

# How of commercial television upon



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How do you assess the impact of commercial television upon the British Broadcasting System from the 1950's until the present day? To help answer this question, it would be beneficial to begin by summarising the history of Broadcasting from the 1920's up to the 1950's.

This will help generate an understanding and make more clear, whether there was a change in the British Broadcasting System after the launch of the first commercial television channel in Britain. This history will contain, in short, the basics of the launch of radio, the development of the British Broadcasting Company and the British Broadcasting Corporation and a summary of the aims and values each of these mediums. There will also be references to the new technology and channels brought into effect during the 80's and onwards, namely Rupert Murdoch and his involvement in Sky TV's developments. As for the main arguments which will be embodied in this text, they will try to bring an awareness as to whether commercial television has lowered the standards of TV, forcing the BBC to lower its own standards of programming to move with the fast pace of British culture. A strong case for determining whether or not commercial television has had an impact on the British Broadcasting System is as follows; The Peacock Report. This report was commissioned in 1986 to help determine whether the BBC could move towards a more commercial stance on broadcasting.

Even the slightest mention of the BBC shifting away from their ' Public Service Broadcasting' standards must imply that there has been some impact on the British Broadcasting System. How much or how little is up for assessment within this text. In the late 1920's a Marconi employee from the

USA named David Sarnoff devised a concept of using Radio to broadcast to the public. By 1920 it became a reality and proved very popular.

This paved the way for broadcasting as we know it in the UK. The British Broadcasting Company (not the modern BBC) which was run by the government took this idea of radio and decided to use it to broadcast to the British public. Formed in 1922 as a government funded monopoly they had the leeway of broadcasting free from the worries of commercial gain and competitors. The Director General of this BBC, Lord John Reith devised principles that the broadcasting should abide by.

This helped sow the seeds of the 'public service broadcasting' morals and values, which we now know today. The principles helped develop the understanding that broadcasting should provide 'the best of everything' and not for profit, broadcasting should serve everyone with political impartiality and that broadcasters shouldn't be tempted to lower the quality of their program content in an attempt to attract listeners, high quality programming should be of the utmost importance. As the BBC held a complete monopoly over all British broadcasting, the shows would not be inclined to go 'down market' in order to attract listeners. In 1926 the Crawford Committee recommended to the government that a charter should be introduced in the interest of the nation to help regulate the content and quality of the broadcasting.

This is where public service broadcasting and the British Broadcasting Corporation (the modern BBC) were provisionally born. They decided that the charter would help to enforce the values of the BBC and aim to 'educate', '

inform', and 'entertain' the viewer. This trinity was and still is (to a degree) the backbone of the British Broadcasting Corporation. The charter also brought about the idea of mixed programming that wasn't considered in the early broadcasting days. This was probably because the BBC realised that they had an obligation to the British public, as a service provider, to uphold the trinity and to give the public a choice in their viewing and to 'entertain' them.

After all, the British public are paying their licensing fees, surely they should get something more than a one-dimensional list of informative programs without entertainment factors. It was in 1954 that the United Kingdom decided it was time to try something new. The public had been pressuring for a second television service, believing that the BBC had been too slow in developing television. Here is where the Independent Television Authority (ITA) was born, to provide a supplementary television service supported by advertising. (Burton Paulu 1961. ) As the programmes were provided by private contractors it gave the ITA the means of showing different. This caused the BBC problems, as Paulu (1961, p. 5) summed it up perfectly: "With competition the BBC faced some real challenges.

It was impelled to provide public service, informational and cultural as well as entertainment programmes; yet its television income is less than half that of Independent Television. But if it lost too many viewers to its rival it might have to give up some of its license money, forego its balanced schedule and suffer a decline in prestige. " So here, already, with it being so young and a new player on the market, ITA has already given the BBC some problems. Undergoing changes to their programming content would surely show that

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commercial Television has well and truly had an impact on the British Broadcasting System. Just how much is still to be seen.

There was an aura of 'controlled growth' about the BBC. They felt like they wanted to expand but obviously due to the PSB codes they couldn't just go off on a tangent and risk lowering their standards. So it was in the mid 1960's that that a second BBC television channel was established named BBC2, along with a network of BBC local radio stations. The BBC still had a view that the British viewing public needed to be protected from harmful television content, as they could be too sensitive to what was shown.

Pilkington's (1962) research into the viewing patterns of the public drew up these findings: "Sitting at home, people are relaxed, less consciously critical and therefore, more exposed. Further, audiences are often family groups and include children who are normally protected from outside influences, and therefore especially vulnerable (Pilkington 1962)." Pilkington also decided that the competition of the competition of the BBC i. e. ITV was corrupting for the viewing mind.

"The quality of programmes is sacrificed to obtain the largest possible audience" This draws another question. If so many people are paying attention to the commercial television stations and enjoying the content, is there a difference between peoples opinions of what is and is not 'quality' programming? The answer to this is quite simply 'yes.' This could have been something that the BBC was missing out on. Surely people would not be watching something that they personally didn't consider as quality.

This, in itself had a great impact on public service broadcasting for the future. The BBC didn't seem to take this research seriously as they showed one of their major signs of adapting to moving times, in order to keep up with the rising popularity of ITV, by commissioning a soap programme called Eastenders. Granada had already enjoyed amazing success with Coronation Street, it first being aired at Christmas time in 1960 and still going strong even today. Soaps are considered nowadays as possibly, one of the lowest forms of television entertainment to date. It's punchy story lines, easy to follow dialogue make it popular with the working class of Britain.

The BBC's decision to compete with ITV in this sense definitely shows the BBC to have lowered its standards of programming content to meet with the demands of the public. And it's easy to say, with Coronation Street wiping the floor with Eastenders in the annual television awards year in and year out, that Eastenders have lowered the quality of their programmes to even less of that than ITV. The introduction of Channel 4 in the 1982 was quite controversial. Channel 4 doesn't create any of its own programmes, only buying them from independent companies.

This gave the people who were watching the television their own voice actually on the television itself, paving the way for broadcasters to give a voice to the minorities. A lot more Asian's, blacks and homosexuals etc were starting to appear on the screen. The first black person to appear on the BBC1 soap Eastenders appeared in early 1985, which was odd as the racial diversity in the real Eastend of London stretched way beyond one family. Eastenders, over the next few years chose more and more ludicrous storylines, and showed that they were in fact in competition with ITV's

Coronation Street. It's easy to be drawn into the thinking that commercial television delivers a sub standard level of programming.

This is dangerous thinking and shouldn't be taken as gospel. Like the BBC, ITV still has its own codes and morals. As with both the BBC and ITV the government has complete right to veto programmes in the interest of the public. The first paragraph of the television act states that the ITA should provide broadcasting services " of high quality, both as to the transmission and as to the matter transmitted," and later on in the same text the instruction is given that all programs are to maintain " a high general standard of quality.

It was also deemed appropriate that nothing within the programmes should be included that (Paulu 1961) ' offends against good taste and decency or is likely to encourage or incite crime... or which contains any offensive representation of or reference to a living person. ' During the 80's there was a massive turn of direction in broadcasting values and it is here where one of the biggest arguments for assessing the impact that commercial television has had on public service broadcasting can be held. The ' Peacock Report' of 1986 suggested, in short, that commercialisation was key to the values of broadcasting. It was debated that in order to please the consumer you didn't have to lower the standards of television. It was still possible to ' educate, entertain and inform' the viewer without sacrificing their ' high standards' or broadcasting. So it was a few years after the release of the Peacock report (which was later dismissed a high number of people due to the fact that the market didn't develop as he predicted and that he didn't frame the arguments about broadcasting in the correct way) that the BBC were forced

to rethink PSB as the public were about to be given more choice as to what they watched than ever before.

The Peacock Report didn't convince the BBC to shift away from its public service broadcasting stance as such, but it helped. The factors were more to do with the competition brought from not being a complete monopoly any longer and the threats this brought to the BBC's existence. The introduction of Sky TV in 1989 was one of the most shocking developments in British Television since the introduction of Commercial Television itself. Rupert Murdoch realised the niche in the market for a TV station that held a less moral high ground and which catered for a wider audience than the possibly dated BBC was tending to do. It was here that Sky TV in Britain was born.

Murdoch's idea was to launch a satellite into space, outside of British air space and to transmit shows from other countries. The networks by which these shows were commissioned and made had a less strict regulation procedure, and because of this some of the shows being broadcast were on a completely different level to those being shown in the UK, even by the commercial TV stations standards. The biggest surprise was that this was all completely legal. The loophole in the law was that the signal wasn't being transmitted from the UK, but from an outside source. This was a similar situation to when British Radio's in the early 1900's were picking up radio signals from ' Radio Normandy' and ' Radio Luxembourg.

' (In fact, this was Britain's first taste of commercial Broadcasting, before the ITA was even formed. ) This challenged Public Service Broadcasting chiefs to change their ideas about the content of their radio programs. Would Sky TV



do the same thing again so many years on? It seems so. The BBC airs such a wide range of programmes nowadays from soaps, to chat shows and documentaries, most of which catering for the minority groups as well the majority it's hard to see how it hasn't changed at all. So the initial question can now be safely reflected upon. As we can see, the BBC no longer holds a complete PSB stance.

They now compete with other commercial television groups for viewers, but still try to keep their PSB values at heart. It's true that they aim to broadcast completely free from the political and social pressures around them, but with shows such as Eastenders going down hill and the camp Graham Norton show being aired on BBC it's hard to see how the BBC hasn't changed since the 1950's. It's hard to see how commercial television has lowered the standards of television in general, as those 'standards' were set by a 1920's pre war government, and in my view weren't catering for the needs and wants of a diverse, multi racial, working class Britain. ITV however, again in my view, did.

The quality of the programming is deemed by the viewer in today's standards, not by the broadcasters themselves. It could be appropriate even to say that PSB values are dated. It's a concern whether the Britain actually needs public service broadcasting anymore. With the amount of television channels being beamed in by Sky, and the readily available DVD's from outside of the UK, people are easily able to watch what they want, when they want and where they want. PSB seems to be becoming more and more a spent force.

For the BBC to survive in the broadcasting world it was important for them to move with the times and change their standards. Commercial television has certainly shared a part in creating the way the BBC has adapted itself in the modern market. With so much 'choice' out there, the BBC is still one of the leading players in the broadcasting game. It just seems that their ideas of quality viewing are not shared by as many people as they used to be. All in all, PSB has been adapted to cater for the viewer over the times, and in the future will need to be adapted even more to cater for the growing 'choice' that the viewer is getting from other sources.