

The Last Broadcast: Reflections on the Life and Legacy of BBC Four

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Abstract

Following the news detailed in the BBC Annual Plan 2021/22 that BBC Four will cease to broadcast original content and will revert to an archive-only channel as a cost-cutting measure, this article endeavours to understand the legacy of the channel as it was, as it is and what it could become.

Keywords

BBC, BBC four, public service broadcasting, arts programming, channel legacy

On 23 April 2021, Sky Arts began broadcasting the long-running music documentary series, [Classic Albums \(1997\)](#). Once a staple of the BBC (BBC Two, 2003–2006, 2008; BBC Four, 2006–2021), Sky had not only acquired early episodes, but, in collaboration with production company Mercury Studios, would broadcast new ones, beginning with a celebration of The Who’s 1967 album *Sell Out*. Prior to the episode’s broadcast, advertisements ran for the new addition: a minimalist monochromatic title sequence featuring sound waves and series excerpts, culminating with the slogan: ‘New and Exclusive to Sky Arts’ writ large across the screen. In just six words, Sky Arts declared a new home, a new look, and a new era for one of music programming’s most significant offerings.

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Sky's acquisition of *Classic Albums* builds on similarly themed patterns within its own scheduling in recent years, drawing on archival assets and new commissions that placed it in direct competition with BBC Four's own Friday night coverage. Spanning the entire weekend rather than a single night, it signified that Sky Arts could not only compete with BBC Four -with greater buying power and longer broadcast hours at its disposal- but also better the channel's offerings. By disengaging, or more aptly, unplugging the long-established relationship between *Classic Albums* and the BBC, Sky reasserted its commitment to offering a space for engagement with arts and culture, indicative of its wider mission to bring 'more art to more people' following their free-to-air move in September 2020 (Sky, 2020).

Former controller Richard Klein once hailed the channel as the 'gold card channel for the arts and culture' (Klein, quoted in Dowell, 2011), a compliment befitting its flagship positioning as part of the BBC's digital provision. However, less than 10 years later, in a vastly different media landscape, it became clear that BBC Four would no longer exist in its original form. As detailed in the BBC Annual Plan 2021/22, BBC Four will revert to an archive-only channel as a cost-cutting measure to 'become the home of the most distinctive content from across the BBC's archive' (BBC, 2021:22), ceasing to commission new programming and only broadcasting some event coverage, such as BBC Proms.

No longer is BBC Four 'a place to think', embodying Reithian values; a space that prides itself on being 'For the Adventurous' in promotional trailers; or even one that maintains its self-styled branding as 'The Musician's Channel', following an increased commitment to scheduling music on Friday nights. Antithetical to its own origins and ambitions, BBC Four will now instead be a place to celebrate and commemorate the BBC. Functioning as a repository of culture from decades past, BBC Four will become a museum of itself, a carefully curated display of the Corporation's output, preserved as artefact. This should come as a surprise to no-one. Speculation regarding the channel's future was reignited in May 2020, after BBC Four was once again named as a target for planned cuts across the Corporation (Campbell, 2021; Weston, 2020), detailing potential options for its future, and plans for its budget to be partially reallocated to BBC Three, (Sherwin, 2020; Sweney, 2020). In March 2021, following months of discussion and speculation, the future of the channel was finally made clear.

We do not wish to make this article a comparative one, to narrativise the cultural work of BBC Four as the David to Sky Arts' Goliath in the competitive space of 'post-broadcast' or 'post-network' screen culture (Lotz, 2014). Nor do we wish to read BBC Four's decline through the optic of BBC Three versus BBC Four -an unfair comparison given either channels' output and demographics. BBC Three's key demographic are 16-34-year-olds, who are targeted predominantly with scripted comedy and drama, as well as reality television programmes, with recent successes including *Fleabag* (2016-19) and *RuPaul's Drag Race UK* (2019). Rather, we position this commentary as a lens through which to consider more closely the state of niche programming in the multi-channel environment, in order to unpack what it means to lose BBC Four as a site of critical inquiry and cultural engagement. To do so is to first revisit BBC Four's past, its precarity and ever-changing identity, before considering the implications of the channel's loss for television production.

While not exclusively an arts channel – BBC Four has provided a home for science, history, music programming and earlier on in its lifetime, drama – the channel has devoted an increasingly significant amount of its broadcast hours to arts programming, including music, ballet and theatre. It is here where we feel the loss of the channel most acutely, and wish to focus our attention, contextualising its loss within the wider landscape of arts programming in the post-broadcast environment, and the continued marginalisation of the genre. How then, can we begin to understand BBC Four, its identity, its address and its place in the industrial and cultural history of the corporation? What does it mean to the audience and the nation? What will be its legacy?

‘What is the point of BBC Four?’

On the 15th anniversary of its launch, Mark Lawson provocatively asked ‘What is the Point of BBC Four?’ (2017). At that time, Lawson’s question suggested that the channel was experiencing an identity crisis and, until March 2021, the persisting discourse surrounding the channel told of its longstanding precariousness. Reflecting on the history of BBC Four and tracing its programming shifts, the ever-changing identity of the channel is clearly evident. An ambitious cultural site for arts and new ideas, the channel also provided a home for provided a British biopics, such as [Burton and Taylor \(2013\)](#); American prestige dramas [Mad Men \(AMC, 2007–2015\)](#) and European imports including [The Killing \(DR1, 2007–2012\)](#) – which formed a central part of its identity for many years ([Esser, 2017](#); [Jensen and Jacobsen, 2017](#); [McCabe, 2016](#); [Ward, 2013](#)) – and homegrown comedies [The Thick of It \(2005–2012\)](#) and [Twenty Twelve \(2011–2012\)](#). The channel’s purposeful mix of ‘highbrow’ and ‘lowbrow’ cultural forms may be precisely why it failed to find or maintain a sense of itself, despite the variety and interest this offered the audience, underpinned by the tenets of public service.

When the channel pivoted towards a fuller embrace of arts programming through its scheduling of theatre, ballet and music, other avenues for cultural and intellectual engagement were maintained through the continued presence of science and history programming. While these programmes ensured BBC Four’s provision of a diversity of factual educational content, their expert presenters, including historians and scientists such as Mary Beard, Lucy Worsley and Brian Cox, gave the impression of trust, authority and quality. Reflecting on the pleasures of BBC Four, Andrew Billen, a self-described ‘devotee’ of the channel, noted that ‘for some of us, when it comes to consuming television and radio, the number four carries with it an *imprimatur of quality*. Radio Four, Channel 4, More 4 and, just as importantly, BBC Four’ ([Billen, 2011](#), our emphasis). The particular marker of ‘quality’ Billen referred to is evident in the reactions to the loss of BBC Four generated in the press and across social media, from audiences, presenters and producers alike, distinguishing it as a distinctive and important televisual site for cultural engagement ([Singh, 2020](#); [Sherwin, 2020](#)). While, as Lawson suggested, the channel lacked a sense of its own identity, it *does* maintain its own quality, one that is equally difficult to define.

The legacy of BBC Four

Reactions to the closure of BBC Four became a springboard for wider ongoing discussions beyond the channel, such as the use of the licence fee, and/or the BBC as an institution. This discourse is notable for its continued attention to BBC Four's difference from much of the televisual landscape, often described as being less mainstream or even counter to other BBC offerings (including its sister channel, BBC Two). The channel is characterised by a reputation for being less risk averse, founded in, as former controller Janice Hadlow noted, a 'willingness to take chances and go where other channels were more cautious to tread' (Hadlow, quoted in [Lawson, 2017](#)). This is exemplified by moments of innovation and experimentation, such as the 'BBC Four Goes Slow' season (2015–16), which capitalised on the Norwegian trend of 'slow television' ([Puijk 2021](#)), providing an antidote to the fast pace of contemporary television editing. The very qualities that drew audiences, programme-makers and presenters to the 'place' of BBC Four at all may be the very reason it so often became a target for closure. Its fate is symptomatic of the ongoing marginalisation of the arts, confirming Jeremy Tunstall's earlier assertion that it had become a television genre in decline, and reflects the degree to which arts programming is 'ghettoised' or 'exiled', existing at the 'fringes of the schedule' ([Tunstall, 2015](#): 223).

However, the consequence of this marginalisation is greater than just having less arts and culture on screen. In losing BBC Four, we also lose the opportunity to see and hear more diverse voices within the intimate space of television. One such example is Jeanie Finlay, then an unknown filmmaker, who was commissioned by the channel to make fan culture documentary, [Teenland \(2007\)](#). In the wake of the archive-only decision, Finlay lamented the fact that smaller and quieter films usually broadcast on BBC Four, would now predominantly exist on iPlayer, at the expense of the 'unifying conjunction of audience, interaction and vital critical notice', resulting in films no longer finding an audience, and instead becoming 'like unread titles in a library' ([Finlay, 2021](#)). Finlay's observations are a sobering reminder of the false democratising promise of streaming, that not all audience members engage with media texts in the same way. For some, online engagement is a natural extension of their viewing experience, drawn to the expansiveness of iPlayer's 'library'. For others, live viewing and adherence to the broadcast schedule remains their primary mode of engagement with television, and more significantly, arts and culture. It is this section of the audience who will feel the loss of BBC Four most acutely. Moreover, they are also exactly the kind of audience films like Finlay's seek to connect with.

The truest sense of what BBC Four is and does is prismatic: different people view it in different ways. This is perhaps best illustrated by the range of reactions that the announcement regarding the channel's future has generated. Following initial speculation of the channel's demise, press coverage was characterised by their focus on efforts to save the channel and halt its closure. Writing for *The Telegraph*, Anita Singh explored this from the perspective of high-profile BBC Four presenters including Lucy Worsley and Janina Ramirez, reacting to the channel's potential demise on social media. Like Billen, Ramirez noted the channel's uniqueness, calling it 'unlike any other', starting the #LoveBBCFour

hashtag with an impassioned plea to ‘spread it, share it, shout about it or we lose it’ (Singh, 2020). Writing in relation to her then new BBC Four series, Worsley wrote similarly, saying she hoped that ‘those who love BBC Four’ would see programming in future. However, Singh’s coverage also included reactions which were less emotive. Mary Beard’s reflection is notable for its pragmatism. In contrast to Worsley and Ramirez, Beard stressed taking a holistic view, considering instead the significance of the continued survival of the BBC as a whole, maintaining space for content for everyone to enjoy (Singh).

Whether a central part of the audience’s cultural engagement or conceived as a smaller part of a more significant whole, BBC Four remains a powerful, yet divisive site of critical and cultural debate, part of our cultural and national life. And yet, it is also considered as specialist and niche, exemplary of the narrowcasting or ‘flexible microcasting’ strategies that typify the multi-channel era (Parks, 2004: 134). Its cultural and intellectual value outweighs fiscal measure, and its very existence has ‘significantly extended and enriched arts programming’ (Wyver, 2007: 89). As such, the loss of the channel feels seismic for those who regularly engage with the channel, and inconsequential for those who rarely do or never have. Irrespective of the technological affordances that change the how, when and where we interact with television, it remains as an ephemeral medium. Television channels come and go, and as the lifecycle of BBC Three has shown, they can come back again, returning to linear broadcast in February 2022 (BBC Media Centre, 2021). Programmes, however, and the thoughts, ideas and feelings generated by them, are more enduring.

Conclusion

While it began as something of a lament for BBC Four, this article became an endeavour to understand the legacy of the channel as it was, as it is and what it could become. This pursuit has brought us to two interrelated conclusions that speak to the complexity of BBC Four as a channel and a brand. ‘BBC4 is the BBC at its best’, said Liberal Democrat culture spokesman, Don Foster, who lauded the station for ‘supporting riskier, lesser known projects that would otherwise struggle to find airtime’ (Foster, quoted in Conlan, 2010). Likewise, Klein celebrated the aim of the channel, ‘to offer discourse and insight through factual, drama and entertainment programming’ (Dowell, 2011). In the face of Foster’s appreciation and Klein’s ambitious vision, there is an ambiguity and a pending sense of fear over what the channel’s new identity and mission is, now that BBC Four is no longer commissioning new programming. Moreover, there are uncomfortable unanswered questions: where will new programming go? Whose interests will the arts programming serve? Where will they find a home? As Jeanie Finlay reminds us, BBC Four gives voice; where will those voices go?

Though tempting to dwell on the consequences of these questions, and one should, we propose that it is more useful, and indeed optimistic, to revisit what we have gained culturally and televisually from BBC Four -and to reflect on its function, both historically and at present. A recent broadcast presented the opportunity for such a reflection, epitomising the channel’s launch ethos -a place to think. For a moment, BBC Four became

not just a mirror for society, a forum for public discourse, a venue for an orchestra or a museum for the arts, but a window during an unprecedented historical moment: the Coronavirus pandemic.

On 12 May 2020, BBC Four broadcast *Life Drawing Live: Drawing the Nation Together* - a live event in which amateur artists gathered in a studio to paint life models. The follow-up to *Life Drawing Live!* a groundbreaking live event broadcast on 4 February 2020- the first of its kind on British screens. Not only was the programme unique in its form and daring, but we would argue in its motivations. At a time where public opinion remained divided, and when the global pandemic had forced the nation into its first lockdown, *Drawing* set out to achieve a bold aim - 'drawing the UK's four nations together in the biggest-ever live, life drawing class' (BBC, 2020). Through the programme, and more importantly through its red button 'Pose Cam' feature with uninterrupted view of the models -BBC Four offered respite. Within the first few hours of its broadcast, over 26,000 people uploaded their personal artworks (Hall, 2020), illustrating the need to engage with something different.

Without the pressures of narrative or competition or the intrusion of dramatic audio-visuals, it provided a moment to distract oneself and to connect, albeit digitally, to not only the subject of the portraits but to fellow audience members. For a moment, BBC Four was not only a space to think, but it was also a space to connect. Comforted by the structure and the togetherness provided by the broadcast schedule during uncertain times (Ellis, 2020), BBC Four proved its value and worth. *Drawing* crystallises what the television landscape and our cultural lives have gained throughout its lifetime, but it also shows what we stand to lose.

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