


The BBC Today Programme: an outrageous deviance from tradition

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2009/02/10/the-bbc-today-programme-an-outrageous-deviance-from-tradition/

2009-2-10

 The [BBC's Today Programme](#) is the flagship of radio news and current affairs. With a weekly range of about 5m listeners drawn from the national elite it sets the agenda for every day. However, I am increasingly concerned that it has broken with one of the most important of British media traditions.

Everyone knows that there is a golden rule for much loved and long-lived media organisations such as Today, Channel 4 News, Newsnight and Private Eye. It is that “They are not as good as they used to be”. It is axiomatic among media folk that standards at these venerable institutions are declining from a date that usually coincides with when we used to work on them.

It was bad enough when The Times seemed to be getting better – even under James Harding, who is clearly aged under 50 and not entirely Etonian. But now it has become clear that The Today Programme is a much improved listen.

Is it just me getting old? But it does seem to be a programme in a run of marvellous form. The chemistry seems to be right. It's not any particular presenter or one scoop – the whole show is swinging. Despite the kerfuffle over Ed Stourton (who is now on air more than ever) it doesn't appear to have lost its nerve amongst all the crisis and under-confidence that pervades much of BBC journalism. Despite cutbacks it doesn't appear to have lost any depth or weight.

This morning it managed to carry off two very off-beat items with panache. One was about a John Cage concert that will last 576 years. The other was about the joys of pure science. These are the kind of items that often fall flat but were carried off with brio and also a sense of purpose.

Of course, it helps to have a top media economist around like Evan Davis when a Crash happens, but the whole team seems happier. I confess I used to find Humphreys more annoying than informative, Sarah Montague used to be stuffy, Jim Naughtie self-indulgent and verbose etc. Well, I still find Jim a bit of a self-parody when he gets on to Scottish or Opera stories but overall everyone seems to be relaxed and thoughtful, a bit less bossy and shrill.

The journalism seems a bit more straight-forward, with fewer artificial rows between Bishops and modern artists. Although, inevitably there is still too much reliance on “a report published today...”. It is not a deeply challenging programme, but I am not sure I really want too much political grandstanding by journalists when I am trying to eat my porridge.

The programme has a simple but excellent website that does all the things you want – Tweets, Podcasts etc – although I wonder if there is more they could do to tap into the vast resources of knowledge possessed by their listeners?

Anyway, sorry to be so bloody nice to a programme that we should all hate, but in a world where journalism is supposed to be going to hell in a digital handcart I thought it would be nice to say something positive. This now allows me to write another blog in a year or two's time bemoaning how crap it has become.

Meanwhile, well done Ceri and the team. Now make it perfect and please, please get rid of Thought For The Day.

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