# Reality TV and live events reshape UK viewing habits in the streaming era



To mark a quarter-century into the 21st century, a recent exploration of television's evolution has revealed a dynamic landscape reshaped by the advent of streaming and the emergence of reality TV. Departing from a once-universal viewing experience—gathering around the family television set—today's audience is embracing an infographic universe of choices, where individual preferences reign and communal viewing is on the decline.

The latest analyses of UK television audience behaviours indicate that traditional viewing paradigms have fundamentally shifted. Data from the ratings agency Barb, although imperfect, offers a glimpse into what captures the public's attention. Major events, rather than standard programming, have dominated the ratings in recent years. The most-viewed broadcasts capture moments of cultural significance, such as the funeral of Queen Elizabeth II and the historic coronation of King Charles III. Elsewhere, sporting occasions like the Euro Cup and The Great British Bake Off have enticed millions, showcasing the enduring appeal of live events amid the fragmentation of viewing habits.

Phil Harrison, a noted TV journalist and author of *The Age of Static: How TV Explains Modern Britain*, highlights a stark contrast: previous decades celebrated scripted dramas and comedy specials. Now, multi-channel platforms compel audiences to navigate niche options, leaving traditional episodic storytelling conspicuously absent from contemporary ratings. Harrison observes, “Viewers have become more atomised and niche-occupying... communal national TV watching is now basically about live events with assumed national importance.”

Reality TV, with its omnipresent influence, has come to redefine mainstream television. The format pioneered by shows like *Big Brother*, although not prominently featured in this century's highest-rated lists, has seeded concepts that flourish in current programming. From talent competitions to culinary contests, elements of the reality genre have permeated traditional television, creating hybrid formats that appeal to diverse audiences. The emergence of shows such as *The Traitors*, considered the most-watched program of 2025 thus far, exemplifies this evolution, retaining the conversations initiated by its forerunners.

However, the rise of reality TV has concurrently heralded a decline in the daytime soap operas that once captivated audiences. With *EastEnders* and *Coronation Street* struggling to maintain viewership, particularly among younger demographics, the traditional narrative structures appear increasingly out of sync with modern audiences. A report indicates that in 2023, only 48% of 16- to 24-year-olds watched broadcast television weekly, down from 76% in 2018—a trend raising alarm bells for traditional broadcasters reliant on ad revenue. As Phil Harrison notes, “Soaps... are like living period pieces,” detached from the realities of contemporary life.

Yet, not all scripted television has succumbed to this decline. The enduring success of *Gavin & Stacey*—which captured 19.1 million viewers for its Christmas special—serves as a case in point. By crafting narratives rooted in relatable experiences and universal themes, this series has managed to engage a wide audience without the biting satire common in contemporary comedies. Harrison argues that the warmth and respect inherent in its character portrayals further contribute to its broad appeal.

In the broader context of changing viewing landscapes, *The Great British Bake Off* stands out, embodying the nostalgic search for a national identity amid cultural uncertainties. Its mix of reality competition and wholesome camaraderie resonates perfectly with modern audiences seeking an escape from the harsher realities depicted in other genres. The show's success illustrates a transition from the more cutthroat reality TV formats towards a kinder, more inclusive style that aligns with shifting societal values.

Reflecting on these developments, it becomes evident that the television industry is at a crossroads, navigating the challenges posed by evolving consumer preferences. As traditional broadcasters grapple with maintaining audience engagement in an age dominated by streaming and digital content, the lessons of the past two decades will likely prove invaluable. The very fabric of television itself is being rewoven, shaped by both the innovative and the traditional, as it boldly steps into the future.

## 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), [[5]](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/media-use-and-attitudes/media-habits-adults/media-nations-2023-latest-uk-viewing-and-listening-trends-revealed/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://www.ft.com/content/bffd62d2-5e5f-4df3-bd8a-ef4596eabbe4), [[6]](https://www.expressandstar.com/showbiz/2025/01/01/history-making-events-top-chart-of-decade-s-biggest-tv-audiences-so-far/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[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), [[3]](https://www.ft.com/content/bffd62d2-5e5f-4df3-bd8a-ef4596eabbe4)
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* Paragraph 6 – [[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), [[5]](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/media-use-and-attitudes/media-habits-adults/media-nations-2023-latest-uk-viewing-and-listening-trends-revealed/)
* Paragraph 7 – [[2]](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 individualized streaming, leading to a decline in mass audience programs. The piece also discusses the rise of reality TV, noting its influence on shows like 'The Great British Bake Off' and 'The Traitors'. Additionally, it touches on the challenges faced by soap operas in adapting to the binge-watching culture.
3. <https://www.ft.com/content/bffd62d2-5e5f-4df3-bd8a-ef4596eabbe4> - An article from the Financial Times detailing the decline of traditional TV viewing among younger UK audiences. It reports that in 2023, only 48% of 16- to 24-year-olds watched broadcast television weekly, a significant drop from 76% in 2018. The piece attributes this trend to the rise of video-sharing platforms like YouTube and TikTok, which are particularly popular among younger viewers, posing challenges for UK broadcasters who rely on advertising revenue.
4. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_most_watched_television_broadcasts_in_the_United_Kingdom> - A Wikipedia page listing the most-watched television broadcasts in the UK, including both special events and regular programming. It provides data on viewership numbers for various events, such as the 1966 FIFA World Cup final and the funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales. The page also includes information on the most-watched programs of the 21st century, highlighting the dominance of live events and reality TV shows in recent years.
5. <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/media-use-and-attitudes/media-habits-adults/media-nations-2023-latest-uk-viewing-and-listening-trends-revealed/> - Ofcom's 2023 report on UK viewing and listening trends reveals a steep decline in mass audience programs. The number of programs attracting over four million viewers has halved over the past eight years. The report also highlights the rise of streaming platforms, with only 48 programs averaging more than four million viewers on streaming services in 2022, compared to 1,184 on broadcast TV.
6. <https://www.expressandstar.com/showbiz/2025/01/01/history-making-events-top-chart-of-decade-s-biggest-tv-audiences-so-far/> - An article from the Express & Star detailing the decade's biggest TV audiences in the UK. It lists events such as Boris Johnson's COVID-19 lockdown announcement and the Queen's funeral service, highlighting the dominance of live events in attracting large viewerships. The piece also notes the decline of traditional TV viewing among younger audiences, with a shift towards streaming platforms.
7. <https://banburyfm.com/national-news/history-making-events-top-chart-of-decades-biggest-tv-audiences-so-far/> - A Banbury FM article listing the top TV audiences of the 2020s in the UK. It includes events like the Euro 2020 final and Line of Duty's final episode, emphasizing the popularity of live events and reality TV. The article also discusses the challenges faced by traditional TV broadcasters in adapting to the changing viewing habits of younger audiences.