

The (Long and Winding) Road So Far: *Supernatural's* UK Broadcast

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The (Long and Winding) Road So Far: *Supernatural*'s UK Broadcast

Simon Brown

Elsewhere in this special issue, Erin Giannini argues that over its fifteen-year run *Supernatural* has become a signature show for the CW, its home network in the United States. In 2006 *Supernatural* was one of only a handful of shows to transfer over from the WB to the CW and while it is not uncommon for networks or channels to either launch or rebrand around a high-profile attention-grabbing series (for instance FX with *The Shield* [2002-2008] or Showtime with *Dexter* [2006-2013], *Weeds* [2005-2012] and *Californication* [2007-2014], see Brown 2010a), the decision to move *Supernatural* to the new network does not appear to have been the result of any sense that the show somehow embodied what the CW would be. It was not the kind of “brand” show that, as Dermot Horan suggests, generates either large audiences or significant kudos for a network, nor makes an important statement about its ambitions (2007, 117). According to Karen Petruska, *Supernatural* was selected because it offered what Dawn Ostroff, President of UPN and then the CW, described as “flow,” a built-in following that would draw the viewers from the old network onto the CW. *Supernatural* made the cut because of its ongoing relationship to *Smallville* (2001-2011), its lead-in show on the WB. Just as viewers of the established *Smallville* tended to stay around to watch season 1 of *Supernatural*, the reasoning was that migrating both series over would offer an added attraction to those same viewers (2011, 223).

The decision to save *Supernatural* for the CW was therefore largely practical, and indeed, as Giannini notes, in its early years both the CW and *Supernatural* struggled to attract major audiences. However, as Petruska points out, what *Supernatural* did have in place of large numbers was remarkably consistent viewing figures, and the result of this was that by 2009 the show had achieved a measure of “genuine security,” which meant it was

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able to survive not only the departure of the showrunner Erik Kripke at the end of season 5 in 2010, but also the completion of his planned original story arc (Petruska 2011, 224). Even a dip in the ratings in season 6 did not have much of an impact, for in May 2011, as season 6 was ending, Mark Pedowitz took over as CW's President. A firm advocate for *Supernatural*, Pedowitz's tenure secured *Supernatural*'s indefinite future. It became regularly one of the first of the network's ongoing slate of programmes to be renewed, and when the announcement was made in March 2019 that season 15 was to be the last, Pedowitz was clear that while he supported the decision of the producers and stars, "if you could convince them to come back, I'm open" (Maglio 2019). Pedowitz's support didn't mean the CW didn't monkey around with the show's timeslot. The pilot aired on a Tuesday night and the first series maintained this Tuesday slot until moving to Thursday with "Hell House" (1.17) in March 2006. From that moment Thursday night became the show's established home until the end of season 5 in May 2010. After that the series ping-ponged around the CW schedule for several years, going from Fridays (season 6 and 7) to Wednesdays (season 8) to Tuesdays (season 9), to Tuesdays and Wednesdays (season 10) and to Wednesdays (season 11), before settling once more into its regular Thursday home (seasons 12-15).

This theme of home is embedded in the series itself. The final episode of season 5, "Swan Song" (5.22), originally conceived as the end of the entire show, begins with Chuck narrating the history of the iconic Chevy impala, which he describes as "the most important object in pretty much the whole universe." Chuck speaks of the importance to Sam and Dean of this perfectly average muscle car, with its plastic soldier wedged into the ashtray and its Lego bricks stuffed into the vents. He says "it never occurred to them that, sure, maybe they never had a roof and four walls, but they were never, in fact, homeless," and it is the memories associated with the car, with their home, that finally allows Sam to shake off Lucifer's control and sacrifice himself for Dean. Home implies stability and it implies family, both important elements in Sam's ability to wrest control of himself back from the devil, and in the context of the CW, the implications are similar. In spite of its occasionally erratic scheduling, over its lifetime *Supernatural* became a constant, regular fixture on the CW's televisual landscape, which in turn facilitated the kind of fandom and the wider *Supernatural* family that supported the series, and the network, in a reciprocal agreement. Dean takes care of the car, and the car takes care of Dean and Sam, just as the CW takes care of *Supernatural* and the fans take care of the CW. However, if *Supernatural*'s US run was defined by its consistency and stability, for UK viewers the experience of watching *Supernatural* has been quite the opposite—a near-chaotic instability—and by examining the troubled

broadcast of the show in Britain I want to highlight the importance of the CW's support, and of a stable home, to *Supernatural's* extraordinary resilience.

In keeping with its status now as the longest running genre TV show in history, the story of the UK broadcast of *Supernatural* is one of a very old-fashioned way of doing things. In 2020 UK viewers find themselves in a glorious post-television world where whole series of *Stranger Things* (2016-) or *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018-) can drop globally on the same day on Netflix, or flagship shows like *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011-2019) and *The Walking Dead* (FX, 2010-) are simulcast. Yet the fact that some series get such VIP treatment only serves to highlight the fact that there are still issues for other shows that suffer a much more precarious and, for the fans, highly frustrating trans-Atlantic existence. *Supernatural* is a case in point.

Supernatural's UK run began promisingly. It was picked up for broadcast by the free-to-air digital Channel ITV2 which, as Alison Peirse points out, had in its outlook a “distinct parity” with the CW and its aim of capturing a 16-34 largely female audience (2010, 263). In contrast to the CW, after acquiring *Supernatural* in 2005, ITV2 saw it as a significant brand product and went to great lengths to promote the show to its core viewership as a key part of a major re-launch of the channel (BBC 2007). Drawing upon the example of Channel Four's successful marketing campaign for the 2005 UK premiere of ABC's *Lost* (2004-2010, see Abbott 2009, 12-14), ITV2 commissioned a substantial promotional campaign with the tagline “Scary Just got Sexy.” The campaign featured TV and cinema ads with Sam and Dean staring moodily off into the distance whilst being groped by beautiful, demonic-looking women. The campaign effectively rebranded the series, known in the USA for its brooding masculine eye-candy but not so much for the kind of sweaty sexual tension suggested by the promos, which implied that Sam and Dean's “family business” involved fighting off predatory women rather than killing monsters.

ITV2's decision to fold *Supernatural* into its rebrand and re-launch is not unusual. As Janet McCabe argues, American series are often used in the UK to give a new channel an advantage over its rivals. For instance, when More4 began in October 2005, Channel Four shifted *The West Wing* (1999-2006) from E4 to its new digital channel to attract audiences (McCabe 2013, 27). As an attention-grabbing signature series for ITV2's relaunch, season 1 of *Supernatural* aired at 9pm on Sunday nights, repeated the next day at 11pm on ITV1. For the next four years ITV2 offered a stable 9pm Sunday night home for *Supernatural*. The Monday night repeat on ITV1 was dropped for season 2, and a brief flirtation with showing season 2 in its entirety on ITV1 after its run on ITV2 ended was abandoned half-way through the season. ITV2 was available for free to anyone, and each season aired in the UK within a short time of its US airing. Season 1 began in January 2006 for

example, while season 2 began in February 2007. Such minor delays were standard, allowing for the season to run weekly in the UK without the normal mid-season hiatus seen in the US and thus to finish almost simultaneously in both territories. There were some grumbles when viewers of season 2 suddenly found themselves facing an unexpected two-month gap between the airing of “Jus in Bello” (3.12) on 13 April, and “Ghostfacers” (3.13) on 8 June (Digital Spy, 2008). Season 3 however was impacted by the writers’ strike and in the USA there was a similar two-month gap between these episodes; so, while this delay was an irritant to some, the general consensus was that ITV2 was treating the show, and its fans, with respect. Little did they know that there was far, far worse to come.

In July 2009 the rights to *Supernatural* were poached from ITV2 by Virgin Media for their own Living TV channel, which had developed a reputation as “UK TV’s home of the paranormal” thanks to the phenomenal success of the ghost-hunting series *Most Haunted*, which had been airing since 2002 but the popularity of which was very much on the wane by 2009 (Elliott 2009). Living TV started season five promisingly by maintaining a similar timetable to ITV2, airing the first two episodes back to back at 9pm and 10pm on 10 February 2010, and then maintaining the same 9pm Wednesday night slot for the rest of the season. However, for fans of the show the big difference was that Living TV was not free to air and was only available to subscribers of either the Virgin digital or Sky satellite service. In 2009 Virgin had around 4 million subscribers, with Sky around 9 million (Virgin Media 2010, 10; Wray, 2009), considerably less than the at least 25 million households who in 2009 paid the licence fee (which anyone in the UK who has a TV set has to pay) and so had access to ITV2. Virgin took on *Supernatural* towards the end of a long-running feud with BskyB, which in 2007 had seen Virgin drop a number of key Sky Channels from its package. This prompted Sky to respond with a campaign aimed at fans of US television to switch from Virgin to Sky in order to retain access to key shows like *Lost* and *24* (2001-2010). Such tactics were largely over by 2009 as the two primary deliverers of UK subscription television began to work cautiously together, finally signing an agreement in June 2010 which saw BskyB purchase Virgin Media Television, including Living TV, while Virgin acquired long term access to the then premium Sky channels (Deans 2010).

Sky rebranded Living TV as Sky Living in October 2010 and it was under the Sky Living banner that UK *Supernatural* fans really began to suffer. This is ironic given that Sky had a long-standing and, as previously mentioned, often predatory relationship with US TV. In the 1990s for instance Sky broadcast *The X-Files* (1993-2002) and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) a full 8 months before they appeared on terrestrial TV, and 2011 saw the launch of Sky Atlantic. This was a premium Sky channel (meaning

that only Sky subscribers could get it) billed as the UK home of HBO, and it launched with two new HBO series, *Boardwalk Empire* (2009-2014) and *Treme* (2010-2013) and, in another example of predatory poaching, the fifth season of *Mad Men* (2007-2015) which promptly disappeared from its home on the free-to-air BBC. Taking the decision to run *Supernatural* in the summer rather than the spring slot it had enjoyed on ITV2 and Living TV, Sky Living did not begin season 6 until June 2011, a nine month delay from the US run, while season 7 began in August 2012, 11 months after the US, and season 8 in July 2013, another nine month delay.

Season 8 ended on Sky Living just before Christmas 2013, and in March 2014 Sky Living announced that it would not be picking up the ninth season, which at that point was already on the air in the US, and which fans could reasonably assume would be starting in the UK in the summer. No reason was given for the decision, and unlike the move from ITV2, there was no announcement that the rights had been purchased elsewhere. For the entirety of 2014 in Britain, *Supernatural* was off the air, prompting the formation of a campaign to save *Supernatural* in the UK. Flyers were handed out at UK conventions; fans were asked to post selfies on Twitter holding signs featuring the hashtag #UKNeedsSPN; a petition was launched on change.org; and an attempt was made between the 28 July and 3 August to get as many fans as possible to download Kansas' iconic "Carry on Wayward Son" to try to get the song to No. 1 in the charts.

While the campaign attracted modest support, with only 855 signatories to the petition for example, and Kansas' signature tune not making the top spot, it did nevertheless show there was die-hard support for the series in Britain, and out of the blue in December 2014, it was announced that season 9 was returning to free-to-air TV when it was picked up by E4. Launched in 2001, E4, like the CW and Living TV, was aimed at a 16-24 year old demographic, and indeed describes itself on Twitter as the "naughty, younger sibling of Channel 4." Fans may have breathed a sigh of relief as *Supernatural* returned to UK terrestrial screens in January 2015, given a decent slot at 10pm on Wednesday night with the first episode following the premiere of season 2 of E4's established SF show *The 100* (2014-2020), but this was nevertheless a full fifteen months and a season and a half behind the US. For *Supernatural* fans of a certain age, this was like a return to the bad old days of cult tv viewing in the UK. As I've argued elsewhere, fans of *The X-Files* in the 1990s—most of whom relied upon the terrestrial broadcast rather than Sky, which was still relatively small in terms of subscribers—were used to watching their favourite show a year, and a full season, behind their American counterparts (Brown 2010b, 164-165). But in the 2000s the increasing take-up of satellite and cable services, alongside the aforementioned use of popular shows like *Lost*, *24* and *Mad Men* as

bargaining chips to encourage new subscribers, had seen such delays become less commonplace. There was therefore some hope that E4 would broadcast *Supernatural* in such a way as to shorten that gap, and this they did, although it was a long time coming. Season 10 began in October 2015, the same month that season 11 began on the CW, and then E4 broadcast season 11 hot on the heels of the end of season 10 in April 2016, shortening the delay to six months and then three months for season 12, which began in January 2017.

Finally, for the first time in seven years since season 4 aired on ITV2 in 2010, *Supernatural* was on free-to-air TV only three months later than its US broadcast. This was short lived, however, as season 13 began on E4 in April 2018, a return to the longer delays which saw the rot set in on Sky Living. Then after the end of season 13 aired in September 2018, *Supernatural* simply never reappeared on E4's schedule. No reason was given, and repeated attempts by fans to find out E4's plans for the show were met with silence. This prompted another petition on change.org when the end of show was announced in March 2019 in order to persuade E4 to air the final two seasons. The broadcast of Season 14 was finally announced by E4 on 18 March 2020, a mere week and a half before it actually began on Sunday 29 March 2020 at 10pm, with each episode also dropping on Amazon Prime at the same time, for those who would elect to pay for it rather than watch it for free. Two weeks later, disappointed with the viewing figures, E4 moved it to midnight, replacing it at the 10pm slot with back to back repeats of the nude dating show *Naked Attraction* (2016-). Shortly after, it was shifted again to 1am. In practical terms this means very little in the contemporary TV landscape, given the ease by which one can now record a show on a PVR or set-top box, or watch it via catch-up. However, considering the UK does not have the same tradition of late-night television viewing as the USA, midnight or 1am on Sunday is about as much of a television death slot as it is possible to find in Britain. The move therefore is not only a clear signal of E4's lack of faith in *Supernatural* (as if such a signal were needed given what had gone before), but what it also does is deny UK the opportunity to share the experience of watching the show live with a like-minded fan community, via Twitter for instance. Indeed, as a backlash, E4's move has prompted a Twitter campaign among UK fans, led by @SPNisSavedintheUK and @valgreen660 to ignore the broadcast and watch each episode together on Monday evening instead. Although E4 announced in January 2020 that they had picked up the rights to season 15, the press release only stated it would air "at a later date" (Munn 2020) and the very fast decision to shift season 14 to a Sunday night death slot in favour of *Naked Attraction* does not sound encouraging for UK fans.

Such a situation epitomises the experience of watching *Supernatural* in UK. Far from being a tentpole product protected from on high and a reliable fixture of the schedule, the experience of watching the series in the UK is tantamount to a form of resistance, a battle by fans against the broadcasters to not only get the show on the air, but to enjoy it as a community. And there certainly is a thriving *Supernatural* fan community in the UK, with for instance regular fan conventions taking place organised by the likes of Starfury (Cross Roads), Rogue Events (Asylum) and, in 2018, Creation Entertainment, which runs the unofficial “official” *Supernatural* convention in the USA, hosted by Richard Speight Jr.

In America, despite being moved to the CW on *Smallville*'s coattails *Supernatural*'s constant and reliable presence gradually and quietly shifted it to the centre of the CW's evolving brand, eventually bestowing upon the series the standing of a kind of beloved elder statesman. In contrast, despite beginning much more auspiciously as a signature show for ITV2, and then as a branded spooky product for Living TV, subsequent moves to Sky Living and then E4 have gradually robbed the series of its status, to the point where it has been replaced by the ultimate TV barrel-scraper, a naked dating show. Like the Impala, and later the Men of Letters bunker (although let's face it, the bunker was never a substitute for the romance of the Chevy and the open road), the CW created a stable, if sometimes mobile, space in which a family could grow, come together and flourish. It seems that to an extent British TV had learned this lesson with events like the simulcasting of the final season of *Game of Thrones* on Sky Atlantic and the regular Monday night 9pm slot for *The Walking Dead* on Fox, the latter followed by the popular fan-facing Aftershow *The Talking Dead* (2011-). In doing so it seemed to be leaving far behind the bad old days of the 1990s when fans waited over a year for BBC1 to broadcast most of season 3 of *The X-Files* out of order with little regard for the integrity of the show. So for instance British viewers could wonder how Scully's dog Queequeg could get eaten by an alligator in “Quagmire” (3.22) only to turn up again in a subsequent episode.¹ Yet while it is true to say that *Supernatural* has at least been shown in the UK the right way round, its nomadic and precarious existence has proved deeply frustrating for UK fans as they have undergone delays, unexpected transitions to subscription services, long periods of uncertainty, and finally what can only be described as outright contempt for the show they love, a fate that is by no means exclusive to *Supernatural*. In the USA, as Chuck quite rightly says, the quiet power of the Winchesters in their fifteen-year fight

¹ Queequeg appeared in three episodes in Season 3, “Clyde Bruckman's Final Repose” (3.4), “War of the Coprophages” (3.12) and “Quagmire” (3.22). The BBC aired “Bruckman” on 3 October 1996, “Quagmire” on 20 November and “Coprophages” on 9 January 1997. Much of the rest of season 3 was similarly out of sequence.

against angels, demons, leviathan, lucifer and finally Chuck himself, was that they were never, in fact, homeless. In the UK the same cannot be said, and the *Supernatural* family has suffered for it.

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