

The expanding and contracting universe of television images' influence on the British imaginary in the time of a global pandemic

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Before the coronavirus pandemic contemporary media landscapes had been ever expanding. In contrast to those working in cultural studies in the latter part of the twentieth century who could study representations and audience interpretations of single television programmes or series (Couldry, 2020, p. 39), more recent studies of media have had to incorporate the diversification, democratisation and 'deep mediatization' (Hepp and Hasebrink, 2017) of people's relationships with media. But during this global pandemic, we have seen, in some ways, television programming coming back to be centrally important to the lives of people in the UK.

The first UK lockdown saw changes to media use. Since 2014 time spent watching television had been decreasing each year. However, in April 2020 British people watched more hours of TV than they had at that time of year since 2015 (Ofcom, 2020b), and an hour and a half more television per day than the average in 2019 (Ofcom, 2020c). Just over half of that time in April 2020 was spent watching broadcast television, an increase of half an hour since 2019 (Ofcom, 2020c). Internet use also went up: people spent half an hour more time per day online in April 2020 than they did six months before (Ofcom, 2020a). This increased media use is perhaps indicative of more time at home to engage with such media, though I'd argue apparent media choices suggest other factors at play.

In 2019, the most watched broadcast television programme was the *Gavin and Stacey* Christmas special followed by the first episode of the season of *I'm a Celebrity Get Me Out of Here* (Ofcom, 2020b). In 2020, the most watched programme was a *Prime Ministerial Statement* on 10th May (when Boris Johnson lifted some lockdown restrictions), followed by a *BBC News Special* on 23rd March

(when lockdown measures were first introduced) (Ofcom, 2020b). About 3.5 million more people watched those two programmes in 2020 than watched the two most popular programmes of 2019 (Ofcom, 2020b). On 16th March 2020, the government started leading daily televised briefings on coronavirus (BBC, 2020a). This was following pressure, particularly from opposition politicians, for clarity over the communication of policy (Gye, 2020). When the daily briefings were stopped in June 2020, there was similar criticism of the move with suggestion that the government was trying to avoid scrutiny and that as the UK was in an “enduring emergency”, authoritative communications were required (BBC, 2020a).

The idea of emergency and crisis is key, I think. In these contexts, with quickly evolving scientific knowledge, policy changes and increasing disease impact on the population, there was desire for regular, official updates. Rather than pluralist, democratised, abundant communication, people wanted top down, singular communication. Broadcast media is inherently suited to this. Broadcasting, a term borrowed from farming meaning scattering seed widely, not in specific patterns (Moran, 2013, page 18), involves indiscriminate communication to a mass audience, from a single source. Television, and broadcast media, is never wholly top down though, there is always input from audiences. The daily government briefings were seemingly instigated due to demand. The relationship between audiences and producers in this way has been described by Seale (2003, p. 516) as a feedback loop.

The feedback loop between audiences and producers may also exist on a more conceptual, less supply and demand level, particularly with regards to construction of identities. In an influential project of the late 1970s, Morley and Brunson studied the television programme *Nationwide*. On the textual analysis component of the project, Morley (1999, p. 117) argued that it “was a reading of the programme which attempted to reveal the ways in which *Nationwide* constructs for itself an image of its audience”. Successful television does not simply project images, but also reflects them.

There is nothing wrong with your television set. Do not attempt to adjust the picture. We are controlling transmission. [...] For the next hour, sit quietly and we will control all that you see and hear. We repeat: There is nothing wrong with your television set. You are about to participate in a great adventure. You are about to experience the awe and mystery which reaches from the inner mind to ... The Outer Limits.

— *Opening monologue to The Outer Limits* (Wikipedia, 2021)

In an event somewhat similar to imaginings of aliens taking control of television broadcasts – or of the opening monologue to *The Outer Limits* – for a two-minute period in 2020, all of the public service broadcasting television channels in the UK showed the same thing. On 8th July 2020, a film titled *Our Stories are Your Stories* was screened simultaneously across 21 UK channels, including multiple BBC,

ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5 channels. There was an aim to reach 50% of the UK adult population with the film.

The central message of the piece was to “represent the way the broadcasters echo lives across our nation and resonate beyond the screen” (BBC, 2020b). There is a clear link between the purported messaging of the film and the conclusions of the analysis of the much earlier television programme *Nationwide*. This was an argument from public service broadcasters for their cultural relevancy, and the timing was important. The BBC director general, Tony Hall, said in relation to the film: “[British free to air television is] there at times of crisis and to provide comfort, laughter, education and education” (BBC, 2020b). As an ardent television fan I am sorry to say that the “roadblock” film did somewhat smack of desperation. This yell of relevancy could only possibly be heard by those already watching television at the time of the broadcast – the producers’ aspiration for this was just 50% of adults. They could only ever be preaching to the presumably converted. The initial panic and desire for information in the early days of the pandemic did provide a boost for the popularity of television but after April 2020, this dipped back down again. Other than in late March/ early April, weekly television reach was lower across 2020 than in the previous two years and in September 2020, the amount of television watched was lower than at that time of year in any of the previous six years (Ofcom, 2021).

Seale (2003, p. 514) argued that the media serves a repository of narratives from which people might obtain identity-forming cultural scripts. I like to imagine this repository as a universe, with these scripts floating about. The rise of the internet and digital media has expanded the size of the universe and populated it with more scripts than previously available. Perhaps in the early stages of the pandemic, there could be seen a drawing in of this universe and a re-centring of television, though this was arguably just a blip, if it was truly there at all. Viewing figures are not a measure of cultural relevance, indeed I am doubtful such a measure could exist. Sometimes though when scrolling social media, I am struck by the quantity of references to television, and of the salience and frequency of memes rooted in moments of TV. It is not a measure, but a subjective observation: possibly television continues to provide some of the brightest stars seen in this night sky. Though I find it difficult to imagine a time when none of the visible astral bodies would be television, the future of TV, particularly public service broadcasting does look perilous. Somewhat in contrast to questions of cultural relevancy, it is possible the danger might come from politically motivated angles, as can be seen in the proposed sale of Channel 4 to private investors. The consequences of such a move can only be guessed at now but I hope it is not the first domino.

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