

Reflecting a Changing World: The value of television which engages us with the wider world

Submission to “A Future for Public Service Television: Content and Platforms in a Digital World” By the International Broadcasting Trust.

Introduction

A critical aspect of a functioning democracy is for citizens to be well informed in order to participate effectively in that democracy. One of the most important ways that people are informed is through mainstream media. The International Broadcasting Trust is concerned with the engagement of the UK public as not just UK citizens, but as global citizens. It is our view that television content which informs and interests mass audiences with the world outside the UK should be a key ingredient of public service television.

Those who are already interested in international affairs will be able to find such content on specialist platforms, in newspapers, online and on radio, but television has a unique ability to engage mass audiences which is why it is so important for civic society. IBT believes it should be the right of all citizens to be informed and engaged with international issues through a range of programming on mainstream channels at peak times, not just an elite who seek such content out.

IBT has been conducting research into the nature of international content on UK television since 1989 and the findings in this paper are based on that research. IBT’s research shows that as a result of the increased commercialisation of and competition within the broadcasting sector over the past 25 years, the opportunity for mainstream audiences to be engaged with informative, serious content about the wider world has been significantly reduced. Instead of broadening our horizons, it appears that public service television runs the risk of reinforcing stereotypes and disengaging us from the wider world.

Why international content matters

At a time when the impact of world events has never been felt more strongly, it is clear that it is important that we understand the external forces which are shaping our lives: global conflicts, international politics, emerging economies, climate change, our relationship with Europe, and the level of influence the UK has on the international stage.

If we want to live in a country which is outward-looking, interested in doing business with other countries, wanting to be involved in international debates and policy-making, then as a society we need to be well informed about what is happening in the wider world.

Television plays a vital role in engaging us with the wider world because, despite the growth of the internet, it remains the main source of information for people in the UK about what is happening in the world.¹ Content on television about the wider world includes both items in news bulletins but also other longer-form programming, such as factual, children's, drama and entertainment output which are equally important because they provide a more rounded perspective of the world. If the scope, scale and financial resources of our public television services are reduced, this will lead to a further reduction in the quality and range of content which engages us with events beyond our shores and is likely to lead to a more insular UK society.

A narrowing range of content for UK audiences in a globalised world

Since 1989 when IBT and its sister organisation 3WE began conducting research into the coverage of international events on UK TV much has changed, but public service television does not reflect the global evolution of the last three decades.

We now live in a world where events in far off countries have a far more direct impact on our lives; companies operate multi-nationally; UK society has become more multi-racial; and the international political landscape is increasingly complex.

With increased globalisation, one would assume that public service broadcasters would dedicate more time and effort to engage audiences with international stories because they are more relevant today than ever before, however this is far from the case.

Non-News Content:

In 1989 there were 1037 hours of new international output on the four TV channels available in the UK; in 2014 there were 686 hours on the five main PSB channels. This drop is partly ameliorated by provision on the PSB portfolio channels, but these channels attract significantly smaller audiences and therefore have far less impact.

Alongside the reduction in the volume, the nature of international output has changed². Serious factual programmes have been largely replaced by softer factual entertainment genres such as reality series, travel challenges, and property programmes. These programmes, while set in international locations, often foreground Brits abroad rather than engaging us with the country in which they are filmed. While they have a role to

¹ Television is still the most popular source of information in the UK: 75% of people use TV news as a source of information about world events and 82% of the public rank the most important purpose of broadcasting to inform ourselves and to increase our understanding of the world. (Ofcom) The five main public service broadcasters attract 78% of all viewing and 95% of audiences still watch live or recorded tv. (Ofcom)

² Losing Reality (3WE, 2002) pg 1, Reflecting a Changing World (IBT, 2015) pg 5

play and are popular, often they do not increase our understanding of other countries, other cultures, religions or ways of life.

The number of countries covered by public service television has also decreased³ and the topics covered in those countries tends to remain the same year in, year out, so that North America, for example, strongly features crime-related programmes, the Middle East is characterised by conflict, and France and Spain focus on property and reality holiday shows.⁴ IBT's 2011 research highlighted the impact of this trend:

This research... reveals the extent to which some topics and some parts of the world receive little or no new coverage through factual, drama or entertainment programming. Most notably, new factual programming relating to the Middle East and North Africa was found to be almost entirely absent from UK television in 2010. Algeria, Bahrain, Lebanon, Libya, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Yemen were not the principal subject of any factual programme in 2010. So, when popular uprisings took place in this region in 2011, the lack of previous television coverage meant that many people in the UK had little information about this part of the world.⁵

News

With the decline in informative international non-news content since 1989, our reliance on news as a primary source of information about the wider world has increased and this has also led to a narrowing of our understanding because news tends to present a view of the world dominated by disease, disaster, corruption and conflict. The international news agenda of the main news bulletins is relatively narrow: they have a strong tendency to cover the same topics, countries and stories and many bulletins reject all but the biggest international news stories.⁶ Research in 2001 went as far as suggesting that the “media are engaged in the mass production of social ignorance”⁷ and this limited representation of other countries on television effectively means that audiences are misinformed about the wider world because of the low level of explanation and context which is able to be given in a half hour news bulletin.

The Current Regulatory Landscape

Channel 4 has a commitment to provide international content in its remit and the BBC Charter includes a global purpose for the BBC to *Bring the UK to the world and the world to the UK*. Both channels make a significant contribution to our understanding of the wider world and IBT does not want their commitments reduced. We have recommended that both channels should make greater efforts to ensure that they find

³ Reflecting a Changing World (IBT, 2015). 2014-15 69% of new international content was focused on North America and Europe and Oceania (mostly Australia) pg 7.

⁴ Reflecting Changing World (IBT, 2015) pg 8

⁵ Outside the Box (IBT,2011), pg 8

⁶ The World in Focus (IBT,2009), pg 2

⁷ *Media coverage of the developing world: audience understanding and interest*¹⁵, Glasgow Media Group, May 2001

innovative ways to ensure that more non-news international content is made available to audiences.

ITV and Five's content commitments in their existing licences are to provide news and current affairs about domestic and international matters without any specification of how much international content they should provide. The 2003 Communications Act includes a requirement on PSBs to broadcast content about 'matters of international significance' as a Tier 3 requirement but, along with the other Tier 3 commitments, this has not had a significant impact on their output.

As a result of light-touch regulation and the perceived diminishing value of the benefits of being a public service broadcaster, existing regulation does little to encourage more international content. In a world where discoverability is increasingly a challenge for broadcasters to ensure they maintain audience share, preferential EPG positioning is very valuable and it is IBT's view that the commercial PSBs should therefore be encouraged to do more to engage audiences with mainstream content about the wider world.

The Future landscape – a narrowing choice

As the market becomes increasingly fragmented, competition for viewers will only increase. This trend is likely to mean the volume of less popular content, such as international documentaries, is likely to diminish while the volume of popular content will increase as platforms try to maximise their income. This in turn will lead to less diversity, a narrower range of content and therefore less choice.

While there is much content available online, the reliability and trustworthiness of online information varies because this content is not regulated for accuracy and impartiality, which undermines its public value. And content on commercial channels and platforms is not commissioned with public interest as its motivation, therefore its public value is often less apparent than that produced by public service providers.

The move away from linear schedules towards the personalisation of content will also lead to a potential narrowing of choice. This is likely to lead to less serendipity and will mean that viewers will mostly watch content which will reinforce their existing interests and view of the world rather than expand them.

Funding public service television: The current PSB ecology of the UK is highly effective, allowing for a range of funding models for different broadcasters to co-exist and thrive. On the commercial PSB's international content and other less popular content is effectively cross subsidised by income generated by other more popular genres. This is a crucial aspect of the UK's successful public service television model whereby content which specifically provides social value but may attract smaller audiences is supported by content which is more popular.

Recommendations

In order to counter current stereotyping of other countries broadcasters need to think about the picture of the world they are presenting to audiences and be encouraged to broaden our horizons rather than reinforce our preconceptions.

Public service television should be a platform for a range of voices and opinions which reflects the population of the UK and the wider world. This requirement should be reinforced by legislation.

The mixed public service television ecology of the UK should be retained and protected. Channel 4 should remain publicly owned and not for profit and the BBC should continue to be funded by a fee raised equitably across all households.

International content should be a key pillar of public service television, providing a range of programming outside news and current affairs, designed to attract mass audiences and engage them with the wider world. The current commitments in the BBC Charter and Digital Economy Act should be maintained and ITV and Five should be encouraged to find ways in which to engage us with the wider world.

About IBT

The International Broadcasting Trust is a media and education charity which has conducted research for over 25 years into the nature of international content on UK television and radio. IBT is primarily concerned with the engagement of UK citizens as global citizens. For more information visit www.ibt.org.uk.