

Ownership, Distribution, and ‘Viewers Like You:’ PBS and British Collaborations in Post-Network Television

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One of PBS’s most notable slogans is that the network is able to broadcast due to the contributions by “viewers like you.” It is a campaign which compels viewers to take active roles in public broadcasting by financially supporting the network. It is a process of inclusion. For more than fifty years PBS has become a source for education and culture, airing programs devoted to high culture - travel, art, theatre, music, and politics. PBS aims to either appeal to the culturally sophisticated or to those who would like to become culturally sophisticated.

Throughout the years, PBS has developed its own niche, collecting a handful of popular mainstays like *Sesame Street* and *Masterpiece Theatre*. The success of shows like *Downton Abbey* and *Sherlock* present questions concerning PBS’s potential as surpassing its role as distributor and more towards a producer for “quality television.” Both fit PBS’s standards, one a period drama and the other an adaptation of a culturally significant literary icon. Both recreate the exotic allure of British culture - intrigue, intelligence, stiff upper lips covering deep unacknowledged passions, with little to no interrogation of those myths. Neither show really challenges ideological concerns of race, class, and gender. *Downton* tries to some extent to acknowledge disparities between classes, but as a period piece reinforces conservative attitudes regarding race, class, and gender are in the past, without complicating persisting inequalities in British culture. Distance is further created when aired for American audiences who can isolate disparities as historical and cultural issues. For American audiences, this reinforces the mystique of British culture PBS already promotes.

Programs made for the BBC and subsequently aired on PBS, like *Are You Being Served* serve to culture the British public, and much like PBS, created or aired programs that reinforced “high culture” and hierarchies of taste. Because of PBS’s airings of theatrical productions, operas, and symphonies, the inclusion of the BBC products have and continue to serve two functions: the first was to highlight the difference between both cultures. There was never a doubt after watching *Monty Python* or *Keeping Up Appearances*, those characters and narratives were distinctly *not* American. Secondly, those programs aired on PBS were automatically positioned as higher forms of television, a type of “quality” television, but only in its content. Jokes are more clever and detectives more intelligent (thought not because they actually were, but mostly because they were different from what could be commonly found on network television).

Downton Abbey and *Sherlock* have revived PBS, as fans gush about Benedict Cumberbatch and Dame Maggie Smith. Both have been culturally poached, as parodies and slash fiction have emerged on late night talk shows, Youtube, and message boards. PBS’s collaborative production effort, however, is marred by the network’s inability to shift its distribution. PBS continues to appear only as a distributor, rather than a producer of programs. The appearance of primarily British casts and narratives, do not immediately mark the shows as collaborative efforts with an American network; rather, airing the programs six months later continues PBS’s policy of airing originally produced and aired British programs.

The temporal difference in air dates also allows for internet savvy viewers to download torrents or utilize streaming sites to view the programs before they hit PBS’s airwaves. The programs bring in more interest and new viewers, but those viewers are able to access programs months in advance. PBS does not gain as much new ground as they could if they aired products

first. Likewise, supportive but absent audiences do not translate into more funding for the broadcast network. While PBS is industrially credited with the programs, their brand of “quality” programming often affiliated has shifted as those who immediately download the programs are not bound to the classifications of quality or cultured programming often affiliated.

The freedom for audiences to choose and download, in reference to commercial networks, is often considered a success; however, considering the impact a surge in viewership could have on keeping PBS on the air complicates the celebration surrounding access and piracy. Public Broadcasting outlets like NPR and PBS may in fact focus on what is stereotypically linked to high culture and reinforce taste hierarchies that maintain social norms. However, the major benefit of PBS is that it does provide opportunities for audiences without access to experience the ballet, learn to cook from professional chefs, or watch adaptations of works within the Western canon. Though there are cable networks who offer similar programming and arguably more quality (in terms of aesthetics), PBS is far accessible. As public television is under threat in the United States, building popular programs could help build a stronger network of viewers like us.