

DAVID MCQUEEN

## Between a Rock and a Hard Place – the Uncertain Future of Current Affairs

Current affairs television is in a strange and precarious place after sixty years at the heart of British broadcasting. First launched in 1953 the BBC's *Panorama* was a trail-blazer for the current affairs form and following a rather shaky birth (see Lindley 2003) it set the standard for current affairs programmes which followed in its path. Many of those that were in competition with *Panorama* over the following six decades, including hard-hitting ITV series such as *World in Action*, *This Week* and *First Tuesday*, have long disappeared from British television screens, although their influence lives on. Ofcom's 2012 survey of the television schedules found an abundance of programmes with current affairs content across all the main channels and that audiences for these programmes are rising significantly as those for news falls. However, those self-styled flagships of current affairs, *Panorama* and Channel 4's *Dispatches*, were reduced to half-hour formats from 2006 and 2011 respectively and adopted more tabloid formats and themes to retain audiences. More generally, current affairs coverage has seen a reduced presence in peak time, waning influence in the media and falling budgets (Hughes 2013).

Squeezed by 24-hour news coverage, creative factual television and a vibrant, independent documentary sector, current affairs coverage is suffering a 'crisis of confidence' (Hughes 2013) and a mislaid sense of purpose. This fragile confidence took a further knock when the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport Jeremy Hunt announced that a new Communication Bill would be launched in 2015. This overhaul of the 2003 Communications Act has had the potential to strip current affairs of its few remaining safeguards and has prompted a vigorous defence of the need for enhanced regulatory protection from the television industry and

media academics (see Hughes 2013). The crisis of confidence has been felt most sharply at a crisis-prone BBC still cowed by the fallout of the Hutton Inquiry, under constant attacks by rival media and a hostile government minded towards further deregulation. The sense of unease running through BBC news and current affairs turned to panic in 2012 following a botched *Newsnight* report which falsely implicated a prominent Conservative politician from the 1980s in charges of child abuse. This scandal, and the associated charges that *Newsnight* had dropped an investigation into sexual abuse claims made against Jimmy Savile, led to the resignation of the BBC's Director-General George Entwistle after only 54 days in the post. The precarious position current affairs finds itself in is not exclusive to the BBC although television executives and programme-makers still claim current affairs in the UK is seen as the 'gold standard' around the world (Hughes 2013). Despite occasional ratings success, the reality is an increasingly timid attitude to programme-making and a steady decline in the quality and depth of coverage of national and international affairs.

This chapter explores the uncertain state of current affairs today and considers its future in a multi-channel landscape of new technologies, platforms and means of accessing content. While more 'current affairs' coverage (as broadly defined by Ofcom) is now available than ever before, some of the form's traditional roles have been taken over by faster-moving, better-resourced and more incisive competition from news and documentaries. It seems that current affairs coverage is trapped in a ratings war it cannot win and that the more restricted role left by shrinking budgets and a nervous management culture threaten to make current affairs an ignored and increasingly irrelevant genre.

## What is Current Affairs?

In the pre-satellite broadcasting era news was more focused on events with far less analysis or commentary than is common today. News was also much more restricted in the type and depth of foreign coverage it could offer

due to the delay in returning filmed reports. By contrast, current affairs programmes such as *Panorama*, *Weekend World* and *World in Action* had the time and resources to investigate and provide substantial discussion or debate around the national and international issues of the day. They could also send teams abroad to provide background and explanation for breaking international stories that news could only sketch out for viewers, often without the benefit of moving images. This gave current affairs coverage a prominence and justified its closely-guarded space in the peak-time television schedule. Current affairs' role in providing weekly, in-depth monitoring of the social political and global landscape led, as Holland (2006) notes, to occasional spectacular revelations, such as *This Week's* 'Death on the Rock' (1988) on the shooting of three members of an IRA unit in Gibraltar. Investigations by *World in Action*, *First Tuesday*, *Panorama* and other series helped shape public attitudes and government action around, for instance, the asbestos and tobacco industries, motor vehicle design and road safety, the war in Vietnam, apartheid-era South Africa, organised crime, police corruption and various miscarriages of justice in the British legal system (see Lindley 2003; Holland 2006).

Histories and accounts of current affairs devote considerable attention to the more controversial episodes of particular series which have involved interventions or reprimands from governments, broadcasting authorities, the management of broadcasting institutions or the courts. Beyond these more controversial episodes, the regular appearance until the late 1990s in the peak-time schedules of such prestigious series as *This Week*, *World in Action*, *Panorama* and *Dispatches* was regarded as a sign of commitment by broadcasters to quality television. For Holland (2006: xiv), 'their seriousness and sense of purpose underpinned television's, and particularly commercial television's, claim to nurture informed citizenship and the core values of democracy itself'.

This sense of purpose for current affairs coverage and its contribution towards sustaining an informed electorate and promoting wider debate in society represent a common thread in much of the available literature. Yet while agreeing on its importance, academics and television professionals alike appear to struggle to provide a clear definition of what current affairs coverage actually is or even which programmes it might include.

Television industry definitions focus on content and include a sense of the issues investigated being of contemporary importance. The BBC's official description is succinct: 'a programme which contains explanation and analysis of current events and ideas, including material dealing with political or industrial controversy or with public policy. Also included are investigative programmes with contemporary significance'.

This definition exemplifies many of the Corporation's classic current affairs programmes such as *Panorama*, *Question Time*, *File on Four* and *From Our Own Correspondent*. However, unlike the terms 'documentary' or 'news' (with which it shares overlapping concerns) 'current affairs' is not a category widely employed or understood beyond the United Kingdom and even amongst British academics, institutions and practitioners there appear some vague and uneven applications of the generic designation, if not fundamental uncertainty as to its exact meaning. Ofcom's 2005 Current Affairs Audit, for instance, included *Question Time*, *The Money Programme* and *999 Frontline*, yet excluded the BBC's *Newsnight*, *Sunday AM* and *The Daily Politics* from many of their calculations of current affairs provision 'because they are classified by the BBC as news or politics even though they contain some current affairs style analysis'. Possible confusion for television audiences is also indicated by Ofcom's audience research which showed that 'viewers tended to define current affairs programming quite widely citing examples such as *Have I Got News for You* and *Jamie's School Dinners* as programmes that they felt had current affairs values'. Ofcom's response to apparent confusion over the meaning of current affairs was the introduction of a 'genre tracker' which allows for 'cross genre programming and therefore will enable such programming to have both a primary classification and a secondary classification'. This dual classification – intended to 'more accurately reflect the range of programming with current affairs elements or values' – may explain many of the apparently contradictory passages in the report.

There is considerable overlap between news and current affairs. This overlap was recognised in 2007 by the then BBC Director-General Mark Thompson's reorganisation of those two areas under his six-year plan, *Delivering Creative Future*. This plan was implemented to deal with a reduced licence fee settlement and falling audiences for news, especially

younger and C2DE audiences. In this plan the current affairs department lost its stand-alone status and was merged into a single News Group comprising BBC News, English Regions and BBC Global News divisions. The plan also set out investment for interactive services in news and current affairs on the platforms which (in Helen Boaden's words in a *BBC News* blog post of 18 October 2007) 'audiences increasingly take for granted – from mobile phones to YouTube; from digital radio to podcasts; from red button TV to the iPlayer'.

Hence for audiences today news and current affairs are found together when, for instance, searching the BBC's iPlayer. The few remaining distinctions continue to be blurred. This is part of what some regard as an ongoing and unresolved identity crisis which, alongside declining overall spending on current affairs, contributes to anxiety about the form's future. Despite evidence that audiences are watching more current affairs, this blurring with news makes it increasingly difficult for current affairs series such as *Panorama* and *Dispatches* to provide a distinctive product.

One reaction to this overcrowded market has been for news and current affairs to move closer together in their coverage of major stories. From 2011 Channel 4 introduced 'a more joined-up approach' between their news and current affairs strands with seven *Dispatches* films in 2012 presented by *Channel 4 News* reporters. Of greatest international impact were two powerful, meticulously-researched and disturbing films about alleged war crimes in 'Sri Lanka's Killing Fields' broadcast in June 2011 and March 2012. These films made use of footage first screened on *Channel 4 News* and extended aspects of original investigations and reports. For the presenter Jon Snow (*Channel 4 News*, 2011) this coverage represented 'the conclusion of two years' worth of courageous journalism by the *Channel 4 News* team in the face of great adversity [...] It shows Channel 4 putting a campaign for truth and justice at the very centre of its news and current affairs output'.

At the end of 2011 *Dispatches* was reduced from an hour-long to a half-hour format, although the number of shows increased from 30 to 40. This was in response to audience research which showed that viewers wanted 'faster, more reactive content' – according to Dorothy Byrne, Channel 4's Head of News and Current Affairs. Byrne argued that this would ensure a near constant presence in the schedule and, with 40 shorter

programmes, would allow *Dispatches* to ‘expand the range of subjects we cover and increase topicality’ (*The Guardian*, 8 November 2011). While Byrne distinguished the changes at *Dispatches* from *Panorama*’s ‘very lightweight period’ there can be little doubt that these changes have been accompanied by a shift towards more domestic and populist themes for the flagship series with programmes broadcast in 2013 including ‘Tricks of the Dole Cheats’, ‘Pampered Pooch’ and ‘Celebs, Brands and Fake Fans’ amongst more traditional hard news topics. ‘Nuclear War Games’ (2012), ‘Syria Across the Lines’ (2013) and ‘South Africa’s Dirty Cops’ (2013) indicate some continued support for international coverage but the strand’s recent uneven tone and focus suggest the brand is undergoing an identity crisis. More often foreign stories have been left to Channel 4’s dedicated global affairs series *Unreported World* fronted by *Channel 4 News* anchor Krishnan Guru-Murthy whose own reports for the programme from around the world have included ‘Baghdad Bomb Squad’ (2012) and ‘South Africa: Trouble in the Townships’ (2011).

Another high-profile collaboration between Channel 4’s news and current affairs team came with ‘plebgate’ when a *Dispatches* investigation uncovered CCTV footage of an incident in which Government Chief Whip Andrew Mitchell had been accused of swearing at a police officer at the gates to Downing Street. The footage showed Mitchell calmly passing through the gate and appeared to be at odds with the tirade of abuse alleged in the official police log. The *Dispatches* team had established that the key ‘witness’ was not present on the night of the incident and was a serving police officer. The editor of *Dispatches* briefed the editor of *Channel 4 News* and they both agreed that the long-form film needed to be screened as soon as possible. It was first broadcast on *Channel 4 News* on 19 December 2012 in its entirety, and immediately caused a furore, generating newspaper headlines for days to come and leading all radio and TV bulletins. The scoop was further evidence of the importance of properly-funded investigative reporting, but also of the continual blurring of news and current affairs at Channel 4 and elsewhere.

## The Impact of Technology

Claims for the abundance of current affairs and discussion of the blurred boundaries between different types of factual television are not especially new. As long ago as 1993, Executive Producer of *World in Action* Charles Tremayne was arguing that the viewer was ‘now better served than ever’ in current affairs and documentaries. Tremayne (1993: 18) compared the ‘early days’ of just three current affairs programmes on two channels (*Panorama*, *This Week* and *World in Action*) against a list of ten programmes on four terrestrial channels including *Dispatches*, *The Money Programme*, *Channel 4 News*, *Inside Story* and *Newsnight*. For Tremayne the dramatic decline in foreign coverage in current affairs was due to the introduction of electronic news-gathering and portable satellite technology which meant that news bulletins could transmit images from locations around the world within minutes of being shot. In an October 2009 interview with this author, former BBC Director-General Greg Dyke also identified technology as the key reason for what he described as news’s ‘triumph’ over current affairs: ‘When I came to the BBC there was an historic battle between news and current affairs. By the time I left news had won. Current affairs had become less and less important. Had less and less resources.’ Mr Dyke argued that current affairs became less important as ‘the technology of news meant it took over. If you watch [BBC] 24-hour news you’ve got all that. For 24-hour news, I think the technology, the ability to be there became so much easier’.

In addition to technological improvements that gave news programmes an advantage there was increasing pressure on current affairs from the sheer abundance of news programming which grew steadily from the early 1980s with the arrival of Channel 4 (1982), breakfast TV (1983) and the launch of longer in-depth news programmes on a number of terrestrial and satellite channels. One way to distinguish news and current affairs was traditionally measured through time. If news was about daily events, current affairs coverage was about events that would provide longer-running stories, developing more slowly. So while news might report on a new study’s findings on the impact of welfare reforms, current affairs could go into more depth

and interview people at the sharp end of such reforms. However, with the arrival of the hour-long *Channel 4 News* (1982), BBC2's *Newsnight* (1980), Sky News (1989) and BBC News 24 (1997), such interviews and accompanying analysis became a regular part of daily news coverage, particularly in the wake of John Birt's 'mission to explain' at the BBC.

Current affairs also found itself increasingly in competition with another genre vying for airtime – documentary. Documentaries could also explore similar concerns but perhaps with an eye to longer-term, more deep-rooted and complex issues where policy problems are not so easily fixed, and without the strict requirements for balance and impartiality imposed on news and current affairs. In this sense, documentaries could examine the need for deeper structural change and challenge the status quo, whilst current affairs coverage was more oriented towards practical, achievable reforms within existing power relations. The appearance of affordable broadcast-quality, high-definition digital video cameras ensured that the cost of documentaries fell dramatically with more quality productions being offered, particularly from the independent sector. Many of these documentaries found audiences beyond the traditional terrestrial television market via such internet sites as YouTube, cinema distribution – *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) presaged a new interest in politically-themed documentaries – and new satellite channels hungry for content.

In fact, however, many documentaries are not easily distinguished from current affairs programmes although documentaries often provide more scope to explore unique, idiosyncratic, personal views and at times suggest more radical solutions. A Louis Theroux or Michael Moore documentary cannot easily be confused with current affairs, yet some episodes of *Dispatches* and *Our World* have shown how the current affairs and documentary forms can and do overlap.

Broadcast journalist Michael Crick has compared the different forms to distances in running: with traditional news bulletins described as sprints, *Newsnight* and *Channel 4 News* as middle distance, and such current affairs programmes as *Panorama* as long distance. Part of this has to do with the length of time available to prepare the programmes, although *Panorama* has successfully produced many programmes at very short notice, such as the October 2012 Jimmy Savile investigation which achieved ratings of



over 5 million viewers. News has to be made on the day; current affairs may have been made over a period of between a week and two months, sometimes longer, while documentaries can be made over a matter of months or even years.

The threat to current affairs posed by the proliferation of news programmes and analysis and the difficulty of maintaining audience ratings is also echoed by journalists. Michael Crick (interviewed by this author in February 2007) has for example commented that:

I think current affairs is in deep trouble [...] the problem is that it is constantly squeezed by the explosion there has been in news programmes, both in television and radio in the last twenty-five years and the fact that *Newsnight* and *Channel 4 News* are so much more powerful. When *Panorama* began there was no bloody competition from anywhere really and then ITV had *World in Action* and *This Week* and there was some competition there and now it's very difficult for the poor buggers out there to think of an item that they can work on for three months and be confident that nobody will scoop them on it. They are finding it increasingly difficult to find a role for themselves and they are finding it increasingly difficult to maintain audiences with 24-hour news and a lot more analysis in your basic news programmes as well: the nine o'clock, the ten o'clock news, the six o'clock news. The future for current affairs does not look bright.

Current affairs as broadly defined *can* still be found in the schedules in a variety of formats but is increasingly squeezed between news and documentaries and has to fight for resources, airtime and audience share. The struggle to remain relevant and survive is further complicated by the continual evolution of news, current affairs and factual formats. For example, while *Panorama's* title has remained unchanged since its first launch in 1953, the programme's style, content and approach has changed significantly from decade to decade to the extent that the programme transmitted today bears little resemblance to its early forebear. A 1955 interview with Salvador Dali by Malcolm Muggeridge (currently available on the BBC iPlayer) is a striking example of a cultural focus that has long disappeared from *Panorama* and a style of interviewing that has disappeared altogether from television.

## Rivalry with Documentaries

The continuing erosion of distinctions between current affairs, documentary and other factual and ‘reality’ genres has created other pressures. Georgina Born’s 2004 study of the BBC exposed rivalry and territorial ambition between a small, underfunded Documentaries department ‘punching above its weight’ in terms of impact and ratings and eager to take on Current Affairs on its own jealously guarded patch, including mainstream politics.

The interviews with staff from Documentaries and Current Affairs, as with so many conducted by Born, are very revealing as to the perceived roles and distinct output of what were then separate departments, as well as the underlying tensions, rivalries and power relations within the Corporation. One executive producer in Documentaries pointed to an ‘anxious’ bureaucratic structure in Current Affairs constantly worrying about the ‘political repercussions’ of programmes in the wake of previous Director-General John Birt’s reforms (Born 2004: 401). The unnamed producer wondered how Documentaries was unscathed by those reforms since, s/he argued, *Real Lives* and all the trouble it drew from the government came from Documentaries. The low opinion in which that producer held Current Affairs was made explicit: ‘They’re obsessed with rigour; they talk a lot about being “journalistically sound”. It’s all in the tone: neutered, authoritative, that “covers the whole story”, that claims some sense of “objectivity”, whatever that means.’

The rather contemptuous language employed here disguises deeper parallels between the producer’s view of current affairs and a long history of critical academic discourse that has drawn attention to the myth of objectivity pervading broadcast journalism and the subtle culture of compliance and control particularly characteristic of the BBC (Philo 2002; Tumber and Prentoulis 2003; Edwards and Cromwell 2006, 2009).

## Panoramic Perspectives?

The BBC's flagship current affairs series *Panorama* is Britain's longest running television programme and is often described as the longest-running current affairs series in the world. In fact, that accolade belongs to a programme of the same name first broadcast by Belgium's Flemish Radio and Television Network which beat the British *Panorama* to air by eleven days, according to the programme's Editor-in-Chief Jan Holderbeke (in a personal communication of August 2013). The BBC's *Panorama* website describes the series as a 'current affairs programme, featuring interviews and investigative reports on a wide variety of subjects'. The series has been described by BBC1 Controller Danny Cohen as a 'gold standard brand' that continues to deliver (Hughes 2013: 6).

Over the six decades of its existence *Panorama* has developed as a forum for airing and investigating issues of public concern. The importance of news and current affairs to what cultural theorist Jürgen Habermas called 'the public sphere' has been written about extensively (Stevenson 1996; Curran 1997; McGuigan and Allan 2006). This perspective is also expressed within broadcasting institutions. Describing its forthcoming relaunch in January 2007, for instance, *Panorama* Editor Sandy Smith wrote that the programme 'will be right at the heart of the nation's conversation' (*The Guardian*, 10 November 2006). The notion of a public sphere of debate to which current affairs contributes is clearly an influential one both for academics and for those working in broadcasting.

Yet the 'democratic function' current affairs coverage is said to perform by liberal theorists (Gripsrud 1999) has been challenged by media scholars who have criticised the narrow range of views and voices traditionally represented in such programmes as *Newsnight*, *Question Time*, *Today* and *Panorama*. Before its relaunch in 2006 *Panorama* was often accused of over-representing elite perspectives in its reporting. The accusation was levelled by media scholars, champions of rival current affairs programmes and even by a number of senior figures within the BBC and *Panorama* itself (Born 2004; Dyke 2004).

Former *Panorama* Editor Roger Bolton argued in an October 2008 interview with this author that the democratic role current affairs coverage plays must sometimes extend beyond the limits of arguments and debates in Parliament to reflect the wider concerns of society:

One of the great dangers that came to bear in the seventies and eighties was this being drawn to the consensus. The other danger was that people like Robin Day thought that essentially Parliament should establish the nature of the argument. I think what the Glasgow Media Group and others helped us to was an awareness that our approach was far too narrow. So when it came to Ireland, for example, we realised that there never had been a debate on the unification of Ireland in the British Parliament. We knew this from polls saying that 45–50 per cent of the British public thought the British should pull out [of Northern Ireland]. There was never a debate. So we thought then we have to represent, find out what people want to talk about, represent their interests. After all they're voting at elections, their children are dying, there's no debate, we must do that. Not driven by the Republicans, driven by an awareness that often the parliamentary consensus was not representative of the attitudes of the country.

Roger Bolton was sacked as Editor following an incident at Carrickmore in Northern Ireland when a *Panorama* crew filmed an IRA roadblock. Bolton recalls how he 'fell down the middle of a hole' because 'key people' at the top of the BBC were saying one thing to the Corporation's Governors and another to the journalists and he naively believed untransmitted footage which 'we had not even decided would be in the programme' could cause such trouble. Bolton's dismissal caused real anger at the BBC and threats of industrial action eventually led to his reinstatement. On resuming his position he was advised by BBC Deputy Director-General Gerard Mansell to 'remember the wider interests of the BBC' (Lindley 2003: 233). Mansell's advice would not prevent *Panorama* from becoming embroiled in further controversy over its coverage of the Falklands War and the Conservative Party in the 1980s, but it has arguably made an indelible impression on editorial policy subsequently with few willing to follow Bolton's example in straying beyond the parliamentary consensus in matters of national security. This is certainly the case in *Panorama's* treatment of Afghanistan which has since the invasion of 2001 failed properly to explore the case for withdrawal – a cause which has received overwhelming popular support (Brissenden 2012).

Evidence of this editorial caution has also emerged in detailed study of 42 episodes made between 1987 and 2004 covering the First and Second Gulf Wars which found that *Panorama* largely confined itself to elite views and predominantly reflected the Westminster consensus in its coverage of conflicts (McQueen 2008). This coverage included studio discussions and interactive debates with members of the public. The live broadcast 'Iraq Crisis Interactive' (2002), the first of its kind for *Panorama*, saw eight BBC reporters answering viewer questions. Viewers were encouraged to vote by text or telephone as to whether war was inevitable. Gavin Esler called for viewer's votes in a manner similar to polls on such shows as *Strictly Come Dancing* or *The X Factor*: 'you can vote by phoning the following numbers: 09001800311 to vote *Yes, war is inevitable* and 09001800322 to vote *No*'. As Charles (2012: 110) notes, such interactive media voting exercises in reality television and elsewhere give the illusion of agency and the impression of historical significance, thereby shifting attention 'away from the realm of substantive political participation'. It is also noteworthy that such an uncontroversial, predictive question was put to the vote, rather than the more controversial and widely debated moral and political question as to whether a war was the right thing for the nation to be embarking upon, a question that was being debated passionately in the wider public sphere. More worryingly, the facts presented in the debate were questionable and echoed prevalent misinformation. BBC reporter David Shuckman for example noted two threats to British interests:

One is, imagine British forces gathering in Kuwait or Saudi Arabia before an attack on Iraq and Saddam feels that his back is against the wall, he may well use the chemical and biological weapons that we know he has. The other route, that terrorist threat, if he feels that his days in Baghdad really are numbered and he can only leave feet first, there is a possibility obviously that he may pass on whatever weapons he has to other groups that may be favourable to him.

Here as elsewhere *Panorama*'s major blind spot comprised an over-reliance on official sources and elite perspectives and the limited space it gave to explore the much broader diversity of opinions and explanations for unfolding events. In the lead up to the Second Gulf War *Panorama* failed to examine the doubts of leading weapons experts such as Scott Ritter, but instead turned to a series of unlikely opponents of the war who tended to

articulate a softer anti-war line or fell back on interactive studio debates and discussion as if the factual case were closed. Interviews with producers and reporters involved in the war reinforced the impression that leading anti-war figures were regarded either as unreliable or as a turn-off to the general public. Had *Panorama* devoted as much time to the detailed arguments of those most closely associated with the anti-war movement as it did to the Government's claims in its coverage of the Second Gulf War, it might have protected itself from the kind of charges levelled by Edwards and Cromwell (2006, 2009) and others who accused the BBC of warmongering.

A narrow, 'Westminster village' view of current affairs does not fulfil the BBC's statutory obligation to provide a diversity of perspectives and reflect and respond to different views held in wider society. The obligation, enshrined in the Corporation's *Editorial Guidelines*, to ensure 'that no significant strand of thought is knowingly unreflected or under-represented' is particularly crucial at times of armed conflict involving British troops, when pressures on British broadcasters to conform to official perspectives are at their sharpest. With the threat of future conflicts ever present the BBC's duty to serve the whole nation bears most heavily on its current affairs coverage where there is more space and time to explore a range of views and options on present threats. While doing so would present dangers for the BBC's relationship to the government of the day, as Roger Bolton discovered in attempting to provide a wider view of the Troubles in Northern Ireland (see Bolton 1990), the failure to do so presents a challenge to the long-term relevance of current affairs and a grave threat to the public's ability to consider alternatives to war.

When former Director-General Greg Dyke was asked by this author why he thought elite views tended to dominate the media and the BBC's reporting he suggested the journalistic culture was at fault: 'It's a village and that village includes the politicians, it includes the civil servants, it includes the journalists, it includes the lobbyists. Journalism is not allowed to question.' Mr Dyke added that 'the victory of news over current affairs has not been to the benefit of our society. I think current affairs gave you time to analyse, understand, research, think. And I don't think news does.'

## *Panorama* and Populism

The tension between exploring a range of views and maintaining an audience has been an ongoing concern for current affairs broadcasting throughout its history. For Holland (2006: 213), writing about ITV's *This Week*, the imperatives for current affairs programmes to add to 'the democratic debate' and to please sizeable audiences were never mutually exclusive, but were constantly argued over and worked through in many different ways. However, legislative changes, particularly following the 1990 Broadcasting Act which freed commercial television from the legal obligation to screen current affairs in peak time, led to an anxious turning point in current affairs history. Holland contrasts the self-consciously serious current affairs coverage that characterised John Birt's regime at the BBC with the populist approach taken by ITV. Similarly, Ray Fitzwalter (2008), former Head of Current Affairs at Granada Television, describes the 1990 Act as contributing directly to the undermining of public service commitments, the release of raw commercial forces and the destruction of the challenging and popular current affairs culture at Granada.

Subsequent government interventions have accelerated moves towards a more audience-led and commercial broadcasting environment (Born 2004: 401). This has ultimately affected both public and independent broadcasting institutions and fed through to such current affairs programmes as *Panorama* which, following its 2007 move to peak viewing hours, has had a greater obligation to maintain audience ratings – an obligation made explicit in its mission statement to deliver impact either in terms of audience size or in take-up by the wider media. Arguments over such moves, particularly in relation to current affairs, are a recurring feature of media commentary (Holland 2001) and are regularly rehearsed in relation to *Panorama*, often by serving and former Editors, BBC managers and senior journalists. Fears that *Panorama*, like its erstwhile rivals *This Week* and *World in Action*, has shifted towards a more populist agenda have dominated discussion of the series and intensified dramatically around the time of its 2007 relaunch (Gaber 2008). Arguments have often focussed

on the health of *Panorama* as a litmus test for the BBC's commitment to public service principles. Concerns about declining ratings for traditional current affairs and how best to respond to this apparent decline are a running motif in the literature on *Panorama*.

*Panorama*'s return to prime time in 2007 under Editor Sandy Smith (formerly Editor of the consumer affairs programme *Watchdog*) was quickly followed by allegations of dumbing down. The move was accompanied by a reduction in the programme's transmission time from 40 to 29 minutes. *Panorama*'s new approach was described by BBC Head of Current Affairs George Entwistle as a significant 'shift towards audience focus while retaining an agenda commitment to report the world as it unfolds that will never change'. It saw the end of studio discussion which had been a regular feature of *Panorama* since its earliest years. Former *Panorama* reporter Tom Mangold was one of many observers to prove disappointed in the re-launched programme, lamenting in *The Independent* (17 June 2007) the use of 'too many inconsequential stories' and complaining that it 'pratfalls noisily between two stools of silly tabloid guff and serious endeavour'.

The term *populist* is used by many to describe *Panorama* under Sandy Smith's editorship, although not always in a negative context. *Panorama* journalist John Ware's comments to this author (February 2007) are typical of how the shift was viewed by reporters:

I think they have become more populist, but I don't think that's a bad thing. I've avoided, in anything I've said, using the words 'dumbed down' because I don't think the programmes *Panorama* have put out so far are dumb at all. They are perfectly decent programmes. I think if the trend continues they will be a little too predictable for my taste, a little unambitious. I mean, you know, tagging, have a go heroes, IVF clinics. It's all good and important consumerist stuff, but it isn't really counterintuitive, none of it is iconoclastic and certainly none of it is what I call 'big statement TV' which is what I'm more interested in and what I think the old *Panorama* used to do occasionally quite well.

*Panorama* changed again, if less dramatically, after Tom Giles was appointed Editor in 2010. The programme is said to have found a new confidence and in 2012 it won three Royal Television Society journalism awards for 'Undercover Care: The Abuse Exposed' and also won praise for 'FIFA's



Dirty Secrets'. The series was saved from a cut to its £500,000 annual top-up for investigative journalism by an intervention by former Director-General Mark Thompson (also a former *Panorama* Editor). The programme makes 40 half-hour programmes and seven one-hour specials with an annual budget of £6.5 million, and the drive to do more with less money is felt sharply at *Panorama*. Limited budgets constrain *Panorama* in the number of lengthy and expensive investigative reports it can undertake as well as the number of foreign stories it can cover.

The programme survives in part because it evolves under each new Editor within a rapidly changing media landscape which has seen an explosion in television channels and almost limitless content online. Today's younger generation are likely to encounter current affairs and documentary coverage for the first time through YouTube or Facebook. *Panorama's* web presence is likely to become increasingly important if the programme is to reach beyond its traditional older, white, affluent, male audience. *Panorama* was an early adopter of new technology with live online debates and phone-ins in the lead up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, but it may be lagging behind other news and current affairs providers in attracting a large number of loyal followers online. *Panorama's* cautious approach to programme-making (that often steers clear of editorialising and strong, definitive positions) may leave it somewhat handicapped in the race for online followers (as of writing it enjoys less than one per cent of the Twitter followers boasted by BBC News Worldwide). The success of opinionated commentators on blogs, Twitter and such websites as Fox News, Democracy Now and Russia Today may also drain future audiences away from more politically neutral and balanced reporting.

Since 2007 *Panorama* has suffered from a ratings anxiety that has, despite its political caution, pushed it towards more tabloid themes and treatments. As with *Dispatches*, the relaunch brought an increased focus on human interest stories and consumer issues, but Tom Giles's editorship has seen rather broader coverage and fewer lightweight items than under Sandy Smith. Evidence of this includes programmes on lobbying ('Cash for Questions', 2013), Donald Trump's development plans for the east coast of Scotland ('The Trouble with Trump', 2013), the Barclay Brothers ('The Tax Haven Twins', 2012), the fallout from Afghanistan ('Mission

Accomplished?’ and ‘Broken by Battle’, 2013), the effects of long-term unemployment (‘A Job to Get Work’, 2011) and ‘Murdoch: Breaking the Spell’ (2011) – although *Panorama* still tends to follow rather than lead the news agenda. The tendency to hammock these tougher targets amongst more populist items which privilege story over analysis may simply dilute the brand further, without winning over a loyal audience. In this sense *Panorama* really is stuck between the rock of ratings and the hard place that is remaining relevant as a brand in an increasingly crowded market of news, current affairs and opinion.

To restore its reputation and win new audiences *Panorama* needs a culture of defiance that such programmes as *World in Action* once displayed; but that would no doubt put it on a collision course with any government or powerful vested interest. Hemmed in by ratings anxieties, budget cuts, a shorter, more tabloid format and a culture of political caution, it seems more likely that *Panorama* will struggle to maintain its place in the peak-time schedule. However, the sixty-year old series has been written off before and it may surprise everyone with further, bolder reinventions. Such boldness is clearly possible, as the rigorous, critical, investigative tradition developed by current affairs programme-makers lives on in countless documentaries, news and current affairs programmes that are readily available on a diverse range of platforms around the world. Many of these programmes offer new and challenging perspectives whilst building sizeable, loyal and active audiences. Their example may yet inspire a resurgence and re-engagement with the vital questions of the day from Britain’s once-proud flagship of current affairs.

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