

‘We shouldn't let great art disappear into BBC Four's cultural ghetto’: The impact of BBC Four on mainstream arts provision

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Abstract

Although BBC Four has been lauded for its dedication to more esoteric content and artforms, since the channel was introduced there has been concern for the range and depth of arts content on the BBC's terrestrial services – BBC One and BBC Two. As journalist Stuart Jeffries warned at the launch of the new channel: ‘We shouldn't let great art disappear into BBC Four's cultural ghetto and let the mainstream be dominated by Carol Smillie's mirthless smile’ (2002). This paper examines the impact BBC Four has had on the BBC's mainstream arts provision as part of a broader shift in the BBC's provision from a Reithian mixed schedule of programming to specialist digital services for niche audiences.

Introduction

The establishment of the BBC in 1922 was also the beginning of arts broadcasting, with classical music, operas, theatre, and talks dominating radio schedules during the BBC's formative years. However, while highbrow content has long been a stable staple of BBC Radio, the history of arts on television is one in which commissioners have grappled continuously with television's status as a mainstream and ‘lowbrow’ medium, alongside growing competition from the commercial sector and more popular programming. Even the establishment of BBC television's more specialist service, BBC Two, in 1964 was caveated with a need to continue to appeal to broader audiences, as receiving the new channel required purchasing a new television set.

The proliferation of digital services at the turn of the millennium opened up a new wealth of opportunity for niche provision on television. BBC Four started broadcasting Saturday 2 March 2002, with an opening night dominated by the arts, communicating a clear commitment to highbrow cultural content from its inception. Based on twenty qualitative interviews conducted February – November 2015 with a range of professionals involved in the production and commissioning of arts content, this article examines the impact BBC Four has had on the BBC's mainstream arts provision. It assesses BBC Four as part of a broader shift in

the BBC's provision from a Reithian mixed schedule of programming to specialist digital services for niche audiences. Finally, with the announcement in March 2021 that BBC Four would be switching to an archive-only channel, the article concludes by raising questions about the sustainability of specialist arts content.

From mass to specialist audiences

In its earliest iteration, PSB in Britain was designed to provide cultural enlightenment for the masses through a mixed schedule of highbrow and light entertainment. Heavily influenced by the work of Victorian poet and cultural critic Matthew Arnold, the BBC's first Director-General, John Reith, regarded the broadcasting of arts and culture to mass audiences as a means by which to cultivate both the individual and create a more equal, civilised society. However, Reith recognised that in order to engage mass audiences with highbrow content, the BBC would need to adopt a strategy of enlightenment by stealth through a carefully constructed diet of specialist and popular programming. The intention was that 'listeners tuning in for something 'easy' on the ear or eye - say, some light dance music - would then be exposed, almost before they knew it, to something rather more difficult which they had not been seeking' (Hendy, 2013: 59). The principle underlying this strategy was the belief that the role of the BBC should be to not only lead, but also to elevate public taste. Reith famously proclaimed that 'few knew what they wanted, fewer what they needed' (1949: 101).

The introduction of a stratified radio system following the war brought with it more freedom for programme makers and commissioners to adopt an uncompromising approach to highbrow content. In a 1952 issue of *BBC Quarterly*, leading academic Noel Annan declared: 'The BBC is haunted ...by the spectre of the average listener. ...Let this phantom vanish from the minds of producers' (143). At its launch in 1946, BBC Radio's Third Programme was unapologetically highbrow in both its content and desire to cater to a very particular audience demographic. In a similar fashion, BBC Four has, from its inception, positioned itself as a niche service that is 'unashamedly expert, undiluted and in depth', and for 'the most demanding audiences' (BBC Commissioning, 2016). In line with this remit, BBC Four's launch was dominated by the arts, featuring programmes on the work of conceptual artist, Michael Landy, Spanish romantic painter, Francisco Goya, surrealist artist, Salvador Dalí and a performance by Senegalese singer and guitarist, Baaba Maal. This opening night line-up set the tone for the type of arts content that would populate BBC Four's schedules, with more esoteric and highbrow forms at the forefront.

However, while many welcomed BBC Four's dedication to more specialised content and art forms, there were growing concerns that 'the BBC was now going to exile its arts programming to a specialist channel that could only be viewed by a comparatively small proportion of the population' (Wyver, 2007: 89). Although access to BBC Four has widened since the digital television switchover began in 2007, anxieties about marginalisation have shifted from focusing on a lack of universal availability to the smaller budgets and audiences synonymous with specialist niche channels. Within this context, there were, and continue to be, concerns that the channel is serving as a 'cultural ghetto'. Journalist Stuart Jeffries warned at the launch of the new channel that 'we shouldn't let great art disappear into BBC4's cultural ghetto and let the mainstream be dominated by Carol Smillie's mirthless smile' (2002).

The decline of mainstream arts provision

The gradual disappearance of arts content from mainstream schedules can be traced back to this proliferation of multi-channel programming at the turn of the century. John Wyver described that shift as a time in which 'the mainstream broadcasters hastened their retreat to the middle ground, when audience share became the dominant factor in decision-making, and when certain previously central subjects, including the arts, were marginalised' (2007: 48). This view is also supported by the independent communications regulator, Ofcom, which, in its first statutory report on PSBs in 2004 found: 'Specialist programming on topics such as arts, current affairs and religion was increasingly pushed out of peak viewing hours' (2004: 5). Ofcom's report goes on to state that: 'Dedicated arts programming has also been marginalised on the channels that have traditionally supported it – BBC Two and Channel 4' (30).

Alongside the increased prominence of digital services, the marginalisation of arts content within the BBC's mainstream proposition is also a result of the shift toward a more ratings-led television commissioning culture across the BBC's television services. Historically, arts programming has often struggled to command audiences comparable to other genres such as drama. Although frequently cited as arts broadcasting's most successful landmark documentary, only an estimated 2.5 million people watched Kenneth Clark's thirteen-part series, *Civilisation* (1969) when it first aired in 1969 (Walker, 1993: 82). However, as one BBC executive producer stated when interviewed: 'In the early days they didn't really care how many people watched, that wasn't really a concern. Now it's very much a concern'. This increased prominence of ratings has emerged as one facet of the highly competitive media market in which the BBC is now situated.

Within this context there has been a ‘significant shift in the BBC’s attitude towards arts programming that is symptomatic of broader neoliberal ideas about the sovereignty of consumer choice and an instrumentalised, audit-driven attitude to the arts and to public service providers more generally’ (Genders, 2020: 59). Although both ITV and Channel 4 have seen a significant decline in their arts output over the past 3 decades, the proliferation of commercial digital and online services has brought arguably fiercer competition, particularly with the launch of Artsworld (later to be known as Sky Arts) in 2000.

When appointed BBC Director-General in 2013, Tony Hall set out a clear commitment to increasing the range and profile of arts content across the BBC’s services. However, his introduction to *British, Bold, Creative* – which lays out his vision for the 2017–2028 Charter period – is saturated both by the neoliberal discourse of market values and the corporation’s acceptance of the need to adapt to economic austerity. While Hall’s commitment to the arts was closely aligned to the public service values that have provided a foundation for the BBC since its inception, he was working in a political, cultural and economic climate in which there was significant pressure on the BBC to evidence a return on public investment through audience ratings. The BBC’s mainstream arts content has subsequently become dominated by derivative popular competition formats such as *The Big Painting Challenge* (2015-) and presenter-led programming that are rarely challenging or innovative. As one BBC executive producer observed:

Quite a lot of the time programmes which I would not really call arts programmes, programmes like [*The Secret History of the British Garden*] or *The Big Painting Challenge*, get arts money. The money that is being put aside for arts broadcasting goes to them. But I’d say at the expense of the things which are telling you about art and culture.

BBC Four had substantially smaller budgets than BBC One and BBC Two, with an annual spend of £44.2 million in 2015, compared to £339 million on BBC Two and £1,052.5 million on BBC One (BBC, 2016). This created an environment, much like radio, in which the arts should theoretically thrive, without the need to attract mass audiences to justify expenditure. However, the association with small audiences and diminished budgets also made the channel a death knell for arts series that struggled to align to the ratings-led commissioning culture of mainstream BBC provision.

Saviour of the arts or cultural ghetto?: The case of *The Review Show*

Fears that arts content was being marginalised within the BBC's mainstream arts provision was confirmed by the high-profile move of *The Review Show*. This started life on BBC Two as *Late Review* in 1994 before being moved to BBC Four in 2013 and eventually cancelled in 2014. The series followed a discussion format, in which the presenters and a panel of guests would review news and developments in the world of arts and culture. The narrative of *The Review Show* is often positioned as one of decline and marginalisation as the series was pushed out of mainstream schedules, but the series actually began as the strand within *The Late Show* (1989-95) called *Late Review*, which followed the current affairs programme *Newsnight* (1980-) on BBC Two at 11:15pm – known colloquially as the 'graveyard slot'. The series was briefly positioned in a peak time Sunday evening slot as part of the *Art Zone* strand in 2000 but was soon renamed and moved again in 2001 to another graveyard slot as a strand within Friday's edition of *Newsnight*.

The Review Show's move to BBC Four in 2013 was part of broader cost-cutting measures which saw the channel axe drama programming and refocus on arts and culture. While the programme went back to airing during peak hours, there was also a reduction in broadcast hours to one programme a month. Writing in the *Guardian* at the time, Alex Preston called the move a 'quiet euthanasia', while regular panellist on the programme, Anne McElvoy, described the BBC's decision as 'Executive code for likely death' (Preston, 2013). Indeed, only a year later the BBC announced that the programme would be axed after losing 86% of its audience following the move to BBC Four (BBC News, 2014). The overarching reaction in the press to the cancellation of *The Review Show* was negative. A year previously, Sarah Crompton had asserted in the *Telegraph* that 'arguments about culture, about what is good and what is bad, should be part of the essence of things'. She concluded that 'the end of *The Review Show* as we know it is a worrying harbinger for the way in which the BBC is now defining itself' (2013). Crucially, there were growing concerns among programme-makers about a loss of critical perspective within the wider public service proposition. As the Arts Lead for BBC Scotland stated, 'On *The Review Show* you would suggest that maybe a theatre show was quite bad [laughs]. I think the BBC has lost a little bit of that in my mind, that kind of space for reviewing and criticism'.

Although the founding ambitions of BBC Four were noble and strongly aligned with the Reithian public principles of providing a platform for impartial critical review, alongside making great works of art and culture available to all, *The Review Show* demonstrates how, by segregating most of its arts output – and by extension minority interest output – into one place,

the BBC made it even more vulnerable to the overriding market logic that equates cultural value with ratings (Genders, 2020). As demonstrated by *The Review Show's* substantial drop in audience numbers, the separation from the BBC's mainstream offering to a specialist channel fragmented the audience into unsustainably low numbers. This type of narrowcasting is regarded as acceptable and effective in a commercial context which prioritises individual consumer choice, it has been positioned by scholars such as Paddy Scannell (2005) as inherently antithetical to the values of PSB. As Tanya Kant states, 'the commitment of narrowcasting to provide the individuated consumer with "what they want" exists in dialogical tension to PSB's traditional commitment to provide commonality to a collective, informed public' (2014: 392). Within this context, rather than being a bastion of cultural enlightenment, BBC Four came to signify the last nail in the coffin for programmes that were failing to meet the increasingly ratings-led culture of the BBC mainstream public service proposition.

Conclusion

In March 2021 the BBC announced that BBC Four would cease commissioning new programmes and become an archive-focused channel as part of broader series of budget cuts, which amounted to £880 million in savings in 2020. Although since 2014, the BBC has pledged to raise the profile of arts content across BBC One and BBC Two, the realisation of which would dampen the impact of the loss of BBC Four as the primary commissioner of arts content, an Ofcom's review of PSB in 2020 found that provision and investment in arts programming 'continued to be relatively low' with a decline of 21% in programme hours across the BBC's television services between 2014 and 2018 (5). Such trends raise pertinent questions about the sustainability of arts broadcasting on television. While many criticise the Reithian diet of mixed scheduling as overly paternalistic, attempts at narrowcasting arts content through specialist channels such as BBC Four only serves to fragment already small audiences. The rise and fall of BBC Four has demonstrated how the founding public service principles to democratise the arts, prompt debate, and introduce audiences to new ideas and support cultural enrichment cannot be siloed into specialist channels, but must remain the cornerstone of all of the BBC's services.

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