

LONDON, FEBRUARY 1987

A team of five are sharing a room in Conduit Street in central London. Two IBM desktop computers take up most of the tiny space. The walls are decorated with portraits of tribal chiefs posing pompously in their leopard skins. In one way, there's nothing strange about this, as we're in the High Commission of Sierra Leone – but the room is being rented by MTV (Music Television). Welcome to the headquarters of the new venture set up to bring one single channel to the European youth!

This set-up is a far cry from the grand Broadway offices of MTV USA in New York City. Launched in 1981 and already a triumph, MTV is being hailed as 'the third major breakthrough' in music broadcasting in the United States, the first being Billboard's Top 100 chart in 1955 and the second the advent of 'freeform' radio with rock and album-based playlists at KMPX, San Francisco, in 1967. A 'corporate innovation of major proportions and psychodemographic success', MTV USA established itself as a leading force in the American music and media landscape.⁷ Whatever people's thoughts on MTV, few disputed its impact on popular culture. MTV was credited with resurrecting the struggling record industry after its 'great depression' in 1979, launching the careers of major acts from Duran Duran to Madonna, revolutionising the film, television and advertising industries and heavily influencing style and fashion.

Despite the success of MTV USA, MTV's debut in Europe was viewed sceptically. There were massive barriers to market entry. First, there was the issue of how to generate advertising revenue from across different markets. A handful of advertisers (Levi's, Coca-Cola) did sign up before MTV went on air, but that wasn't enough to get the network running.⁸ The idea of MTV – a brand that would stand for 'youth, jeans and rock 'n' roll' – was sexy in theory. In practice, television advertising in Europe was exclusively national. Enter MTV, a channel instantly beamed across borders, wanting to convince potential advertisers that the future was all about developing economies of scale. This was easier said than done, as MTV's two-strong advertising sales team quickly realised.

The second barrier was distribution. Satellite television in Europe was in its infancy while cable television was unevenly distributed across the continent. Often, these technologies were used as a means of replacing TV aerials to capture terrestrial programmes rather than as a source of multi-channel TV. Satellite television was a novelty and MTV was part of this new wave. There was a lot of

work to be done in conjunction with satellite and cable operators to get viewers to...

[...]

‘Cool’ soon became a big noise in corporate industries across the board, not just music and television. The Cool Brand Council was set up in the UK in 2001, later spreading internationally. This council sought to award ‘cool’ status to select brands via an independent panel of experts who would assess the merit of a brand according to a set of criteria cross-judged with consumer poll results. However, ‘cool’ as defined by industry experts and through quantitative consumer research is an oxymoron. Cool Britannia signalled the beginning of the ‘corporate cool’ era in marketing and the beginning of New Labour governance, but it was also the end of the ‘real cool’ – that which was once radical, shook the status quo and helped shape that new cool vision. It was time for hip to reinvent itself. The underground cool – that which would also ultimately be discovered by marketing, win ‘cool brand’ awards and fully flourish in 2007 – was indeed bubbling under elsewhere.

Let’s head to Hoxton Square, Shoreditch – at that time a nondescript area of east London.