

## Ex-Pat TV

### **The Status of US Imports on UK Terrestrial TV**

*Christine Becker, University of Notre Dame*

As the existence of two Flow roundtables on the topic attests, transnational television flows have increased in recent years, and in particular, the ties and exchanges between US and British television have grown tighter and more fluid.<sup>1</sup> It's striking to note, then, that the presence of US imports is quite small on one particular area of the British TV dial, one which actually still captures a majority viewing share overall: the so-called terrestrial channels (or broadcast networks, to use US parlance). BBC One, BBC Two, ITV, Channel 4, and Channel 5 collectively still capture just over 50% of the total viewing share in a typical week.<sup>2</sup> And from August 2013 through July 2014, only thirteen US-originated series premiered first-run on all of the terrestrial channels. American shows are more pervasive on the digital siblings of the terrestrial channels (i.e. BBC Three, ITV2, E4, etc.), all seven of which constitute around another 13% of viewing share; these outlets premiered 34 US series. But by far, the dominant outlet for US programming on UK TV is multichannel pay TV, as satellite and cable channels premiered 60 first-run series across thirteen outlets (as well as many more US series in reruns), and the Sky satellite service alone aired 41 first-run series across three channels, Sky1, Sky Atlantic, and Sky Living. Sky Atlantic in particular has made US imports its *raison d'être*, and Sky has spent a huge amount of money to snatch HBO shows away from the terrestrials, though this has yet to result in huge ratings (*Game of Thrones* aside).

Sky's spending spree has forced the hand of broadcasters, especially the BBC, which as a license-fee funded entity must strive to keep expenses within reasonable limits. That pressure is exacerbated in the current moment, as the license fee is up for renewal in 2016, and many are demanding its elimination. Given that circumstance, even without Sky opening up its fat wallet, it makes economic sense for the BBC to retrench with cheaper homegrown programming rather than rely on pricey imports. Plus, the BBC is in a position of having to defend its singular value; it must air programming that feels essential to license-fee payers or risk losing their support. A recent example is illustrative. In March, the BBC announced that the youth-oriented digital channel BBC Three will be pulled off the air in 2015 and made available only online and with a reduced budget. While there has been an outcry against this move, those disdainful of BBC Three overwhelmingly point to just one program airing on the channel to slander it:



**Luke Brown** @gr4sshopp3r · Mar 6

They can't axe BBC3! Then I can't watch the same **Family Guy** episode 10 times a day and that show no one cares about. #SaveBBC3

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 **Alfie Bell** @alfie\_bell · Mar 5  
Axing BBC3 is probably a good idea.  
All it is is crap, crap, **Family Guy** repeats and more crap.  
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 **Steven Nash** @nashienet · Mar 4  
Create your very own BBC3 by picking up a **Family Guy** boxset and putting it on a 24/7 loop #SaveBBC3  
Expand [Reply](#) [Retweet](#) [Favorite](#) [More](#)

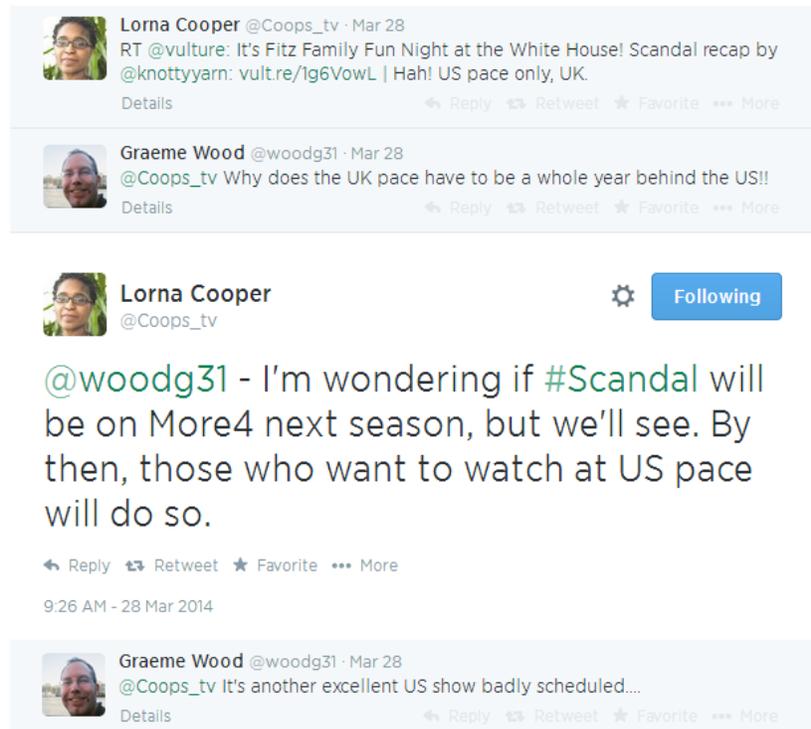
 **Lorna Cooper** @Coops\_tv · Mar 14  
Ratings: BBC Three's best performing show last night? **Family Guy**. An average of nearly 600,000 in 11pm hour. What will BBC3 do without it?  
7:56 AM - 14 Mar 2014 - Details  
Collapse [Reply](#) [Retweet](#) [Favorite](#) [More](#)

 **Kevin O'Sullivan** @TVKev · Mar 14  
[@Coops\\_tv](#) What will we do without BBC3? Watch American imports elsewhere...  
Expand [Reply](#) [Retweet](#) [Favorite](#) [More](#)

The last tweet starkly illustrates why it could be seen as detrimental for BBC channels to carry popular US imports, especially given those shows' pervasiveness on multichannel outlets. In contrast, BBC Three's digital sibling BBC Four has managed to survive the channel-slashing impulse thus far partly due to the perceived cultural value of its highly acclaimed documentaries, but also thanks to the import of prestigious Scandinavian dramas like *Borgen*. Despite my impulse to quantify imports as I have done above, they don't all count the same in terms of cultural and economic value.

An additional reason why US imports have declined on terrestrial TV involves scheduling and viewing habits. It is always a challenge for UK outlets to schedule US shows, given the two television systems' contrasting seasonal practices, as well as the unpredictability of renewal and cancellation in the US market. In turn, British audiences grow weary of trying to find and keep up with the UK scheduling of US shows. This has been exacerbated in recent years by mid-series and even mid-season cancellations of US imports due to spotty ratings; for instance, Channel 5 dropped *The Walking Dead* and More4 cut *Scandal* loose after low overnight ratings. Audiences become reluctant to commit to shows when they can be taken away unexpectedly or go on lengthy hiatuses, all while still airing first-run in the US.

 **Sam Pellington** @sampell97 · Aug 16  
Why the hell has **Channel 5** got **Gotham** for the UK?? Just another series for them to **cancel** half way through again #ShouldBeAiredOnSky  
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UK MSN TV critic Lorna Cooper argues that due to the decline of terrestrial-aired US imports, British viewers have been “weaned off” of US shows on the terrestrial channels and are now more accustomed to watching such programs on multichannel TV, DVD, and online. Cooper says, “Brits are still eager to watch a decent US import on TV, but when it comes to prestige dramas especially, the savvy are not being bound by linear TV constraints.”<sup>3</sup> Where this will ultimately leave the terrestrial channels is the key question that lingers. Might homegrown programming save them from obsolescence with its competitive distinction, or will audiences follow *Family Guy* and its brethren to new frontiers?

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<sup>1</sup> Elke Weissmann, *Transnational Television Drama: Special Relations and Mutual Influence Between the US and UK* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012)

<sup>2</sup> “Share of Viewing By Channel,” BARB: [http://www.barb.co.uk/trendspotting/analysis/share-of-viewing-by-channel?\\_s=4](http://www.barb.co.uk/trendspotting/analysis/share-of-viewing-by-channel?_s=4). Accessed August 12, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Lorna Cooper, “re: Import questions.” Email message to author. August 17, 2014.