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1970s Current Affairs – A Golden Age?

The 1970s is sometimes described as a golden era or classic period of current affairs broadcasting in Britain. This reputation is built on the successes of programmes such as *World in Action* and *This Week* at ITV and *Panorama* at the BBC. At a time of social, political and economic upheaval these programmes explored controversial issues, exposed hidden scandals and often challenged powerful vested interest. Conflicts at home (in Northern Ireland, on the economic front, in the political sphere) and abroad (in the United States, Vietnam, South Africa and other nations) were explored with a new-found candour and willingness to defy established viewpoints. This confident, challenging turn in investigative television journalism drew audiences of many millions at a time when current affairs programming was guaranteed a prime time slot by television charters and legislation.

Nevertheless, the quality of current affairs in the 1970s was far from consistent. These programmes had distinct, competing identities and the independent sector often appeared to dominate the form in terms of creativity, ratings and critical reputation. The period was also marked by tension and disagreement around definitions of impartiality and balance in the relationship between broadcasters, the government and/or the ITA/IBA. The period also witnessed early signs of change with John Birt and Peter Jay's influential series of articles in *The Times* attacking current affairs' bias against understanding which eventually led to an overhaul of production practices and a certain disengagement or distance at the investigative level. This paper draws on recent archive research to gain a sense of the state of current affairs programming in this turbulent decade.