

## **TV GENRES IN RELENTLESS DECLINE**

**Arts, Children's, Current Affairs, Education,  
Natural History, Religion and Science**

**JEREMY TUNSTALL**

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**Lord David Puttnam**

**A Future for Public Service Television: Content and Platforms in a  
Digital World**

Arts, Children's, Education, Science, Religion, Natural History and Current Affairs are seven UK TV genres which have been, and still are, in relentless decline – despite their traditional status as essential elements of UK Public Service Broadcasting.

The decline has been in both audience numbers and in hours transmitted. This was evident in a sharp contrast between what 200 British TV producers told me in 1990-91 and what a separate sample of 150 producers and executive producers have told me in recent interviews.<sup>1</sup>

British television has become much more market-driven and commercial. Sky and Virgin subscribers have access, each week, to thousands of hours of fresh American programming. Since the 1970s the BBC has lost one third of its audience and ITV (despite ITV2, ITV3 and ITV4) has lost over half of its audience. ITV has lost much of its advertising revenue to Google.

In the 1990s British TV production was casualized. In the 1980s, with the main exception of the actors, most British TV workers had been in secure long-term employment and were protected by strong trade unions. Today all television workers – including the senior people, like most executive producers, are insecurely employed.

The BBC's central position is significantly worse than its senior managers told two Commons Select Committees (in 2014-15 and 2015-16).<sup>2</sup> The senior managers are well aware of the severe insecurity experienced by most TV people, including executive

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremy Tunstall, *Television Producers*. London and New York: Routledge, 1993.

Jeremy Tunstall, *BBC and Television Genres in Jeopardy*. Oxford and New York: Peter Lang, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> House of Commons: Culture, Media and Sport Committee, *The Future of the BBC*, February 2015.  
House of Commons: Culture, Media and Sport Committee, *BBC Charter Revenue*, February 2016.

producers (inside or outside the BBC and ITV). The senior managers know that their own quite generous salaries are needed in order to prevent them from accepting twice the salary at Sky or Virgin or in an American owned indie production company. Top BBC managers are aware that successful executive producers in their thirties are tempted to defect. As the financial squeeze continues – with the Americans offering still more money and the BBC able to afford still less – there will be further decline across most, or all, of the 21 BBC genres. But the BBC top management – as in the long-running Savile saga – prefers to avert its gaze and to present a falsely confident face to politicians, press and public.

## **PUBLIC SERVICE GENRES IN DECLINE**

*Children's* programming, back in 1990, had a solid late afternoon presence on both BBC and ITV. Today there is no such late afternoon children's programming on either BBC1 or ITV1. Instead the BBC has two dedicated children's outlets, namely CBBC and CBeebies, which do quite well between 4pm and 6pm. But most viewing by schoolchildren either involves non-children's British programming or it involves American channels, including children's channels provided by the likes of Disney, Nickelodeon, Warner and Discovery. British children are, in practice, being groomed to comprehend and to adopt American slang, teenage values, humour and celebrity culture.

UK Arts programming peaked in the 1980s and has since declined. For over three decades ITV's *The South Bank Show* averaged 23 programmes per year, but in 2010 it was cancelled. In a period of five years (2006-11) British television's annual Arts budget fell from

£72 million to £44 million – a real terms cut of almost one half. Such a savage cut inevitably leaves the remaining half of the genre’s workers feeling highly insecure.

*Education* programming – both for Schools and for general adult audiences – was an important ingredient of traditional PSTV, but has largely vanished from mainstream television; it is still alive and well on BBC Radio 4.

*Religion* survives as a British TV genre. Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and Sikhs have joined British TV’s Religion team. Much of the programming is defensive; each of these acknowledged religions seeks quietly to consolidate its UK position through alliances with other TV genres, especially Art, History and Music.

*Natural History*, also, has declined as a public service TV project. The BBC Bristol Natural History Unit still does many hours of programming. But this is largely lowish budget, British based output, such as *Springwatch* and its seasonal siblings; or medium budget series about a particular giant species; or about one remote and exotic country. David Attenborough still presents some of these cheaper series, but he no longer effectively authors and creates high budget, high prestige, multi-species, and multi-location, TV series. During 1979-2008 David Attenborough authored an oeuvre of 83 hours of authored BBC television. The three most ambitious series – *Life on Earth*, *Living Planet* and *Trials of Life* – involved a total of 38 TV hours during 1979-90. For these series (and a few others during 1991-2008) Attenborough played seven or eight roles (alongside an executive producer). He had the original idea; he sketched out each episode’s contents; he kept in touch with filming crews around the world; he later joined the filming and spoke to camera in the desert or high up in the rain forest canopy; he was consulted on the massive film edit. Towards the

end of the production sequence Attenborough wrote and spoke the few, but vital, extra words needed to add to the edited film; he also wrote the book of the series and he led the publicity effort. These Attenborough-authored top-of-the-range British NHU series ceased in 2008. David Attenborough was now too old for the often extreme filming conditions. These prodigally filmed series – with their heavy reliance on both new Science and new Technology – were finding it hard to get major co-sponsors. The American Discovery company was ceasing to be a co-funder and has now become an aggressive commercial rival.

Since 1990 the *Science* genre has seen a big drop in its hours-on-air and an even bigger drop in its total audiences. In 1990 the BBC had four Science series – *Horizon*, *Antenna*, *Tomorrow's World* and *Q.E.D.*; both ITV and C4 also had long-running Science series. Back in 1990 *Horizon's* focus was on Science and Scientist research teams. But now *Horizon* starts with the viewer's human concerns and addresses Ageing, Alcohol, Allergies, Body Clocks, Brains, Car Crashes, Children, Cosmetics, Diet, Dogs, and so on.

*Current Affairs* is a seventh genre which has seen huge decline. British TV Current Affairs had its golden years in the 1970s, when the BBC's *Panorama* and ITV's *World in Action*, *This Week* and *Weekend World* competed against each other; in the 1970s these four series were reaching a collective weekly audience of about 20 million Britons. In recent times ITV and C4 still have small Current Affairs outputs; but C4 has now cut back on *Dispatches* and its groundbreaking *Unreported World*. Most big foreign stories and big UK investigations are too difficult and too expensive, under today's Current Affairs conditions and budgets.

*Science and Current Affairs* executive producers and commissioners told me that they face a common problem. It is now very difficult to attempt investigative reporting about the Pharmaceutical industry or about most large multi-national companies. The biggest American, British and European companies now defend themselves with aggressive and expensive lawyers. TV producers do not want to spend much of their time and programme budget on their own lawyers, on legal meetings, and on the assessment of legal risks. Human narratives are much simpler and cheaper than corporate investigations.

*Sport* was part of BBC Reithian Radio in the 1930s. In the 1980s the BBC still led the Sports genre – mainly by providing brief “Highlight” recordings from Football and a range of other sports. Today the BBC and ITV together carry as many hours of sport as they did in 1988. But Sky, Virgin and BT now dominate “Live Sport”; their subscribers can access eleven sports channels, which offer 250 hours of sport each 24 hours.

## **A FEW PUBLIC SERVICE TV SUCCESSES**

Several other genres still provide some Education and Information along with large dollops of entertainment and consumer appeal:

- *Travel* programming in 1990 focused on package holidays, but today has returned to its earlier love of the long rail journey.
- *Home* finding in the *Location, Location, Location* tradition provides some useful information with much consumer appeal.

- *Quiz* shows continue to be very cheap and very popular (not least on BBC2) and offer their own distinctive education plus entertainment mixes.

The BBC has several long-running shows which are hard to classify within genres, but which generate their own unique mixes of education/information/entertainment. These include *Antiques Roadshow* (began 1977), *Top Gear* (began 1978), *Crimewatch* (1984), *Countryfile* (1988), *The One Show* (2007) and *Who Do You Think You Are?* (2008). The normal location of these unique shows is on BBC1, which (like BBC2 and BBC4) has very few viewers under age 35.

## **TV DRAMA AND NEWS**

Britain's two most prestigious, and most popular, TV genres are *Drama* and *News*. Drama and News together deliver about 45 of each week's top 100 largest UK audiences.

Soap Drama is still very much the most popular genre or sub-genre. In cost-per-hour and cost-per-audience, soap drama is fairly cheap. UK Soap is unremittingly British; it is also seen, within TV Drama, as a vital training ground – especially for writers, but also for actors and executive producers.

Three other Drama sub-genres are more American influenced. Much "Quality Popular" ITV and BBC TV drama has been Crime Drama, which must compete directly with aggressive American Crime imports. Costume Drama (often based on Austen, Bronte, Dickens or Tolstoy novels, or freshly conceived like *Downton Abbey*) typically involves

American co-funding and some American actors. Finally, more original “artistic” drama also often depends on American co-funding and audience interest. Uniquely in British TV, Drama has to compete with the full tidal wave of Hollywood’s Movie-TV-Cable-Online output, both present and past. The switch of HBO, and other high budget American TV drama, to Sky exemplifies a broader trend. Most British Drama producers say that their budgets have been severely cut. But producers in other genres strongly assert that it is their budgets which have been and still are being cut – as part of a BBC and ITV policy of protecting Drama funding.

*News* is the most important TV genre. No other genre is stripped across BBC and ITV four times each weekday; no other genre has anything like the BBC’s 24 hour home-and-foreign all-news offerings on TV, on Radio, and Online. Both BBC News and ITV News have bigger daily UK audiences than the largest newspaper print-and-online news services (of the Mail, Guardian, Trinity Mirror and Telegraph groups). BBC News has become the UK’s leading national news agenda-setter. National newspaper Editors must hope that their “exclusives” will be recognised as such, and picked up, by the BBC.

BBC Online is seen by struggling newspapers as having unfair (“subsidized”) advantages. While the BBC is the dominant news agenda setter in British national politics, it must remain non-partisan and neutral. But the newspapers have recently become more dominant than ever in terms of Online as well as on paper, partisan political opinion and comment. Meanwhile most newspapers are happy to focus their opinion and comment weapons on the BBC’s latest sins, large and small; and the newspapers are happy to be seeing a cutback in the funding of BBC News from 2016 onwards.



## **CALIFORNIA COMMUNICATIONS, UK NEWSPAPERS AND UK GOVERNMENTS VERSUS PUBLIC SERVICE TV**

Since 1916, Hollywood movies have dominated UK cinema screens. Since 1916 there have been 20 UK Prime Ministers and not one of them has comprehended the strength of Hollywood in the UK and Europe.<sup>3</sup>

Since 1990 (under Prime Ministers Major, Blair, Brown and Cameron) the BBC, ITV and Channel Four – in their efforts to deliver Public Service Television – have been losing the struggle against three linked forces.

Firstly, an increasingly merged California Communications industry – which combines Hollywood video product with Silicon Valley tech – becomes, year by year, an ever more formidable competitor. Meanwhile California sees China, India (and other 100 million plus population nations) as largely media self-sufficient; however Europe, with its many small-but-wealthy countries is the key export market.<sup>4</sup> London is now designated as the American EMEA Headquarters for Europe, Middle East and Africa. Californian Communications companies are now aligned from City Airport in East London via London Bridge, Saint Pancras, Mayfair, and especially from West London to Heathrow. Much London programming is now produced by Independent Producer companies which are, in fact, American (or Euro-American) owned.

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas H. Guback, *The International Film Industry: Western Europe and America since 1945*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969.

Jeremy Tunstall, *The Media Are American*. London: Constable, and New York: Columbia University Press, 1977.  
Davie Puttnam, *The Undeclared War*, London: HarperCollins, 1997.

<sup>4</sup> Jeremy Tunstall, *The Media Were American*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

The strongest single California Communications entity in the UK is the Murdoch-controlled Sky-Fox-News grouping. The combined UK revenue of American Sky and American Virgin is three times that of the BBC.

Secondly, the BBC and PSTV are confronted by the UK newspaper and online press – with its leadership of opinion and its urgent need for digital salvation.

Thirdly, the BBC and PSTV have been diminished by successive Governments (Major, Blair, Brown, Cameron). Since the arrival of Sky in 1989-90, and especially in 2010 and 2015, the BBC has been asked to do more with less money. Meanwhile American controlled Sky and Virgin, plus British Telecom, are increasingly creaming off selected high cost-and-prestige genres. The steady decline of the BBC and PSTV since 1990 seems very unlikely to be reversed.