# Can They Survive without the BBC

# Wildlife and drama programming are at the core of public service broadcasting. **Nick Manley** asks if they will they atrophy if the BBC gets smaller

A colleague had an interview for a highly-paid production role at the BBC. Sitting in the

White City canteen they watched a BBC staff member come back for a second and then third

heavily-subsidised breakfast thinking ‘that’s not what I’m paying my licence fee for’ and

decided not to take the job. Although this behaviour isn’t policy or even generally accepted,

perhaps it displays an outdated sense of entitlement that just wouldn’t happen in a modern

independent production office.

**Wildlife means money for the BBC**

The Natural History Unit (NHU) in Bristol is a specialist department within BBC Studios

Productions and is generally considered to be the largest producer of natural history content

in the world. At its inception the NHU was seen as a department that offered distinctive

programming unmatched anywhere in the world. BBC Studios was created by a merger of the

BBC’s distribution and commercial sectors, including BBC Worldwide, in April 2018. It is

an autonomous commercial entity which generated an income of £1,837m in the year

2023/24, according to the National Audit Office (NAO). From inception in 2018 to 2023/24

BBC Studios provided £1,906m in financial returns to the BBC through dividend payments

and contributions made as part of its work as the BBC’s main production and distribution

partner.

The NHU makes money for the public service BBC network. It does so through co-

productions with international partners including major streaming services. According to

Tom Fussell, CEO BBC Studios, over 80 per cent of revenue came from sales to third parties

such as Discovery, Netflix, and Apple TV. The BBC is aware it is behind the digital

competition – as the NAO also concluded: ‘the BBC has not been able to develop its product

portfolio with the same pace and sophistication as that of rival media organisations’ (NAO

2024).I worked as a freelancer and staff member for the BBC for over 30 years on a huge range of

factual and drama programming. I spent many years on BBC science shows. Some old

friends moved on to the NHU. I asked ex-colleagues how would the NHU survive. The clear

response was ‘very easily’. However, that will not come without a sea change in the editorial

experience. With NHU production running at £3m and over per episode BBC Studios is keen

to promote only projects that are seen as globally marketable. The NHU works on a loose

model of one major series and three minor projects at an annual pitch to the head of sales and

commissioning at the BBC. The current internal commissioning model allows continuity-

potential as 2026 project proposals can be greenlit for production in 2028/29. The problemin

this model is that short-term contracts are being offered to creative editorial staff with many

directors and development producers on monthly or annual contracts rather than on a

permanent staffing basis.

**Wildlife without the licence fee?**

The worry is that such contracts leave the door open for drastic staffing cuts should the 2028

licence fee settlement mean a radical rethink of budgets and project planning. The streaming

service model requires viewing completion, that is, producing a series that will hold viewers

across an entire season of episodes. The streaming model wants a viewer to watch all

episodes: the series must have a link, an emerging theme, that will draw the viewer into

repeat consumption of the product. A broad encyclopaedic description of the varied species

of the Galapagos would be informative and educational but would not retain audience figures.

The assumption is that potential viewers may be selective about which episodes they watch or

just lose interest in a repetitive format. The immediacy of mass information and images via

the internet has prompted programme-makers to look to how they entertain and retain

audiences.

To achieve this, the streaming networks buy into series that have a narrative hook to get and

hold viewing figures. Natural History struggles with this as it has always adhered to the

Reithian model to inform and educate. When Disney/Pixar partnered with the NHU in 2009

there were staff sessions on narrative structure to promote the idea of entertainment in story

construction. Shooting schedules included material to construct narratives. A scene such as

the beautifully-edited baby iguana vs snakes in *Planet Earth 2* used reaction shots and

cutaways in the narrative style of a Hollywood blockbuster. It is an incredible watch butworks to very different genre conventions than the traditionally revealing, but more

informational, wildlife approach.

The streaming model needs action, it needs narrative, it needs broad appeal through

entertainment. What this will mean is that the funding will come with conditions that are

currently not in initial editorial and commissioning meetings. The money will still come,

there will be millions to support the output, but the sales suits will be in that meeting from the

start.

For BBC staff that means a far more unstable career and a creative editorial process that must

now include second-guessing the business model with sales targets and short-term deadlines.

This is detrimental to creativity and bold decision-making. A staff employee who has the

potential for a long career in the department will feel confident to promote new and diverse

content. The employee on a six-month contract will worry about rocking the boat and be

constrained by looking to secure re-employment.

***Bake Off* takes off**

Historically the BBC has a global reputation for truthful representation of fact. In August

2023 the Reuters Institute described it as ‘one of the most highly trusted sources of news’.

The BBC itself claims a global reach of 400 million people. The sixth Ofcom Annual report

on the BBC 2022/23 reported a 69 per cent positive audience view when they were asked to

comment on the BBC’s ability to help people understand what is going on in the world. The

BBC should be looking to preserve the emerging talent that created small show formats like

the original BBC2 *Great British Bake Off*. At its beginning, it ranked seventh on the BBC2

weekly viewing figures, twelfth on nightly ranking, and had an audience of 2.24m. Thirteen

years later the show’s producer, Love Productions, reported a turnover of £85m from the

show while the BBC gained 35 international territory sales in 2021. Then Love fell out of

love with the BBC’s financial plans and took the show to Channel 4. BBC guidelines on how

much of the licence fee it will pay had increased to £500,000 an hour, totalling £15m. That

was £10m short of the Channel 4 offer of £75m over three years. BBC Arts Correspondent

David Silletto commented: ‘It’s no wonder that a rival broadcaster swooped […] it has

something very few programmes an offer, five million viewers under the age of 34 […] That

demographic is marketing catnip.’ (Perhaps the corporation’s single biggest mistake came in

2007 when it gave away the iPlayer for free. Asking viewers to pay 48p a day for the iPlayer,offering global content on demand, seems far more palatable than £174.50 as an annual

charge.)

Across the television industry there is a sense that editorial creativity generally feels

hollowed out by purely profit-driven production. In November 2024 Steven D Wright asked,

‘Are we watching the death of British television? With no one daring to risk new formats and

68 per cent of freelancers out of work, our world leading industry is in terminal decline’. To

support this assertion he characterised the BBC’s decision to spend £9m on a Danish dating

show *Stranded on Honeymoon Island* in 2025 as a ‘slap in the face for homegrown creatives’

.

What has begun to emerge are leading independent producers of wildlife and natural history

content. In 2012, after thirty years at the NHU, including five years as head, Alastair

Fothergill left to set up Silverback Films with Keith Scholey. In April 2017 he reminisced

about pitching the *Our Planet* series: ‘That would have been hard to manage with the BBC’

.

He diplomatically said the Netflix budget compared ‘very well’ with the BBC offer. The

BBC has a range of indicative prices for the supply of commissioned programming. The tariff

for a BBC high-end factual is between £225 and 350,000. Fothergill did not disclose the

value of the Netflix funding but if the entire budget for the BBC’s most expensive

documentary series ever, *Planet Earth*, was £16m, it’s no idle speculation that *Our Planet*’s

was greater by far. That could also be why Left Bank Pictures moved to Netflix. According to

their own company financial statement season one of *The Crown* cost £11.6m an episode.

That figure rose to £40m, as a running total, as it released the fifth series on Netflix in 2023

(Reid 2023).

**Turning a crisis into a continuing drama?**

So where does television drama sit in a post or reduced licence fee model? In conversation

with Selwyn College Cambridge master Roger Mosey on 6 February 2025 BBC Director

General, Tim Davie, asserted, “*Wolf Hall* wouldn’t happen without the BBC”

. Wolf Hall’s

creator and director, Peter Kominsky, appeared on *Newsnight* on 21 March 2025 stating the

opposite, claiming the 2024 second series, *The Mirror and the Light*, was nearly cancelled

due to BBC budget pressures. (**See chapter X of this book for Peter Kosminsky’s account**

**of the series’ fraught history**.)In March 2025 Katie Razzall, BBC culture and media editor, and Tom Brooks-Pollock,

*Newsnight* editor, quoted Jack Thorne, writer of *Adolescence*, and television adapter of *His*

*Dark Materials, Skins,* and *National Treasure*, saying he thought traditional broadcasters like

the BBC could have made the drama but they would have had to cut some of the most

expensive scenes: “I could have done it, it just would have been very different. And

truthfully, it probably would have needed co-finance from abroad.

” Could the BBC have

produced other top dramas such as *Mr Bates vs The Post Office?* Patrick Spence, the

executive producer of the show, told the BBC: “Not only would *Mr Bates* not get funding

today, but I wouldn’t have even started developing it”.

In his January 2025 Crick Institute Lecture the BBC’s previous Director General, Tony Hall,

‘We first need to decide want we want a BBC to do – for all of us – for our

argued that,

country – for the world’. Yet who are the ‘we’ he refers to? What do people want from the

BBC for the £145.4m it received in licence fee revenue in 2023/24 or indeed the £3.66bn

since 2010? The viewing figures point to high-end outputs and news, not so much for

regional content or solely UK-relevant issues. The much-quoted figure of 67 per cent of UK

viewers looking to the BBC for factual output also shows 70 per cent of those choose to

access the BBC online and to seek international issues.

**Is the future independent?**

Companies such as Bad Wolf Productions (*Wolf Hall*, *His Dark Materials*, *Red Ey*e) which

have high-end £1m to £2m an hour budgets will always have the option of co-funding as they

have big name casts attached – actors such as Mark Rylance, James McAvoy, or Ruth Wilson

– alongside a track record of international sales. Between 2015 and 2020 Bad Wolf spent

£259m on seven seasons of television: *A Discovery of Witches* seasons 1, 2 and 3, *His Dark*

*Materi*als seasons 1 and 2, *Industry*, and *I Hate Suzie*.

But mid-range independent producers would be struggling to find collaborators. Very

successful BBC returning series like *Death in Paradise* (Red Planet Pictures) work on a

budget of about £900,000 an episode where around £400,000 comes from BBC Studios,

Britbox, and the BBC. In addition €500,000 (£431,000) comes from Guadeloupe where the

series is filmed. Red Planet also get a 30 per cent tax rebate from the French Government

under their Tax Rebate for International Productions (TRIP) guidelines for shooting in France

or a French territory.Co-funding is a starting point before beginning commissioning talks with the BBC. Less

well-funded series such as the UK-based spin-off *Beyond Paradise*, made for £400,000 an

episode, may suffer. A series like that is also looking to find funding from the BBC, BBC

Studios, and BritBox. The sales gap becomes a chasm for a mid-range series when looking

for international sales when what sells is star names, and period, costume, and heritage

drama. Hence *The Crown* had Netflix invest an estimated $130m (£97.65m) for the first two

seasons (Seale 2019). That’s around £12m an episode. What does that mean for the UK

viewer? This comes back to the issue of BBC core values: does the BBC want to inform and

educate? By educate does that mean it is prepared to encourage UK-based talent, jobs, and

craft by subsidising UK-based and UK-focused programming? The potential financial

alternative would be akin to the Channel Five drama model which works on a £275,000 per

hour budget. At that funding level they cannot afford UK production wages and costs so they

go abroad to find cheaper personnel and locations. The *BBC Commissioning Supply Report*

*2023/24* showed 39 per cent of productions were made by qualifying indies but only £1m of

that is ring-fenced for small independent production companies.

International sales to 230 territories mean that it’s very likely BBC Studios, as an

independent funding source, would step in to fill any funding gap left by a BBC without the

licence fee. Independent production companies likely to survive without a BBC licence-

based commission could be the likes of The Forge who made *National Treasure*, *Roadkill*,

*Help*, and *Becoming Elizabeth*; Sister Pictures and Noisy Bear who produced *Black Doves*

(2024);Quay Street Productions who produced *After the Flood*, *Nolly*,and *Lazarus*; and

World Productions, producers of *Line of Duty* and *Vigil*. But for the BBC to survive it may

need to take a good hard look at how successful UK independents run their businesses and

forgo the nostalgia of the licence fee model.

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factual and drama production worldwide both as a freelance cameraman and BBC staff series

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