

BBC Arts Programming: A service for citizens or a product for consumers?

Abstract

The BBC occupies what is often considered to be a unique position within UK culture as both a respected national institution that is a pillar of enlightenment values and, increasingly, as an agile, entrepreneurial business that has to deliver ‘value-for-money’. This study will contribute to the existing body of literature examining the impact of a neoliberal marketisation discourse on BBC policy by focusing specifically on the provision of arts programming as a key indicator of how the logic of the marketplace has permeated the BBC’s commissioning culture. In doing so, it argues that the loss of the topical arts magazine and discussion formats from BBC television, in contrast to radio, is symptomatic of the ways in which arts broadcasting has been reimagined both in the corporation’s internal production culture and in its public pronouncements as a product for consumers rather than a service for citizens.

Keywords: arts broadcasting, public service broadcasting, BBC, audience measurement, neoliberalism

Introduction

As a public service broadcaster (PSB), the BBC has, from its inception, regarded arts programming as an important element in its overarching mission to help create an informed and educated citizenship. A conception of the arts as having inherent value as a public good underpinned the BBC’s cultural strategy and informed its commissioning of arts programmes in which ideas, opinions and criticism were disseminated and circulated without necessarily being concerned about their popularity. However, the BBC occupies a unique position within

UK culture as both a respected national institution that is a pillar of enlightenment values and, increasingly, as an agile, entrepreneurial business that has to deliver ‘value-for-money’ (Küng-Shankleman, 2000: 85). The tensions and contradictions of this dual function have had a profound influence on the BBC’s sense of its role, how it understands and addresses its audience and its arts broadcasting provision. As arguably the UK’s most important cultural and arts provider, the BBC has been enmeshed in debates about how the value of the arts are measured. Thus, in scrutinising the BBC’s arts programming, this article examines how the corporation’s policies and practices have evolved in relation to these broader cultural and political debates, exploring how the BBC has responded to external pressures from regulators, politicians and the British press. It argues that 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 (Belfiore 2004). As the world’s longest running public service broadcaster, and the model on which many other public service broadcasters are based, the BBC also constitutes a crucial case study into broader challenges facing public service arts provision not just in the UK, but internationally.

Although the impact of a neoliberal marketisation discourse on BBC policy has received considerable scholarly attention (Collins, 2007; Dawes, 2014; Lee et al., 2011; Lis et al., 2018; Spigelman, 2014), the present study contributes to this body of literature by focusing specifically on the provision of arts programming as a key indicator of how the logic of the marketplace has permeated the BBC’s commissioning culture. The first section offers a broad overview of the BBC’s moral mission that determined its arts provision and how this has evolved through the effects of two strong forces: pressures to widen its understanding of what constitutes ‘the arts’ in response to competition from other broadcasters and changes in

public taste; and political and regulatory pressures to be more ‘accountable’ and justify receiving public funding through the licence fee. The second section provides the first in-depth analysis of how the BBC has evaluated and sought to measure its audience for the arts and why this has come to be an overriding preoccupation for television commissioners. The third section analyses the changing nature of the BBC’s arts broadcasting itself, focusing on the arts magazine programme – characterised by the use of short features rather than an extended focus on a single subject – as a format that has been regarded historically as a particularly important way to engage audiences in topical and occasionally challenging cultural commentary, often in an innovative and experimental style. In discussing these issues, the article draws attention to the salient differences between television and radio, with the latter often marginalised or ignored altogether in discussion of contemporary UK broadcasting. Through highlighting the contrasting commissioning priorities of television and radio, this article argues that the loss of the dedicated arts magazine and discussion formats on screen is symptomatic of the ways in which arts broadcasting has been reimagined both in the BBC’s production culture and in its public pronouncements as a product for consumers rather than a service for citizens.

The analysis presented here derives from a broader study based on twenty qualitative interviews conducted between February and November of 2015 with a range of professionals concerned with the production and commissioning of arts content across the BBC’s television, radio and online services.¹ These include key figures directly involved with setting the arts strategy for the current Charter period (2017-28), including the BBC’s Director of Arts, Head of Arts Commissioning, and Head of Digital Development. All unattributed quotations are from these sources. The rich, empirical detail and insights provided by these interviewees are contextualised through an analysis of broadcasting policy, reports and

internal BBC documents. Section three also draws upon quantitative data concerning the provision of arts programming across British television between 2011 and 2016.²

The BBC's changing attitude to arts broadcasting

The arts have been a staple in BBC schedules since the corporation was first granted a license to broadcast in 1922. Alongside regular broadcasts of operas, plays and talks on the arts, the BBC also produced programmes such as *Music and the Ordinary Listener* (1926) that sought to introduce audiences to and increase appreciation of 'serious' music, with accompanying explanatory programme notes published in the *Radio Times*. Determined by the attitude of the BBC's first Director General, John Reith, the BBC's approach to arts and culture was elitist. Reith's views were shaped by those of Matthew Arnold, who thought exposure to the arts would help create a more tolerant and humane society. Arnold's views formed part of a long tradition of understanding the arts as having a moral and civilising function (Belfiore 2008: 124-45). As a one-to-many medium, Reith regarded the technological capabilities of broadcasting as determining its civic and moral duty to create a more informed and 'enlightened' democracy through fostering citizenship and encouraging public engagement in political debates. As part of this civilising process, the BBC would make the improving effects of 'high culture' available to all, regardless of location, education or income.

Although elements of this moral mission of promoting cultural engagement and enrichment continue to underpin arts provision, the BBC's austere Reithian paternalism has been softened gradually in favour of a less distant and more emollient relationship with its audience that ascribes more agency to the individual. In his manifesto for reinventing the

BBC during the 2017-28 Charter period, Radio and Education Director, James Purnell, promised a move toward ‘expertise, without the elitism’, stating:

This new Charter will last for 11 years, and will take the BBC to its centenary. The BBC that turns a hundred will have come a long way from its beginnings. It won’t be the Auntie that dispensed culture from on high. It will be much more of a thoughtful friend. Prodding us to keep our resolutions, helping us ask and find answers. (2017)

This shift in attitude by the BBC is symptomatic of a more contemporary dilemma within arts broadcasting and PSB more broadly. On the one hand, while often branded as ‘elitist’, the type of programming alluded to above by Purnell has historically provided tangible justification for continued public funding by representing supposed minority interests that theoretically may not otherwise be met by commercial broadcasters. On the other, the past decade has brought increased pressure on the BBC to adjust its arts strategy to appeal to broader audiences. In the current era, the BBC now balances precariously between promoting an anti-elitist stance, while at the same time attempting to refute accusations of ‘dumbing down’ and diluting public service values.

The ways in which the BBC defines and communicates the cultural value of the arts has also evolved within this context. Cultural value is not a static or inherent property of the arts, but rather is situated and defined as part of broader institutional, cultural and political discourses around the role of arts and culture in society. Since its inception, the BBC’s definition of the arts has expanded from the Arnoldian moral elevation provided by ‘high culture’, to reflecting culture as a ‘whole way of life’ of the type described by Raymond Williams (1958). This more democratic and sociological approach to the arts is at the

forefront of the BBC's current cultural strategy, with terms such 'creativity' and 'self-expression' featuring prominently in the discourse surrounding arts content.

The BBC's shift in attitude to arts broadcasting has been, in part, in response to rival broadcasters. The challenge of ITV from 1955 onwards prompted the corporation to broaden its appeal to a non-specialist audience and launch its first television arts magazine programme, *Monitor*, in 1958 as 'part of an overall BBC strategy to fight the commercial opposition, albeit on the BBC's own terms.' (Irwin, 2011: 326). *Monitor* set the precedent for a number of successful BBC arts magazine series in the years that followed, including *Wednesday Magazine* (BBC, 1958-63), *New Release* (BBC Two, 1964-68) and *Omnibus* (BBC One, 1967-2003). As will be discussed in greater detail in section 3, through its informal mode of address and eclectic style, the arts magazine blurred the boundaries between the esoteric and the popular to engage a wide spectrum of viewers with various aspects of the contemporary cultural agenda.

However, the BBC's most significant terrestrial rival in terms of cultural programming came with the launch of Channel 4 in 1982. Channel 4's founding charter committed the new PSB to 'experimentation in both form and content' and its first Chief Executive, Jeremy Isaacs, was determined to encourage 'innovation across the whole range of programmes' and give 'a high priority to the arts' (Hobson 2007: 12). Channel 4 both democratised and politicised the arts, commissioning a range of programmes that had an 'alternative', eclectic and cathartic embrace of varied art forms with an emphasis on contemporary art and innovative video art series such as *Continuous Diary* (1984), *Dadarama* (1985) and *Ghosts in the Machine* (1986-88). In doing so, Channel 4 occupied an active role in setting as well as covering the cultural agenda, to which the BBC had to

respond if it was to maintain its position at the forefront of debates around the arts and cultural value. Broadcast four nights a week for forty weeks in the year, BBC Two's flagship arts magazine, *The Late Show* (1989-95), offered a highly responsive and overtly pluralistic approach to the arts that was designed to counter Channel 4's dominance of innovative arts broadcasting on television.

Although both ITV and Channel Four have seen a significant decline in their arts output over the past three decades, the proliferation of digital and online services has brought arguably fiercer competition. The launch of Artsworld (later to be known as Sky Arts) in 2000 provided the UK's first dedicated satellite channel for the arts in direct competition with the BBC. Just two years later the BBC established BBC Four with a remit to reflect a range of UK and international arts, music and culture. However, since its launch, BBC Four has faced on-going criticism for pushing the arts to the margins of BBC schedules in order to recalibrate mainstream output to compete with the growing plethora of commercial channels. Reviewing the channel's launch night, journalist Stuart Jeffries proclaimed that 'BBC4 has been invented chiefly because BBC1 and BBC2 have given up the ghost as serious suppliers of cultural programmes' (2002).

The emergence of online platforms such as the BBC's on-demand streaming service, BBC iPlayer, have also brought new challenges and opportunities for the production and distribution of public service arts content. Beyond allowing audiences to watch broadcast programmes on-demand, the BBC also commissions 'iPlayer Exclusives' targeted at a younger demographic of viewer than arts broadcasting typically commands. Most prominent of these is *Private View* (2014-), a series of twenty-minute films that use prominent figures in popular culture to guide viewers through areas of the artistic canon. Alongside standalone

content, the BBC Arts website (bbc.co.uk/arts) also hosts auxiliary material designed to enhance and extend audiences' experience of broadcast programmes on television and radio (Genders, 2018).

As argued in the introduction, the BBC is not simply one broadcaster among many but occupies a special place in the UK television ecology and comes under severe political scrutiny. The Conservative government led by Margaret Thatcher (1979-90) was actively hostile to the BBC, favouring a deregulated broadcasting marketplace governed by consumer choice. In 1985, Thatcher tasked a committee led by Alan Peacock with assessing whether the BBC should introduce advertising and sponsorship to supplement its licence fee. Although the proposal was rejected, the neoliberalist underpinnings to the inquiry were still prominent in the findings of the Peacock Committee, which argued that 'consumers were the best judges of their own welfare and they, and not the producers, should determine the character of broadcasting' (Crisell, 1997: 213). The BBC responded to these attacks by defending and augmenting its arts provision. For instance, John Wyver situates *The Late Show's* engagement with contemporary politics as a response to the radical changes made by Thatcher's 'determinedly free-market agenda' (2007: 61). As people became increasingly disenfranchised with the political system and their representation as citizens within it, the BBC used the arts as a forum within which to discuss wider societal issues.

Although the Labour governments under Tony Blair (1997-2007) were much more sympathetic to the BBC and to the public value of the arts more generally, 'New Labour' did not reverse the focus on market forces and value for money. As Robert Hewison argues: 'In order to make his party electable Blair had abandoned the collectivist values of old Labour and accepted the primacy of individualism, private enterprise and the market that had been

established under Thatcher' (2014: 10). Blair's administrations continued and expanded the Tory neoliberalist approach to public policy through an instrumental focus on public-private partnerships and 'management by audit'. Within this political context, Catherine Needham identifies an emerging concept of the 'citizen-consumer', which, she argues, fundamentally marginalises 'an alternative model of participatory citizenship centred on concern for a common interest, collective deliberation and discussion, loyalty to the political community and the value of public engagement as a good in itself' (2003: 5). The establishment of the independent media regulator Ofcom in 2003 represented a profound shift from the notion of broadcasting as a cultural force towards prioritising consumer choice. While Ofcom monitors the provision of arts content across the five main PSB channels (BBC One, BBC Two, ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5), its emphasis on reporting output hours and spend has been criticised for 'knowing the cost of everything and the value of nothing' (Harvey, 2006: 92).

The overall effect of these changes has been a gradual erosion of the BBC's ability to sustain a varied and robust arts provision. Once elected in 2010, the new Conservative-led coalition government froze the BBC's licence fee for six years in what former Culture Secretary Ben Bradshaw called an 'act of cultural and political vandalism' (quoted in Burrell, 2010). Although committed to providing arts programming, the BBC's Director General Tony Hall's introduction to *British, Bold, Creative* – in which he lays out his vision for the 2017-28 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. Hall argues that the BBC must 'reflect the financial times that we live in, focused on an efficient BBC, producing the highest-quality programmes and delivering services providing great value for money' (2015a: 4). As will be discussed in section 3, this places severe pressures on the BBC's arts provision and its continued ability to provide a service for citizens rather than consumers. In

this climate, there is also sustained pressure on the BBC to evidence a return on public investment through audience ratings. However, as the next section details, the question of how to measure audiences has an established history within the BBC and has long been recognised as a particularly sensitive issue for arts broadcasting that is not expected to command high audience figures.

Different forms of audience measurement

Broadcasters and I think everybody involved including producers are always beating themselves with the audience thing. I'm not saying audiences don't matter; audiences do matter. But in a sense audience return isn't the most important thing. Audience appreciation is the most important thing. You might have hit a very niche target area that is really appreciative of that genre in arts and that niche audience really love it.
(Creative Director, independent production company)

Gathering data regarding audience appreciation was first established by the BBC in 1936 and therefore actually predates ratings as a method for measuring audiences. In the ten years prior to this, the composition of the BBC's listening public was virtually unknown to the broadcaster in both scale and sentiment. Reith was particularly averse to audience research as 'he knew that a comprehensive investigation of listener tastes would influence and eventually dictate broadcasting policy, and that worthwhile programmes for minorities would be sacrificed to the ratings' (Crisell, 2002: 46). However, the BBC's Head of Listener Research, Robert Silvey, suggests that there was a growing unease within the corporation during the early 1930s concerning a 'lack of information about listeners and their reactions to programmes' (1974: 1). Coming from his background of working in the statistical department

of the London Press Exchange, Silvey was tasked with conducting the first national survey of listening habits. The importance of taking a sociological rather than statistical approach was reinforced by the BBC's first Director of Talks, Hilda Matheson, who argued that 'information about the modes of presentation that audiences preferred were just as important as information about the types of programme they most listened to' (Nicholas, 2006: 3).

What began as a basic questionnaire sent out to radio licence holders had, by the early 1950s, developed to become known as the 'Reaction Index' measuring 'not so much how many people watched the TV programmes, but to what extent they liked them' (Schwarzkopf, 2014: 38). This has further evolved into what is now termed the audience appreciation index, or 'AIs' in which audiences mark their enjoyment of a programme on a scale from 1 to 10; these responses are then consolidated to give an overall appreciation value between 0 and 100. Despite the increasing prevalence of using ratings as a measurement, AIs continue to be promoted as a valuable tool for measuring the public value of BBC programming and services that typically have a narrower appeal such as arts broadcasting. As articulated in a recent BBC audience information document, 'niche, targeted programming, even though attracting a limited number of viewers, can often score very highly, as it is actively chosen and appreciated by the viewer' (2015b: 6). Indeed, in 2018 BBC Four had the highest appreciation rating across the BBC's network television channels with a score of 82.8, four points above BBC One despite the former only reaching 12.7 per cent of the UK population per week compared to 68.9 per cent by the latter (BBC, 2018: 63).

An appreciation rating is an important measuring tool because, as noted, historically, arts television has commanded smaller audiences in comparison to other genres such as drama, current affairs or sport. Although frequently cited as arts broadcasting's most

celebrated documentary, only an estimated 2.5 million people watched Kenneth Clark's thirteen-part series *Civilisation* when it first aired in 1969 (Walker, 1993: 82). While it is often suggested that this was because a significant proportion of the population was unable to receive BBC Two at the time, internal figures show that of the 'BBC2 public' (that is, those able to receive the channel) only 4.2 per cent actually tuned in (Conlin, 2016: 269). Similarly, despite the number of those with access to BBC Two expanding over the following three years, in 1972 the first episode of John Berger's critically acclaimed series *Ways of Seeing* was only watched by 1.6 per cent of those able to receive the channel (Conlin, 2016: 269).

However, despite being an area of provision that has been accepted as synonymous with specialist audiences, there has been a tangible shift toward a more ratings-led television commissioning culture within the BBC's arts provision. As one BBC executive producer observed: '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.' As further evidence of this trend, a freelance producer described meeting with a channel executive following the successful launch of a new daytime classical music series in 2006:

We went into her office and sort of sat there and she said, "Well, I have to say, when we commissioned this we weren't at all sure that you'd be able to deliver something that worked for us, but you really have". But while she was saying all this to us she was literally spinning round on the chair and kind of tapping away on her computer and looking at the screen and then talking to us. She was looking at the audience figures as they came in minute by minute. That's how obsessed they are.

More broadly, the use of ratings as a quantifiable measure of success is not an entirely recent preoccupation. Georgina Born describes how an emphasis on viewing figures proliferated during the 1990s with the arrival of satellite television stating that, faced with a substantially more competitive multichannel environment, ‘executives became increasingly aware of the huge significance of popularity, as measured by ratings, for the legitimacy of the BBC’ (2005: 62). The BBC’s ‘obsession’ with ratings had a seemingly detrimental impact on the production cultures of specialist factual provision. Examining the dip in history documentary production during the late 1980s and early 1990s, Dafydd Sills-Jones argues that the lack of provision during this time resulted from ‘a change in the ideology of the broadcast production culture, from one that was mainly interested in traditions of expression structured through producer taste and peer review, to a system in which a measurement of audience taste became more and more important’ (2016: 92). Rather than temper this ratings-led agenda, the BBC’s stringent focus on measuring the ‘public value’ of its services during the previous Charter period (2007-17) served to place further pressure on television commissioners to provide quantifiable evidence of value-for-money through audience reach (see Collins, 2007).

The importance of viewing figures for television producers and commissioners is particularly striking if compared to the responses of radio commissioners when asked how they measure programme success. Whilst the head of arts commissioning for television often referred to approximations of measurement such as ‘good’ audience figures for particular channels, the arts commissioning editor for BBC Radio 4 and the World Service admitted he did not ‘know the size of [the audience] as much as I probably should’. This was an attitude also felt by programme-makers, as one freelance producer with experience working in both radio and television explained:

One of the good things about Radio 3 is even though they are more concerned with ratings now than they ever have been, it is at such a kind of lower level of expectation than television, and that isn't a criticism. If you put a programme on BBC Two, it's got to score on the ratings, whereas even now Radio 3, particularly in the evening and things like that, they're prepared to take a bit more of a risk.

As the above account highlights, although ratings are taken into consideration on radio their impact on arts commissioning appears to be substantially less than that on television. In part this can be attributed to the method by which radio audiences are measured. Whereas the Broadcasters Audience Research Board (BARB) provides overnight figures for individual programmes, RAJAR (Radio Joint Audience Research) publish quarterly figures of how many people are listening at particular times, rather than to particular programmes. In this regard, individual programmes face less scrutiny than might be expected in television. Whereas, poor viewing figures for an arts programme on television can make newspaper headlines the following day, the time taken to publish results and the lack of specificity in regard to content make it hard to frame listening figures as performance measures for specific radio programmes. Furthermore, because radio programmes cost substantially less to produce than television, there is less onus on commissioners to demonstrate value for money.

Alongside ratings, an increasingly prominent measure by which to judge the audience's appreciation for arts television programming is its 'talkability', defined by Andrew Green as 'the extent and duration of viewers' on- and off-line conversations during and after a programme or ad has aired' (2014: 5). The head of arts commissioning described talkability as central to the BBC's programming strategy:

You're constantly trying to think of new ways of achieving scale, impact, getting people to want to watch it. Most of it's about wanting people to talk about it and say, "Oh my god, did you see that amazing thing?" So even if you didn't see it, at least now you can catch up with it.

Before the proliferation of online media these were often referred to as 'water cooler moments', alluding to discussions between colleagues in the workplace about the previous evening's television. For broadcasters, the potential of a programme to become part of social discourse beyond the moment of consumption has become a valuable asset in a competitive media landscape. In recent years, the proliferation of social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook has resulted in the emergence of what some have termed the 'virtual water cooler'. However, this phrase is a misnomer given the term's original reference to discussion predominantly occurring some time after a programme has aired. Rather, social media platforms allow users to post instantaneously and read responses to programmes during transmission, a practice that Mark Lochrie and Paul Coulton dub 'second screen viewing' (2011).

Although much of the current academic analysis around the significance of social media in relation to television audiences centres on popular genres such as drama (e.g. Pittman and Tefertiller, 2015) and reality television (e.g. Lochrie and Coulton, 2011), the accounts of those interviewed for the present study demonstrates how social media response is deemed significant for arts commissioners. According to the BBC's Director of Arts:

The main reason for wrapping up *The Review Show* wasn't the low viewing figures. It was the fact that it was silence on Twitter when it was going on. That was the biggest thing for me. [...] Often you can have a programme which not many people have watched, but Twitter is alive with it. Other times, you can do things where it's absolutely silent. It's a very sure sign that it's just wallpaper for people at that moment.

As highlighted above, it is the instantaneous nature of response that holds particular value as a measurement of success. The notion of wanting to avoid being 'just wallpaper for people' chimes with a wider paradigm shift towards an emphasis on media texts that encourage audiences to 'lean forward' and 'interact, engage and pay attention', as opposed to the 'leaning back' media consumer 'passively soaking up low brow, undemanding entertainment' (Wilson, 2016: 182). However, rather than representing a qualitative paradigm shift in audience measurement, social media response is often used as quantifiable evidence of audience attention with the potential for a programme to generate a critical mass of interactions, or 'noise', regarded as a key indicator of success.

An underlining issue in regard to quantifiable measures of value in arts programming is the apparent disparity between audience appreciation and actual engagement. When speaking with numerous interviewees involved in both programme-making and strategy there was a sense that whilst many appreciate arts programming being available on the BBC, far fewer tend to actually engage with it. As the Director of Arts went on to describe:

People want to know that something is there, but not actually consume it very often.

So if you take *The Review Show* that was something that people didn't watch, but they

liked the fact it was there. There's a particular type of person who felt very strongly that *The Review Show* should be there but it didn't translate actually into a desire to watch it. That in the end was the hardest thing in winding that up.

This disparity between appreciation of the value of having arts programmes available and actual viewing figures is in contention with wider political and institutional emphasis on delivering quantifiable evidence of public value. As the case of *The Review Show* highlights, the reliance on both ratings and social media response has had a tangible effect on certain areas of the arts provision. The nature of this impact will now be explored in further detail through focusing on formats once considered a staple of television schedules: the topical arts magazine and the discussion format.

The decline of creative spaces for critical review

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. (Arts Lead, BBC Scotland)

The television arts magazine and the studio-based discussion programme have been regarded historically as important formats for disseminating and widening access to contemporary cultural debates. However, whilst radio continues to provide a valuable critical perspective on contemporary cultural developments, coverage on television has effectively narrowed, leaving few spaces for this type of criticism on screen. Data collected concerning arts output across BBC One, BBC Two, BBC Four, ITV1, Channel 4 and More 4 suggests a significant drop in hours between 2011 and 2016 inclusive. Taking a random four month sample for

each year, the data shows a decrease of 87.5 per cent in hours of magazine programming and a 94 per cent reduction in hours of discussion formats. BBC Two, a channel traditionally associated with more experimental arts programming and cultural review, saw the most significant drop in output hours for both the arts magazine and the discussion format, down by 67 per cent in the same period. The sample also revealed that arts ‘infotainment’ formats on BBC Two had increased from two hours in 2011 to twenty in 2016.

Contributing to this decline is the tendency for topical magazine series to shift toward a documentary-style format. *Monitor*, *The South Bank Show* and more recently *The Culture Show* (2004-15) are all prominent examples of series that started out as magazines before gradually shifting to focus on a single subject each episode. Even more striking as an indicator of television’s reluctance to provide a critical perspective are instances in which programmes dedicated to discussion and review are cancelled completely. As already mentioned, a recent high-profile example is *The Review Show*, which started life on BBC Two in 1994 before being moved to BBC Four in 2013 and eventually cancelled in 2014. The overarching reaction to this in the press was predominantly negative, with Sarah Crompton asserting in the *Telegraph* that ‘arguments about culture, about what is good and what is bad, should be part of the essence of things’ going to conclude 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).

The BBC’s head of arts commissioning acknowledged the decline in the magazine format on television, attributing it in part to increased coverage of the arts in the news and online:

Obviously there are less magazine shows than there were and that's been a big change. That is partly due to the growth of online, partly due to the change in the way news works – news has a lot more culture in it now in the way that newspapers have a lot more culture in them now than they used to. You look at *Newsnight*. It's much more of a blend of topical politics through to current affairs and cultural thought.

Here it is important to note how the BBC itself has contributed to this decline, with much of the rhetoric surrounding the launch of BBC's new arts strategy, BBC Arts, in 2014 promoting the need for a more holistic approach to arts coverage. In particular, BBC One's nightly light entertainment magazine, *The One Show*, was highlighted as part of Tony Hall's vision to put 'arts at the heart of the BBC' and ensure they 'are a part of people's every day experience' (2014). As a result, there has been a marginal increase in arts features within the programme, including short films on the works of artists such as Holbein, live reports from The Hay literary festival, and the launch of a summer art competition offering viewers the opportunity to have their work displayed at the Royal Academy in London. The BBC has also made a notable effort towards increasing arts coverage within its overall news provision through the creation of the role of Arts Editor. Reaching 80 per cent of UK adults across its services each week (BBC, 2018: 62), BBC News is presented as an ideal platform for raising the profile of the arts across the BBC's output.

However, although typically commanding a larger viewership in terms of ratings, it is inadequate to claim that this serves as a suitable alternative to the dedicated arts magazine. Despite the introduction of the role of Arts Editor, the amount of coverage arts receives is still largely determined by a wider news agenda that tends to privilege breaking stories from other areas of public life such as politics, health, education and science. Furthermore, when

the arts are covered it is often in the context of issues such as funding cuts or high-profile controversies. As the arts critic Michael Billington asserts in his short essay 'The Decline of Criticism': 'In a period of high inflation and low funding, the arts are a running news-story and criticism is inevitably upstaged by the latest report from the Casualty Department' (1990: 37). A freelance journalist who had previously worked for both Channel 4 and BBC news also described the precarious and limited nature of this coverage, stating:

If you turn on the television news and there are full-time correspondents, you might get a piece about when the North Korean embassy opened up for its first art exhibition that would have got on the news, and we certainly did it on *Front Row*. But often it's fighting – this is the bigger challenge of fighting with breaking news developments and often that's the story that gets dropped.

Such accounts highlight a fundamental disparity between ambitions to increase arts coverage in the mainstream provision and how this is achieved in practice. The evidence from commentators and BBC employees suggest that such strategies have contributed to an overall decline in both the quantity and depth of critical arts coverage available on the BBC.

This apparent gap in arts provision on television is particularly evident when compared to the accounts from those working in radio. In common with television, the arts magazine and review formats have historically been a prominent feature within BBC radio schedules, with programmes such as *The Arts This Week* (Third Programme, 1969-71), *Critic's Forum* (BBC Radio 3, 1974-90) and *Kaleidoscope* (BBC Radio 4, 1973-98) providing weekly discussion on a range of topics including theatre, books, films and the

visual arts. Although television's commitment to the magazine format has evidently waned over the past twenty years, it continues to be a staple of the BBC's speech radio schedules.

Perhaps the most prolific example of the arts magazine on BBC network radio today is Radio 4's flagship topical arts strand, *Front Row* (1998-). Airing every weekday evening at 7.15pm, its content is driven by recent developments in various fields of culture, from popular film and music to more esoteric areas of visual arts and literature. One of the presenters of the programme described the importance of maintaining a critical position to the subjects and artists covered as fundamental to its character and identity:

My bigger interest is, and I think it's something that *Front Row* tries to do - the phrase my editors uses is "interrogate the arts". So you're looking at, you know, who is this new writer and what is this interesting new idea? How are they doing it? Especially if they are doing something innovative. [...] But also to ask, is this good or bad?

Free from requirements to appease advertisers and shareholders, the BBC has traditionally been positioned as the most conducive environment in which to nurture these values. The prominence of *Front Row* in Radio 4's schedules not only gives it a significant place within arts reviewing through its coverage and reach, but its daily weekday presence also ensures that the programme is at the forefront of the contemporary cultural agenda.

Still, beyond a loss of critical perspective, the concentration of topical coverage within a non-visual medium limits the range of creative opportunities for communicating ideas about the arts. My interviewees often referred back to such series as examples of high quality arts programming. As one BBC executive producer remarked:

Arts broadcasting at its best has always engaged in a kind of critical way and has itself often been quite creative. I mean a lot of the filmmaking on *The Late Show* or on *Arena* was itself done with great style.

As discussed in the introduction, the television arts magazine has historically been regarded as an innovative format, with many early series praised for their distinctive filmmaking from now acclaimed figures such as John Schlesinger and Ken Russell, the latter of which exclaimed that ‘Monitor was and still remains the one and only English experimental film school ever’ (In Dickinson, 2007: 70). Series such as *Monitor*, *The Late Show* and *Arena* were overt in their resistance to the prescribed forms of television, and as such have been held up as some of the most creative pieces of filmmaking not just in arts but also within television more broadly. Most significantly, they carved out spaces in the schedule for creative expression in terms of form as well as subject matter.

The departure of the dedicated arts magazine format from BBC television has both contributed to and become the symptom of a broader decline in this tradition of creative programme making within the arts. According to Wyver, ‘the importance of these programmes lies in the way in which they break with television’s usual forms of dealing with the arts and with the medium’s dominant form of vision’ (1998: 42). However, the institutional contexts informing BBC arts production have changed substantially since series such as *The Late Show* and *Arena* achieved critical acclaim. The contemporary ratings-led commissioning culture described by many programme-makers is one that privileges competitive and economic value over that of creative or cultural value, with already limited

funding becoming increasingly concentrated on arts programming that conforms to, rather than subverts television's dominant forms.

In a bid to attract broader audiences, there has been a notable shift in commissioning priorities toward arts programming that utilises the common formats and narrative conventions of more popular television genres. Examining arts output on BBC One, *The Big Painting Challenge* is in many ways reminiscent of the hugely successful *Great British Bake Off* (2010-) and other popular competition formats such as *The Apprentice* (2005-); *Fake or Fortune?* (2011-) feeds off the enduring popularity of the television crime drama. The BBC maintains that the use of popular formats offers new perspectives and broadens the appeal of arts programming in a way that strengthens, rather than diminishes its ability to 'inform, educate and entertain'. Nevertheless, a number of producers raised pertinent concerns that other areas of the arts provision are being left underserved, with already limited resources disproportionately directed toward this type of programming in pursuit of high ratings. One BBC executive producer observed:

Quite a lot of the time programmes which I would not really call arts programmes, programmes like *Historic Gardens* 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.

Programmes such as *The Big Painting Challenge* and *Fake or Fortune?* have come to exemplify more deep-seated concerns that there has been a decisive and possibly irreversible shift toward an arts proposition characterised by more risk-averse, formatted output. In the late 1990s the BBC's board of governors reportedly urged the BBC to 'rise above the ratings

game’ and be ‘unashamedly public service in the quality and range of its programmes’, including more arts programming in peak-time television schedules (Gibson 1999). Yet from the perspective of producers and other commentators it would appear that this focus on quantifying public value has only become more pervasive and deep-seated as the media landscape has become more competitive. In an interview with *The Times* in 2013, artistic director of the National Theatre, Nicholas Hytner criticised the BBC for ‘neglecting the arts’, asserting that ‘they’ve really got to detach themselves from this *Downton* ratings mentality’ (quoted in Malvern 2013). Such statements exemplify fundamental concerns with the use of ratings and social media response as a measure of value and their detrimental impact on the delivery of a rich and diverse arts proposition.

Conclusion

As discussed in section two, the BBC has, since the 1930s, concerned itself with audience attitudes and response. While the history of BBC arts broadcasting is one that has demonstrated resistance to marketisation, the neoliberalisation of both public life and broadcasting policy from the 1980s onwards has resulted in a seemingly irremediable shift toward a production culture that prioritises ratings and audience return at the expense of cultural value. As this article has revealed, both commissioners and producers contend that a significant number of licence payers ‘appreciate’ the availability of arts programming, but the disparity between audience attitudes and actual engagement is at odds with broader pressures to provide quantifiable measures of success. In order to achieve higher ratings, television commissioning strategies have become focused increasingly on low-cost, low-risk programming that has been described by producers as overtly derivative in its format and limited creatively both in subject matter and style. Although commissioners argue that the value of popular formats such as *Fake or Fortune?* and *The Big Painting Challenge* lies in

introducing new audiences to the arts, for producers their proliferation has resulted in a dearth of imaginative programming and cultural criticism on screen. This is in stark contrast to the continued prominence of both the arts magazine and discussion formats on BBC radio. The findings of this article would suggest that BBC radio's continued commitment to providing a critical perspective on the arts is largely driven by the absence of the ratings-led commissioning culture that is evident in television.

The loss of cultural criticism on television prompts questions about how the BBC is positioning itself as both a public service broadcaster and arts provider within the contemporary media landscape. Further to this, the increase in commercial competition from large international media conglomerates and online providers such as Netflix raises pertinent concerns about the future sustainability of public service arts content on a global scale. Indeed, as the first section highlighted, PSB and the arts have always been ideologically as well as strategically entwined. Although the Arnoldian paternalism of John Reith now appears antiquated, the vital contribution of the arts to personal and civic life in Britain is still widely accepted by broadcasters and policymakers alike. The arts not only improve our quality of life, but also make us better citizens through offering alternative perspectives on contemporary issues and fostering mutual understanding between cultures and communities. Although the BBC should be held to account, the focus on quantifying inherently unquantifiable subjective values in terms of social, cultural and individual benefits raises pertinent questions around whose interests these processes serve. By failing to attend to the fundamental cultural value of services and programming, the BBC's arts provision is increasingly built on a need to demonstrate value for money to policymakers, rather than actually serve the public as citizens.

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¹ The interviews analysed were undertaken for a Doctoral thesis examining the evolution of BBC arts broadcasting in the digital landscape. Interviewees are identified by job title to situate their experiences within the context of their particular role and status within the BBC.

² The quantitative data utilised in section three is drawn from a 2017 research project entitled 'Arts on Television: a quantitative study of terrestrial broadcast schedules'. The research was funded by Cardiff University and led by Dr Caitriona Noonan.