

People expect quality from the BBC...

5.51 For the majority of respondents to consultation, programme quality is vital – in the words of one respondent, it is “at the heart of the contract with the audience” – the BBC should deliver the highest possible quality, whatever the subject or type of treatment involved. In our quantitative research people cited high quality programmes – particularly news programmes – as the aspect of the BBC they valued most.

...although there seems to be a perception that quality is in decline...

5.52 There was a strong feeling from public consultation and qualitative research that the quality of the BBC’s output, particularly TV, has got worse in the last few years. From our qualitative research, strong supporters of the BBC seemed to think that BBC TV, and especially BBC1, had lost ground in areas where it used to be prominent, particularly drama and comedy. Any perceived decline in quality appears to be confined to television – only 8% of people we asked as part of our quantitative survey thought BBC radio programmes had got worse.

“The BBC does produce some of the cheap-and-low-quality programming (Changing Rooms etc) but I don’t want the BBC to become elitist.”

Darren Fisher, consultation respondent

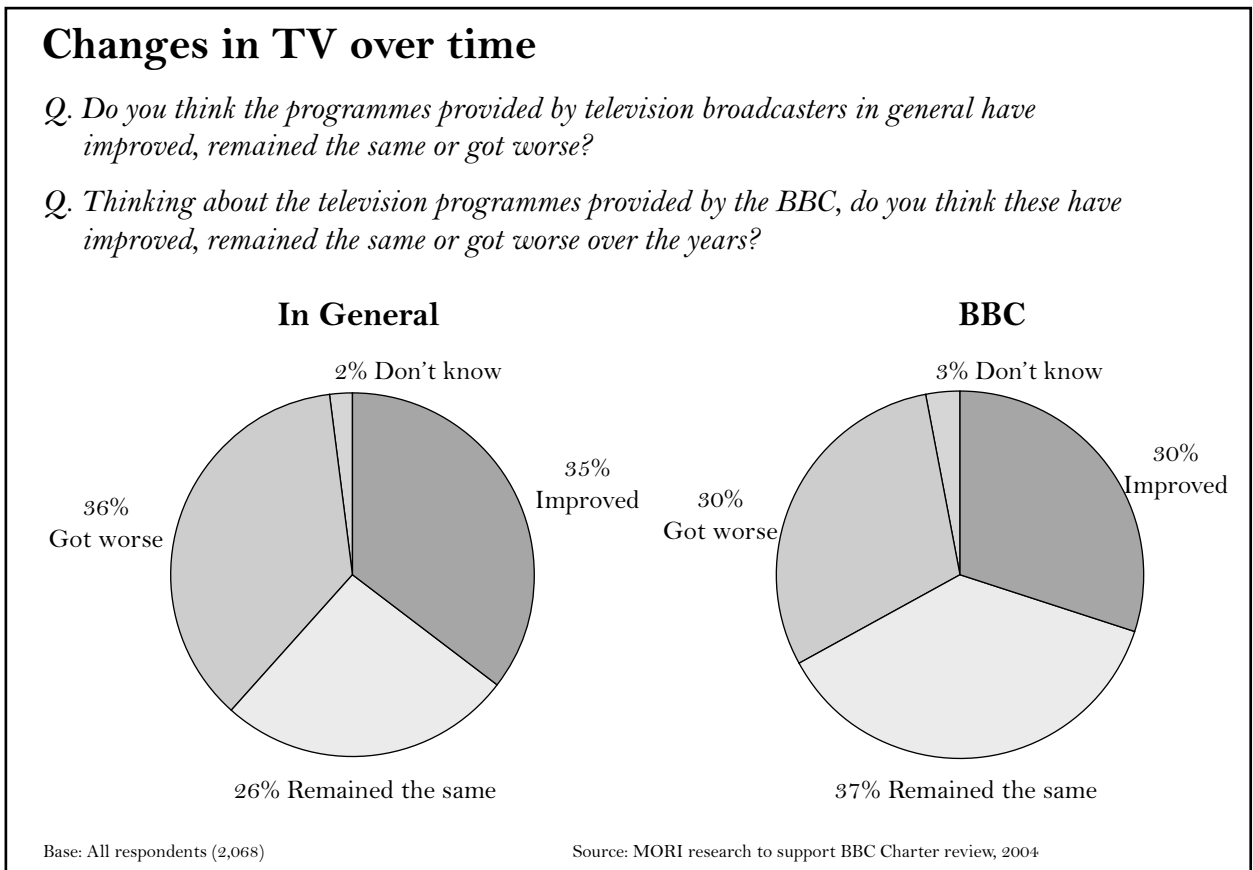
5.53 People’s concerns tend to fall into three main areas:

- Too many repeats of programmes that do not interest them – and using repeats in an unimaginative way
- “Dumbing down”
- “Copycat” programming – too many game shows, reality and makeover programmes that are not all that different from those offered by other channels.

5.54 It is difficult to tell how much of this is because people tend to remember the good programmes from the past and to forget the bad ones. In fact, many of the examples of highly valued BBC programming were from the past – even as many as twenty or thirty years ago.

5.55 Our quantitative research was less clear. The perception that there were ‘too many repeats’ on television, ‘programmes were dumbed down too much’ and a ‘decline in programme standards’ featured highly in spontaneous criticisms of the BBC – constituting 3 of the top five concerns (the others being having to pay the licence fee, and the level of the licence fee).

5.56 About 30% of people thought that BBC TV had got worse over time, whilst 37% thought they remained the same and 30% thought they had improved (see box). People in older age groups were the most likely to think that quality had declined – conversely, those who thought it had improved tended to belong to younger age groups. However, a finding of our deliberative research was that “the unanimity about the sense of decline in quality of BBC television output is startling”.



...perhaps because of a desire to maximise ratings.

- 5.57 Decline in quality was seen as being at least partly as a result of the BBC following rather than leading current trends. The BBC's value was often perceived to have been eroded by an approach to scheduling that places concern about ratings – particularly audience share – above the Corporation's historic role as leading public service broadcasting in the UK. The point came up many times in consultation that the BBC's success should be judged on measures like the quality, diversity and distinctiveness of its output and impact on audiences – not necessarily on audience size.
- 5.58 On the other hand, some people argued that the BBC had to get the balance right between popular and “elitist” programming.
- 5.59 In summary, the BBC was seen to have to strike a careful balance between the provision of popular entertainment, which brings it directly into competition with commercial broadcasters, and the provision of other public service broadcasting which, by its nature, is likely to attract rather smaller audiences.

So how does all this fit in with the wider provision of public service broadcasting?

- 5.60 When they were first asked, only a few people had a good idea of what exactly is meant by the term ‘public service broadcasting’ (PSB) – and this applied across all public service broadcasters, not just the BBC.
- 5.61 After they had thought about it and discussed it, they could identify the kinds of things that might be part of PSB – things like:

- ‘Quality’ – how good programmes are and how well they are made
- Offering a range of different types of programmes, and a variety of programmes within those types
- Offering programmes that reflect the needs of different communities, satisfy all audience types and represent different points of view
- Offering programmes and services that help people learn, reflect the different cultures of the UK and enable people to take part in the democratic process, eg quality news and current affairs programmes

5.62 In general, people who took part in our qualitative and deliberative research tended to think that the BBC provides all of these things, but that these attributes don’t say all there is to say about the BBC taken on their own. Those who liked the BBC a lot tended to think that having no advertising and, in theory at least, not being completely driven by ratings were important elements of PSB – and that the BBC was the only broadcaster able to give them this. People who liked the BBC less sometimes thought that PSB meant less sport and entertainment, and as a result, less that they might want to watch.

5.63 The BBC’s role as a public service broadcaster attracted a range of views. Some respondents said that the BBC should not be reduced to being merely a supplier of pure PSB, narrowly defined by ‘genre’ – for example, arts, religion, regional programming, current affairs, etc. – or in narrow economic terms such as genres the market fails to provide. It should, instead adopt a wide and relatively flexible definition to “educate, entertain and inform”. On the other hand, there were those who wanted more emphasis on the ‘inform’ and ‘educate’ elements and less on entertainment – for example, derivative formats, game shows, reality TV etc. Overall, however, our qualitative research suggested that the BBC is seen as meeting what people saw as the main attributes of PSB.

5.64 For example, our open forum discussions often sparked lively debate about what constitutes PSB broadcasting. One example is the television programme *Fame Academy* – some believed such ‘reality television’ fulfils many aspects of a PSB remit, including building talent, interactivity, activities with schools, and resulting in effects beyond the programme, for instance in reading and learning. Many believed that PSB is about an approach rather than a type of programme. On the other hand, others felt that it was a prime example of a derivative entertainment show which the BBC should not commission.