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## ITV's trials and errors

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EVEN before the viewers had dusted off their plastic holly for Christmas 1992, ITV declared that it was not really trying. It was not worth spending a lot of money because advertisers were no longer interested in running commercials when the shops were shut. So ran the logic.

So how did not trying show up in the ratings for the viewing week that ended on Boxing Day?

The BBC's share of the audience was 49.5 per cent and that for ITV, including Channel 4, was 45.5. A clear victory for the beleaguered Beeb. Just as in 1991, when the figures were almost identical. And just as in the year before that.

If there is cause for belated cracker-pulling at the Beeb, it might be found in the figures for the programme that does not show up in the Top 30 because it is less than 15 minutes long. The Queen's Broadcast. Given that there is no such thing as bad publicity, the monarch's fireside speech could reasonably be expected to be tinselised with extra interest.

But the real buck in the trend was the way in which viewers deserted ITV for a Queen's Speech generally regarded to be the most important for years, if not ever. BBC1 pulled in more than 13 million, compared with 10 million for 1991, while ITV's share dropped from 10 million to 4.5 million. This despite The Sun publishing the contents of said speech before Christmas.

This suggests that the 'BBC for the big occasion' reflex is still deeply ingrained. It also makes Sky Sports's current hyping of its ball-by-ball Test coverage as a British 'tradition' sound even sillier.

The trimming of bloated Christmas specials has done the BBC little harm. The Christmas Day edition of Only Fools And Horses, a mere 65-minute episode compared to the two-hour globetrotting spectacles of previous years, still managed to top the single-show Top 30. ITV's David Jason vehicle, The Darling Buds of May, could harvest only 9.6 million viewers on Boxing Day, trounced by the wizened buddies of Last Of The Summer Wine with nearly 13 million.

As might be expected, the soaps did not slacken their grip. Interestingly, the special Christmas Day edition of **EastEnders** (15 million) did better than Coronation Street (13.95 million). Next year ITV will know better than to run the Street at 5.20pm.

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