



Joanna Scanlon
as DI Viv Deering

Channel 4 aims to make 'disruptive and innovative' TV, but does *No Offence* fit the (old) bill? Georgia Platman investigates.

Police procedural drama *No Offence*, which first aired in 2015, is one of the close study products for the AQA A Level exam. We're asked to study it synoptically, which means thinking about it from many angles: the way it represents people, places and things; the way it was made and the visual language used; who it was made for; who it was made by; and the contexts around its creation. The synoptic set texts are chosen because they are so rich and complex, giving students and teachers tons to unpack: *No Offence* is a fantastic example.

What is a 'Police Procedural' Drama?

A TV, film or book-based procedural takes place around a set of workplace routines, sequences or procedures. There are procedurals based on the police, the legal system, scientists, politicians, the military and various other professions. Some of the most famous are *CSI* and *Law & Order*. Police procedurals will typically involve activities such as gaining warrants, gathering evidence, and forensics.

Episode 1 of season 1 is brimming with complex characters; unusual representations of race, gender and disability; quirky music; a tight, well-paced script and excellent visual language choices. When the show, set in a crumbling police station in inner-city Manchester, first aired, it attracted adjectives such as 'bold', 'feisty', and 'brash'. In the first scene, a woman rejects a potential lover, telling him she'd 'rather have a wank'; she turns out to be the main character, DC Dinah Kowalska. The surprises keep coming: the first episode sees the police officers investigating crimes ranging from a woman committing bestiality to a serial killer targeting girls with Down's syndrome. The boss, DI Viv Deering, is outrageously vulgar – at one point saying 'I'm nipping home for a shit, shave and a shampoo'. She is often unprofessional such as bursting into the men's toilets to talk to a colleague, and determinedly and shockingly non-politically correct, referring to her superior – a Black man – as 'Obama' and people with Down's syndrome as 'm***s'.

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However, while the show's media language and media representations are fascinating, they are also pretty obvious and straightforward for Media Studies students to analyse. What's trickier to write about – because we need concrete and in-depth knowledge, is stuff on audiences, industry and the contexts surrounding how and why the show got made: the 'by whom' and 'for whom'.

No Offence was written and made by *Shameless* creator Paul Abbott, and his company, AbbottVision. It was commissioned by Channel 4, a public service broadcaster (PSB). What does that all mean, exactly, and why does it matter to us as students of the media? And now that we can look back on the show, which ran for three seasons, with some degree of historical perspective, can we glean anything about its importance in the canon of UK television?

Contexts: Why Did Channel 4 Commission *No Offence*?

At first glance, it would be easy to dismiss *No Offence* as just another police procedural. A lazy understanding of TV scheduling might have it that cop shows are enduringly popular, therefore C4 just wanted something that would bring in the viewers. But the reasons behind C4's commissioning of *No Offence* are actually much more interesting, thanks to the network's



PSB remit (main task), which is actually written into UK law. The remit is split into four parts:

- champion unheard voices
- innovate and take bold creative risks
- inspire change in the way we lead our lives
- stand up for diversity across the UK

Let's look at whether *No Offence* 'Episode 1' fulfils the remit.

Does *No Offence* Champion Unheard Voices?

No Offence creator Paul Abbott is known for his semi-autobiographical hit show *Shameless*, also set in Manchester. With both shows, he champions the underdogs, the down and outs, and puts northerners – who have traditionally been sidelined in TV in favour of southern voices – front and centre. *No Offence* Episode 1 sees DI Deering and the gang at the Friday Street Police Station staring across the road with envy at the coppers working at the more modern police station, one of whom, Detective Superintendent Darren Maclaren (the aforementioned 'Obama'), even has a posh, southern English accent, which contrasts sharply with the fast-paced, northern twangs sported by the main characters. Maclaren tries to squash the team's operation to find a serial killer, but Kowalska, Deering and co. disobey and come up trumps, finding the killer's victim in the nick of time.

As well as being about northerners, *No Offence* also centres women characters. All the publicity for the show features Deering, Kowalska and a third woman cop from the station, Joy Freers, who is promoted from detective constable to detective sergeant during the first episode. This not only breaks the mould for TV in general, which has traditionally sidelined women characters to supporting characters for male leads, but it is especially progressive for a police drama by placing women in the spotlight and allowing them to be funny.

Finally, the main crime focused on in this episode is on a serial killer targeting people with Down's syndrome. Although the killer has selected his victims based on their appearance, the audience is forced to see them as individuals as the police question their friends and family. It turns out one of the women, Jocelyn, had been physically abusive to her own parents as a teenager and in more recent years, prostituting herself and sexually exploiting her husband, Mikey. Mikey himself – played by an actor with Down's syndrome – is charming and sweet. Far from the normal representations of people with disabilities as passive victims, Abbott eschews stereotypes and makes them as unusual and complex as the rest of the cast.



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Does *No Offence* Innovate and Take Bold Creative Risks?

In many ways, *No Offence* is a run-of-the-mill police procedural, written by Paul Abbott, an established showrunner with an impressive list of credits to his name. However, Abbott offers a rare blend of working class stories, edgy writing and quirky drama. In commissioning AbbottVision to make a show for them, C4 bet on getting a bit of that magic to be able to tick the 'bold, creative risks' box on their remit. Even if the show isn't exactly innovative, at least AbbottVision itself claims to be, offering a combination of a production company with a writers' studio, which nurtures new talent.

Perhaps the show's real 'bold risk' is its gutsy women leads and outrageous, no-filter dialogue. A channel with more restrictions or less appetite for risk might have rejected a character like DI Deering for being too vulgar. However, C4 was able to see past the colourful language and see Viv as the star of the show in spite of/because of who she is. The acceptance of creative risk that is enshrined in C4's remit means that difficult, unlikeable, and even offensive characters can come to life. Why is this important? Because we watch TV to be entertained and it is far more entertaining to watch difficult, unlikeable and offensive people than boring, sanitised people.

Does *No Offence* Inspire Change, in the Way We Lead Our Lives?

Within this part of C4's remit, the channel seeks to 'inspire citizenship and stimulate debate among viewers'. To some extent, it could be argued that any show about the police prompts the audience to think about bigger issues: the nature of policing, the justice system, societal inequalities. An example of stimulating debate from the set episode 1 could be the provocative and morally ambiguous characters. We've already seen that DI Deering is controversial, and that one of the victims with Down's Syndrome is abusive to her husband. And then there's the storyline that follows DC Kowalska through into the second episode and beyond: her decision to take in one of the victims, Cathy, as a foster child. Her action could spark

audience debates about our social care system, about professionals getting too close to their work, about children who grow up neglected by their parents, etc. These are not easy topics, but they are incorporated into this entertaining show to give it an element of social realism and confront the audience with some of the harsh realities some people face.

Does *No Offence* Stand Up for Diversity Across the UK?

Hopefully, this article has already shown that *No Offence* gives C4 a slam dunk in this category. It has representations of people from different parts of the UK, of different races and nationalities, of people with disabilities, and of people from various classes. Those representations eschew stereotypes and subvert audience expectations. Abbott's characters might be over-the-top in terms of larger-than-life personalities, but the many facets he gives his characters – both lead and supporting – are every bit as real as we humans are.

So I think it's safe to say that by commissioning *No Offence*, C4 is fulfilling its remit. It's working within the conventions of an established and popular genre – police procedural – but in true Abbottvision and C4 style, it does so in a way that breaks the mould.

Georgia Platman is a writer, copy editor, filmmaker and Media teacher based in Suffolk.

What is Public Service Broadcasting?

In 1982, when Channel 4 came about (as its name suggests), there were literally only three other channels. Two of those, channel 1 and channel 2, were (and still are) run by the British Broadcasting Corporation, which ruled the TV and radio airwaves as our original public service broadcaster (PSB). Being a PSB meant the company's primary aim was not to make a profit but to serve and be accountable to the people who paid for it (i.e. us, via the TV licence). The BBC's remit was to 'inform, educate and entertain' the general public.

In the 1950s, the third channel was given to commercial (for-profit) operation 'Independent Television' (ITV). As ITV's funding came from advertisers, its programmes needed to act as magnets to pull the largest number of viewers possible. This meant there were now three channels that were beholden to the general public, with programming whose aim was to appeal to the broadest possible number of people, though for different reasons. It became clear that there was a gap in the market: there was little thought given to niche audiences, such as young adults, minority ethnic groups, or people with disabilities. Enter Channel 4.

C4 was a hybrid of the two models: it would be a PSB, not funded by a licence fee, but by advertising. The PSB part meant the government could ensure there was programming for underrepresented communities, or 'tastes and interests not generally catered for by ITV', as the Broadcasting Act 1981 put it. The Act also enshrined that the channel should aim to be educational and innovative. These three cornerstones still form the basis of C4's remit today – although you can see from the diagram above (taken from C4's website) that it has expanded over the years. C4's unique position as a commercially funded PSB means it has a privileged position in British TV: as it is not funded by the general public, the station can take risks that the BBC would be castigated for. And C4's canny scheduling to niche audiences means advertisers can get their products right to the people they are aimed at.

As broadcasting space is so valuable to companies, the fact that the UK government gives one of the prime channel slots away for free has always irked certain people. Politicians have made regular attempts to take away C4's PSB status in order to make money from the channel. So far these have been rejected, but with the increasing segmentation and digitisation of television it is an interesting story to follow – look out for it in the news.

What do you think? Should we have laws protecting certain types of TV programming, or should it be wholly privatised? What about adverts: do you mind them or do you prefer watching ad-free TV?

(Image from <https://www.channel4.com/corporate/about-4/what-we-do/our-remit>)



C4's remit

<https://www.channel4.com/corporate/about-4/what-we-do/our-remit>

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