

I am current affairs: LOOK AT ME! LOOK AT ME!

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I was trying to work out just what it is that is going on with the commissioning system in TV current affairs, which as I said [before](#), is going through an odd phase. Is it all down to a relentless drive to boost ratings and attract corporate sponsorship by levelling down to the lowest common denominator?

I think you have to separate out different types of current affairs and you have to be careful about measures of “quality”. These days the range of programmes that could be put in the category of ‘topical factual’ runs from ‘reality’ TV to major documentary series made by companies such as [Brook Lapping](#). And sometimes it can be the programmes that have the worst editorial standards (eg [Big Brother](#)) that brings out the most unvarnished truths (about latent racism and the hypocrisy of the public). Sometimes it is the cheaply produced programmes ([More4 News](#) for example) that have a more independent and thoughtful approach.

Of course, all the people I know who commission programmes will deny that they are influenced directly by any commercial agenda. Although, they might admit that they *have* changed strategy. In a multi-channel world they need to make their channel stand out. That’s partly about chasing corporate advertising but to an extent that was always the case – and, anyway, the BBC is at it, as well. You don’t stand out by having a series of 8 standard programmes. You do it by having one outstanding programme which gets covered in other media (free advertising for your show) followed by 7 ok-ish programmes. The ‘stand-out’ show can stand out for their originality ([Adam Curtis](#)), for being contrarian ([Global Warming Swindle](#)), for being shocking ([Bodyshock](#)), or for being utterly authoritative and intelligent ([Brook Lapping](#)). It’s not so much driven by a sense of what the public wants. It’s not even about viewing figures in isolation. It’s about reminding the multi-channel home that your station exists and is Very Exciting.

I don’t want a return to the Golden Age of [World In Action](#), [Panorama](#) etc where an elite churned out (often very dull) shows to something of a formula to a captive audience. I much prefer the pluralistic, multi-formatted, post-modernist current affairs/documentaries. And there are some real gems such as a recent Channel 4 programme in [The Insider](#) series which gave a counter-intuitive take on fostering. But I am afraid that in the search for gimmicks and column inches, TV long-form journalism is in danger of throwing the journalistic baby out with the bath water of tradition.

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