

A Future for Public Service Television: Securing the Future of Arts Broadcasting

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This inquiry is a welcome contribution to the current debate on the future of public service broadcasting. Significant structural and technological changes within the industry make this a crucial moment to reflect on the value of television. Here we define value in the broadest terms to encompass cultural, social, political and economic value. This wide conception of value is especially pertinent in those areas of television that traditionally have been difficult to sustain commercially.

The remit of the inquiry is broad but, following the submissions by Professor Jeremy Tunstall (City University) on genres under threat and Professor Jeanette Steemers (University of Westminster) specifically addressing children's programmes, we as television scholars wish to draw further attention to the specific challenges facing arts programming going forward. Based on our on-going research with the television industry and arts organisations around this issue, we also offer recommendations to the inquiry in order to sustain a culturally rich and diverse programme provision in the UK¹.

The Challenge Facing Arts Broadcasting

In 2014 Tony Hall, Director General of the BBC, announced that the Corporation would place the arts centre-stage across all BBC platforms (BBC 2014). While this

¹ Over the past two years we have carried out a series of interviews with a number of stakeholders in this area including: broadcasters, independent production companies, freelance producers, and arts organisations. The aim of the research is to understand how arts programming is responding to changes in the broadcasting landscape in the UK. More information about the research can be found here: www.artsbroadcasting.com

offers some good news for both those working in that area of programming and audiences with an interest in the subject of arts, the wider trend is one of decline.

Research commissioned by Ofcom categorises arts television as a genre 'at risk' of disappearing as relatively small audiences are unable to offset increased production costs (Mediatique 2014, 10). A decline is also evident in Ofcom's (2012) own research which finds that in the five years to 2011 spending on arts programming by the five main terrestrial broadcasters fell by 39%. Regular strands, which arguably are the lifeblood of any genre, have been cancelled (e.g. *The Review Show* (BBC 1994 - 2014) or moved to niche subscription channels (e.g. *South Bank Show* ITV 1978 - 2010; Sky Arts 2012 -). Meanwhile, ITV and Channel 5 broadcast little regular arts content, and Channel 4's peak-time arts output fell from 30 hours in 2009 to just 19 hours in 2014 (Ofcom 2015, 26). There is a clear downward trend in the visibility of arts content within the schedules, particularly during peak-time.

This decline is the confluence of a number of factors. Decreases in commissioning and production budgets mean fewer resources for producers. Within specialist factual genres such as arts, this can have a limiting effect on the coverage of the subject, access to expertise, and the aesthetics of the final programme. Furthermore, our research directly highlights that even within the PSB's traditionally aligned to serving niche audiences, in a more competitive, multi-channel environment the commercial necessity of appealing to a mass audience has become the norm. This has had a direct impact on the tone, subject-choice and scheduling of arts leading to accusations of marginalisation and 'dumbing down'.

Two further unique elements underscore the need for intervention within the arts genre specifically. Unlike UK-originated children's content, which has had some success in accessing international markets, arts television has historically been a national construct and rarely sells beyond national markets. It often struggles to find an international audience at a time when many PSBs and independent producers are looking to expand their revenue streams through overseas content and format sales. Furthermore, the genre's decline in peak-time makes arts content less attractive to

independent production companies and over the past decade there has been a marked decline in the number of production companies specialising in this content. Given the structural and commercial changes in the television sector, both of these limitations suggest that the downward trajectory of arts content on British public service broadcasting is unlikely to be reversed without a deliberate strategy to save it.

Why is Arts Broadcasting Vital?

One of the founding principles of PSB is that broadcasters should engage with the totality of life in Britain including its cultural life and artistic community. For a large portion of the population, television is their primary way to engage with the arts across the UK. If this genre disappears from free to air channels it denies access to the whole population to the range of arts and culture available. It also renders a whole area of society effectively invisible at a time when the Warwick Commission (2015: 32) argues that 'too few of the population have access to as rich a culturally expressive life as might otherwise be open to them'. Therefore, marginalizing art and culture on television further marginalizes these spheres in everyday life.

British arts and culture is a globally successful sector communicating British creativity and ideas worldwide. It is a significant employer, with cultural and creative sectors constituting 'the fastest growing industry in the UK' (Warwick, 2015: 20). However, it also contributes to local wellbeing and features in a variety of national policy agendas including health, education, urban regeneration and social inequality. Television offers it further reach and visibility that has both economic and cultural value. Content which is critical and engages with debates on the sustainability of the arts contributes to a more vibrant sector. In return the arts sector makes important contributions to the television sector and the wider creative industries in terms of creative innovation and talent. This is a delicate ecosystem and so the health of the creative industries depends on the health of the arts and cultural sectors and vice versa.

Despite claims that we have moved into a 'post-broadcast age', the findings of reports such as that by the Warwick Commission suggest that 'TV remains a key feature of most people's everyday cultural life' (2015: 33). In order for broadcasters to fulfill their remit for public service a mixed ecology of programmes is needed ranging from drama to sports, news to comedy. Arts, of course, needs to be part of this mix. A strong arts proposition will serve to offer audiences high quality, informative programmes which speak to the diversity of creativity in the UK and beyond. Everyone should have access to the arts regardless of economic or social background and a healthy public broadcasting system will reflect these values.

Recommendations

We offer these recommendations as practical interventions in this area drawing on the insight gathered in our research.

1. Given the likely changes to both funding and content provision (e.g. the introduction of the BBC studio system) after charter review, it may be time to comprehensively explore new models for funding content which the market may struggle to provide. This extends beyond just the arts to other genres, which in his submission Tunstall argues are at risk of terminal decline, most notably in the areas of specialist factual and current affairs. A number of models have been proposed but these offer their own issues. For instance, contestable funding has been mooted in this area, however like Steemers and her concerns with that as a model for funding children's content, we have grave concerns as to whether (given the unique characteristics of the arts television market described above) sufficient interest and innovation will come from outside the broadcasters. The imposition of quotas has also been used before to protect threatened genres (e.g. religion). Our interviews with stakeholders suggest that this is not viewed favourably and would likely lead to further ghettoisation. We believe this would exacerbate a downward slide in both quality and quantity of content. Therefore, we would

recommend that greater consideration of new and existing models of funding be considered for genres 'at risk' such as arts.

2. At the moment the BBC is the largest producer of arts programming. Furthermore, with content across its services reaching on average 96.5% of the British population a week (Warwick, 2015: 33), the BBC occupies an important position within the wider arts ecology in Britain in terms of reach and visibility. Any change to the BBC's structure and the provision of content will impact on all genres, but most especially arts which is already precarious. Given the plans to move the majority of BBC production to a commercial subsidiary (BBC 2015) we recommend that the place of arts in the proposed system needs careful consideration given the wider trends outlined above.
3. While Ofcom and its associated research have signaled issues with the provision of arts content the regulator has yet to offer any viable strategies for the future. We would like more detailed monitoring of arts by the regulator and greater consultation about future provision.
4. Changes to the governance of the BBC also seem likely following the consultation process around Charter Review. Whether the BBC Trust remains or is replaced by another system, we recommend that arts remain a visible part of their agenda and that there is sufficient accountability regarding the provision both in terms of the quantity and nature of the programming.
5. While we lament the decline of arts on Channel 4 in peak-time we also acknowledge the creative risks it has taken and its partnership with both artists and arts organisations (e.g. the short-form series *Random Acts*). We believe that this activity is dependent on Channel 4 being publicly owned and we see this as yet another reason to keep the ownership of channel as it is for the time being.
6. We believe there are both economic and cultural rationales for greater provision of content for and with young people. Undoubtedly, young people have different consumption habits (e.g. preference for online consumption rather than linear schedules). Yet arts programming has the potential to offer novel forms of engagement and opportunities for creative expression and further investment should be made into developing innovative content

creation and distribution strategies that reflect this. Engaging with young people in this way will also encourage them to see the arts as a viable career aspiration thereby strengthen the sectors.

7. We also believe there is a need for greater diversity in arts broadcasting in terms of subject matter and form, and in the diversity of those working in this genre behind and in front of the camera. Our research found that many within the field regard current arts provision as too narrow in its focus and often reluctant to take creative risks. The arts are one of the most vibrant and diverse areas of public life and it is important to have programming which reflects this. Public service broadcasters must provide space to take creative risks and should strengthen their distinctiveness through investment in programming that is creative in both style and content. We also advocate an ongoing commitment within all PSBs to diversity through paid training opportunities extending access to this professional space beyond those from more privileged backgrounds.
8. The reduction or closure of BBC Four as part of the cost-cutting strategy of the BBC has been a concern shared by a number of our interviewees. While some would argue that the closure of BBC Four would mean more arts content on BBC Two, we believe this is a simplistic understanding of the current television landscape. We believe there is a strong argument for maintaining BBC Four in terms of protecting specialist factual provision (not only in the arts) and as tangible support for the wider arts ecology in Britain.
9. We would like to see the broadcasters who are covered in this inquiry engage with arts events and communities from across the UK, not just in the capital. We recognize that much of the arts is centred in London but the emergence of creative hubs, including within the devolved nations, suggests that innovative content can be sourced from around the UK. Our research highlights that many arts organisations, venues and artists outside of London feel excluded from the mechanisms of broadcasting and its coverage of the arts despite their critically acclaimed and successful work. We would like to see further investment in developing on-going relationships between

national broadcasters and arts organisations to bring audiences coverage of events from across the UK.

10. As academics who work and live in Wales, we both have an ongoing interest in the provision of broadcasting for and from the nations of the UK – a subject which requires its own space for consideration within the inquiry. In the specific case of Wales, policy-making in relation to culture is devolved to Welsh Government while broadcasting remains a Westminster issue. Our research indicates there is a dearth of specialist factual content that represents the arts and culture in Wales both on network and opt-out services. In 2014 Ofcom reported that Wales had seen ‘the biggest decrease, by more than a fifth, in spend on nations’ programming since 2008’ (11). This represents a particularly chilly climate for arts television, with many of those interviewed within the sector considering the present arts proposition in Wales inadequate. If one of the duties of PSB is to represent the UK, its nations, regions and communities, then it is crucial that there is a strong voice for Wales that reflects the contemporary cultural life of the nation. In order to address this significant weakness in the overall public service provision, we would advocate the need for a more coherent strategy for arts programming that both serves licence fee payers in Wales and promotes Welsh creativity and culture across the network.

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