

Ofcom to undertake new PSB review

The broadcast and communications regulator Ofcom is to begin its third review of Public Service Broadcasting in 2014/15, and expects to publish its conclusions by the summer of 2015.

Until recently the future of this regular review hung in the balance. Although it is a statutory duty of the regulator to conduct a PSB review every five years, changes proposed by the Government would have seen this responsibility removed from Ofcom and instead the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport granted discretionary powers both to commission any future reviews and to determine their scope.

As reported in The Independent, the plans were scrapped earlier this year following threats of a cross-party rebellion in the House of Lords. Ofcom has now announced that the next PSB review will "consider challenges facing the industry and assess how the needs of citizens and consumers can best be delivered".

New resource for followers of media policy debates

The LSE has launched the Media Policy Planner, with the aim of supporting individuals and organisations who wish to keep track of and contribute to media policy making. The Planner includes a calendar with information about timing and deadlines of media policy consultations, a directory of individuals and organisations with expertise in current policy topics – plus a range of other resources for those wishing to explore a particular issue - e.g. The BBC Charter Review – In greater depth.

Explaining the thinking behind the Planner, the LSE points out that not only economic but also democratic and cultural interests are at stake in media and communications policy decisions. Academics who might be able to contribute useful evidence are often not aware of what's happening in policy processes; civil society groups often have their fingers on the pulse of the process and want to influence policy, but lack the resources to conduct research or find evidence that supports their causes. The Media Policy Planner, therefore, "is designed to help level the playing field and make information about the timing of policy making and access to evidence and expertise available to everyone".

Remembering a true friend of public service broadcasting

Jocelyn Hay CBE, founder and President of the Voice of the Listener and Viewer (VLV), died in January. A staunch defender of public service broadcasting and holder to account of broadcasting bosses and politicians, Jocelyn Hay was well respected and highly influential.

In her obituary for The Guardian, former Sandford St Martin Trustee Maggie Brown recalled how Hay "helped change the climate [in broadcasting] to one in which listeners and viewers had to be consulted" and pointed to her "ability to ask the penetrating question, and to lobby with a masterly persistence". Professor Robert Beveridge, writing in The Scotsman, highlighted Hay's achievement in establishing, almost singlehandedly, "an organisation which achieved substantial professional and political credibility by the quality of argument and submissions it made in a plethora of consultations and also the way in which it stood up to anything that threatened the vibrancy or even the existence of public service broadcasting".

Those fortunate enough to have known Jocelyn Hay will also remember her as unfailingly courteous and kind. She was a remarkable person, who will be greatly missed.

St Martin's looks back – and ahead

The 90th anniversary of the first broadcast of a church service inspired the Archive team at St-Martin-in-the-Fields (from which the service came) to uncover some of the stories of the church's long partnership with the BBC. It's a partnership that continues to this day and one that has given St Martin's a place in the hearts of listeners throughout the world.

"Maybe, just maybe", reflects Archivist Michael Hellyer, concluding his piece for the church's website, "If we continue learning to listen, understand and get our language right, then nation will indeed speak peace unto nation, and the peace of God will be shared throughout the world with people of all religious beliefs and none."

Round-up of the reviews

"Indiana-Jones-meets-The-Da-Vinci-Code while remaining both true, intelligent and firmly in control of its material" wrote Lucy Mangan in her Guardian review of BBC2's Bible Hunters: The Search for Biblical Truth, a programme whose title gave little clue to the thrilling nature of the exploits recounted within. Meanwhile, in BBC Radio 3's Faith Without God, the idea of faith as "less-grounded reason" gave Daily Telegraph reviewer Gillian Reynolds help "with the bits of the Creed I find tricky most Sundays".

God's Cadets on BBC4 followed new recruits to the Salvation Army's officer corps. The programme moved and repelled the Daily Telegraph's Christopher Howse in equal measure, while Ellen Jones, writing in The Independent, found Nick Poyntz's 90-minute documentary offered "an unexpected dose of candour".

Channel 4's documentary Secrets of the Vatican "isn't really breaking anything new", wrote Sam Wollaston in the Guardian. Even so, he felt it painted "an extraordinary and damning picture of a rotten institution. Basically it's The Borgias, Neil Jordan's drama series with Jeremy Irons as Pope Alexander, only in the 21st century and all real." Not surprisingly, perhaps, the Catholic Herald proved harder to impress, finding the programme largely lacking in hard evidence to substantiate its allegations, and apparently "entirely content to dig up dirt on the flimsiest evidence". Though its reviewer felt the documentary was on stronger ground when probing the Vatican's secrecy about its finances, suggesting it could usefully have focused on this subject alone.

Plaudits for Rev... but will there be a fourth coming?

Hallelujah! said the standfirst for The Telegraph's review marking the return of Rev. after a break of more than two years. Broadcast (behind a paywall) was more curmudgeonly. "Viewers lose faith in Rev" was its headline for a piece pointing out that viewing figures were 800,000 lower than for the first episode of the previous series. Even so, the programme's audience of 1.5 million was, it conceded, well above the BBC2 average for the 10pm slot.

Penny Kiley, writing for Ship of Fools about the sitcom's enduring popularity, described it as "more like The Office than Father Ted, except that the key question isn't "Will Tim get the girl" but "Will Adam get his prayers answered?" Tom Hollander's character wasn't the only one in intercessory mode: "Let us pray that that's not it, for ever and ever, for Rev," said Sam Wollaston, reviewing the final episode for The Guardian. "It may not be the most original, or roll-in-the-aisle-laughing hilarious (I was closer to tears in this one). But it's touching and smart, very human and immensely likable. Amen."

AA Gill in The Sunday Times (also behind a paywall) took the opportunity of his review of Rev. to take a sideswipe at the "solipsistic reasoning" of the television industry when it comes to religion, and to assert that "religion has never been more tangible in world affairs and public life. Not having more sensible and serious religious broadcasting isn't modern, it's a failure to face modernity."

Amen to that too.

'Fuzzy nones' reject the religious habit (though not entirely)

Coined a few years ago by sociologists Abby Day and David Voas, the term 'fuzzy fidelity' refers to religious people who don't conform to neat categories about belief. And now new research suggests fuzziness is also to be found among those who claim not to be religious. Writing for the Nonreligion & Secularity blog about the results of two large surveys carried out last year with YouGov, Professor Linda Woodhead of Lancaster University notes that even though 38% of her respondents report having 'no religion', most of these 'nones' are not atheists. What they reject is identification with 'religion', with a particular religion, and with the label 'religious'. Moreover, "thoroughgoing nones" – of the Richard Dawkins variety – are not representative of the majority of nones, according to Woodhead, nor do their numbers appear to be growing.

As for the word 'fuzzy', it is, says Woodhead, whether applied to religious or non-religious people, "useful only as a placeholder. It's dangerous if it leads us to think there is something confused about the people to whom we apply the term. It's we who study them who are confused – once our categories improve we can ditch the word. In the meantime it's a useful reminder that most people are neither thoroughgoing religious nor non-religious 'fundamentalists' but dwellers in a more rich and variegated landscape somewhere inbetween."

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