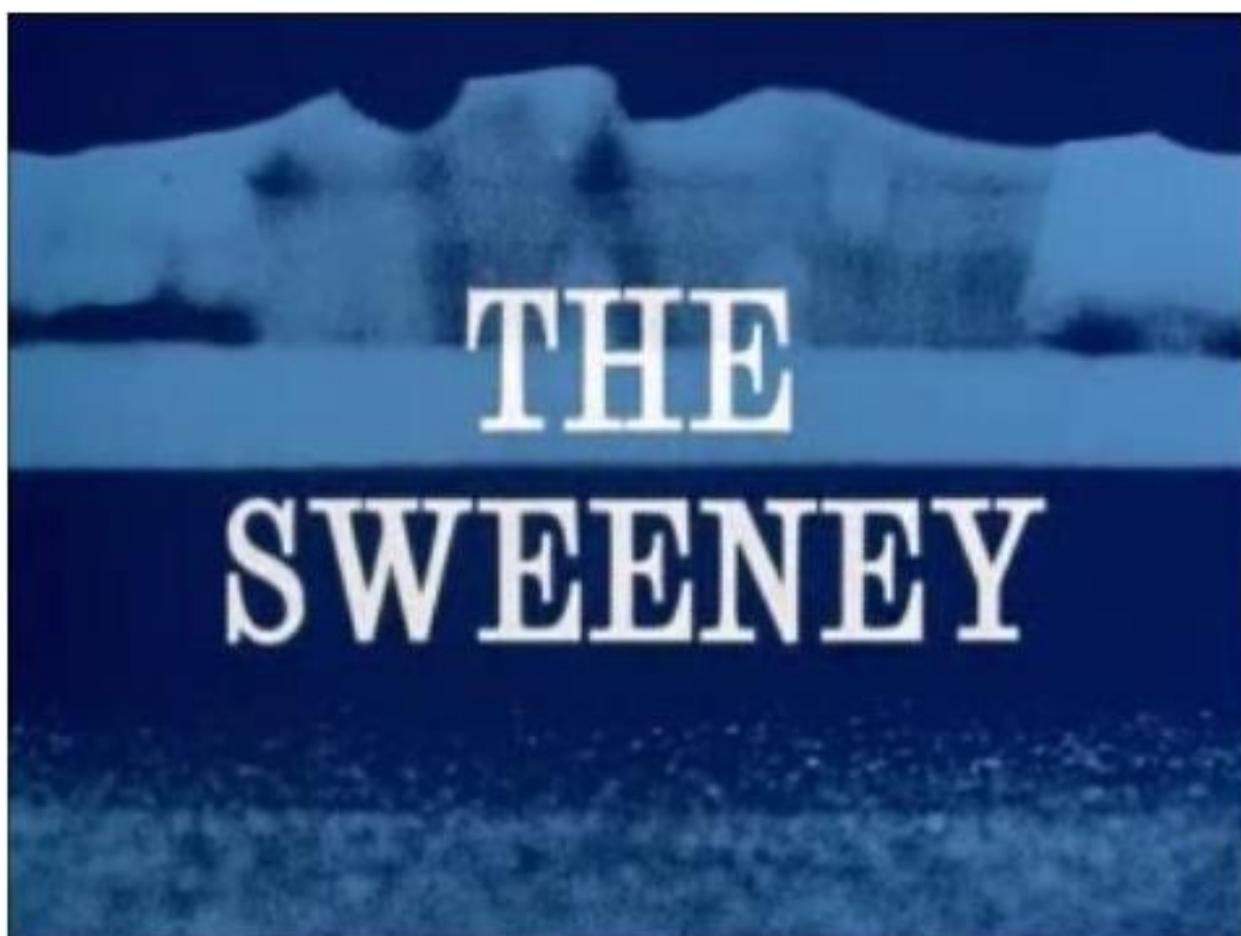


The Sweeney

(Series 1 Episode 1, 1975)

Factsheet 2 - Media Industries, Audiences & Media Contexts



Acknowledgements

All quotes from dialogue: *The Sweeney* Series 1, Episode 1 (1975), ITV.

Images	Acknowledgement
All images	Freemantle Media / ITV

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The Sweeney

(Series 1 Episode 1, 1975)

Component 2: Understanding Forms and Products

Focus Areas:

Media Language

Representation

Media Industries

Audiences

Media contexts

PART 1: STARTING POINTS – Media Industries

The nature of media production, including by large organisations:

- The programme was produced by Talkback Thames using the Film Production Unit Euston Films with a focus on high production values. Each episode cost in excess of £250,000 to make and was filmed on a strict ten day shooting schedule.
- *The Sweeney* was the most popular product made by Euston Films.
- Thames Television was one of the regional franchise holders of the ITV network broadcasting in the London area from 1968-1992.
- *The Sweeney*, produced by ITV, a commercial broadcaster, presents a different production and distribution model to *Luther*, a BBC production.

The importance of different funding models:

The Sweeney was broadcast on ITV, which in 1974 was the UK's only Independent Television Channel that relied on advertisements to fund the production of television programmes. The viewing figures for each episode would have guaranteed ITV valuable income from advertisers who wanted to place commercials in the breaks. The success of *The Sweeney* was therefore

important to Thames Television and the ITV in terms of raising revenue.

The functions and types of regulation in the media:

The Sweeney was broadcast by ITV in the post-watershed 9pm slot. The characters were part of the Metropolitan Police's 'Flying Squad' suggesting that the narrative would contain mature themes regarding violence and theft. There is mild swearing and some references to sexual activity, but this was restrained even given the later scheduling time, reflecting the social and cultural context of the 1970s. The DVDs were given a 15 rating.

PART 2: STARTING POINTS – Audiences

- The initial appeal of the programme was the fact that it offered a different, more realistic representation of the police force, one that more accurately mirrored the stories that were appearing in the press at the time. The programme also had the added appeal of the humour created through the relationship between Regan and Carter.
- The filming style and action scenes would have appealed to fans of the crime genre who were ready for something different and more contemporary.
- Some of the takes are much longer than in contemporary examples of the genre, this was similar to more serious dramas of the time where audience concentration is expected.
- As the series developed over the years the audience became involved with the two main characters which contributed to the continued success of the programme.

- At the height of its success it was pulling in 19 million viewers per episode.
- The ongoing popularity of the programme is evidenced in the two film spin-offs produced, one in 1977 and one as recently as 2012

Theoretical perspectives on audience: Blumler and Katz's Uses and Gratifications theory:

There are several theories that have been written to explore the relationship between audiences and media products. The Uses and Gratifications theory was one of the first to suggest that audiences can be active consumers of the media and seek out and use different media products in order to satisfy a need and to experience different pleasures including:

- **Entertainment/diversion:** audiences watch some media products including crime dramas to escape from everyday life into a fictional world that absorbs their interest. *The Sweeney* was entertaining and was a refreshing change from some of the other crime dramas broadcast at the time as it challenged the reassuring image of the police. It also had the added excitement of action including car chases and shoot outs which would have usually only been seen in film.
- **Information/education:** crime dramas can give audiences an insight into another area of society with which they may not be familiar, in *The Sweeney* this was police procedures. The insight into London gangland would have reinforced pre-conceived ideas audiences may have from real life stories of gangsters, for example The Krays.

PART 3: STARTING POINTS – Media Contexts

The specification requires learners to develop their understanding of relevant contexts of media and their influence on the product.

Historical Context

The Sweeney demonstrates how genres develop over time. The programme introduced a more gritty, realistic representation of the police force informed by cultural influences including press stories and American crime drama imports. This

view challenged the more reassuring image of the police evident in other examples of the genre such as *Dixon of Dock Green* and *Z Cars*.

The programme also looked different to previous crime dramas, it was shot on 16mm film to achieve a washed out, grainy feel to the images, creating a more gritty realism.

The Sweeney reflected the time in which it was made as in the 1970s the actual Flying Squad were in the news after reports of bribery, corruption and consorting with gangland criminals.

The programme was produced before the 1984 Police and Criminal Evidence Act was passed which provided a code of practice for the exercise of police powers. Before that, there were few restrictions on the methods that could be used by the police to secure a conviction. For example, when Regan exhorts information from Billy through violence and suggesting that they can frame him.

Social and cultural contexts

How *The Sweeney* reflects the society and culture of the time in which it was made through its representations, themes, values, and messages.

Consider:

- *The Sweeney* tells us a lot about the society of the time in terms of social hierarchy, power, gender roles and how authority was regarded.
- The men in the programme were macho, sexist and in positions of power. Their lives were seen to be exciting, appealing to the male audience of the time. They often broke the rules and engaged in violence.
- Although Regan and Carter are depicted as good at heart, their often dubious ways of getting information potentially reflected the culture of the Metropolitan Police of the time. In 1972 a new Commissioner for the Met, Sir Robert Mark was appointed to investigate corruption in the London force. He described the CID as 'the most routinely corrupt organisation in London'

(<https://www.thehistorypress.co.uk/articles/the->

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[sweeney-the-dirty-squads-police-corruption-and-sleaze-70-s-style/](#)). During his investigation 50 officers were prosecuted and 478 took early retirement.

- The programme reflected the inequality between men and women in society. The majority of police officers seen are men and the roles for women in the programme were frequently that of the victim or sexual temptress.
- The programme changed the way in which crime dramas would be made in the future and audience expectations. It was said to be

influential in the creation of *Life on Mars* and *Ashes to Ashes*.

- It became culturally iconic with quotes from the series passing into popular usage. It was also mentioned in the songs *Wow!* by Kate Bush and *Cool for Cats* by Squeeze illustrating its place in popular culture.
- The programme referred to the Kray twins, actual East End gangsters to establish credibility and make cultural links. Carter says about Kemble: *'He's hard. He's one of the few that The Twins left alone.'*