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Commissioning and Producing Public-Service Content:

British Arts Television

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Abstract

This article analyzes the commissioning and production of arts television in the United Kingdom. It identifies the drivers that shape output, including regulatory and economic forces, linking professional practices to the form and content of the programs that emerge. The research uses interviews with senior staff within the major broadcasters (BBC, Channel 4, and Sky Arts), the independent production sector, and arts organizations to critically interrogate changes in production practices. In particular, the research focuses on the decline in specialist independent producers and the ongoing emphasis on partnerships to reveal a genre ecology at a moment of crisis that necessitates complex modes of competition, codependence, and negotiation. The precariousness of the genre has implications for all public-service genres that are “at risk” of disappearing from our screens. Therefore, in what is a period of profound change, this article

extends and deepens our understanding of professional practices within the contemporary television industry.

Keywords: Arts, Television Production, Public-Service Broadcasting (PSB), BBC, Sky

Television has engaged routinely with the arts throughout its history. Visual arts, opera, theater, dance, photography, music, architecture, and literature all appear on our screens in a variety of formats such as documentary, performance capture, magazine, and drama. The arts on television connects domestic life to culture performing a number of roles ranging from historian to educator, champion to gatekeeper.

However, despite this tradition, arts television is undergoing some profound changes that threaten its future as a distinct part of the television landscape. The volume of arts on British screens, and spend within the genre, is declining rapidly. Ofcom (2016) reports a 16 percent annual decrease in the volume of hours of original output, with the public-service broadcasters spending 14 percent less.² This is a long-term downward trend and without timely intervention arts will disappear from television, making a substantial element of cultural life invisible to the public. Arts television in the United Kingdom is a genre “in jeopardy.”³

This article examines the threats to arts television and the changes in the commissioning and production processes. It considers the impact of increased commercial imperatives, “light-touch” regulation, and changing cultural expectations on provision—conditions not confined to the United Kingdom’s television industry. The research further analyzes the responses of broadcasters and decision makers to the uncertainty within television and how these responses may actually undermine the long-term sustainability of the genre. Therefore, this article gives greater focus to the complex forces that underpin our media industries.

At the time of writing, BBC, Channel 4, and Sky all have dedicated arts departments with decision-making powers around commissioning content. The BBC supplements this with its own in-house production department that makes content through BBC Studios and sells this through BBC Worldwide, a recent example being the landmark series *Civilisations* (2018). In all three broadcasters, power is exercised through relative creative autonomy and budgetary control in the form of a dedicated commissioning editor who is supported by a team of editorial and production specialists. These institutional arrangements are further reflected in the organization of content. For example, arts is a distinct program category on the BBC's iPlayer (as per Figure 1), whereas the subscription channel Sky Arts has a dedicated section on Sky's on-demand service. Arts is also part of the wider framing and discourse of television stakeholders, with both the UK telecoms regulator Ofcom and BARB, the audience research board, continuing to monitor and report on arts as a distinct program genre—in the case of Ofcom to warn about declining hours and spend within the genre.⁴

Figure 1.

Screenshot of BBC iPlayer's arts page. Taken January 11, 2017.

Here lies the crucial point: Arts as a television genre is industrially defined as opposed to theoretically or aesthetically defined. Other genres, such as drama and comedy, often occupy a more prominent place in the consumption preferences of audiences and, in the research agenda, where arts is often subsumed under the genre of factual production. Therefore, in this study, arts as a genre is predominantly defined through the process of its production, and to understand it, we must examine these processes and their impact on the range and styles of arts programs available to audiences.⁵

The article begins by mapping the current landscape for arts television in the United Kingdom, including its major constituencies and the changes taking place therein. The analysis, emerging from a series of semi-structured interviews with creative professionals in this area, points to two factors conditioning output and directly affecting the future of the genre. First, the research considers the supply-base for arts television and the reasons many independent production companies appear to have abandoned or been forced out of the genre. Second, it explores the emphasis on partnerships which allows broadcasters to harness outside expertise reinforcing their legitimacy and value, but which can have implications for the critical nature of the content. The article concludes by asking whether arts television in the United Kingdom is sustainable in the long term and considers the consequences of this research for other genres regarded as essential for public value.

Genre and the Study of Production

Scholars like Mittell and Alacovska argue for the enduring significance of genre to television professionals and the researchers who study the practices of media industries.⁶ These researchers argue that, for those working within the television industry, genre continues to shape ways of thinking and orientates the work of specialists within the production ecology. Consequently, the role of the researcher is to uncover its “structuring and enabling function.”⁷ As Cottle argues, a focus on genre as an object of study enables us to understand “wider organisational relationships and dynamics that exist within a particular field of production.”⁸ This broader field of production includes competitive and codependent relationships, with a range of actors in that ecology. Therefore, the focus on a genre-based community, as opposed to a focus on a single institution, could highlight possible forms of occupational solidarity at a time of anxiety around the future.

In the study of commissioning and production strategies within arts television, genre offers an important occupational and ideological boundary. In this study, the concept of genre has further analytical value in that it overcomes the binary of public-service broadcasting (PSB) versus commercial provision. Arts broadcasting is often framed in the context of having public value, yet including Sky Arts (the main pay-TV channel in this space) in the sample allows us to see the forms of value that might be created outside a PSB framework.

The primary method used within this research was semi-structured interviews conducted by the project team between 2014 and 2016.⁹ This sample included senior executive staff at BBC, Channel 4, and Sky Arts. Interviewees included commissioning editors, channel controllers, and executive producers with the interviews conducted mainly face-to-face, although some were conducted via Skype. For additional depth and range, the study also included independent producers and senior representatives of a number of cultural institutions, including the National Portrait Gallery. In total, fourteen interview transcripts were coded and analyzed for this article using the software NVivo.

Mapping Arts Television

Arts broadcasting comprises a number of constituencies, including broadcasters, the independent production sector, the regulator, artists, and arts organizations, each of which performs a specific function within the genre.

The BBC, the United Kingdom's largest public-service broadcaster, dominates the production of arts content. It is the largest and most established producer in the genre through its in-house production department which today produces content for television, radio, and online platforms. It is also one of the biggest commissioners and buyers of arts content from the independent sector.¹⁰ The BBC has been home to many long-running strands and prominent

returning arts series, including *Monitor* (1958–1965), *Imagine* (2003–), and *The Culture Show* (2004–2015). However, as news and drama grew more powerful through the 1990s, due to their perceived strategic value, the arts (along with other public-service genres) became more marginalized in the strategy of the Corporation.¹¹

This seemed to be partially redressed when in 2014 the new director general and former chief executive of the Royal Opera House, Tony Hall, publicly reaffirmed the BBC's commitment to the arts, announcing that the Corporation would place the arts “center-stage” across all BBC platforms.¹² What emerged was the launch of “BBC Arts,” a branding strategy operating across the entirety of the BBC's portfolio on television, radio, and online and designed to make arts more visible to audiences and the wider ecology, including those in the Department of Culture, Media, and Sport as the Corporation navigated charter review.¹³

The other terrestrial channel with a commitment to the arts is Channel 4, a commercially funded, public-service channel. Channel 4 began transmission in 1982 with a remit to offer alternative content to the BBC/ITV duopoly and to support the growing independent production sector in the United Kingdom. It continues today to commission everything from the independent sector, although its alternative status is less well preserved. The paradoxical nature of the channel can be seen in its “need to be innovative and different and yet to attract audiences and be commercially successful, even if in moderate terms.”¹⁴ An initial commitment to arts and culture meant that in 1986 the arts department had 10 percent of the programming budget of Channel 4 and was praised for its intellectual scope and innovative content.¹⁵ However, as discussed later, in recent years the visibility and strategic importance of arts to the channel have waned with fewer hours overall dedicated to the programming especially in peak time.¹⁶ Where arts

programming is present, it draws heavily on the norms of talent-led, lifestyle programming (e.g., *Grayson Perry: Who Are You*, 2014) in line with wider factual trends within the channel.¹⁷

The third and final broadcaster in this space is the subscription channel Sky Arts, part of the offering of Sky, the United Kingdom's largest pay-TV broadcaster. As the relative newcomer to this space, Sky Arts was launched in 2007 taking over from Artsworld as part of a prestige-building strategy for Sky and as a lure to middle- and high-income homes. The channel runs twenty-four hours a day relying heavily on repeats while buying content nationally and internationally (e.g., musical performances by the violinist André Rieu). As part of its wider drive to secure lucrative returns from the rights associated with original content, it has commissioned a number of independently produced formats, including *Portrait Artist of Year* (2013–) and *Guitar Star* (2015–), and a series of TV plays credited as *Playhouse Presents* (2012–), all enjoying various degrees of commercial and critical success. Framed publicly as a push to make the arts more visible within its portfolio, in 2015 Sky Arts 1 and Sky Arts 2 were merged to create one single channel, which was placed higher in the Electronic Program Guide (EPG) and given more budget to commission original content.¹⁸

An important narrative within this research is the recognition among the interviewees that each channel performed a different function and delivered specific value within the market. Competition is often framed as the primary characteristic of the television industry. However, this framing overlooks the ways in which cohabitation may feature and become a necessary requisite to sustainability. As Cottle writes in relation to the genre of natural history, “[C]oexistence and cooperation, competition and rivalry are enacted and played out in response to strategies of self-interest and the imbalances of scale and market opportunity.”¹⁹ This is captured here as the commissioning editor for Channel 4 compares and contrasts his

broadcaster's use of the flamboyant transvestite potter Grayson Perry to front some of its documentaries about arts and contemporary identity, to the BBC's *Face of Britain* (BBC Two, 2015) which used a very traditional lecture format to tell the story of British portraiture:

If you set that [*Faces of Britain*] alongside the Grayson Perry portrait series, that's the difference. But you want both. I want both as a consumer. I'll watch the Schama portraits thing. It will be magnificent. It will be like the authorised version. The official, high-gloss . . . It's like that's the sort of National Curriculum and we'll be there as the sort of alternative, slightly more subversive, slightly more contemporary, slightly more documentary in its feel. That's perfect. That's the BBC and Channel 4 working as they should work, it seems to me.

(Commissioning Editor, Channel 4)

The interview narratives reveal a complex relationship between the broadcasters operating in this genre. There are points of criticism, often made about poor imitations of successes (e.g., that the BBC series *Big Painting Challenge* was a pale imitation of the successful Sky Arts's series *Landscape Artist of the Year*). But crucially, as the quotation also illustrates, there are moments of professional admiration and envy.

I would argue that this sense of community has wider value in the debates about the long-term sustainability of the genre. All of the interviewees agreed that mixed provision and programming was needed. In an area of specialist factual production like arts, competition means each must "up our game" (Commissioning Editor, Channel 4). At the same time, no single broadcaster is viewed as able to provide all of the types of content that the genre needs to survive due to the wider content and branding strategies they pursue. This strengthens arguments for

pluralistic provision among broadcasters, program-makers, and funders at a time when public funding is under threat.

There have, however, been substantial changes which threaten the genre's long-term sustainability. Quantitative analysis emerging from the regulator Ofcom suggests a gap between the public rhetoric of the broadcasters promoting their accomplishments in this genre and the realities of television commissioning. First, the volume of arts programming in the United Kingdom has declined dramatically since the early 2000s. Where once all of the main UK broadcasters did something in this space (including ITV and Channel 5), provision has now largely withdrawn to the three broadcasters discussed. In 2015, there was a 16 percent decrease in original UK arts and classical music output, largely driven by an annual reduction in hours from the BBC (down 15 percent to 301 hours) and Channel 4 (down 32 percent to twenty-one hours).²⁰ Furthermore, there is less money within the genre especially as public-service broadcasters spend less on new arts and classical music programs—£36 million in 2015, down 14 percent from 2014²¹—leading to a strong reliance on repeats in the schedules. The data indicate that this is not a one-off decline but is part of a persistent downward trend in the past decade.

A second concern within the genre is in terms of scheduling. Although scheduling is sometimes regarded as an artifact of an old era of television, peak-time hours still have significant strategic value for a genre. These slots garner visibility and commitment on behalf of the broadcaster and its decision makers. In pragmatic terms, it directs budget to a project enabling it to compete with other output such as high-quality drama. However, in the past decade, arts programs have been moved out of the times associated with peak viewing and often into late night slots. Content has also been shifted from principal channels onto niche channels.

The launch in 2002 of BBC Four, the BBC's "intellectually and culturally enriching" channel, illustrates some of this ghettoization. While some saw the channel's launch as an opportunity for more arts content, many recognized that this was also part of a strategy to mainstream BBC Two, the broadcaster's second channel, and thereby marginalize certain genres such as arts.²²

It is worth noting that this ecology represents the consequences of a regulatory environment in the United Kingdom that is "light touch." Until now there have been few commitments to protecting suppliers and little direct intervention by policy-makers at the level of genre (beyond introducing tax relief for children's television programs). For broadcasters and policy-makers, the logic of market competition takes precedence over innovation, risk, and public value, and the lived impact of this is the terminal decline of arts from terrestrial television.

A Genre in Transition: The Withdrawal of Independent Production

Although broadcasters are the main buyers of content, we now turn attention to a key part of the supply-base—the independent production sector. Independent production companies ("indies") have become central to the delivery of television content globally. The ability to retain Intellectual Property rights for content (enshrined in the UK Communications Act 2003), coupled with favorable terms of trade and deregulation, has been at the center of the sector's growth in the United Kingdom. This has led to the era of the "super-indies"—the emergence of major multinational production companies with significant global reach and resources and who also exercise increasing power in the television market. In the past, a number of independent producers operated in the genre of arts. This ensured competition and provided diverse content for broadcasters, particularly Channel 4. However, as the super-indies grew, the number of

specialist independent production companies operating in the genre shrank substantially. This section considers the reason for this withdrawal by indies and some of the consequences of this for the sustainability of the genre.

Figure 2.

Number of independent production companies working within arts and classical music, 2006–2014.

Source. Ofcom, “Trends in TV Production,” 2015,

https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0027/79551/o_o_annex_trends.pdf?lang=cym (accessed May 25, 2017). Data for 2007 are not provided in the Ofcom report.

In just a decade, there has been a marked decline in the number of independent production companies working in the genre of arts. As the graph above illustrates, in 2006, there were forty-nine companies active in this genre; by 2014, there were just nine.²³ These small- and medium-sized indies are long established, and many produce arts content in conjunction with other factual outputs, including history and travel. However, a downward pressure on budgets means very low profit margins on projects. As one director in Bennett et al.’s study commented, “arts documentaries just don’t exist anymore” as it becomes difficult to sustain a business reliant on shrinking commissions, evidenced by the fall in hourly output and spend.²⁴ This theme of financial precarity was one evident throughout the interviews with indies and freelancers, and a number lamented the exit of their peers due to the difficult market for their content and, by extension, the loss to the industry of their expertise and passion for arts. There are few financial incentives for new companies to enter this sector, thereby forcing commissioners to rely on the capabilities of a few proven players. While this allows consistency and recognized

professionalism, many argued that innovation is more difficult to deliver with such a limited supply-base.

Two forms of content have been the cornerstone of arts on television, and changes to the demand of these have affected the independent production sector's engagement with the genre. Single documentaries have historically been the primary mode of programming for the arts, with documentaries like *Face of Britain* a substantial part of the offering. While technological advances allow some cost efficiencies, single documentaries can be costly to produce due to the need to secure image rights and the costs of location filming and on-screen talent. Furthermore, these have often been culturally specific, appealing to a niche audience, and so can be difficult to sell overseas in the scale that television markets demand today. In line with a wider withdrawal from single documentaries, landmark single documentaries in the arts are rare and so there are fewer opportunities for prime-time visibility for indies.²⁵

There is now a drive across the production sector to create salable formats. Arts producers have certainly embraced this trend, and formats are now a prominent feature of arts programming. In particular, competition formats and talent-led formats form part of the commissioning strategy of the broadcasters from Sky Arts's *Portrait Artist of the Year* (2014–) and *Landscape Artist of the Year* (2015–), to the BBC's *Big Painting Challenge* (BBC One, 2015–) and *Fake or Fortune* (BBC One, 2011–). While much arts content is difficult to sell overseas, formats have been exportable with shows like *Big Painting Challenge* selling abroad.²⁶ Formats sit well with the business model of the independent sector and its emphasis on international (re)sales. However, the reality is still a challenging production setting coupled with severely limited budgets, scale, and sales, thereby deterring many indies from committing resources routinely to developing ideas related to the arts.

The other format, which is the lifeblood of any genre, is the returning series. The returning series is the staple of the television schedule and forms the foundations of a genre's production ecology, offering predictable visibility either weekly or seasonally. Its volume also has value to indies in particular, as it offers regular work enabling greater professionalization, talent development, and financial sustainability. Within arts television, there have been a number of examples of this, including *Monitor* (BBC, 1958–1965), *Arena* (BBC, 1975–), *Imagine* (BBC, 2003–), and *The South Bank Show* (ITV, 1978–2010; Sky Arts, 2012–)—and again many of the established companies listed in Note 3 have contributed to these. However, like the single documentary form, the returning series has been one of the casualties of the current landscape. Cuts to *The South Bank Show* and *The Review Show* (BBC, 1994–2014), both of which interrogated a range of cultural forms and artists, means fewer spaces for recurring arts content. Programs about contemporary issues potentially compromise the shelf-life of the content, reducing the incentive for independent or in-house producers, the latter who also have to keep one eye on maximizing audiences and delivering a return on investment.

Where indies do operate in the arts, they have adapted both their content and business models. The shift to formats has resulted in the mainstreaming and hybridization of content. For many, the pressure is on providing content that is “not too arty” (Independent producer) and therefore believed to have more appeal. In terms of remaining financially viable, revenue from additional content exploitation (e.g., DVD, archive footage) and secondary rights is perhaps marginal but can offer some commercial return. This is especially the case for live performances, and some indies offer direct sales of theater performances via online retail platforms. Furthermore, in 2010, following the cancelation of *The South Bank Show* on ITV, it was revealed that the program's presenter, art critic Melvyn Bragg through his production company Directors

Cut Production, had the rights to the entire *South Bank Show* archive for commercial purposes, demonstrating the financial value that some arts content can enjoy.²⁷ Bragg negotiated transmission rights with Sky Arts who now regularly broadcast archive editions of *The South Bank Show* and some “new” programs that blend archive and original footage.

Furthermore, the drive by many publicly funded arts organizations to engage audiences through new platforms and the growth and affordability of digital technology have allowed some indies and freelancers to work directly with artists and arts organizations to showcase and share content. Although working with small margins, many of these indies appreciate the creative freedom that working with online platforms allows, bypassing the traditional distributors of content.²⁸ Over the past few years, there has been an emergence of digital agencies and organizations working in conjunction with galleries and museums, creating short-form documentaries with production values to rival television, though of course without the budget (e.g., Art21, TateShots, VernissageTV). As John Wyver, co-founder of the independent production company Illuminations, explains, it is “exciting to do things elsewhere beyond the broadcasters [. . .] other production, distribution and exhibition contexts means that a more challenging and enriching media culture can develop around television.”²⁹ Though perhaps instead of “around,” should that be “without” television? This offers the tantalizing question of whether a reinvigoration of the genre might happen outside the television systems as old models and representations perish.

Over the past twenty years, there has been a steady decline in the number of independent production companies working specifically to produce arts content for television. Fewer broadcasters coupled with decreasing budgets, less prime-time slots, and a limited market to exploit secondary and tertiary rights means that there are few incentives for some independent

producers to work in this space, especially large indies who turn to more lucrative program genres like drama and entertainment. However, a small number of indies and freelancers continue to provide content adapting both their business models and output. Although independent production is often regarded as solely a commercial undertaking oriented exclusively toward the market, Bennett reminds us that for some working in television, there is still a strong pull toward public service underpinned by hope for democratic and social ideals.³⁰ Framing indies exclusively in terms of a motivation to maximize profits overlooks companies who attempt to reconcile public service with commercial sustainability. It is these *private* sector companies that will become essential for the sustainability of the arts genre in terms of its diversity and innovation and for the delivery of *public*-service content more widely.

However, would more specialist production companies improve and diversify the content, lead to more culturally risky/innovative content, and therefore secure the genre's future? The answer is probably not. A sustainable genre needs both suppliers *and* buyers, and as illustrated above, indies are still highly dependent on the priorities of buyers and their sporadic demands for content. While the rhetoric suggests an open and vibrant market, the quantified demand for content appears limited.

Negotiating Partnerships and Value

Partnerships with public sector organizations are fully embedded in the ethos and norms of arts programming, mirroring a wider trend in the television industry.³¹ Broadcasters and production companies have enjoyed formal and informal links with a range of established arts organizations such as the Arts Council.³² These partnerships with “the big cultural institutions” (Series Editor, BBC) have arisen in response to changes in the television marketplace around financial scale,

creative collaboration, and access to the marketplace. This section considers some of the benefits of collaboration along with the risks.

Partnerships extend across a range of activities, and in relation to collaborations for television tend to fall into a few categories. The most visible form of partnership is performance capture where broadcasters relay a performance either live or recorded. For example, Sky Arts transmitted a recorded performance of the dance production Matthew Bourne's *The Car Man* (2015) filmed at Sadler's Wells, thereby extending the reach of the art form, its choreographer, and the theater to audiences not there in person. Documentaries too are a key space for the realization of strategic partnerships between broadcasters and arts organizations. Illustrative of these arrangements are programs like *The Museum* (BBC Two, 2007) which documented behind the scenes of the British Museum and *Faces of Britain* which includes the credit "A BBC and National Portrait Gallery partnership." This form also extends to some occasional forms of co-creation and exhibition as in the case of the Channel 4 series *Grayson Perry: Who Are You?* where a number of the portraits produced as part of the television series were placed in the National Portrait Gallery.³³ Finally, there is coverage of events within the art world, such as the "Museums at Night" initiative (covered by the BBC) and the Turner Prize (which was broadcast by Channel 4 until 2016 and is now with the BBC). Occasionally, these become broadcaster-driven events (e.g., BBC's "Get Creative" campaign), although these are infrequent and often limited to less visible platforms such as radio and online.

Looking across the schedules, there is some conformity in the partnerships appearing on-screen as they often involve major, London-based institutions and rely on a narrow range of significant players. I would argue that this strategy highlights a preference for "museumized" art within UK television as partnerships with established players are perceived to diminish some of

the risks of collaboration. However, this can perpetuate an artistic canon that is heavily skewed to Western appetites re-enforcing traditional hierarchies from within the art world. Furthermore, within the story of culture and creativity in the United Kingdom, attention is often skewed to London. Arts, culture, and broadcasting share a keen focus on the capital for funding, decision making, and institutional prestige. This legacy has been a historic source of political unease that decades of decentralization and devolution have failed to remedy. This has consequences for the diversity of art forms on our screens and limits access to nontraditional arts.

We can contextualize the rationale for partnerships as part of a wider drive within publicly funded services. Within public sector discourse and the resultant policy, partnerships have emerged as a key mechanism for the delivery of enhanced services. In the Thatcherite (1979–1990) and New Labour (1997–2010) eras, increased accountability of public services, the advance of performance indicators, the pursuit of private sources of funding (to offset reduced public funding), and concerns over delivering “value for money” conditioned the practices of both arts organizations and broadcasters.³⁴ By the 1990s, it was clear that publicly funded galleries, museums, and broadcasters could not operate entirely independently, and so these groups sought ways to leverage their combined resources.³⁵

For broadcasters, leveraging their collective resources undoubtedly delivers benefits. It allows them to demonstrate value for money and efficiencies at a time of cuts to funding (both public funding and greater competition in the advertising markets that Channel 4 and Sky Arts occupy). Wyver reasons that as the costs of on-screen talent and copyright agreements rose, “imaginative partnership and/or revenue-sharing frameworks were often necessary.”³⁶ Certainly, within the interviews, partnerships were a direct response to the decline in budgets and an attempt to “deliver more with less” (Executive Producer). For instance, while there are costs

associated with the initial set-up, the coverage of large-scale cultural events such as the Edinburgh International Festival and Hay Literature Festival provides cost-effective content which is flexible enough to fill different platforms, including television and radio, and also online spaces—this coming at a time when audiences are increasingly mobile across different platforms. Therefore, partnerships that deliver arts content to our screens are a tangible way for broadcasters to demonstrate value for money to audiences, subscribers, and policy-makers, even if the cost to both parties is often obscured or underestimated.³⁷

The interviewees also stressed the cultural benefits accrued through collaboration. Encouraging engagement, participation, and consumption with the arts was central to the rationale and ambitions of the broadcasters:

I think that's one of the duties that the BBC has, to make television that feels like it will rivet an audience now, support cultural institutions through partnership and indeed through coverage, encourage a sort of participation in the culture generally. (Commissioning Editor, BBC)

Here, we clearly see a social imperative to open the arts to a wider audience and to encourage the democratization of the arts, a manifestation of a wider public policy surrounding culture in the United Kingdom.³⁸ Television, because of its ubiquity and everydayness, is seen as a crucial bridge between arts and the public:

[T]he most effective [medium] is television. It's got the biggest reach and it's a visual medium, so it generates a recognition factor; you see something on a screen, you want to come and see it, you recognise it. [. . .] All of this is expanding our reach. [. . .] I wouldn't say we depend on it, but we enormously

value it because it gives us a bigger reach, a longer reach. (Senior Curator,
National Portrait Gallery)

As traditional institutions attempt to engage new publics (such as young people), television has become a more prominent resource for arts organizations as they look to expand the scope and impact of their remit.

There is mutual exchange within such collaborations and partnerships. Broadcasters and producers benefit from the associations with cultural expertise, thereby contributing to their legitimacy and perceived cultural competence. Even in this ecology, it is museums and galleries that take the lead in defining what qualifies as art.³⁹ As Raats et al. argue, partnerships become an effective and “strategic mechanism to legitimate operations” and “safeguard” the broadcasters’ expert credentials.⁴⁰ Therefore, in promoting the work of art institutions and the artistic works created and housed within, symbolic and material value is realized for both parties.

However, while such partnerships may be mutually beneficial, what are the consequences for the content seen on screen? Two interlinked consequences emerged as concerns for the interviewees: a threat to editorial independence as a result of unequal partnerships and a retreat from television’s role as cultural critic.

It is worth pausing here to reflect on some tensions with the interviewee narratives. When asked about partnerships, there was a distinction between the voice of senior management espousing the value of partnership and the everyday experience of producers obligated to engage directly with those partners—a tangible gap between idealized and realized. While senior decision-making staff advocated for the strategic value that they offered, producers and film-makers often recounted the logistical and creative problems that arose in bringing those collaborations to screen. For example, while the value proposition of partnering with major arts

institutions was still evident, for this experienced producer, creative control and editorial independence are often conceded:

On the whole when you work with those big institutions, much as you might protest to the contrary, you are the junior partner. You tend to be following their agenda. Politicians like it because it looks democratic, which in a way it is. It's helping those great institutions—and they are great institutions—to reach a wider public. That's fine. But it's not the BBC setting the agenda. (Series Producer, BBC)

While this is likely to be contested by external partners,⁴¹ there was a perception among some producers of yielding control at a time when failure is often made public and can be effectively mobilized by competitors and critics. Producers recounted experiences where access to art works or institutions was withdrawn as partners exercised their power within the collaborations, shifting it from an equal partnership to a service agreement. Part of this relates to the different production frameworks that exist in the worlds of art and television. The production process for television, including its aesthetic demands and timeframes, does not always neatly align to the processes surrounding the creation and distribution of art works.

A further element is an ongoing fear of losing distinctiveness and identity. For the producer above, part of their independence and power is sacrificed to appease politicians and secure political collateral—a concern not entirely surprising given the political hostilities experienced by both BBC and Channel 4 at the time of these interviews. For this reason, partnerships can to be seen in the wider context of disciplining public sector organizations. Partnerships are framed and reaffirmed as having a positive impact, although the agency of both broadcasters and art institutions to oppose that framing is substantially diminished as a result of

funding cuts and public accountability. While partnerships offer benefits as discussed earlier, the consequences of not partnering are both financial and cultural. Although senior decision makers within both spheres have been induced to think in wholly positive terms about partnerships (in public at least), this overlooks some of the ways in which mutual ambitions are frustrated in an attempt to secure political legitimacy. What can emerge is an inauthentic form of collaboration in which broadcasters risk becoming marketing and branding entities for arts and culture of a particular kind. In being “selective, incremental, and pragmatic,”⁴² might they be complicit in narrowing the range of acceptable arts, artists, and voices in the United Kingdom (i.e., predominantly metropolitan and institutionally endorsed)?

A consequence arising is that it may diminish both the appetite and ability of broadcasters to be critical of the art on screen and the processes and institutions that support the production of those forms. As one cultural journalist puts it, where “critical voices are being drowned out by applause,”⁴³ a comment echoed in the interviews,

I think there's a kind of recognition that we've lost a bit of—that's a place where we would often have our critical perspective or on *The Review Show* you would suggest that maybe a theatre show was quite bad [laughs]. I think the BBC has lost a little bit of that in my mind, that kind of space for reviewing and criticism. It's much more about partnerships and let's do this lovely big project with The Tate or the BFI. We're a little bit hand-in-hand with the arts institutions and I think we've kind of lost a little bit of critical perspective. (Series Editor, BBC)

Indeed, over the past twenty years, we have seen the broader demise of the magazine format, a key space for the kind of critical and political debate that is being lamented. In the past, series such as *The Late Show* (BBC, 1989–1995) and *The Review Show* (BBC, 1994–2014) were

a very visible element within television schedules and a space to critically evaluate the economic and political dimensions of professional art and culture. While reconciling the program budget with audience ratings is one reason for their demise,⁴⁴ it is also likely that these formats frustrated the emphasis on partnerships and the focus on art appreciation that is an emerging characteristic of arts television today.

To conclude, partnerships bring value to both parties; as indicated by one senior editor: “they [arts organisations] need us, we need them.” This research does not argue that partnerships do not deliver value. Indeed, in terms of shared expertise, and public demonstrations of value for money, they offer significant benefits to broadcasters countering some political and commercial pressures. They should not, nor probably could not, be abandoned completely if the genre of arts is to be sustainable. However, from his research on BBC partnerships, Raats imparts a warning from broadcasting professionals that there are limits to “employing a partnership strategy as a credo for PSB sustainability.”⁴⁵ This research furthers that warning pointing to specific challenges and consequences of collaboration specifically as a route to *saving* arts television. The narrowing of content to formats devoid of any explicit political or cultural critique undoes television’s historical role as a space for challenging, diverse, and often dissenting voices. In effect, it threatens the critical autonomy of broadcasters, something that the interviewees in this study were fearful of losing.

Reinvigorating Questions of Sustainability

This article reveals the ways in which individuals and institutions are negotiating substantial change through a complex set of dependencies that take place within and beyond television production and commissioning, and even the media industry itself. Factors driving this change include the dominance of an economic logic within television and the ongoing commodification

of creative content. Deregulation, increased competition, and marketization of content threaten the sustainability of specialist factual production, especially content associated with niche audiences.

Within this context, arts on television is contracting in significant and detrimental ways, making the question of how to sustain it as a visible and vibrant area of television programming all the more important. It has adapted its structures, forms, and processes, but the result has been a narrowing of programming and a contraction of its supply-base. The creative diversity, plurality, and prominence of the genre are at risk, evidenced by material declines in the volume, spend, and visibility of the genre.

The future of genres like arts (and religion and children's) depends on a combination of factors, including a stable volume of commissions across a diverse subject range and whether producers can secure sufficient profit margins (albeit small) to ensure their continuity. Effective measures to sustain public-service genres will need to consider both demand and supply-side interventions. Policy will not serve much purpose in the sustainability of public-service genres if it fails to consider both sides of program provision. Debates on PSB usually focus on demand (e.g., broadcaster funding) or supply (i.e., tax breaks) but rarely bring both together, and therefore, public-service genres remain precarious. In addressing the issue of sustainability of arts television, this research argues for an ecology approach to policy-making and regulation which considers the complexity of the factors in unison.

Like many niche genres, the political economy of arts television is regulated by a delicate balance between public value and commercial imperatives. This does not mean that these motivations have to be at odds. The continued presence of companies with a commitment to arts and the renewed interest and creative ambition in science and history on television testify to the

opportunity to reposition a genre for a new era, although of course compromises must be made. What is clear from this research is that within niche genres plurality, competition and autonomy are essential to their long-term sustainability.

[TS: Please set footnotes as article footnote.]

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²Ofcom, “PSB Annual Research Report,” 2016, <http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/broadcast/reviews-investigations/psb-review/psb2016/PSB-Annual-Report-2016.pdf> (accessed May 25, 2017).

³Jeremy Tunstall, *BBC and Television Genres in Jeopardy* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2015).

⁴See Ofcom, “PSB Annual Research Report,” 2016.

⁵Ana Alacovska, “From ‘Poetics’ to ‘Production’: Genres as active ingredients in media production,” in *Advancing Media Production Research: Shifting Sites, Methods and Politics*, ed. Chris Paterson, David Lee, Anamik Saha, and Anna Zoellner (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 181–99; Jason Mittell, *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture* (NY: Routledge, 2004).

⁶Ibid.

⁷Alacovska, “From ‘Poetics’ to ‘Production’,” 187.

⁸Cottle, “Producing Nature,” 170–71.

⁹The project team comprised the author and a doctoral researcher. Interviews with senior BBC staff (e.g., commissioning editors, Head of Arts) were conducted together, whereas others (e.g.,

producers) were conducted by the researcher. All non-BBC interviews (e.g., Sky Arts, Channel 4) were conducted by the author.

¹⁰In 2016, BBC Studios was launched as the BBC's new program-making subsidiary. It will operate as a commercial entity supplying content to all broadcasters, not just the BBC, and thereby replacing in-house production. At the time of writing, it was not clear how this would operate in practice and whether certain genres would be protected within this new outward-facing structure. Without protection or guarantees of some sort and given the forces outlined in this article, it is difficult to see how arts will be competitive within this system.

¹¹John Wyver, *Vision On: Film, Television and the Arts in Britain* (London: Wallflower Press, 2007).

¹²BBC, "Tony Hall Announces Greatest Commitment to Arts for a Generation," 2014, www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/latestnews/2014/bbc-arts-release (accessed November 10, 2015).

¹³The way the BBC, the United Kingdom's main Public-Service Broadcaster, is governed and funded is set out by Royal Charter and is reviewed by the government approximately every ten years. The current charter began in January 2017.

¹⁴Dorothy Hobson, *Channel 4: The Early Years and the Jeremy Isaacs Legacy* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), 190.

¹⁵Wyver, *Vision On*; Hobson, *Channel 4*.

¹⁶Ofcom, "PSB Annual Research Report," 2016.

¹⁷Caitriona Noonan and Amy Genders, "Breaking the Generic Mould? Grayson Perry, Channel 4 and the Production of British Arts Television." *Critical Studies in Television* 13 (1, 2018): 79–95.

¹⁸*Broadcast*, “Sky Arts Unveils Bold Strategy,” March 27, 2014, www.broadcastnow.co.uk/sky-arts-unveils-bold-strategy/5070082.article (accessed November 10, 2015).

¹⁹Cottle “Producing Nature,” 82.

²⁰Ofcom, “PSB Annual Research Report,” 2016.

²¹*Ibid.*, 22.

²²Vana Goblot, “BBC Four as ‘A Place to Think’: Issues of Quality, Cultural Value and Television Archive in the Digital, Multiplatform Age” (PhD thesis, Goldsmiths, University of London, 2013).

²³Independent production companies operating in this space include the following: Storyvault (which produces *Portrait Artist of the Year*, Sky Arts, 2014–; *Landscape Artist of the Year*, Sky Arts, 2015–); Oxford Film and Television (*Face of Britain*, BBC Two, 2015; *The Genius of British Art*, Channel 4, 2010); Swan Films (*Grayson Perry: Who Are you?* Channel 4, 2014; *Nicky and Wynnton: The making of a concerto*, BBC Four, 2016), Illuminations (*Art of Faith*, Sky Arts, 2008); Directors Cut Productions (*South Bank Show*, Sky Arts, 2012–), and Matchlight (*Sold! Inside the World’s Biggest Auction House*, BBC Two, 2016).

²⁴James Bennett, Niki Strange, Paul Kerr, and Andrea Medrado, *Multiplatforming Public Service Broadcasting: The Economic and Cultural role of UK Digital and TV Independents*, 2012, <https://cowboysorindies.files.wordpress.com/2012/09/bennett-strange-kerr-medrado-2012-multiplatforming-psb-industry-report.pdf> (accessed February 24, 2016).

²⁵A recent and notable exception to this is the BBC series *Civilisations*.

²⁶The BBC Studio series *The Big Painting Challenge* sold to Foxtel Arts, the Australian equivalent to Sky Arts.

²⁷David Lee and John Corner, "Situating the South Bank Show: Continuity and Transition in British Arts Television," *Journal of British Cinema and Television* 12 (3, 2015): 364–82.

²⁸While this does offer some opportunities for indies, broadcasters still remain the main sources of large-scale funding and offer the most exposure of their work.

²⁹Wyver, *Vision On*, 118.

³⁰James Bennett, "From Independence to Independents, Public Service to Profit: British TV and the Impossibility of Independence," in *Media Independence: Working with freedom or working for free?*, ed. James Bennett and Niki Strange (NY: Routledge, 2015), 71–94.

³¹Tim Raats, "Public Service Media and the Partnership Agenda. Matching Public Policy with PSB Strategy," *International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics* 8 (1, 2012): 105–25; Tim Raats, Karen Donders, and Caroline Pauwels, "Finding the Value in Public Value Partnerships," in *The Value of Public Service Media*, ed. Gregory Ferrell Lowe and Fiona Martin (Gothenburg: Nordicom, 2014), 263–80.

³²Wyver, *Vision On*; Amy Genders, "Temple of the Arts? The Evolution of BBC Arts Broadcasting in the Digital Media Landscape" (PhD thesis, Faculty of Creative Industries, University of South Wales, 2017); King's College London, "The Art of Partnering," 2015, <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/cultural/culturalenquiries/partnership/Full-report.pdf> (accessed May 14, 2018); Raats, Donders, and Pauwels, "Finding the Value in Public Value Partnerships."

³³Noonan and Genders, "Breaking the Generic Mould?"

³⁴Robert Hewison, *Cultural Capital: The Rise and Fall of Creative Britain* (London: Verso Books, 2014). Raats, "Public Service Media and the Partnership Agenda"; Raats, Donders, and Pauwels, "Finding the Value in Public Value Partnerships."

³⁵Maeve Connolly, *TV Museum: Contemporary Art and the Age of Television* (Bristol: Intellect, 2014); King's College London, "The Art of Partnering."

³⁶Wyver, *Vision On*, 192.

³⁷King's College London, "The Art of Partnering."

³⁸Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, "Culture at the Heart of our Communities," 2016, www.gov.uk/government/news/culture-at-the-heart-of-our-communities (accessed January 30, 2017).

³⁹Andrew McClellan, *Art and its Publics: Museum Studies at the Millennium* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), XIII; Connolly, *TV Museum*, 64, 84.

⁴⁰Raats, Donders, and Pauwels, "Finding the Value in Public Value Partnerships," 263.

⁴¹King's College London, "The Art of Partnering."

⁴²Raats, Donders, and Pauwels, "Finding the Value in Public Value Partnerships," 264.

⁴³Mark Lawson, "British TV Is Learning to Love the Arts—But It Can Love Them Too Much," 2014, www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2014/apr/18/tv-arts-bbc-channel-4-creative-partnerships#start-of-comments (accessed January 30, 2017).

⁴⁴John A. Walker, *Arts TV: A History of Arts Television in Britain* (London: John Libbey, 1993), 176; Wyver, *Vision On*, 64.

⁴⁵Raats, "Public Service Media and the Partnership Agenda," 116.

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