

## BOOK REVIEWS

**BBC and television genres in jeopardy**, by Jeremy Tunstall, Oxford, Peter Lang, 2015, 400 pp., £20 (paperback), ISBN 978-3-0343-1846-4

At the time of writing, with the white paper on the future of the BBC round the corner; actors, journalists and organisations such as the Save the BBC campaign of BECTU (the Broadcasting, Entertainment, Cinematographer and Theatre Union) and the campaigns to protect the BBC campaign of 38 Degrees and AVAAZ, this is a timely book. Auntie faces a real budget cut of 10%, and has begun moves to transfer its production arm to a separate commercial unit. The storm over Jimmy Saville, the criticism provoked by the £100m junked digital media initiative, and the payoffs to departing executives, have all made the BBC not only a news platform, but a subject of the news.

Tunstall mentions some of these issues, but the body of his book looks at the genres most pertinent to the BBC's public service remit, which are now in danger of succumbing to the demands of digital media and commercial pressures, mostly from US-based media companies. His knowledge of the BBC and the industry informs his latest book, which draws on interviews he carried out in the 1990s for *Television Producers* (Tunstall, 1993) and interviews with producers and commissioners he carried out in 2010.

He begins by examining some of the dilemmas posed by the demands of public service broadcasting, and questions whether the BBC is rising to these demands. He cites criticism of the BBC, such as political neutrality, the middle class bias of the organisation, its London-centricity, and lack of ethnic representation in the face of the digital revolution, which suggests the BBC is failing to meet these obligations. He then moves on to reveal how much television is owned by American companies. As a freelance documentary director, I know many independent production companies and many of the people who work for them, but I (apparently like many of the key media policy decision makers Tunstall writes about) was not much interested in what was going on beyond the pond. According to Tunstall, 28% of all UK viewing comes from American owned companies, which amounts to 40% of all audience viewing time. Children's television is unique within British television as the only genre in which American programming has more than half the genre's total viewing audience. So much for claims about the superiority of British television.

British television is thus increasingly dependent on American and European companies, and television has become 'more than ever a hit driven business', which Tunstall shows has had a major impact on the success and failure of the 21 genres he examines, and which places the future of the BBC's public service remit in jeopardy. Tunstall lists the most popular genres as drama and soap, but even here some high-quality drama serials have disappointing audience figures. The genres in significant decline are education, natural history, science, arts, children, religion, and

news and current affairs. The last, he points out worryingly, is the prime exhibit of public service broadcasting.

A strength of Tunstall's book is his interviews with the commissioners and producers of the organisation, and these give a good insight into the BBC's arcane bureaucracy. But, I would like to have known more about the management roles of some of the interviewees, and to what extent the structure of the management has been influential in the failure of the BBC to meet public service demands. For example, Tunstall states that 'for at least four decades BBC News executives had been trying but failing to establish finance as a serious broadcast news field' (p.162). However, he claims all this changed with the arrival of Robert Peston, and he writes of the 'brave executives' who appointed him. Who were they? How does the bureaucracy function in its impact on programme making and therefore on the strength of the departments that make the various genres? I would like to know more about these managers who can hire, fire, and commission programmes, but are seemingly unaccountable, and cling on to their positions, taking credit for successes, but blaming programme makers for failures? Tunstall writes that current affairs has offered little coverage of 'climate change, criticism of big multinational companies in energy, pharmaceuticals and high tech', yet nothing of this is mentioned in his interview with Clive Edwards in 2011. He was the commissioning editor and presumably responsible for this.

Tunstall assigns the failure of the natural history unit to address key factors such as global climate change, population growth and the extinction of the species to the problems the public service broadcaster has with trying to maintain political neutrality. If the success in hiring Peston is attributable to brave executives, can failure also be attributable in part to less brave – indeed, pusillanimous – executives, more worried about audience figures and their jobs than upholding the values of public service broadcasting political?

From a BBC programme maker's point of view some of this failure to uphold the values of public service broadcasting seemed evident in the dismantling of the documentary department from 2002. Yet Tunstall notes that the flourishing public service genres are now history, travel – and documentary. He writes that the leading form of British television documentary is the traditional 'observational' documentary, cheap and entertaining. Popular subjects are hospitals, war, prisons, school and the family. He mentions a group of 20 independent documentary makers who have achieved a 'substantial body of highly individual work', but it would have been interesting to follow the network of directors from the BBC to the independent sector. This would have revealed the major influence of the BBC documentary department on all television documentaries, with producers such as Jeremy Mills, Paul Hamann and Paul Watson, as well as Stephen Lambert, who Tunstall notes had an impact on formatted reality television. This is a reflection of the importance of the BBC's role in influencing the rest of television, the media and cultural life, and goes beyond just what genre content is transmitted by the BBC. A minor proof reading error is that Tunstall refers to Richard Curtis, when he means Adam Curtis.

Much of the blame for the jeopardy experienced by public service broadcasting is laid at the hands of the policy makers, innumerable committees and the BBC governors, whose policy making 'was amateurish in both conception and execution'. He writes that the committees largely ignored such issues as genre mixes and levels of imports from Hollywood. Tunstall (p.370) is absolutely uncompromising in declaring that the report of the Peacock committee is:

... one of the most influential, amateur, arrogant and ignorant documents in the entire history of British broadcast policymaking. It was the Peacock Committee which influenced the Broadcasting Act of 1990 which Peter Kosminsky agrees (*Guardian*, 5 January 2016, p.29) changed the broadcasting world and ushered in the need to 'maximise profits and led to an almost immediate collapse in ITV programme standards'.

Tunstall's book was published in 2015, yet many of the interviews are from 2010 and a more up-to-date analysis of events would have been useful; for example, in his discussion of Craig Oliver, and the section on history and *Timewatch*, which he finishes after the departure of Laurence Rees. However, an examination of the BBC's recent history of television genres and their role in public service broadcasting is a timely contribution to the debate when the future of the institution is at stake.

## Reference

Tunstall, J. (1993) *Television Producers*, Routledge, London.

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**A very short, fairly interesting and reasonably cheap book about knowledge management**, by Joanne Roberts, London, Sage, 2015, 168 pp., £15.99 (paperback), ISBN 9780857022479

This is the latest in the series of *Very Short, Fairly Interesting and Reasonably Cheap* books. Its topic is knowledge management. It is indeed very short. It can be read cover-to-cover within a few hours, and as all chapters are about 20 pages long, and written in an engaging, easily accessible style, they can be read individually in 20–30 minutes. For such a short book, it succeeds in giving a reasonably good overview of the academic topic of knowledge management. Each chapter is well focussed on a particular topic, and can be read as a self-contained, independent essay. The first three chapters give an introduction to foundational issues, including why knowledge management has become a popular topic, the academic discipline in which the topic is located, and how it links to the topics of information management and learning, and the nature of management, knowledge and knowledge management. The next three chapters are focussed on particular types of knowledge process that can be managed, the acquisition, transfer and retention of knowledge, innovation processes and the creation of knowledge, and the relatively neglected topics of ignorance, forgetting and unlearning.

While I have a number of critical comments about the book, in general terms I enjoyed reading it, and it succeeded in giving a succinct introduction to many of the key issues, authors and concepts in the domain of knowledge management, from the linkage between knowledge, data, information and wisdom, through the distinction between tacit and explicit knowledge to Nonaka and Takeuchi's theory of knowledge creation and communities of practice. In fact, the range of topics