# Television’s identity crisis: how streaming and reality TV reshaped UK viewing habits since 2000



To mark a quarter-century into the 21st century, an exploration of television’s rapid evolution reveals a medium permanently altered by the streaming revolution. The narrative weaves through ratings, genres, and viewer behaviour, shedding light on how pop culture has transformed dramatically since 2000.

Once a cornerstone of communal experience, television now inhabits a fragmented landscape where individual viewers curate their viewing schedules. While millions still congregate around the year's most-watched broadcasts—a phenomenon that can be traced back through decades—this trend now largely revolves around significant cultural or newsworthy events rather than traditional scripted programming. According to viewing data from the UK ratings agency Barb, the list of most-watched shows consistently reflects moments of national importance, such as royal events or live sports, rather than scripted dramas that once dominated. Phil Harrison, a TV journalist and author, aptly notes that traditional premieres and scripted series have lost their standing as shared experiences in an era of limitless choices.

In stark contrast to the past, when shows like "Coronation Street" or "EastEnders" routinely topped the ratings, contemporary viewing habits indicate that scripted content can no longer guarantee mass appeal. Phil Harrison stresses that the model of scheduled viewing has given way to on-demand streaming, resulting in a smaller audience for traditional soaps, which now struggle to retain viewership amidst the rising popularity of reality television. While series that celebrate everyday life, such as "The Great British Bake Off," illustrate the genre's current soft-spoken success, they are also indicative of shifting cultural identities. The very title of the show encapsulates a collective yearning for a shared national narrative—one that seems increasingly elusive in today's media ecosystem.

Reality TV, which burgeoned in the early 2000s with programmes like "Big Brother," has irrevocably reshaped audience expectations and the television landscape itself. Despite the absence of "Big Brother" from recent ratings lists, its influence permeates modern television, paving the way for shows that spotlight "ordinary people" and competitive formats. Contest-based series dominate today's cultural conversations and exemplify the allure of reality programming, as evidenced by the soaring viewership numbers for competition-oriented shows like "The Traitors."

However, the popularity of reality television marks a broader decline in traditional soap operas—once rich in storytelling and cultural reflection. Both "EastEnders" and "Coronation Street" report dwindling numbers, particularly among the under-35 demographic, leading industry analysts to consider their potential obsolescence. Harrison suggests that the long-form narratives of soaps simply cannot compete with the bingeable nature of contemporary streaming dramas, which, with expansive story arcs, attract a young audience seeking fresh perspectives reflective of modern life.

As younger viewers increasingly gravitate towards platforms like YouTube, the implications for traditional broadcasters are severe. Ofcom reports a staggering drop in weekly viewership among 16- to 24-year-olds from 76% in 2018 to a mere 48% in 2023. This transformation raises concerns for traditional television networks that heavily rely on advertising revenue and struggle to adapt their content strategies to attract a younger audience. For instance, the success of "Hollyoaks" among this age group, credited to a leaner episode schedule and shorter runtimes, highlights the necessity of innovation in content delivery.

Yet the landscape is not without its bright spots. Scripted comedies still find their way to success, as demonstrated by "Gavin & Stacey." This charming series appeals broadly by offering relatable, heartfelt narratives devoid of cruelty or cynicism. Its revival and continued popularity underscore the desire for programming that resonates across generational divides; it manages to strike a chord by presenting common human experiences with warmth and humour—elements that resonate deeply in a time of social fragmentation.

The future of television remains uncertain but promising. As emerging creators reshape the medium with innovative storytelling—illustrated in popular shows that blend genres and explore multifaceted themes—the potential for the industry to adapt and thrive amidst audience fluctuations appears tangible. Essentially, for every challenge the medium faces, there lies an opportunity for reinvention reflective of contemporary society’s complexities.

In this ever-evolving landscape, television continues to be a powerful tool, reflecting and influencing the cultural zeitgeist. With the power to shape discussions around identity, community, and the state of society, it remains a vital part of a shared human experience—even in a world where individual viewing preferences reign supreme. The journey through the next 25 years promises further upheaval and, hopefully, innovation.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2025/may/23/the-guide-reality-tv-streaming-tv-pop-culture), [[2]](https://www.apnews.com/article/01780bd6be10a4a7e85b795000d6db4e)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](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), [[5]](https://time.com/6336906/best-tv-shows-2023/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2025/may/23/the-guide-reality-tv-streaming-tv-pop-culture), [[2]](https://www.apnews.com/article/01780bd6be10a4a7e85b795000d6db4e), [[3]](https://www.ft.com/content/bffd62d2-5e5f-4df3-bd8a-ef4596eabbe4)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2025/may/23/the-guide-reality-tv-streaming-tv-pop-culture), [[4]](https://www.axios.com/2024/06/04/asian-american-hollywood-film-tv-representation), [[5]](https://time.com/6336906/best-tv-shows-2023/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](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), [[6]](https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2024/08/tv-still-runs-politics/679550/?utm_source=apple_news)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2025/may/23/the-guide-reality-tv-streaming-tv-pop-culture), [[2]](https://www.apnews.com/article/01780bd6be10a4a7e85b795000d6db4e), [[7]](https://www.ft.com/content/ec93d0dd-d70a-4da3-897f-adcba4bca2b8)

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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.apnews.com/article/01780bd6be10a4a7e85b795000d6db4e> - This article discusses the decline of traditional cable and satellite TV networks, highlighting how shifts in viewing habits have led to reduced relevance and viewership. As audiences increasingly turn to streaming services like Netflix, networks such as MTV, USA Network, AMC, and Disney Channel have experienced significant audience shrinkage, often relying on reruns and low-quality reality shows to fill their schedules. The piece also notes that while some networks like Fox News Channel and HGTV maintain viewership, the industry faces uncertainty due to a substantial drop in cable subscriptions over the past decade and the growing dominance of streaming platforms.
3. <https://www.ft.com/content/bffd62d2-5e5f-4df3-bd8a-ef4596eabbe4> - This article examines the decline in traditional TV viewership among younger UK audiences. According to Ofcom, in 2023, only 48% of 16-24-year-olds watched broadcast television weekly, down from 76% in 2018. Younger generations, particularly Gen Z and Gen Alpha, prefer video-sharing platforms like YouTube, leading to a decline in live TV viewing. The piece also notes that while older demographics continue to watch broadcast TV, the shift poses challenges for UK broadcasters who rely on advertising revenue.
4. <https://www.axios.com/2024/06/04/asian-american-hollywood-film-tv-representation> - This article highlights the potential revenue boost for American media companies by focusing more on Asian American stories. Streaming has become the primary TV consumption method for Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander communities, with significant presence on platforms like YouTube and Netflix. The piece notes that over 80% of Hollywood executives believe increasing on-screen representation of Asian Americans could lead to higher spending from Asian American households. However, it also points out that production houses and distributors are hesitant to back projects centered on marginalized communities.
5. <https://time.com/6336906/best-tv-shows-2023/> - This article reviews standout TV shows of 2023, highlighting inventive and subversive visions from emerging creators. Despite industry challenges like strikes and financial struggles, the year produced notable series such as the inventive detective series 'Poker Face,' the comedic satire 'The Other Two,' and the thought-provoking reboot 'Dead Ringers.' The piece also mentions 'Telemarketers,' a distinct true-crime documentary, 'The Curse,' which explores reality TV, and 'BEEF,' which tackles themes of anger and repression.
6. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2024/08/tv-still-runs-politics/679550/?utm_source=apple_news> - This article discusses the enduring influence of television in American politics. Despite predictions of its decline due to the rise of the internet and social media, TV remains the most influential medium in shaping political discourse. The piece notes that while viewership of traditional TV newscasts has declined, the audience remains substantial and still outnumbers those watching other TV programming. Cable news channels have retained viewers, particularly among older demographics, which are crucial for political campaigns.
7. <https://www.ft.com/content/ec93d0dd-d70a-4da3-897f-adcba4bca2b8> - This article discusses how Netflix has managed to dominate the entertainment industry despite challenges like writers' and actors' strikes and declining movie theater attendance. The piece notes that Netflix, which began as a mail-order DVD service, found monumental success after transitioning to streaming in the mid-2010s. Its share price boomed, particularly during the Covid pandemic, when people consumed huge amounts of content. However, competition increased as legacy companies launched their own streaming services, leading to a rough patch in 2022 when Netflix lost nearly a million subscribers.