

The slow death of American imports



By [Christopher Fraser](#), Deputy Film Editor (2010/11)

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If you've been to the cinema, switched on a television or – dare I say it – browsed any of the ad-supported YouTube channels lately, you probably won't have failed to see Dustin Hoffman looking all smooth and talking about "how some stories are so good we wish they'd never end", and a load of other sentimental claptrap designed to sell you a satellite package. But underneath Hoffman's crooning voice and zen expression, things have been changing when it comes to our access to US quality TV.

I don't own any Sky package – the prerequisite to acquiring access to Sky Atlantic – and I'd be willing to bet that neither do the majority of students. It's not that it's an exorbitant price; I've just found British TV to be perfectly adequate before now. But Sky Atlantic throws all of that out of joint, and here's why.

The new deal behind Sky Atlantic, so far, includes exclusivity rights on all of HBO's catalogue for the next five years, as well as other excellent US dramas like *Mad Men*. HBO, for those who aren't quite so clued up, is the company who made (amongst others) *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, *Bored to Death* and *The Pacific*; they're a force to be reckoned with when it comes to premium TV. And the deal that secured *Mad Men* is likely to butter AMC up in the future; amongst their other output are the hit shows *Breaking Bad* and *The Walking Dead*.

So what? After all, both *Band of Brothers* and *The Pacific* had their UK premieres with Sky, and shows like the Danny McBride-starring *Eastbound and Down*, while not secured by Sky, are still exclusive to another pay channel, FX. And it sort of makes sense; HBO, after all, is a subscriber-only channel in the USA, so it makes sense that the UK home of their shows would be the same.

But this hasn't always been the case. You'd have to be hiding under a rock for the last decade to have not heard about *The Wire*, a TV show so powerful and brilliant that it's not pretentious to call it art. In the UK, we were lucky enough to have it air on BBC2 (though, admittedly, after the original broadcast on FX), at the ridiculous hour of 11:20pm – but it was still there. We were still, to all intents and purposes, paying for it with the licence fee, and it was a fantastic investment. We also had the first four seasons of *Mad Men*, a show of an admittedly different calibre and pace, but still one that commanded respect and had much higher production values than a lot of other TV drama.

It seems like the BBC has capitulated, though: it seems that they provided no alternative bid for the HBO catalogue, and reportedly offered around 25 per cent less than Sky for *Mad Men*. This is in line with their new vision to spend less on outside shows and more on in-house productions, but American output has long been an important and more than worthy part of terrestrial scheduling; it gives us a sense of perspective. To see the flipside, there's a reason why PBS is one of the most respected (if underwatched) network channels in America; it's because they import a lot of BBC programming, most recently the smoothly titled TV adaptation *Sherlock*.

Of course, having said all this, it might not be too late. We can't ignore that the BBC has been collaborating more and more with the Starz network, behind *Spartacus: Blood and Sand*, and the latest incarnation of *Torchwood* (currently filming). Shows like *The Walking Dead* and *Breaking Bad* still remain

free from any exclusivity clauses, so in theory the BBC could put in a bid. But I doubt they will. As Rupert Murdoch's septuagenarian claws slowly close over BSkyB, things are only likely to get worse for people who just stick with the licence fee.



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Nadine Dorries' Fit Daughter

9 Mar '11 at 4:46 pm

All entirely redundant - doesn't everyone just download what they want to watch?

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