# Reality TV and live events reshape UK television's cultural landscape



As we navigate the second quarter of the 21st century, it is imperative to reflect on the seismic shifts in television and how they have creatively and culturally influenced modern society. The landscape of TV has transformed dramatically over the past 25 years, predominantly driven by the surge in streaming platforms and the ascendancy of reality television. This evolution signifies a departure from the once ubiquitous ritual of communal viewing, where families gathered around regular programming, towards a fragmented scene where audiences curate their experiences, tuning into a diverse array of content at their convenience.

Despite these sweeping changes, television has not entirely lost its capacity for shared cultural moments. A review of the UK’s most-watched broadcasts reveals that major live events still draw large audiences. Analysis of historical viewership data indicates that while people can now choose from a virtually limitless catalogue of shows, mass entertainment continues to thrive in certain areas. Events like royal funerals, sporting finals, and public addresses have crashed through the ceilings of traditional viewer metrics, capturing the attention of millions. As Phil Harrison, a noted TV journalist, pointed out, “Communal national TV watching is now basically about live events with assumed national importance,” highlighting a significant shift in audience engagement.

Central to this transformation is the impact of reality television, which has significantly infiltrated popular culture, marking a pivotal shift in viewer preferences. Once renowned for scripted drama, the ratings leaderboard has transitioned predominantly towards reality formats, with shows like "The Great British Bake Off" emerging as cultural touchstones. Harrison notes that although "Big Brother" is not featured in the most-watched list, its influence is felt throughout the evolution of reality-based programming. The success of talent contests and lifestyle shows illustrates a broader tendency towards content that embraces relatability and appeal to the everyday viewer.

In parallel, traditional soap operas, which once dominated UK television, are watching their audiences dwindle alarmingly. Viewership among younger audiences continues to drop sharply, with figures from Ofcom indicating that less than half of viewers aged 16-24 engaged with broadcast television on a weekly basis, compared to 76% just five years ago. Harrison suggests that this decline is not merely about changing consumption habits but also about the disconnect between the narratives offered by these soaps and the realities of contemporary life. With episodic dramas often not reflecting the zeitgeist of modern Britain, it appears that soaps struggle to captivate a younger demographic, whereas other formats that allow for more expansive narratives are thriving.

The dynamics of viewing habits have also shifted significantly across other genres. Scripted television has often been overshadowed by reality formats in recent years, with notable exceptions like "Gavin & Stacey," which managed to resonate at scale due to its universal themes and relatable content. This phenomenon reflects the broader cultural inclination towards programming that celebrates warmth, humour, and everyday challenges, establishing itself firmly in the national identity.

Perplexingly, as major media companies grapple with outdated business models based on rigid traditional programming schedules, the streaming age presents both a challenge and an opportunity. Many networks, strapped for new ideas and gripping content, are leaning heavily on reruns and subpar reality offerings to fill their schedules. This reliance on lower-quality programming raises questions about the sustainability of cable and satellite networks as audiences gravitate more toward platforms that deliver high-quality, on-demand experiences tailored to individual tastes.

In this rapidly changing environment, the challenge remains for broadcasters to reinvigorate their offerings and connect meaningfully with a young and diverse audience demanding authenticity and relevance. As Phil Harrison succinctly puts it, realigning with the modern viewer’s expectations necessitates a rethinking of how narratives are crafted to truly reflect contemporary society. Whether this can be achieved within the traditional broadcast framework remains to be seen, but the success of programmes that bridge the gap between universality and local relevance will be critical in defining the future landscape of UK television.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2025/may/23/the-guide-reality-tv-streaming-tv-pop-culture), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2025/may/23/the-guide-reality-tv-streaming-tv-pop-culture)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2025/may/23/the-guide-reality-tv-streaming-tv-pop-culture), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2025/may/23/the-guide-reality-tv-streaming-tv-pop-culture)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://www.apnews.com/article/01780bd6be10a4a7e85b795000d6db4e), [[4]](https://www.ft.com/content/bffd62d2-5e5f-4df3-bd8a-ef4596eabbe4)
* Paragraph 4 – [[6]](https://www.time.com/6316559/fall-tv-strikes-impact/), [[5]](https://www.axios.com/2023/08/10/disney-streaming-movies-parks-earnings-iger)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2025/may/23/the-guide-reality-tv-streaming-tv-pop-culture), [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2025/may/23/the-guide-reality-tv-streaming-tv-pop-culture)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2025/may/23/the-guide-reality-tv-streaming-tv-pop-culture> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2025/may/23/the-guide-reality-tv-streaming-tv-pop-culture> - This article examines the evolution of television over the past 25 years, focusing on the impact of streaming services and reality TV. It highlights how traditional TV viewing has shifted from communal experiences to on-demand, personalized content. The piece also discusses the decline of soap operas and the rise of reality TV, noting that shows like 'The Great British Bake Off' have become emblematic of this change. The author reflects on the broader cultural implications of these shifts and their influence on modern British society.
3. <https://www.apnews.com/article/01780bd6be10a4a7e85b795000d6db4e> - This article discusses the decline of traditional cable and satellite TV networks, which once played a pivotal role in shaping popular culture. As audiences increasingly turn to streaming services like Netflix, traditional networks are experiencing significant drops in viewership and content production. Networks such as MTV, USA Network, AMC, and Disney Channel are now heavily relying on reruns and low-quality reality shows to fill their schedules. The piece highlights the uncertainty facing these networks and the challenges they face in adapting to the digital age.
4. <https://www.ft.com/content/bffd62d2-5e5f-4df3-bd8a-ef4596eabbe4> - This article reports on a significant decline in traditional TV viewership among young audiences in the UK. According to Ofcom, less than half of viewers aged 16-24 watch broadcast television weekly, a sharp drop from 76% in 2018. Younger generations are increasingly favoring video-sharing platforms like YouTube and TikTok, leading to challenges for traditional broadcasters who rely on advertising revenue. The piece also notes that older demographics continue to watch broadcast TV, but the overall trend indicates a shift in viewing habits.
5. <https://www.axios.com/2023/08/10/disney-streaming-movies-parks-earnings-iger> - This article discusses the challenges faced by media giants like Disney, Warner Bros. Discovery, NBCUniversal, and Paramount as their traditional TV business models become unsustainable due to increasing cord-cutting. Disney CEO Bob Iger emphasizes the need for a serious reevaluation of their reliance on traditional television to ensure long-term success. Despite their streaming initiatives, these companies do not expect their streaming services to break even until at least 2024 or 2025. The piece highlights the urgent need for strategic shifts in the media industry.
6. <https://www.time.com/6316559/fall-tv-strikes-impact/> - This article reports on the tentative agreement reached between the Writers Guild of America (WGA) and the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers, ending the writers' strike. The piece discusses the impact of the strike on the TV industry, noting disruptions to shows like 'The Drew Barrymore Show.' While daytime and late-night talk shows may resume soon, scripted shows will take longer due to the ongoing actors' strike. The article also highlights the dominance of reality TV in the fall schedule and the challenges faced by traditional TV networks.
7. <https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/paramount-misses-quarterly-revenue-estimates-weak-ad-market-offsets-streaming-2024-02-28/> - This article reports on Paramount Global's fourth-quarter financial results, highlighting a surprise profit despite missing revenue estimates. The profit was driven by gains in streaming, which offset a weak advertising market. Paramount+ added 4.1 million subscribers in the quarter, surpassing estimates. The company continues to invest in its streaming platform and expects domestic profitability by 2025. The piece also notes a 12% drop in revenue from the TV media segment, partly due to lower political advertising and Hollywood strikes.