

Truth Will Out: The Success of Top Gear's Honest Approach to TV

Last year, TorrentFreak, a website dedicated to bringing up-to-date news on downloading, asked download site Mininova to record the number of times films and TV shows were downloaded, so that they could publish an end of year 'Top 10 Most Pirated Movies and TV Shows of 2007' list. Though not comprehensive, the results would give people the gist of what films and programmes had been popular that year. Most of the results were as expected: Desperate Housewives, 24, Prison Break, Lost, Heroes.

But then, nestled among these giant US dramas on the number 2 spot was Top Gear.

One can only imagine what modest witticism Jeremy Clarkson, who – following Top Gear's win at the National Television Awards in 2007 for Best Factual Programme, was quoted as saying: "We haven't put a fact in for five years now" – might have muttered in response to TorrentFreak's findings.

Clarkson's modesty is understandable because, as the presenters of the show are only too quick to admit, the popularity of the show is really rather baffling. It's a Sunday night programme, about cars, presented by three middle-aged men. So why is it BBC2's most popular show, boasting 6 million dedicated viewers each week?

Quite simply, it's because Top Gear doesn't take itself too seriously – it reflects an honesty which is only too rare in today's telly climate. It's a show about motoring, but everyday motoring: there's little talk of torque ratios, but plenty about things that concern real drivers, from tacky plastic interior to [car finance](#).

The show is broadcast on Sunday nights, but as producer Andy Wilman has mentioned, it's not filmed with a Monday-morning mentality, but instead tries to capture the excitement of a Friday night with star guests and silly, humorous games designed to destroy caravans. And as for the three presenters, Clarkson, Richard 'Hamster' Hammond and James 'Captain Slow' May, it's their middle-aged grumpiness, their don't-give-a-damn attitude, and their playful but well-intentioned banter that endears them to audiences.

This affection for the show's presenters was best seen following Hammond's famous 2006 crash that landed him in hospital with 'serious brain injury'. The hospital that cared for Hammond was inundated with flowers and notes of support, 11,000 messages of goodwill were posted on Top Gear's website, and fans of the show donated £250,000 to Yorkshire Air Ambulance, who had airlifted Hammond to safety. Thankfully, Hamster made a full recovery.

And as the download figures suggest, this affection for real, honest TV is being craved around the world. Where the downloads of big US shows like Heroes and Lost just emphasise people's impatience for the next instalment, or maybe people's unwillingness to pay extortionate prices for 'Series One, Part One' style DVDs, Top Gear's success reflects its place as a top British export, which 350 million men, women and children, in over 20 countries, watching 32 channels, tune-in or download each week – just to get a dose of Clarkson and Co.'s unadulterated honesty and humour.

The show's success looks to continue as well, with similar shows commissioned in Australia and the US, and a Top Gear World Tour planned, which will see the programme's thrills and spills showcased in 15 different countries.

About the Author

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