Benevolence and Gift-Giving in *Backyard Blitz*

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*A gift always looks for recompense.*
-From Scandinavian poem in Edda.

The amount of money and freebies that were thrown at them was WAYYYYYY over the top ... A whole house, furniture, landscaping, plants, a holiday, and cash ... even the fridge was worth $17,000!! that's more than our car cost ...(Illyandra). Who actually pays for all this stuff? Mr Packer? (Cheyanna) Sponsors donate them. It's not like anybody shelled out for them. If Hardly Normals (Harvey Norman) donated some flash fridge then you can't say it cost $17,000 because it gets written off by Gerry Harvey as a donation come tax time. It's cheaper to donate them than have to pay for ad .... nobody watches them anyway. Bugger the house with all the gizmos, just give me Jamie Drurie, drool, drool! (Dani).
- Ninemsn online discussion about an episode of *Backyard Blitz*.

Gift-giving has become a distinctive trope within popular television makeover programs. Of interest here is the prevalence of gift-giving in Australian home makeover programs, and the way that it functions in their narrative, driving the makeover and grounding it in a meaningful social and national context. While the makeover of the house or yard is the action of the narrative, and its completion is the desired goal, gift-giving has become the premise and central dramatic focus within this program type. The surprise presentation by the media team of the gift of the makeover to a deserving person is the climax of the narrative. It will be argued that gift-giving draws attention to social relationships and obligations, asserting the social and moral value of the makeover over its material value. It affirms particular family and community values and ethical ideals while fetishising commodities, promoting them as an integral part of an Australian way of life. Commodity exchange is configured as gift exchange, framed as giving to exemplary Australians who have ‘given to others’. Taking *Backyard Blitz* as a case study, this paper will explore this narrative and symbolic function of gift-giving and the mythologising of benevolence as a desirable national trait.

Nine Network's *Backyard Blitz* has been one of the most popular of the Australian home makeover programs, along with its companion program *Renovation Rescue*. Home makeover programs proliferated in Australia in the late nineties and first years of the new millennium, enjoying great popularity throughout a period of sustained metropolitan real estate market and housing construction industry growth.
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The programs still rate well, but their popularity is waning, a trend that could be linked with the slowing of the real estate market, along with other factors such as the popularity of other program types such as the 'person' makeover and behaviour makeover (Super Nanny). In mid-February 2005 no home makeover programs were in the weekly OzTam Top Twenty. In late 2004, one or two such programs, Backyard Blitz and Renovation Rescue, were in the Top Twenty; three to four in mid-2003; five to six in mid-2002, and four to five in mid-2001. At their peak in popularity, over a quarter of the Top Twenty were Australian home makeover programs.

The emergence of this program type within the field of reality or 'ordinary television' can be understood in economic terms, representing the changing relationship between commercial content and advertising, with products increasingly embedded within the narrative. It is important also to view the phenomenon in social and symbolic terms. Makeover programs affirm particular ideals of citizenship within consumer culture, and articulate what it means to belong to social collectives—family, local, national and global communities—and to 'express' or acquire identity through particular consumption practices. Some programs such as Backyard Blitz represent themselves as socially transformative, championing community mindedness and benevolence; they position themselves as vehicles of social change rather than as merely vehicles for product placement. Similarly, the commodities that are given and received within the program are fetishised, represented as changing lives, and as sometimes having magical qualities appropriate to the heroic status assigned to the recipient. The trope of gift-giving heightens the social meaning within the narratives, since the gift only makes sense if we view it in the context of particular social relations and obligations. The exchange of commodities within the narrative serves to manage and resolve complex social relationships and obligations, which in these narratives often appear to be unequal or in crisis. The gift-giving is particularly satisfying, providing narrative closure, because it is represented as socially transformative, restoring domestic stability to a family that faces difficult responsibilities and circumstances. Cheat talks of the 'moral economy' of the gift, noting that the gift serves to reinforce social relations: 'By a moral economy I mean a system of transactions which are defined as socially desirable because through them social ties are recognised and balanced social relations are maintained'. His discussion of the symbolic work of the gift is particularly suggestive for a narrative analysis of gift-giving in these television programs which depict social ties in rich and intimate detail.
The work of the gift

This discussion of gift-giving and benevolence in the commercial media betrays a particular assumption about gift-giving that is subject to considerable debate among social and cultural theorists, the notion derived from Marcel Mauss that the giver or donor always acts out of self-interest. Wolflingburger identifies three main motives in gift-giving: obligation, self interest and altruism. However, self-interest is most widely acknowledged as important, indicating the influence of Mauss's work:

In Scandinavian and many other civilizations contracts are fulfilled and exchanges of goods are made by means of gifts ... (gifts) which are in theory voluntary, disinterested and spontaneous ... are in fact obligatory and interested. The form usually taken is that of the gift generously offered; but the accompanying behavior is formal pretence and social deception, while the transaction itself is based on obligation and economic self-interest.

This observation of 'formal pretence and social deception' is particularly relevant to analysis of commercial television's performances of gift-giving.

Social theorists contend that gift-giving is a ritual that plays an important symbolic function in all societies, although in diverse ways. While motivations for gift-giving vary depending on the situation (different for rites of passage, such as weddings, and rites of progression, such as birthdays), the giving and receiving of gifts develops and strengthens reciprocal relations, creating 'bonds of trust and dependence that assist ... (people) in their everyday lives'. It would appear that televised gift transactions, such as those represented in Backyard Blitz, despite their staged or scripted nature and transparent commercial dimension, serve to strengthen reciprocal relations between the commercial media (through celebrity representatives) and the communities it addresses and represents, affirming values that are important in everyday life.

The commercial media has a vested interest in forming reciprocal bonds with the recipients, who owe them at the very least a good deal of tolerance, if not a performance of surprise and gratitude when they find themselves in their transformed private domain in front of cameras and a national audience. Rugimbana et al assert that 'gift givers manage meanings about who the giver is and who the receiver is, as well as the nature of their relationship', an observation that is particularly apt when the media is the giver, as the program-makers and the presenters literally control the narrative, as well as the gift (the makeover), which defines identities and social relations. Gift-giving is highly suited to the commercial media’s job of ‘managing meanings’ in relation to its own image, and that of the subjects it represents. The strong connection between the gift-giving depicted in the renovation
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program and the everyday rituals of the audiences' lives helps to extend those managed meanings beyond the screen to the domestic domain it represents.

While Mauss's concept of self-interest is central to this discussion, I suggest that there is a need to move beyond the obvious—economic self-interest—when considering the media's investment in gift-giving. These popular depictions of gift-giving clearly serve commercial self-interest—product placement, public relations and the pursuit of ratings—but this focus overlooks other dimensions of gift-giving. As Mauss observes: 'social phenomena are not discrete; each phenomenon contains all the threads of which the social fabric is composed. In these total social phenomena, as we propose to call them, all kinds of institutions find simultaneous expression: religious, legal, moral and economic'. Following Mauss, this article argues that it is important to situate the media's self-interest in its social and moral, as well as economic, dimensions, noting the way that the gift exchange in these narratives is a 'total social phenomenon', expressing different institutions (religious, legal, moral and economic) and associated values and ideals depicted as the Australian way of life.

Cheal argues that giving to others beyond the levels required by immediate necessity is a general phenomenon, and that the gift economy is constituted by redundancy; this differentiates it from other economic systems. Redundancy is one of the more notable aspects of scenes within programs such as Backyard Blitz (as noted in online discussion quoted in the preface, of the 'wayyyyy over the top' nature of the giving). Cheal critiques social exchange theory—the reduction of gift-giving to self-interest—and offers an analysis of political economy perspectives on gift-giving which, he argues, fail to address the complexity and differentiation of contemporary gift-giving practices. His critique is pertinent for an analysis of the commercial media's interest in benevolence, alerting us to the problem of overlooking diverse symbolic functions of gift-giving by reading it simply in economic terms. The political economy perspective assumes that the emergence of capitalism has seen morals replaced by markets; this approach can tend to devalue and trivialise the significance of gift-giving in such a social order. Cheal calls for renewed sociological interest in the gift, asserting that despite enormous changes associated with capitalist modernisation, gift transactions continue to have vital importance in social life.

Robert Allen claims that television itself is a 'gift economy'. Noting that television's job is 'to recruit people who will watch television as viewers', Allen, like many other scholars, highlights the commercial rationale that informs not only the structure and operations of the television industry and its programming strategies, but also the nature, flow and segmentation of content, and the relationships established with audiences. This dominant political economy interpretive
framework privileges the economic and can tend to discount the diverse social and cultural significance of the content itself. Content is seen as a vehicle for something else (advertising, consumer culture, hegemonic values), and its diversity, specificity and meaning for audiences is overlooked.

Allen maintains that ‘becoming a watcher of commercial television also involves the viewer in an implicit economic contract’. Having established this notion of a commercial transaction (as the ‘real relations’, or economic cause) occurring between the network and the audiences, Allen extends the premise and asserts that the transaction is (mis) represented as a ‘gift’ exchange. Television, he argues, presents itself as a ‘gift’ to the viewer, masking the underlying economic transaction (the economic base). His observation offers an important perspective on the commercial media’s depiction of its ‘benevolent’ role in relation to the public (and disavowal of its commercial interests), however it is less plausible when he extends the premise further to characterise the audience’s experience of television. He asserts that viewers experience television as a gift, rather than as the economic exchange that ‘it really is’. Although every narrative transaction is also an economic transaction between producers and consumers, ‘at the level of reading, the nature of that transaction is the gift/accepting of a gift rather than the selling/purchase of a commodity’. The limitation of this notion of the ‘gift economy’ of television is that it takes an analogy (between the presentation of programming to audiences, and gift-giving), without detailing the very significant differences between the ‘transactions’ and social formations being compared, and makes it a conceit that informs the analysis of television (as a gift economy): ‘The entire economic system of commercial broadcasting is premised upon the expectation that at least some of the viewers will reciprocate the gift of programming by purchasing the product’. It is questionable that audiences experience television programming as a gift, or that they see it as anything other than the ‘selling/purchasing of a commodity’. Allen’s discussion assumes that the commercial nature of television is covert, and that content operates at a different, cultural, level to conceal this aspect of the medium, a perspective that is consistent with Marxist ideological critiques of popular culture, and which works well with Mauss’s thinking about the ‘social deception’ associated with the gift. Allen’s observations about television’s performance of gift-giving are significant and highlight the commercial media’s modes of self-representation. However, one can develop his observations to explore television’s use of symbolic rituals such as gift exchange as the media’s way of engaging with audiences.

Australian makeover programs which deploy gift-giving occupy very different positions in relation to the social life and values to which they refer. Auction Squad places emphasis on commodity value, measuring effort and choices against the market, while Backyard Blitz emphasises use value and symbolic value, crafting
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the outdoor area with a family's particular needs in mind, measuring effort against the emotional response of the recipient and audience. *The Block* and *Changing Rooms* emphasise competition, individual achievement and personal gain, with the 'gifting' of products/services barely noticeable behind the entrepreneurial effort. *Backyard Blitz, Renovation Rescue* and *Ground Force* stress community-mindedness and cooperative work that is done for the benefit of others. They foreground gift-giving, making it the climax of the narrative. No matter how they are played out, however, the depictions of gift-giving in different programs serve to highlight and manage diverse and sometimes conflicting understandings of economic and social and moral value. These 'staged' gift-giving rituals, by performing this symbolic work—managing unstable meanings about social relations and value—enable the commercial media to connect with audiences in meaningful ways. The scenarios and social relations depicted are presented as being closely linked to the everyday homes, lives and values of targeted audiences. The emphasis on values is consistent with recent trends within audience and market research and media planning, in which there is increasing commercial interest in the 'values' of targeted audiences. Gift-giving facilitates the media's intermediate role between advertisers and audiences, and between private and public interests.

There is considerable diversity within home and garden makeover programs, as they target different audiences and taste preferences, and adopt different modes of address. Some, like *Better Homes and Gardens* and *Our House*, instruct audiences about home improvement and decoration methods, products and services; like all of the make-over programs these use direct address, but combine it with an 'expository mode' of representation. Others, adopting the 'interactive mode' (which sees a representative of television go into the world to provoke a response) in conjunction with the 'observational mode', use drama to focus on human behavior in a competitive context: the work, skills and dilemmas of ordinary people (*The Block*) or experts (*Changing Rooms*). Programs such as *Auction Squad* (and *Location Location* and *Hot Property*) place more overt emphasis on the commercial value that is added to properties through the skillful use of products and services; recipients may not appear particularly deserving.

Raymond Williams noted television drama's 'naturalistic' interest in ordinary lives, 'a crisis of illness or money or dislocation or disturbance', arguing that drama has come to see its function 'in this experimental investigative way; finding a subject, a setting, a situation; and with some emphasis on novelty, bringing some kind of life into drama'. Drama has shifted its location from the 'palaces, forums and streets' of earlier eras and theatres, to focus on 'enclosed rooms' which are a 'declaration of how we are living and what we value'. Williams emphasises the 'direct continuity' between these 'enclosed rooms' of television drama, and the
rooms in which we watch ‘the framed images of television’. This is similar to Stephen Heath’s observations about ‘television’s seamless equivalence with social life’, and Miller and Cunningham’s comments on the banality of television, ‘which makes it anthropological’. Robert Allen observes television’s ‘penetration into the private spaces of our lives, its unnoticed connection with the rituals and routines of daily life’. Such observations are pertinent to discussion of home renovation programs. Williams’s analysis, written before the emergence of reality TV as we know it, prefigures the popular home renovation genre, and its preoccupation with the transformation of enclosed rooms and its direct continuity with the homes and lives and consumption patterns of the viewers.

What makeover programs share is the integration into the narrative content, within the restricted domain of the home, of the media (through representatives bearing ‘gifts’) and commodities (products, services and know-how). They may do this in very different ways, but their use of donated commodities and services to add value to properties and people is fundamental. In some programs, goods and cash are donated by sponsors (such as Harvey Norman, Stegbar, Mitre 10 and Wizard Home Loans), and in others, goods are purchased with a budget allocated by the network. Product placement has increasing importance in commercial television as traditional advertising loses its appeal to many advertisers: advertising ‘clutter’, channel-hopping, audience fragmentation, and increasing costs have made traditional broadcast advertising less viable. The emergence of this type of program is clearly linked with changing conditions within the television and advertising industries, and the imperative to find new ways to bring products to the attention of consumers.

The case of Backyard Blitz—makeover as gift for a ‘special’ person

As in most home renovation programs, the makeover is central in Backyard Blitz, forming the action of the narrative. A derelict yard is the problem that the narrative addresses, and the Bliz team are the story’s protagonists, tackling and resolving this problem through the makeover. The completion of the makeover is the desired goal of each episode, and the surprise presentation of the completed project to the recipient, in front of family and friends, is the climax. The makeover exhibits the team’s skills, the products and services used, and in this sense its commercial function is evident: the program can promote goods and services to a highly targeted audience within its narrative as well as in sponsored advertising breaks. The makeover adds material value to the recipient’s home, although this is understated.
rather than explicit in Backyard Blitz, in contrast to programs such as The Block and Auction Squad, which foreground monetary value and gain.

The cultural value of the makeover as well as its material value is stressed in The Block and Auction Squad as much as in Backyard Blitz. In the Australian television context, the makeover represents fulfillment of the ‘Australian dream’: home/garden ownership; an outdoor-oriented Australian way of life, with balance between leisure and work, between openness and security/privacy; and the casual integration of diverse peoples (gender/sexuality, age, race/ethnicity, class, ability), cultures, styles, and lifestyles. National identity is given a contemporary and cosmopolitan inflection in such programs, and the traditional Australian characteristic of ‘making do’ (with the traditional backyard, Hills Hoist and BBQ) is replaced with ‘making over’, a display of resourcefulness and cleverness that embraces consumerism, and adopts new products and styles.

In Backyard Blitz there is special emphasis on another symbolic dimension of the makeover: the social value. The makeover highlights a particular social context and affirms kinship relationships. The makeover is a ‘gift’ for a special person, a reward for that individual’s hard work and sacrifice for others in their family and community. So for example, one program gave the makeover as a special Mother’s Day gift to a Maltese migrant, Evelyn, who has raised fifteen children in Australia, making sacrifices to enable them to become successful Australians (‘Maltese Mother’s Day’, Episode 11, 2003). Another makeover (‘One Good Turn Deserves Another’, Episode 18, 2004) transformed the yard at the home of Jye, a young boy with Down’s Syndrome who raised money for accident victim Sophie Delezio, the ‘special person’ in an earlier episode. Other gift recipients include a priest who has cared for hundreds of disadvantaged children (‘Doing it for the Kids’, Episode 1, 2004) and a woman, Mavis, who has worked for twelve years caring for disabled people, while also caring for her disabled brother and daughter (‘Respite and Recreation’, Episode 3, 2003). The social circumstances that explain the neglected yard are presented to us as significant, making the team’s intervention particularly meaningful and charged with affect. If the focal point of the action in the story is the yard, it is more than just a needy site; its neglect is significant for what it tells us about social relationships and obligations, and the exemplary care and dedication of a mother, father or child towards their family/community. The transformation of the yard represents the fulfillment of hopes and good wishes that loved ones have for the deserving recipient; it affirms kinship bonds.

As these examples suggest, the gift-giving aspect of the makeover in this program has heightened dramatic resonance. We are aware of the social meaning of the gift; it pays tribute to the contributions of the recipient. The rationale, the reason why the Blitz team intervene to make over the backyard, is important in each episode,
situating the narrative in very personal kin and community contexts. The gift is usually depicted as a form of reciprocity, giving back to someone who has given to the community. Other narrative elements further highlight the social or kinship relationships that provide the context for the giving, for example: the ‘nomination’ of the recipient by someone close to them, focusing attention on the relationship context in which the gift-giving occurs; the regular use of special occasions, such as Mother’s Day, anniversaries, weddings, a homecoming, housewarming or a baby’s arrival, appropriate to the theme of gift-giving within kinship networks; and the special ‘party’ at the end of each episode, often a reunion of family and friends, sharing the giving (participating in making it possible) and sharing the gift (enjoying the new entertainment area).

The recipients in Backyard Blitz are ‘deserving’: the program’s call for applications asks viewers to nominate someone who is ‘an active and admirable member of your community, an unsung hero, a quiet achiever’. In its emphasis on giving to ‘special’ people, Backyard Blitz differs from many other Australian home/garden makeover programs (such as Better Homes and Gardens, Our House, Changing Rooms, The Block and Auction Squad), which tend to emphasise places and the process involved, rather than the recipients, and the deserving social context in which the gift-giving is occurring. Better Homes and Gardens sometimes transforms the homes of the celebrity presenters, hardly needy recipients, and the makeover in Auction Squad is meant to generate profit for the owners who often seem greedy rather than deserving. Renovation Rescue shares Blitz’s emphasis on the recipients and their social contexts, paying tribute to community-minded Australians, calling for nominations for ‘someone who works tirelessly to help local charities and community projects’. Sometimes the teams from the two programs join for television ‘specials’ (for example, Renovate or Detonate, Feb 8, 2005).

In ‘Miracle Mum’ (Episode 14, 2003) the Blitz team made over the sparse outdoor area of the Children First Foundation farmhouse which accommodates underprivileged children from around the world. Again, the makeover has meaning because of the social context; it is a gift for Moira Kelly, the extraordinary woman who established and runs the Foundation and the home, and who has spent years helping disadvantaged people. Friends from Rotary nominated Moira, and a wide network of people who have been inspired and helped by her supported the makeover as a tribute to her. The aesthetic and practical value of the renovation is insignificant compared with the social significance. Several other episodes, ‘Respite and Recreation’ (Episode 3, 2003), ‘Home away from Home’ (Episode 22, 2003), ‘Doing it for the Kids’ (Episode 1, 2004), ‘Terrific Thornhole’ (Episode 5, 2004) are similar in theme, depicting makeovers that are performed as gifts to acknowledge special
individuals who have performed extraordinary community work, fostering children, or caring for disabled or disadvantaged members of the community.

While these recipients are especially altruistic and outstanding in their accomplishments, the majority of the people (out of 120 episodes from 2000 to the end of 2004) who receive assistance from the Blitz team are exemplary in the way they have given to others, making sacrifices for their families or the wider community. The theme of personal sacrifice for the good of others runs across most of the narratives, yet two main types of recipient can be identified in Backyard Blitz. The first type are family heroes—usually mums, dads or sometimes kids—who have carried an unusually large burden of care. These family heroes are the subject of the majority of episodes (approximately two thirds of the episodes). The second type (evident in approximately twenty-five per cent of the episodes) are community heroes—individual helpers, fundraisers, organisers and teachers—(for example, Episodes 12, 16 and 23 in 2001, 3, 10, 11, 21 in 2002, 3, 10, 14, 16, 22, in 2003, 1, 5 and 18 in 2004) who support others in need, and those involved in other community service—firefighting (23 and 25, 2002), lifesaving (19:00, 3:2004), the SES (13:2004), police (24:2002) and the military (6:00, 10 and 19 in 2004). The latter category includes sporting champions, such as Betty Cuthbert (‘Golden Girl’ 13:03), who have represented the country at an elite level (see other elite athletes in 7:03, 12: 2004, 19:2002).

Only a very small number of episodes (around five per cent) each season depict makeovers that seem to be driven less by the social context of deserving recipients than by a challenging site—a small inner city apartment (7:2004), a ‘renovators’ delight’ (17:2003), a lawn bowls club (6:2004) or a neglected yard (24:2003). In those few site-oriented programs, the recipients are representative rather than exemplary members of the community. In episodes 8 and 11 in 2004, titled ‘It could be you’, parts One and Two, the team randomly selected homes for the makeover, demonstrating a different rationale by depicting average rather than special people.

Not only does the program depict a diverse range of community heroes, but it also presents different kinds of family heroes. Many are ‘Aussie battlers’, people who care for their families under particularly difficult circumstances—coping with displacement, illness, accidents, disability, and financial difficulty. The program pays tribute to their endurance and survival, and the care they have given the family, rather than public achievements. Some are representative Australians, more average folk who are nevertheless appreciated and nominated by their families. Others are ‘super-parents’ who carry a significant burden of care because they have large or extended families or are parenting alone. Across these diverse narratives there are several dominant and recurrent characteristics in Backyard Blitz: sole parenting—sole mums, dads, orphaned kids/young adults feature in about twenty per cent of the
episodes (four episodes in 2002, six in 2003, five in 2004)—disability and illness—major narrative elements in about one third of the episodes (seven episodes in 2001, six in 2002, eight in 2003, and seven in 2004)—and migration—migrant families are represented in at least a couple of episodes each season (and in five episodes in 2002, as if in defiance of divisive race politics evident in Australia at the time).

The narratives portray an Australian society that is inclusive, tolerant, multicultural, accepting and supporting of difference (race, age, class, ability). This is also notable in Renovation Rescue. The tropes suggest a thematic preoccupation with difficulties faced by families who, for different reasons, have a heavy burden of care and limited support. One might argue that such programs endorse a neo-liberal economic philosophy, consistent with the right-wing Coalition government’s policies, in the depiction of people who manage to get by without welfare and government services in spite of difficult circumstances. Backyard Blitz champions self-help and traditional forms of benevolence and community mindedness, interventions that take place at the level of individuals and their communities rather than at state level.

The choice of recipient in Backyard Blitz indicates a great deal about the program’s construction of the ideal and exemplary Australian: they are benevolent, hard working, practical, self-sacrificing and self-sufficient family or community minded people, who have perhaps overlooked material and aesthetic concerns and their own comfort while focusing on helping others. Individuals in the Blitz team also embody these admirable national characteristics, and are depicted as caring not only for the recipients but also for the ‘family’ of the team, albeit in a fun-loving, Aussie larrikin fashion. Benevolence is presented as a desirable and ‘natural’ national characteristic, as Australian as the belief in ‘a fair go’. This has also been notable in news coverage of Australians’ involvement in international aid operations abroad: the aftermath of the Bali bomb, and Solomon Islands peacekeeping, aid and reconstruction after the Tsunami disasters. Such international disasters have provided rich material for episodes of Blitz, highlighting the community mindedness and benevolence of Australians and their exemplary ethical conduct as global citizens.

Sharing the burden of care: the media and benevolence

The media team’s ‘rescue’ intervention enables the media to represent itself as generous, assuming a ‘community service’ role. As Bonner notes, the fairy godmother role is one of the commercial media’s favorite forms of self-representation. The media’s intervention however, highlights the imbalance
in social relations that the recipients’ life circumstances or commitment to others have created. No matter how exemplary the lives of these recipients are, it is implied that their domestic lives are unbalanced; the team’s intervention promises to restore balance and harmony. While *Backyard Blitz* shows cohesive families and communities, the domestic scenarios depicted are in many ways less than ideal. Not only are the homes in need of material improvement (the Australian dream cannot be attained without this windfall/gift), but the material need points to a more disturbing problem, uneven social relations, which is often manifest in unequal or unusual patterns in the distribution of labour in families and communities depicted. A mother’s illness means that the dad has to work and care for family and home. The struggle of a working single mother points to problems associated with family breakdown. A portrait of parents struggling to care for disabled children highlights the limitations of health services and government support, and shows unmanageable levels of stress and work in many people’s lives. A person’s charitable work helping disadvantaged children points to the unequal distribution of resources, and the enormous need for benevolent intervention to attend to social problems. All episodes in some way address conflicts of interest and social tensions which are beyond the scope of any individual’s efforts. The media team doesn’t claim to solve these problems, but the makeover they undertake magically transforms the domestic realm, and resolves problems at a narrative level.

Television networks have long been associated with charity fundraising, televising annual concerts, telethons and special programs. The media’s own charitable activities are promoted as media content, whether as news stories or as televised events. Media organisations are uniquely positioned to manage their public image, demonstrating commitment to the communities with which they wish to connect, a function that became increasingly important in the 1980s as television (and radio) developed national networks, and the media’s connections with local communities and audiences weakened. The networks’ dramatic representation of their involvement in localised communities and causes helps to publicise their connection with the communities that matter to audiences. The commercial media continues its traditional association with charities and worthy causes, but has also found other ways to connect with audiences by depicting itself as altruistic within program content. The rise of cause-related marketing has seen a wide range of corporations, including media corporations, adopt new promotional strategies that enhance their public image, presenting them as ethical and supportive of worthy causes.

Cheal notes that: ‘Gifts have a “free floating” presence within the moral economy of interpersonal relations, and they therefore facilitate types of interaction that might otherwise be only weakly institutionalized’.

Not only does the commercial media in its intermediate role perform a commercial service, bringing audiences to markets,
it also represents itself as performing a community service, bringing content and information to audiences. This position the commercial media has in relation to the public interest differentiates it from many other industries and makes it subject to particular regulatory regimes. The commercial media has itself a ‘burden of care’, as it were, in relation to the communities it addresses; its social responsibilities are sometimes, but not always, in conflict with its commercial interests. Gift-giving in programs such as Backyard Blitz symbolically integrates commercial and community interests, and conveys an ideal of markets and morals happily coexisting. The programs represent the commercial media and sponsors giving commodities and services to members of the community, affirming community and moral values. The giving of gifts literally and symbolically enables this type of interaction—an informal or ‘weakly institutionalised’ community service—between the commercial media and the audiences and communities it addresses. One could argue that the media’s symbolic engagement with the community through gift-giving and benevolent intervention, and the meaning it has for recipients and audiences, is as real and revealing as its strategic commercial operations and provides valuable material for understanding social relations and the media’s changing role in relation to them.

Indeed, Mauss asserts the interconnection between different aspects of social lives: ‘Things have values which are emotional as well as material; indeed in some cases the values are entirely emotional. Our morality is not solely commercial’. This is pertinent to any understanding of the home and backyard, the site of gift exchange within the renovation programs. The home is a highly over-determined site, characterised by semiotic excess. It embodies social and cultural myths—family values and egalitarian ideals of the Australian dream—and both personal identity and public image. It is simultaneously the locus of pragmatic and sentimental values. Gift exchanges in such a context resonate in a highly affective and personalised fashion, as well as in terms of shared community values. Cheal asserts that ‘we can ... define the gift economy as a system of redundant transactions within a moral economy, which makes possible the extended reproduction of social relations’. Media depictions of gift transactions are important material for exploring the nuances and management of complex social relations, and further, for understanding the media’s efforts to manage its complex intermediate position in relation to its audiences, the social world it addresses and the commercial world.

Cheal refers to a study by Zelizer which argues that in the nineteenth century, American support for the bereaved ‘shifted from a gift type of mutual aid to an impersonal market system served by insurance companies’. Family and community transactions were taken over by the transactions of institutions as the management of death became rationalised and formalised, a shift that radically changed beliefs
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about life and death. Zelizer claims that this challenged 'a powerful normative pattern: the division between the marketable and the non-marketable, or the sacred and the profane'. Cheal asserts that it is possible to accept these observations without implying that the social significance of gift exchanges has been diminished. He contends that this change brought with it a process of the 'differentiation of gift transactions' within a changing moral order, with gifts no longer being used as 'practical means for mutual aid, but instead they are symbolic media for managing the emotional aspects of relationships'.

These observations sit comfortably with the findings of this analysis of the role of benevolence and gift-giving in the media; programs such as Backyard Blitz provide assistance to people whose lives have been affected by the burden of care for others in the community. The programs seem to project a shift in the locus of charity and benevolence, and point to a crisis in institutional support for families and communities and a nostalgic return to informal arrangements within neighborhoods and families. While the programs affirm conservative social values, they offer an implicit social critique, addressing the significant gaps in institutional support for those affected by illness and disability. At the same time they celebrate the 'informal' supports and profile self-sufficient families and communities.

Makeover programs present the unlikely coexistence of the 'sacred and the profane', gift and commodity, and insist on the irreducible value of the gift, while at the same time itemising the gift's market value. The programs play on nostalgia for an imagined past, and invoke what Mauss describes as 'a return to the old and the elemental', through their focus on the gift and on the ideals of charity, community service, and solidarity:

Once again we shall discover those motives of action still remembered by many societies and classes; the joy of giving in public, the delight in generous artistic expenditure, the pleasure of hospitality in the public or private feast. Social insurance, solicitude in mutuality or co-operation, in the professional group and all those moral persons called Friendly Societies, are better than the ... mean life afforded by the daily wage handed out by managements, and better even that the uncertainty of capitalist savings.

Makeover programs present a more intimate and manageable social world characterised by less rationalised and formalised forms of support for the needy and the bereaved; they depict families and neighborhoods rallying together with practical help. And in doing this, they position themselves, and the media, as a powerful agent of change, as benefactors, helping to restore stability and order in the face of inadequate institutional support.

This is a powerful legitimisation of the media's intermediate role between the commercial world and its audiences. It 'makes over' the commercial media,
representing it not merely as a champion of socially responsible practices in the community, but also as playing a crucial role in restoring balance to families and communities carrying a heavy burden of care.

It has been argued that gift-giving has a rich symbolic function in *Backyard Blitz* and similar home renovation programs, a function which can be characterised as follows. It reproduces social relations and strengthens and affirms existing social ties and bonds, connecting with the social world of the audience, creating continuity between the on-screen world of products and gift exchange, and the off-screen lives of the audience. It does this through its appeal to the moral economy, emphasising ethical forms of conduct, and mythologising altruism as a heroic national trait. It works to resolve interaction ambiguities regarding the stability of the system of relations, and serves to stabilise and affirm traditional family and community life. It raises questions about values—economic, social and moral—and provides stimulus to assess and affirm those values. It manages meanings, in particular the media’s public image—and its precarious intermediate role in relation to audiences and advertisers—enabling the media to represent itself as altruistic. Gift-giving facilitates the intermediate role of the media, linking advertisers, products and consumers in meaningful ways. As the textual analysis has detailed, gift-giving also has various narrative functions in *Backyard Blitz*, providing narrative structure—the narrative of gift-giving—and surprise—the rationale for the narrative, as well as the goal. Benevolence, a heroic quality linked with gift-giving, is evident in the narrative figures: the hero/recipient, the nominators, and the media team donors. In this sense, meaning and story are organised around a shared understanding of benevolence and around the performance of gift-giving.

While gift-giving is linked with economic rationale—product placement, sponsorship and the media’s desire to represent itself favorably—it also has significant social and mythic functions. Scenes of gift exchange have meaning for the people represented in the programs (helpers, recipients, family and friends) and for audiences, because they connect with everyday domestic scenarios and kinship relationships. They assert moral value over market value, relating to socially conferred and negotiated understandings of worth, need and reciprocity, which are presented within a nationalist cultural and ethical context. Gift-giving and benevolence are mythologised as Australian traits, and linked with the understanding of what it means to be an exemplary Australian.
Notes

Sites of Benevolence
Christy Collis and Maggie Nolan


Benevolence and Gift-Giving in Backyard Biliz
Liz Ferrier

5 Mauss, op.cit.
7 Mauss, op.cit., p 1.
10 ibid.
11 Mauss, op.cit., p1.
12 Cheal, op.cit., p 12.
13 ibid., p 4.
14 ibid.
16 ibid., p 120.
18 Allen, op.cit., p 119.
19 ibid., p 119.
20 ibid.
21 ibid., p 120.
23 ibid.
25 ibid.
Benevolence

28 Allen, op.cit., p 134.
29 See Bommer on 'marxhead television', programs linked to magazines, op.cit., p 54.
31 Bommer, op.cit.
32 Cheal, op.cit., p 19.
33 Mauss, op.cit., p 63.
34 Cheal, op.cit., p 19.
35 Cheal, ibid., p 5.
37 ibid., p 5.
38 Mauss, op.cit., p 67.

Surgical Theatre, Gifted Performances: The changing moral economy of surgical training
Sally Wilde

3 Eyers, op. cit., p 16.
5 Surgical training in private practice is routine in the United States, but not always uncontroversial: Robert Sade, 'Private patients and surgical training', *JAMA*, vol 238, 1977, p 2180.