Television has its origins as a public service provider. In the UK, for instance, the BBC had clear-cut objectives to both educate and inform, delivering quality programming for whom the ideal audience was (upper) middle class and Home Counties, in pronunciation if not location. With this model in mind, television entertained us but also gave us something to aspire to, delivered from the perspective that ‘Aunty knows best’. ‘Aunty Beeb’, the sobriquet increasingly used from the 1950s and semi-affectionately, very much denoted this perspective.

Television is not a static medium. The practitioners’ reflections and interviews in this section convey a more egalitarian position and interpretation of television, mainly because the television companies are now financially accountable and the ultimate performance criterion is its audience ratings. This is not just about the commercial bottom line and the twin dictates of advertising and market share, but about audience empowerment and the rise of social media that increasingly amplifies the audience voice and the immediacy of its influence. Karen Ross and Doug Wood of Shine TV, which controls the global MasterChef franchise, speak about this in Chapter 14, as does Clive Jones, formerly of ITN (Independent Television News) and now chairman of a major disaster relief charity, who also reflects on the interplay between disasters, such as war, famine, typhoon... and news in Chapter 11.

The role of the production company has changed from a traditional top-down model delivering programming, which entertains and educates, to a multi-faceted, multi-voiced, interactional model, which has to manage the competing voices – programme maker, commissioners, participants, audiences – and their needs – almost a form of reciprocal determinism, but with a constantly shifting focus. These dynamics and tensions are explored in some detail by Peter Hamilton, a leading figure in global documentary programme markets in Chapter 12;
and, in Chapter 17, by Jan Euden and Mick Sawyer who run their own independent production company.

Anya Sitaram, founding director of an internationally recognised production company and another of the practitioners interviewed in Part II, refers in Chapter 16 to the notion of the ‘citizen journalist’ as a viewer who is not only allowed to air his/her views, but also may determine direction and content of programmes in real time. Audiences, which once simply delivered applause or viewed remotely from their living rooms, are increasingly active and present. Viewers’ agency among other things includes polling on the futures of programme participants and critiquing televisual output in programmes in which they star. Big Brother is no longer watching and controlling, but is watched and voted upon.

And whilst the medium’s output might be dismissed as transitory or ephemeral, as Luke Chilton, an assistant producer on an ITV daily morning magazine programme, says in Chapter 10, we would be wrong to dismiss it as simply ‘disposable television’, but information and entertainment packaged to meet the appetites of its audiences. At the same time, award-winning documentary maker Olivia Lichtenstein talks about the ‘alchemy of the cutting room’ in Chapter 13 and the ability of a documentary to reveal itself in the manner of a sculpture emerging from stone, as well as the role of the programme maker as artist unencumbered by more commercial (or audience-driven) imperatives.

Programming decisions are not taken in a vacuum and we need to explore the influences to enable the construction of a more in-depth view. The goal of this section therefore is to unveil what goes on behind the screen. Jon Snow and Cathy Newman of ITN both explore how broadcaster and programme perspectives influence news and documentary treatment in Chapters 8 and 9, respectively. In Chapter 15, Martin Daubney speaks frankly about pressure to deliver the ‘money shot’ and seeking the balance between what makes compelling television and a duty of care to those who feature in it, or whose participation may entail revealing intimate behaviours.

The practitioners’ voices enable us to better appreciate and be aware of the practicalities which go into producing a piece of television, contextualise the ultimate output within the constraints of decision-making and its influences, and contextualise our analysis and understanding through the lens of practicality.