

“The Popular Entertainment Side of Broadcasting Should Receive Much More Attention”: The BBC, Comedy, and Nation-Building at Home and Abroad

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Brett Mills 

Creative Arts, Edge Hill University, UK

Abstract

This article outlines and examines the role comedy and entertainment have played at the BBC in constructing a sense of national identity both in the UK and overseas. It demonstrates the ways in which UK national identities are intertwined with ideas of a sense of humour, and the extent to which this is a performative act. Beginning with a historical approach, the article shows how the BBC, over time, has employed comedy as a way to evidence particularities of UK national identities, and the importance of the organisation in contributing to this.

Keywords

BBC, TV comedy, sitcom, BBC comedy, nation building

Introduction

In October 2021 the BBC published a list of ‘The 100 Greatest TV Series of the 21st Century’ ([BBC Culture, 2021](#)). It was produced by surveying 206 television critics, academics, journalists, and members of the television industry across 43 countries, who were asked to provide their personal top 10 from which the ranking was compiled. Though the selection of contributors inevitably results in a list skewed by the cultural norms of those who participated, the list is usefully indicative of the programmes that are

Corresponding author:

Brett Mills, Creative Arts, Edge Hill University, St Helen’s Road, Ormskirk L39 4QP, UK.

Email: millsb@edgehill.ac.uk

typically seen as having cultural heft and to be significant. The list does not make particularly good reading for the BBC, given that around four-fifths of the 100 series come from the United States. The results also indicate the kinds of television that those surveyed see as ‘great’ for the overwhelming majority are drama series. Only one documentary series features; *Planet Earth* (2006). Comedy has quite a strong showing, with a quarter of the list made up of sitcoms. While the majority of these are American series, those that are made by the BBC in the UK are disproportionately high on the list. For example, both *Fleabag* (2016–19) and *The Office* (2001–03) appear in the top 10. The rest of the BBC’s comic contributions are made up of *The Thick of It* (2005–12), *Inside No.9* (2014–), and *Detectorists* (2014–17), and only two non-BBC UK comedy programmes appear; Channel 4’s *Peep Show* (2003–15) and *Catastrophe* (2015–19).

Although problematic in terms of valuing the views of those deemed ‘experts’ over more general audiences, the list is useful because it indicates something about the global circulation of programming and therefore the ability of series to be comprehensible, enjoyable, and of significance beyond their initial country of production. If critics and academics in Colombia, Uruguay, Mexico, Turkey, South Africa and Israel all concur that *Fleabag* is one of the top 10 programmes of the 21st century, this points to the BBC’s global status within international understandings of television quality and significance, which here is evident across countries, languages, cultures, and continents. The global circulation of television drama is well-known and often situated in contexts such as globalisation, cultural imperialism, and capitalism (Tinic, 2009; Ward and O’Regan, 2011; Zhu, 2008; Åberg, 2015). By contrast, analyses of comic broadcasting in similar contexts are much less apparent. This is testament to the disproportionate amount of energy the field of television studies spends on some genres rather than others. It also points to conceptualisations of the international movement of television forms, and supposed alignments between kinds of programming and the ease with which they can move around the world. The BBC’s list suggests that drama persists as the genre best able to travel across national borders and retain its comprehensibility and prestige. However, that a full quarter of the list is made up of comedies – albeit predominantly American ones – shows humour too is a global cultural force. And the high placing’s of some of the BBC’s comic output points to the Corporation’s success in situating itself as a producer and distributor of comedy with leverage beyond the UK.

The UK has been quite successful in convincing itself it has the best sense of humour in the world, and has managed to convince many other nations of this too. A survey in 2017 found that ‘the UK was voted the funniest country in Europe’ according to those in Spain, Germany, France, Italy, and the UK, which awarded itself the title (Ferguson, 2017). In the United States there is a ‘widespread notion of British-made entertainment as inherently superior in terms of complexity and intelligence’ (Lavigne and Marcovitch, 2011: ix). That the British sense of humour is assumed to be superior to others means BuzzFeed can produce a list called ‘22 tweets that prove the Brits have the best sense of humour’ (Rahman, 2019). While such accolades might indicate something particular about the comic possibilities of the content and structure of the English language, it has instead been shown that English-speaking countries use humour in quite different ways, pointing towards a situated use of language in the UK that marks it as distinct (Schermer and

Kfrerer, 2020). It is likely to be for this reason that resources offered by institutions that teach English as a foreign language or support people preparing to move to the UK often highlight humour as something to be cognisant of. Such resources indicate that ‘The UK has its own breed of humour’ which can be ‘mind-boggling’ and ‘feel like a whole new language’ (Study International, 2021; Simon, 2007). Humour is presented to foreigners as equally important to learn about in order to fit in with British culture as queuing, handshakes, being polite, and drinking tea (Study Links, 2016). A survey of twins in the UK and the United States indicated there are genetic differences in those from each country which make certain kinds of humour more likely. By this logic, national senses of humour are more than cultural, embedded instead in genes; ‘experts admit that the results have left them baffled’ (Dobson, 2008). That said, there are concerns that the pride that the British have in their supposedly superior sense of humour might be an example of problematic exceptionalism, such that – in international relations – ‘our abstruse wit might not be quite the soft power asset it was’ (Ganesh, 2018).

The BBC itself, in its educational materials, asserts that ‘humour has been a central to the history of storytelling across the UK for a long time’ (BBC Bitesize, n.d.). And the UK Government agrees, such that since 2013 the ‘Life in the UK’ test – required to be taken by all non-nationals applying for UK citizenship and purporting to encompass all the most important elements of UK history, politics, and culture – has contained a section on the British sense of humour, with indicative examples of cultural milestones proffered up as emblematic of the uniqueness of the country’s comedy. As the headline of the article reporting this in *The Guardian* stated, ‘Want to become a British citizen? Better swot up on *Monty Python*’ (Booth, 2013). What is important here is not debates about whether there is anything particular, or superior, about the British sense of humour, not least because such a query is impossible to usefully measure and necessarily requires diminishing non-UK cultures. Instead, what is of significance is the weight attached to the *assumption* of the superiority of the British sense of humour. The question can be asked; why is it seemingly so important to citizens of the UK to understand themselves in terms of their comedy, to the extent that their Government formalises this as part of the route to citizenship? In addition, given two of the BBC’s current public purposes are ‘To reflect, represent and serve the diverse communities of all of the United Kingdom’s nations and regions’ and ‘To reflect the United Kingdom, its culture and values to the world’ (BBC, 2021: 19), what role has the broadcaster played in situating a supposedly unique sense of humour as part of this ‘culture’ and its ‘values’? In effect, how are contemporary global and national understandings of the UK inflected via ideas of comedy, and how are these intertwined with nation-making practices of the BBC since its inception? This paper investigates these questions via analysis of the relationships between comedy and national identity, and through examination of one possible of many ‘media histories’ (Nicholas, 2012) of the BBC’s comedic output in both television and radio, and its contribution to such ideas of identity.

Comedy, nation and identity

Comedy plays a particular role in notions of national identity, irrespective of whether it is understood as a vital component of such identity, or simply one element alongside many others. A key way it does this is through its selection of targets, uniting groups in mockery of others. Such 'patterns of jokes' may involve any single or combination of cultural categories, such as gender, occupation, age or, indeed, nation (Davies, 2011: 2). It is the 'widespread and popular' nature of humour that enables its social significance, particularly when 'considerable numbers of jokes exist with a common theme' (Davies, 2011: 2, 4). One of those themes is nation, and there are clear cultural norms within many countries concerning which other nations can be humorously called on in terms of particular characteristics. So, the French mock the Belgians for being stupid, just as Australia do the Tasmanians, the English do the Irish, and the Mexicans do the Yucatecos (Davies, 1998: 2–3). Important here is that 'the butts of stupidity jokes are not a distant or alien group', and there is instead a 'centre-periphery relationship' (Davies, 1998: 1) between joker and butt that points to the importance of humour as a tool for social interaction. But for any of this to work there must be some cultural agreement about what this 'centre' is from which the 'periphery' can be measured and marked. There must be an 'us' and 'them' that is culturally-agreed, and which functions to lump thousands – or millions – of people into readily recognisable categories defined by unambiguous terminology. As such, the power and joy of this kind of humour works via the invitation jokes offer to understand oneself as a member of 'us', marked as superior to 'them', allied with the pleasure of situating oneself in a commonality of 'us' that reasserts belonging, community, and cultural and societal norms.

These are all ideas that have resonances in nation-based ideas of public service broadcasting, such as those invented by – and continuing to be the goal of – the BBC. Indeed, the primary component of the history of the BBC might well be its continuing negotiation of competing and mutating conceptualisations of the UK, in political, cultural and ideological terms. At the same time as attempting to suggest that there is something particular about the 'British character' that legitimises the existence of the UK as a nation and hence the BBC as an institution, the BBC has also had to acknowledge and reflect a 'pluralistic Britishness' that responds to and exemplifies the 'multi-national character of the UK' (Hajkowski, 2010, 1–3). This means that the BBC has long been constituted of multiple regional and national radio and television broadcasters, which themselves impose localised identities on the people who live in those communities. It is, then, 'regional, national, global' (Crisell, 2002: 28), with all of the possibilities – and tensions – this formulation enables and necessitates. Benedict Anderson defines nations as 'imagined communities' (1983) which use multiple processes to suggest there is something inevitable and logical about their existence. Systems such as the law and education are clear examples of this imagining, but the 'cultural roots of nationalism' (Anderson, 1983: 17) are similarly important. Cultural components of nations are often able to be categorised as important because of the pretence that they have long historical roots, thereby situating the current formulation of the nation as nothing more than a continuation of that which has been in existence for some time. This means the idea of

traditions is important, with nations foregrounding such traditions as emblematic of their uniqueness and longevity. But many such traditions are, to use Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's term, 'invented' (1983), with much shorter histories than is supposed. They have a 'symbolic nature' and 'seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition' (Hobsbawm, 1983: 1). Broadcasting offers an excellent context within which such repetition can take place, through its reach to mass, collective audiences, and its regularity in programming that correlates with the annual cycle of holidays and other events such as Christmas, Easter, and the New Year. Indeed, Hobsbawm uses the BBC's Royal Christmas broadcast – an annual broadcasting tradition in the UK first undertaken in 1932 – as an example of a tradition 'actually invented, constructed and formally instituted' (1983:1); that is, invented for and by broadcasting with the purpose of 'imagining' the nation, and which now functions as an annual marker of British-ness.

Comedy has for many years played a role in this process of annual marking, with the Christmas special of long-running and popular series a clear festive staple. While the proliferation of broadcasting services in the last three decades has often been understood as evidencing the collapse of the mass, collective audience, the comedy Christmas special remains a place which brings together very large audiences. So, for a number of years *Mrs Brown's Boys* (2011) was the most-watched programme on British television at Christmas, with 9.7 million viewers in 2014 and 6.8 million in 2017 (Gayle, 2017; Plunkett, 2015). That comedy might function as a tradition ousting others that have stood for some time is evidenced in the significance placed upon *Mrs Brown's Boys* beating the Queen's annual broadcast in the ratings in 2014 (Plunkett 2015). The 2019 Christmas special of *Gavin and Stacey* (2007-19) was both the most-watched festive broadcast of the decade (with 11.6 million viewers) and, after reaching 17.1 million viewers in total including those using catch-up services, was the 'biggest scripted programme of the decade' (Cremona, 2020). The special-ness of the *Gavin and Stacey* Christmas episode was even more apparent because the programme's previous series had ended in 2010, meaning a return to television screens after nearly a decade. Both *Mrs Brown's Boys* and *Gavin and Stacey* attest to comedy's negotiation of the nation and beyond, given the former is a co-production between BBC Scotland and the Irish national broadcaster RTÉ, and the latter often draws on English-Welsh cultural differences for its humour.

Other significant times in the year are also often marked by the BBC with comedy specials, or comedy is used to link together festive periods. For example, the sitcom *Miranda* (2009-15) ended in 2014–15 with a two-part special, with the first episode broadcast on Christmas Day and the second on New Year's Day, a similar format to that adopted by *The Vicar of Dibley* (1994-2020) in 2006-7. *The Vicar of Dibley* is one of the few comedy programmes to have been given an Easter special (in 1996), presumably because of congruence between the programme's religious setting and themes and the occasion being marked. These episodes are typically publicised as 'specials', and are often one-offs with self-contained stories, rather than part of longer series. The production structures of television comedy take this into account, with broadcasters such as the BBC planning months, or years, in advance, to ensure there is enough 'special' television for moments such as Christmas. All of this is an 'invented tradition', for there is no necessary

or logical correlation between Christmas – or other times of the year – and comedy. Audiences had to learn that Christmas was a special time of the (broadcasting) year, and that this should at least partly be equated with humour. The nation is constructed around these annual occasions via broadcasting, with comedy playing a significant role in that construction.

There are, of course, significant tensions within the notion of a national sense of humour, just as there is for anything that is asserted to define the nation. Nations corral together different people with different interests and different histories, aiming to assert a notion of commonality that legitimises the organisation of the nation-state. Given the UK is a multi-nation country, the history of the BBC is one rife with difficulties in working out how to present, reflect and embody ‘the nation’ with reference to the country’s multi-part construction, as well as regional differences within those parts. Battles over the style of English used by BBC presenters attest to the difficulty in constructing national norms (Schwyter, 2016), whereby other forms of speaking and whole languages are rendered marginal or absent. Comedy can be an effective tool for the articulation and exploration of a resistance to that domination, such as when Scottish comedy draws on the ‘theme of anti-Englishness (or, rather, more accurately, ‘not-Englishness)’ even when an ‘element of self-parody’ simultaneously mocks this stance as it is expressed (Wilkie, 2014: 178–9). Welsh comedy can also be understood in terms of its relationships with England, though this is attenuated through the dominance of the English language and the multilingual nature of the country and its broadcasting, meaning the nation, in order for its programming to be comprehensible within England, has to depict a ‘Welsh Wales’ that conforms to stereotyped and unthreatening norms (Perrins, 2014: 82). And Tim Miles (2010) argues that in Northern Ireland the consensual nature of the comic interaction might be understood differently given that country’s history and politics are continuously filtered through the need to work towards consensus. All such articulations necessarily simplify the complexities and breadth of uses and content of humour in nations, but significant here is how these ideas sit in terms of their relationships to a dominant ‘middlebrow’ Englishness (Cardiff, 1988), even though what can be understood as English comedy is itself rife with tensions and reformulations and constituted of ‘multitudinous versions’ (Medhurst, 2007: 39). This multitude, however, is not infinite, and circulates around mythic histories that are ‘mostly middle-class, almost exclusively white’ (Medhurst, 2007: 44) and exclusionary in multiple other ways. This means a recent sitcom such as the BBC’s *Citizen Kahn* (2012–16) can be entrapped within debates about how ‘Asian cultures on television are still mostly exoticized and Orientalized’ even if there might be something radical in how the series ‘positioned itself squarely within the British tradition of family-based sitcom’ (Saha, 2013: 99–100). Generational differences matter too, to the extent that in 2018 the BBC Marketing and Audiences department commissioned research to unearth what made younger audiences laugh, responding to concerns that they no longer turned to the Corporation for comedy (Aming, 2021). All of this is testament to the cultural work ideas of nation must consistently engage in, repeatedly imagining themselves in ways that aim to point to a sense of commonality and logic, while also being attuned to the tensions and irresolvable contradictions that necessarily result from the project of aligning millions of people under a notion of

collectivity. The history of the BBC can be understood as an enactment of that project; and comedy has been one of the ways the institution – both home and abroad – tried to carry out, and evidence the logic of, that task.

The making of the comedic nation

That comedy would function emblematically as a synecdoche for the nation – both at home and abroad – was not in any way inevitable, or foreseeable, at the outset of broadcasting. The BBC's famous dictum – 'inform, educate, entertain' – implies an equality between these three aspects, though it is no accident that 'entertain' comes last. As Heather Sutherland argues, 'comedy has always been the least plausibly public service genre' (2010: 7). The BBC comedy department's existence distinct from other groupings such as 'entertainment' and 'drama' may appear common-sensical now, but this seeming inevitability had to be made. At its inception the BBC did not have a separate comedy department, and did not establish one for quite some time. As reproduced in Asa Briggs' history of the institution (1961: appendix), the organizational chart of the BBC in 1923 simply has, under the Director of Programmes, the four sections, 'women's and children's hours', 'talks, religion, correspondence', 'special features, series, talks, research' and 'music'. By 1927 there was a larger number of staff overseeing programming, but still here the word 'comedy' remains entirely absent, with instead the Productions Director overseeing 'variety and revue programmes' (Briggs, 1961: appendix). This is understandable, because at that time the model that was being emulated in terms of entertainment was that which had existed for some time in the theatre via the music-hall and revue, where comedy was part of a mixed bill. In addition, the BBC struggled to attract many established entertainment performers to perform because many theatre owners and managers banned them from working for the organisation, fearing the broadcaster would destroy their business (Briggs, 1961: 251). Nowadays there remains a symbiotic relationship between comedy theatre and television, where stand-up comedians with successful stage performances get picked up for television work. This means what is now understood as stand-up culture in the UK is inherently intertwined with the BBC's programming choices. But at its outset the BBC was instead received quite differently, functioning as a challenge to traditions of comedy and the industry that thrived on them.

Though the BBC might have been wary about comedy and entertainment it has nevertheless routinely turned to it throughout its history, notably at points where it has engaged in the act of defining itself and communicating what can be expected from it by the public. For example, the first programme following the opening ceremony and the news on the first night of BBC Television on 2 November 1936 was *Variety*, constituting multiple performances in the style of an evening of entertainment at the theatre. Comedy is a component of this: the programme features Buck and Bubbles, who are listed as 'comedians and dancers' and who are described in the programme information as 'a coloured [*sic*] pair who are ... versatile comedians who dance, play the piano, sing, and cross-chat' (*Radio Times*, 1936a: 88). Here it can be seen how comedy at this point is understood within an array of performance abilities, including music and dancing. That first week also includes a broadcast from the London Theatre of the play *Marigold* by L.

Allen Harker and F.R. Pryor which is described as ‘a Scottish comedy’, and at the weekend the programme *Variety* which includes Horace Kenney who is listed as ‘comedian’ (89). Only a few weeks later the BBC was already indicating what it would later go on to discover was a natural relationship; comedy and Christmas. Sprinkled throughout the Christmas Day schedule for 1936 are multiple acts described in terms of comedy; Sutherland Felce (‘Conjuror and Comedian’), Walker and Smarte (‘Comedy Jugglers’), Russell Swann (‘Conjuror and Comedian’) and Sherkot (‘Silent Comedian’) (*Radio Times*, 1936b: 95). Briggs refers to 1933 to 1937 as the ‘romantic era’ of BBC radio ‘with a deliberate emphasis on gaiety, colour, and movement’ (1965: 103), and it is within this context that BBC television entertainment similarly sat. Better able to indicate movement than radio, television no doubt turned to variety comedians as a tool to demonstrate the medium’s potential. Yet there was at this stage already the insistence that kinds of comedy, and subjects for humour, functioned in terms of nation-building, primarily through the exclusion of material that might be seen to question or problematise the version of the nation and the sense of commonality broadcasting was being drawn on to express. After all, ‘one thing which the BBC did not do during the 1930s was to provide entertainment with a satirical edge’ (Briggs, 1965: 113). Here, humour – as a component of variety – is drawn upon as a tool for nation-building, denuding comedy of its critical, carnivalesque components that might render unstable the very idea of nation being constructed.

What this also points to is the variety of forms that accommodate comedy, and the multiple purposes to which it can be put. The history here is one of the BBC – and other broadcasters around the globe – trying to work out how comedy and these new broadcast media could fruitfully come together. Where today genres such as the sitcom, the sketch show, the panel show, and recording of stand-up routines constitute comedy television and radio might seem ‘obvious’ (Mills, 2012: 43–6), these formats had to be invented, their conventions becoming attuned primarily through trial and error. While there may be a synergy between the episodic nature of broadcasting and comedy given that broadcasting, ‘with its separate segments, slots, and schedules, and its different genres and types of programme, can be considered a variety form’ (Neale and Krutnik, 1990: 179), how this worked in practice still had to be worked through. This experimental approach to entertainment meant that radio’s early years constituted an “ad hoc” environment’ in which ‘many staffers and engineers came to the microphone of necessity to entertain and experiment’ (Purcell, 2018: 420). But rather than this suggesting the development of broadcasting arose solely from inward-looking practices, what now constitutes the norms of comedy television and radio can be seen as responses to contexts outside the Corporation. For instance, the BBC’s acceptance that it would have to focus on comedy stars as the core around which programmes should be made and promoted was a response to impending competition from commercial television in the 1950s (Mundy, 2008). In the same period, the movement of creatives and stars around the ‘North Atlantic triangle’ (Collins, 1990: 212) of the UK, the USA and Canada evidence the ‘competing demands of the national and the transnational in the 1950s’ (Hilmes, 2010: 31). The BBC’s output, then, was always imbued by external factors and contexts, filtered via a necessity to ensure what was produced in some way related to particular ideas of the nation.

The BBC in the world

The socio-cultural purposes to which comedy could be put, and the centrality of humour to the ‘imagining’ of the nation the BBC offered to its public in the UK and to the wider world, came about precisely because of factors beyond the nation. It is tempting to understand the BBC in parochial terms, and to critique the organisation because its public service remit necessarily requires it to prioritise the members of the nation it aims to serve over larger, global contexts. However, the fact that all nations exist in intertwined international relationships, and have histories that stretch beyond their borders, means that understandings of the BBC’s development must acknowledge such ‘entangled’ (Cronqvist and Hilgert, 2017) histories. This, clearly, affects all the output of an organisation such as the BBC, and the very ways in which it understands itself and its purposes. Yet there is a particularity here to comedy that indicates something about the social and cultural roles it plays, and was called on to play. As has been shown, from its inception the BBC had situated comedy not as a specific form but as a constituent of entertainment, part of a mixed-bag of variety possibilities but with no particular purpose marking it as distinct from, say, jugglers or singers. It was only when the BBC was required to reckon with forces it could not control – and which came from beyond the national borders – that the precisely powerful and meaningful interactions broadcasting and comedy could achieve were discovered. It may seem obvious now that comedy and broadcasting are natural bedfellows, but this is a state of affairs that was not foreseeable at the BBC’s outset. Indeed, it came about at times when the UK was forced to face outward rather than inward.

The first instance of this concerned the Second World War. Briggs outlines how, prior to the war, the BBC was reluctant to take cues on how to develop entertainment formats for radio from the United States, and so ‘it was towards Europe that the BBC turned’ (1965: 109). The focus in the United States of building programmes around specific personalities or performers, however, became inevitable simply because those efforts that were attempted by the BBC were so successful. *Band Waggon* (1938–40), for example, was ‘a popular light entertainment magazine, which combined music, patter, and detection’ but whose pairing of Arthur Askey and Richard Murdoch meant it overcame the supposed limitations of this variety format to reach ‘possibly the widest BBC public that had ever been attracted to light entertainment’ (Briggs, 1965: 117). A similar ‘personalized’ approach was taken to the subsequent *It’s That Man Again* (also known as *ITMA*) (1939–49), this time centred on the comedian Tommy Handley, and which would go on ‘to be the greatest of war-time successes’ and the ‘most English of English programmes’ (Briggs, 1970: 109, 564). The series has been said to have ‘passed into legend’ (Briggs and Burke, 2009: 196) for its role in maintaining morale for listeners during the war, becoming ‘became part of Britain’s wartime vocabulary’ (Nicholas, 2017: 83) to the extent it has been argued that the use of comedy during the conflict was the UK’s ‘secret weapon’ (Richards, 1997: 87). This was despite the BBC’s assumption that what would be good for the nation terrified at the outbreak of war, and what would legitimise its existence as public service broadcaster, would be ‘serious music, uninformative news bulletins, and

dour Ministry of Information talks on fuel economy, food rationing, or national savings' (Hendy, 2007: 25).

The second factor that evidenced the importance of humour to the developing BBC was the organisation's relationship to the British empire and the changing and problematic nature of the relationships between the UK and the countries it had colonised. As Briggs outlines, the BBC was dragged into debates about its functions as a tool for the UK to speak to its colonised territories not least because those countries were developing broadcasting systems of their own. A memorandum produced in 1929 argued that the UK was 'presumably entitled no less than others to diffuse its ideas and culture' (Briggs, 1965: 375) and the BBC would serve as a useful tool for this purpose. It was precisely broadcasting's ability to bring people together collectively in the communal act of simultaneously engaging in the consumption of programming that was seen to align with the very act of asserting commonality amongst those members of the countries then under the yoke of Empire. As R.C. Norman, the then-Chairman of the BBC, put it in a 1936 article in the *Radio Times*, the BBC's Empire Service 'provides the most striking testimony to the new role of broadcasting, for by means its citizens of the Empire, however scattered their homes may be, have been enabled to participate simultaneously in events of Imperial importance wherever they occurred' (1936: 5).

Given the desire for these overseas services to communicate to their listeners a notion of what the BBC understood to be emblematic of Britishness and good in terms of intellectual and moral development, their output was carefully formulated. The opening broadcasts for the Forces Programme, for example, contained orchestral concerts, news reports, and recitals (Briggs, 1970: 129). But such programming was not popular; or, at least, not as popular as intended. Although the British military listened a lot to the service offered to them, there were 'demands for 'more variety' and 'no heavy music'', and much less interest in 'Religion, drama and talks' (130). A notable context here is that a shortage of necessary equipment and the accommodation circumstances listeners found themselves in meant that listening 'was invariably in groups' (130); a mode of audienceship akin to that of the theatre and which inevitably lends itself to programming that enables and encourages collective reactions, such as laughter. Reactions to the Empire Service similarly ran counter to how the organisation conceptualised itself and the collective-making possibilities of its programming. The use of 'evocative prose, poetry and music to highlight ... patriotic and historical content' may have given the BBC 'social and political credibility' (MacKenzie, 1986: 167) at home. This programming inevitably could not unite the wide range of diverse audiences listening around the world. Tellingly, this turned on different countries' relationships with, and understanding of, British humour, and how they understood themselves in terms of that humour. Listeners in New Zealand and Australia who had 'an understanding of British accents and humour' reportedly expected quite different things from the Service than those in Canada who 'did not enjoy the broad humour of BBC variety programmes' (Potter, 2008: 480, 479). That said, 'entertainment tended to be more popular than education' on the Service, troublingly to the extent that it required the BBC to produce 'romantic visions of empire' that could align with entertainment principles, rather than more complex and thoughtful engagements with Empire that might have been possible in more serious formats (Hajkowski, 2010: 23). In

attempting to construct a national, and then global, sense of the UK, the BBC struggled to bring into alignment what it understood as the (limited) purposes of entertainment, and how audiences understood it. It was in going out into the world that the BBC discovered that the UK was understood in relationship to humour and comedy, and this reformulated the organisation itself in fundamental ways. After all, it was ‘the development of the Empire Service’ that contributed to the BBC’s decision in 1932 that ‘the popular entertainment side of broadcasting should receive much more attention’ (Briggs, 1965: 92).

And now?

A much more recent example exemplifies how the ‘attention’ subsequently paid to ‘the popular entertainment side of broadcasting’ continues to function in other ways too. In 2020 the BBC established BBC Studios Germany Productions, a production and distribution centre in Cologne, Germany which, according to its recently-appointed Managing Director Philipp Schmid, intended to ‘bring [to] German audiences the best the BBC has to offer’ (quoted in [BBC Media Centre, 2020](#)). In 2021 the organisation announced its first original commission; a German remake of the sitcom *Miranda* for the German channel ZDF Neo, with the working title *Ruby* ([BBC Media Centre, 2021](#)). This follows in a long line of international remakes of UK sitcoms, such as *One Foot in the Grave’s* (1990–2000) American, Swedish, Dutch, and German versions (*Cosby* (1996–2000); *En fot i graven* (2001); *Met één been in het graf* (2006); *Mit einem Bein im Grab* (1996–97)). However, remakes had traditionally involved selling the format of a programme to an overseas broadcaster or production company who then produce their own version. What is different here is that BBC Studios itself is functioning as the production company, having set up a base in a non-UK territory, and thus the organisation is now situated as comparable to those existing in that territory. It is a useful example of the BBC’s current engagement with the world beyond the UK via its BBC Studios arm, which has to carefully negotiate the commercial logic driving its actions and the need for the wider BBC to evidence its continued commitment to UK-based public service broadcasting. Thus the BBC Studios webpage contains a carefully curated argument that this commercial activity can contribute to the BBC’s public service remit and the UK both culturally and commercially: ‘the revenues we generate supports the wider British creative industries in general and builds awareness of great British content’ ([BBC Studios, 2021](#)).

Comedy, often a marginalised and overlooked form of television, has been a vital force to the ways in which the BBC has understood itself in relation to the wider world – and how that wider world has understood the BBC and, by extension, the UK. For this argument, it is almost too neat that BBC Studio Germany Production’s first commission should be a sitcom. This attests to the global circulation of British comedy formats, and the expertise in comedy production that the BBC is understood to have globally. While remakes necessarily reshape content in order to align with local cultural understandings and senses of humour, it is here clearly assumed there is something fundamental to *Miranda* that is translatable into comic content for German audiences. Whereas in the past countries such as Australia looked to the BBC for a ‘model’ (McKie and Natt, 1996: 146)

of how to produce comedies – resulting in series such as *Mother and Son* (1984–94) and *After the Beep* (1996) – here it is now actively a tool that can be used by the BBC for the development of its overseas commercial arm, a product enabling the establishment of a permanent overseas presence in a globalised television landscape.

Yet there remain tensions within the version of the UK an organisation such as the BBC presents to the world, given the assumptions and expectations that non-UK audiences bring to their consumption of UK content. For example, BBC America has been successful in introducing American audiences to a wider variety of programming than had hitherto been the case, but its content persistently presents ‘a mostly white, nearly homogenous nation-state’ (Newton, 2017: 21). Furthermore, national audiences can be resistant to the suggestion that ‘their’ comedy is able to circulate globally, questioning ‘the ability of transnational viewers to ‘get it’’ (Bore, 2011: 366). The challenge for broadcasters is to find ways ‘to make the local global’ and ‘make the global local’ (Chalaby, 2012: 31, emphasis in original), negotiating the particular and the general. The movement of programmes around the world is clearly affected by linguistic barriers, resulting in synergies between those with ‘a common Anglophone culture’ (Boyd, 2011: 244) less accessible to others. Similarly, cultural differences function as barriers, such as the difficulty the BBC found in selling *The Royle Family* (1998–2012) outside the UK in countries with notably different conceptualisations of class (Stemmers, 2004: 156). Embedded within comedy is its status as a product for which the BBC serves as a disseminator and which those who make it might find a more suitable home for; after all what may be the first ever radio sitcom – *The Strange Adventures of Mr Penny* (1936–7) – was sold by its writer – Maurice Moiseiwitisch – to Radio Luxembourg in 1937 (Purcell, 2020). ‘Serious’ genres such as news, current affairs and documentary are commonly proposed as the most vital elements of public service broadcasting. It is clear, however, that comedy continues to resurface in the BBC’s history and present practice as an inescapable phenomenon useful for achieving the very ideas of nation-building embedded in the organisation’s remit. It is also – as the German remake of *Miranda* and the high placing of a number of BBC sitcoms on the global list of the best television of the 20th century show – an ongoing force fundamental to the BBC’s relationships with the rest of the world, and international understandings of the BBC.

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ORCID iD

Brett Mills  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9899-5303>

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Author Biography

Brett Mills is Visiting Professor of Media and Cultural Studies at Edge Hill University, UK. He is the author of *Television Sitcom*, *The Sitcom*, and *Animals on Television*, and co-author (with Erica Horton) of *Creativity in the British Television Comedy Industry* and (with David M. Barlow) of two editions of *Reading Media Theory*. He is a member of the team currently undertaking two AHRC-funded projects on multispecies storytelling.