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Not going out: television's impacts on Britain's commercial entertainment industries and popular leisure during the 1950s

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ABSTRACT

The 1950s was a pivotal decade for Britain's entertainment industries, with the rapid diffusion of television and sharp declines for hitherto dominant urban venue entertainments. This had important social consequences, including the acceleration of the trend from community-based socialising to more sedentary, family-based, entertainment – the last essential component of the 'industrialisation of the home'. However, the disruptive impact of television varied considerably among different incumbent urban entertainments, with variety theatre and cinema facing catastrophic declines, while spectator sports and dance halls continued to flourish. This article examines television's differential impact on incumbent entertainments using a variety of new sources, including Customs and Excise data; unpublished government social surveys; and trade sources. The differential impact of television on incumbent entertainments can be largely explained by the degree of 'commitment' demanded of consumers for different leisure activities; the degree to which television was a strong substitute; the presence of addictive elements (gambling); and the extent to which the activity appealed to a youth audience. However, the rapid collapse of variety theatre and cinema can only be fully explained by television enabling strong latent preferences for commercial entertainment in the home, which were now satisfied by television.

KEYWORDS

Television; leisure; entertainment industries; lifestyles; industrialisation of the home

The 1950s is widely regarded as a pivotal decade for Britain's entertainment industries, owing to the rapid diffusion of television and a consequent shift in commercial entertainment media from (mainly urban) venues to the home. This in turn had major social consequences, accelerating the trend – already evident in the inter-war era – away from community-orientated lifestyles to lifestyles based around the nuclear family, with the

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home becoming 'an intense domestic unit enclosed from the wider world'.¹ Between 1951 and 1960, television was transformed from a mechanical novelty to a necessity for almost all British homes. Meanwhile, venue-based entertainments typically witnessed falling admissions, with variety theatres and music halls almost disappearing by the end of the decade, together with a catastrophic drop in attendance and revenues for the previous entertainment-disruptive innovator – cinema. Television can be regarded as the last essential component of the industrialisation of the home, which became the locus of almost all the family's daily needs, from washing clothes to accessing commercial entertainment.

While this transition has been subject to much contemporary and retrospective analysis, almost all studies focus on a single incumbent entertainment medium, such as cinema or variety theatre, and the extent to which its downfall was the result of television. This article examines the impact of TV on all major venue-based entertainments: cinema, variety theatre/music hall; the 'serious' theatre; dance halls; and spectator sports. Moreover, it focuses on valuable, but hitherto under-exploited, archival sources to shine new light on both the pace of decline for incumbent commercial entertainments and their causal factors.

The CUST 153 class in The National Archives is a particularly valuable source, containing a wealth of quantitative and qualitative evidence on Britain's entertainment industries from 1915 to c.1960, assembled by HM Customs & Excise (hereafter C&E), in its roles of collecting entertainments duty – a tax on entertainment venue admission prices – and monitoring the fortunes of the sector. Further valuable information was found in the T (Treasury) and RG (Government Social Survey) papers. This article also draws on a variety of other data, including commercial surveys and reports and official deputations from entertainment industry bodies.

The next section sets out a framework for assessing the differential impact of television's diffusion on venue entertainment media, based on the level of 'commitment' of its patrons, the extent to which its services were close substitutes to those offered by television, the presence of addictive factors, and the degree to which the medium attracted the main demographic group that still placed a strong premium on the bright lights of the town – teenagers and young adults. We then examine the impact of television on the main venue-based entertainments, classified according to these factors. However, these tell only half the story – the availability of television also met a desire for consuming entertainment in the home that had been hitherto suppressed, owing to the inadequacies of pre-1950 home entertainment technology, that could provide sound, but not visual, broadcasting.

¹A. Hughes and K. Hunt, 'A culture transformed? Women's lives in Wythenshawe in the 1930s' in A. Davies and S. Fielding (eds), *Workers' Worlds: Cultures and communities in Manchester and Salford, 1880–1939* (Manchester, 1992), 92.

Theorising television's differential impacts on incumbent commercial entertainments

Scott, Walker and Miskell's analysis of working-class leisure during the 1930s categorised leisure activities into three broad groups, based on the frequency, cost and minimum threshold level of commitment required of the consumer.² Low-commitment activities (e.g. film, radio) could be accessed with virtually no forward planning, at low cost, and could be enjoyed with little or no accumulated knowledge regarding the activity and its conventions. These activities thus typically had high participation rates. High-commitment activities (e.g. the 'serious' theatre, sports, dancing) required substantial knowledge of the activity to get full value from the visit and were typically characterised by smaller but more loyal fan bases, often segmented by age, gender and/or class. Participation costs were generally higher, owing to their niche appeal, with higher price points and fewer venues, requiring greater transport costs. Finally, activities such as smoking, drinking and gambling often incurred heavy expenditure, despite relatively low minimum price points, owing to their addictive nature.

However, while this framework is useful, it does not completely capture the main factors that might determine the differential impact of television on venue-based entertainments. Two other factors need to be added, the first being the closeness of substitutes. Television rapidly proved a strong substitute for variety theatre, especially after the launch of ITV in 1955, which co-opted many of its leading stars, such as Tommy Trinder and Gracie Fields. Television was also keen to broadcast serious plays, partly to establish its cultural credentials. Conversely, during the 1950s the Football League refused to regularly televise matches, to protect their stadia as the only places where games could be watched. The final factor, of growing importance during the 1950s (given rising teenage purchasing power), is how strongly the entertainment form was skewed towards the youth market. Teenagers and young adults placed a strong premium on entertainment outside the home, for socialisation and courtship, and would therefore have a much greater relative preference for venue entertainments.

Fortunately, data on the 1950s entertainments sector are particularly good compared to other British industries, owing to entertainments duty – a tax on admission costs for cinema and live commercial entertainments. Entertainments duty had been introduced in 1916; from 1935, live entertainments (except sports) were charged at a reduced rate. In 1946 the duty for non-racing sports was reduced to match the rates for theatres. In 1952 a three-tiered duty structure was introduced, with all commercial sports (including racing) and miscellaneous entertainments (such as exhibitions) being charged

²P. Scott, J. Walker and P. Miskell, 'British working-class household composition, labour supply, and commercial leisure participation during the 1930s', *Economic History Review*, 68, 2 (2015), 657–82.

at a scale intermediate between those for cinemas (high) and for theatres (low).³ Duty rates varied by both the type of entertainment and admission charges. In the 1956/57 financial year, theatres had an average 12.5% entertainments duty, yielding around £2.3 million; sports and other non-cinema entertainments had a 22% duty, yielding £3.6 million; and the cinema had an average 35% duty, yielding £34.7 million.⁴

Table 1 shows gross and net (of duty) revenue for venue entertainments in 1950. The second half of the 1940s had witnessed an unprecedented boom in commercial entertainment. Given rationing of many basic goods, and widespread shortages, the public had little else to spend their discretionary money on.⁵ Conversely, building controls virtually prohibited the building or refurbishment of leisure venues, leading to large cinema audiences, profits and entertainments duty receipts, but virtually no investment in venues that had not seen significant refurbishment since the 1930s. The table shows cinema to be the dominant commercial entertainment medium in 1950, accounting for 70.2% of gross receipts and a substantially larger share of admissions (as cinemas had much lower price points than the other entertainments shown). The next most important medium is theatres and music halls (14.08%), dominated by variety theatre and music hall. Non-racing spectator sports accounted for 6.38%, with football comprising almost 70% of that sum. Racing sports accounted for 5.74% of gross entrance receipts, although on-course betting augmented their total revenues substantially further.

Table 1. Gross admission receipts and average entertainments duty for British venue entertainments in 1950.

Entertainments	Gross receipts (1950)		Tax receipts (1949/50)	Estimated average tax
High rate of tax:	£,000	% of total	£,000	%
Cinema	107,000	70.22	36,970	34.6
Horse racing	3,955	2.60	1,780	45.0
Dog racing	3,422	2.25	1,540	45.0
Other racing	1,377	0.90	620	45.0
Other entertainments	622	0.41	280	45.0
Lower rate of tax:				
Theatres and music halls	21,454	14.08	2,360	11.0
Football	6,736	4.42	640	9.5
Cricket	361	0.24	30	8.3
Other sports	2,631	1.73	250	9.5
Other entertainments	3,909	2.57	430	11.0
Unclassified	909	0.60	100	11.0
Total	152,376	100.00	45,000	29.5

Source: TNA, CUST 153/12, 'Entertainment Duty', note, n.d., 3 December 1951, and comments on the estimate, 4 December 1951.

Notes: Receipts data also include non-taxable admissions; Customs and Excise calculated that taxable admissions amounted to £103 million in 1949/50. With a total duty payment of £36,970,000, the average incidence of tax would be just under 36%.

³The National Archives (subsequently TNA), T233/2038, memorandum on entertainments duty, c.1957.

⁴*ibid.*; provisional figures.

⁵TNA, CUST 153/11, 'Entertainments duty review', note by Customs & Excise (hereafter C&E), 30 October 1956.

Given our theoretical framework, cinema is expected to be particularly vulnerable to competition from television, as a low-commitment activity and a strong substitute (both being audio-visual, screen-based, media). Variety theatres and music halls are also expected to be vulnerable, owing to their relative low-commitment nature and strong substitutability with television – especially after the launch of ITV, which had a much more commercial ethos than the BBC and larger budgets to aggressively poach top variety performers.

Meanwhile, high accumulated investments in fan community membership, activity-specific cultural capital and, in some cases, skills developed over time would make high-commitment leisure, such as the serious theatre, or spectator sports, much less vulnerable to television. The final factor identified by Scott, Walker and Miskell – addictive leisure activities – is more problematic for entertainment venue leisure.⁶ Betting on spectator sports – especially football, horse racing and greyhound racing – were the main forms of gambling in mid-twentieth-century Britain, and betting's addictive nature might therefore be expected to further protect these sports from the rival attractions of television. However, it has been argued that most gamblers rarely went to see the sports they betted on, an argument we briefly examine.⁷

The rise of television

Regular BBC television programmes were broadcast from 1936 (with the exception of the Second World War period). However, television ownership/rental only became substantial in the run-up to the 1953 coronation, which created so much public interest that the government felt obliged to cancel its 1951 indefinite moratorium on further TV transmitters. Over the following years public pressure, together with the anticipated launch of ITV, compelled the government to extend the broadcasting network nationwide. As [Figure 1](#) shows, televisions had diffused to 10.6 million British homes by the end of June 1960, and data for the UK shows that by the end of 1960 some 81.8% of homes had television licences (alongside an unknown number of licence evaders).⁸

Early televisions were very expensive. In 1952 the cheapest cost around £60, including purchase tax (a sales tax), equivalent to almost seven weeks' earnings for average male industrial workers aged 21 or over, for a set with only a nine- or 12-inch screen.⁹ Screen sizes increased and prices fell during

⁶Scott, Walker and Miskell, *op. cit.*

⁷R. McKibbin, 'Working-class gambling in Britain 1880–1939', *Past & Present*, 82, 1 (1979), 147–78, here 168.

⁸W.A. Benson, *The Impact of Television* (London, 1967), 213.

⁹TNA, T229/735, 'Radio and television sales', draft paper for Economic Policy Committee by A.R. Low, 26 July 1952; National Media Museum, Bradford, EMI Papers, Box 10, 'Radio and television market', unsigned EMI memorandum, 16 June 1952. Earnings data (for April 1952) are from UK, Department of Employment and Productivity, *British Labour Statistics: Historical Abstract 1886–1968* (London, 1971), 101.

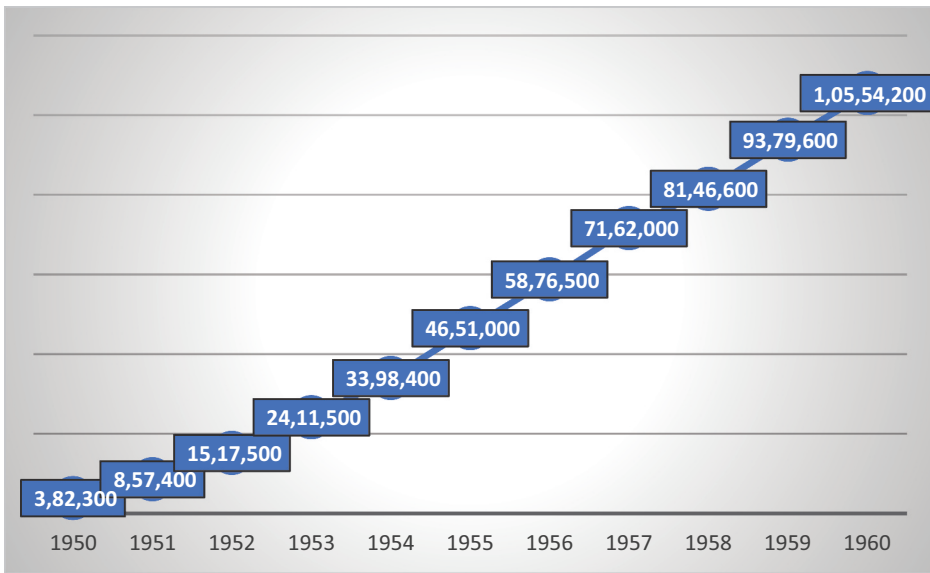


Figure 1. British households with televisions, 1950–1960. Source: John Spraos, *The Decline of the Cinema* (London, 1962), 24. End of May figures up to and including 1952; end of June figures thereafter.

the 1950s, but the Treasury kept television expensive, by varying purchase tax, up to 66.7% of the set's wholesale value; taking part of the TV licence revenue as Treasury funds; and, at one point, levying a separate £1 annual duty on TV ownership. This reflected 'stop-go' aggregate demand policy, designed to rein in public expenditure to protect the value of sterling, together with efforts to provide some measure of protection for venue entertainments against this new disruptive innovator. The government also periodically tightened hire purchase regulations on television and other consumer durables, again to reduce sales, as part of stop-go policy.¹⁰

During the early 1950s, televisions were mainly confined to higher income groups. However, television diffusion moved into a second, accelerating, phase in 1955, boosted both by its growing general popularity and the launch of ITV from September 1955. Television also extended its geographical reach, while larger screen formats improved picture quality. Meanwhile, television was reaching more working-class homes, assisted by lower prices, better value for money (as programme hours expanded and a second channel became available) and the growth of TV rental services. From 1953 to 1959, average BBC programming per week grew from 39 to 64 hours, while from 1955 to 1959, ITV weekly programming rose from 50 to 74 hours. Viewing hours per week also rose, from 13.4 in 1953 to 18.3 in

¹⁰P. Scott and J.T. Walker, 'The impact of "stop-go" demand management policy on Britain's consumer durables industries, 1952–65', *Economic History Review*, 70, 4 (2017) 1321–45.

1959.¹¹ Moreover, viewing was concentrated in the evening, competing head-on for leisure time with cinema, variety theatre and dance halls.

By the end of 1958, both the BBC and ITV had achieved virtually national coverage. ITV boosted television diffusion, as it had a much more commercial ethos than the BBC's relatively high-culture approach. ITV also aggressively recruited stars from other media, particularly variety acts, and put on shows such as *Sunday Night at the London Palladium* (introduced from the launch of ITV), that directly competed with variety theatre.

Cinema: the entertainment giant's downfall

During the inter-war era Britain had been one of the most important cinema markets. By 1939 annual cinema admissions had reached 990 million, around 25 times as large as ticket sales for football matches.¹² As shown in [Figure 1](#), in 1950 cinema accounted for around 70% of gross receipts for commercial entertainment venues. An analysis of Britain and 11 other industrialised nations for 1950 (or the nearest available year) showed that cinema admissions per head of population were 28 per year, substantially higher than for its nearest rival, the USA, with 23; 17–19 for three other English-speaking nations; and 8–14 for seven non-English speaking nations.¹³ British cinema attendance was dominated by the working class, for whom cinema's appeal went beyond the films shown, providing affordable luxury in the form of palatial fixtures and fittings, together with well-heated, draft-free buildings, which were often far more comfortable than their homes.

[Table 2](#) shows cinema admissions, and gross and net (of entertainments duty) takings, for 1938 and 1946–1960. By 1960 cinema admissions, and real gross takings, had fallen to only 36.9% and 41.1% of their respective 1950 levels. Despite belated cuts in entertainments duty, real net takings had also declined sharply, to 57.2% of the 1950 level. The film industry was very unhappy with entertainments duty, which was levied on takings, rather than profits. Moreover, given that the scale was set by reference to fixed groups of admission prices, it was very difficult to adjust seat prices to match variable costs. However, the industry's main complaint was that television had become an increasingly dangerous competitor, especially following the launch of independent television.¹⁴

¹¹W. A. Belson, *The Impact of Television: Methods and findings in program research* (London, 1967), 223

¹²S. Hanson, *From Silent Screen to Multi-Screen: A history of cinema exhibition in Britain since 1896* (Manchester, 2007), 66.

¹³H.E. Browning and A.A. Sorrell, 'Cinemas and cinema-going, in Great Britain', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society, Series A*, 117, 2 (1954), 133–70, here 136.

¹⁴TNA, T233/2038, 'Submission to Chancellor of the Exchequer by All industry Committee on the Film Industry', c.23 February 1956.

Table 2. Cinema admissions, and gross and net (of entertainment duty) takings, 1938–1960, nominal and real (1950) values.

Year	Admissions (millions)	Gross takings		Entertainment duty		Net takings	
		Nominal	Real	£ Million		Nominal	Real
				Nominal	Real		
1938	987	41.5	73.5	5.5	27.9	36.0	98.1
1946	1635	118.1	135.9	42.4	139.5	75.7	134.0
1947	1462	105.4	114.4	37.7	117.0	67.7	113.0
1948	1514	108.8	109.8	38.0	109.6	70.8	109.8
1949	1430	103.3	101.3	36.5	102.3	66.8	100.7
1950	1396	105.2	100.0	36.8	100.0	68.4	100.0
1951	1365	108.3	94.4	37.3	92.9	71.0	95.2
1952	1312	109.6	87.5	38.1	86.9	71.5	87.8
1953	1285	108.9	84.4	37.4	82.8	71.5	85.2
1954	1276	110	83.6	35.9	78.0	74.1	86.6
1955	1182	105.8	77.0	33.4	69.5	72.4	81.0
1956	1101	104.2	72.2	34.0	67.3	70.2	74.8
1957	915	93	62.2	28.3	54.1	64.7	66.6
1958	753	83	53.8	n.a.	n.a.	63.9	63.7
1959	601	69	44.5	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
1960	515	64.3	41.1	2.2	4.0	58.2	57.2

Sources: TNA, CUST 153/8, submission to the Chancellor of Exchequer by cinema industry delegation, 16 February 1955; CUST 153/9, 'Cinemas – Miscellaneous Statistics', n.d., c. February 1958; admissions duty: estimate for 1960–1961, signature illegible, H.M. Customs, 4 February 1960; 'Entertainment duty', undated note, c.31 March 1960; T233/2038, document on 1958 Finance Bill regarding notes on clauses on entertainments duty, c. March 1958, p. 36; 1946–1949; H.E. Browning and A.A. Sorrell, 'Cinemas and cinema-going in Great Britain', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society, Series A*, vol. 117, Part 2 (1954), 133–70, 134; John Spraos, *The Decline of the Cinema* (London, 1962), 14, 117.

Notes: Admissions figure for 1960 is provisional. Real prices deflated by the Retail Price Index, 'Purchasing power of British pounds from 1270 to present', <https://www.measuringworth.com>, 2022 (accessed 13 April 2022).

John Spraos proposed a three-stage model of television's impact on cinema, which has been broadly supported by subsequent analyses.¹⁵ He argued that even in the early 1950s television was a major factor behind the relatively small drop in cinema audiences, given that there was little or no decline in attendance for areas without TV reception. This is corroborated by an earlier analysis by Browning and Sorrell, who compared two reception areas (for the Sutton Coldfield and Home Moss transmitters) with areas of negligible transmission. They found that the decline in cinema admissions was strongly related to good TV reception and suggested that perhaps three-quarters of the decline in cinema admissions during the early 1950s was due to television.¹⁶ The film industry took a similar view. A May 1953 film/cinema industry deputation informed the Financial Secretary of the Treasury that they were facing a growing competitive threat from the BBC.

The television service was able to employ artists for only a fraction of the salaries paid to film stars, and entertainment comparable with that provided by the cinema was available in people's homes . . . The introduction of sponsored television in due course would make matters worse.¹⁷

¹⁵John Spraos, *The Decline of the Cinema* (London, 1962), 22; D. Docherty, D. Morrison and M. Tracey, *The Last Picture Show! Britain's changing film audiences* (London, 1987), 15.

¹⁶Browning and Sorrell, *op. cit.*, 150.

¹⁷TNA, CUST 153/8, 'Summary of deputation representing the main cinema and film organisations', 13 May 1953.

Cinema was also losing the battle for the consumer's time. According to a study by Mark Abrams, the proportion of total entertainment time devoted to cinema had fallen each year from 1948 to 1954, from 23.3% to 15.4%. Conversely, time spent on television had risen from 0.5% to 28.6%. The only other entertainment sector with a significant increase in the consumer's time was dancing (from 2.0 to 2.6%), while the other main loser was radio (from 71.4% to 51.2%).¹⁸

Average cinema attendances in 1955 were 25.8 per head of total population, still higher than any other nation.¹⁹ However, competition from television was intensifying, owing to the rapid diffusion of televisions, including to cinema's core audience, the working class. The second stage of decline, which Spraos dates from 1955 to 1958, involved substantial displacement of cinema-going by television, which was now rapidly diffusing to working-class homes. Spraos found that the increase in TV ownership over 1955–1958 was driven by the growth of TV licences, rather than the launch of ITV.²⁰ This suggests that TV ownership was more important than choice of programming, but does not prove that ITV did not accelerate television diffusion. Spraos also identified a third phase from 1959, with cinema attendances continuing to decline, but at a slower rate, as TV diffusion was now reaching groups such as the elderly, who already had low propensities for cinema-going.²¹ However, 1959 saw the peak decline in admissions (20.2%), implying that this third phase only started in 1960 (when the annual admissions fall slowed to 14.3%).

In 1955 the various cinema and film interests formed the All Industry Committee of the Film Industry to lobby for lower entertainments duty rates and more government support for the sector.²² However, the leading cinema chains, the Rank Organisation and ABC, showed little hesitation in embracing their new rival, following the launch of commercial television in 1955. Rank almost immediately developed an interest in ITV via Cinema Television Ltd. Shortly afterwards, ABC and Granada Theatres became programme contractors, via their subsidiaries Associated British Cinemas (Television) Ltd and Granada TV Network Ltd.²³ Then in July 1957 the Rank Organisation took a stake in the independent television company for the Isle of Wight.²⁴

¹⁸Churchill College Archives, Cambridge, Mark Abrams papers, GBR/0014/ABMS/5/24/1, 'Leisure activities in Great Britain 1948–54', n.d., c.1955. Other activities included in the survey were football, further education, filling football coupons and greyhound racing.

¹⁹TNA, CUST 153/8, confidential memorandum on cinema duty, unsigned, C&E, 14 March 1956.

²⁰Spraos, *op. cit.*, 26.

²¹*ibid.*, 22.

²²TNA, CUST 153/9, 'Submission to Chancellor of the Exchequer by All Industry Committee of the Film Industry', 1958.

²³TNA, CUST 153/19, 'C&E report on prices and admissions for commercial entertainments', October 1954 to September 1955, n.d., c.1955.

²⁴TNA, CUST 153/20, 'C&E report on prices and admissions for commercial entertainments', October 1956–September 1957.

By the late 1950s the decline in cinema attendance was subject to cumulative causation, as each cinema closure made a visit to the cinema less convenient for people in its catchment area and reduced the choice of films. Spraos estimated that a 10% increase in cinemas would, by their mere presence, increase the frequency of cinema-going per head by between 7.5% and 8.8%.²⁵ In addition, while some closures involved loss-making cinemas, by the late 1950s the cinema chains had begun repurposing their cinemas, as bingo, billiard and dance halls, or selling them off to property developers, a process that impacted both profitable and unprofitable cinemas.

There had been about 4600 licensed cinemas in 1941 and there were almost as many when the Board of Trade began collecting statistics in 1950.²⁶ From the year ending 31 March 1951 to the year ending 30 September 1958, the number of cinemas in Britain declined from 4591 to 3980. Yet operating costs had risen from £33.1 million to £40.7 million, and trading profits had fallen from £17.8 million to £9.2 million, with average profits per cinema (before depreciation and interest) declining from £3900 to £2300.²⁷ Moreover, cinema closures were not limited to small and/or independent cinemas. In 1956 the Rank Organisation announced the closure of 40 cinemas by the end of October 1956 and a further 39 during the following months. The ABC chain also announced the closure of at least 25 cinemas and possibly up to 50. Altogether 260 cinemas closed between the beginning of 1956 and the 1957 budget (with a net loss of about 220), concentrated in the 501–1000 seat range, which comprised the majority of British cinemas.²⁸

Entertainments duty for cinemas (averaging 34% during the early 1950s) was progressively cut in 1954, 1957, 1958 and 1959, to about 9%, to help the cinema and film sectors. Government also sought to reduce the diffusion of television, imposing a new £1 per year duty on TV licences in August 1957, in addition to the £3 TV licence fee (and purchase tax equivalent to 60% of the television's wholesale value). From around 1958 the cinema sector took advantage of lower entertainments duty, to raise prices and thereby invest in their venues, improving cinema's image as a comfortable and luxurious environment (making up for almost two decades of very low maintenance and refurbishment). However, palatial fittings and warm, draft-free cinemas were now less of an attraction, given that a substantial proportion of

²⁵Spraos, *op. cit.*, 34–57.

²⁶TNA, T233/2038, 'Entertainments duty', budget proposals document, n.d., c. March 1958.

²⁷TNA, CUST 153/9, Cinematograph Exhibitors Association, Entertainment Tax Campaign, Report by Stoy Hayward & Co., 5 December 1958; 'Submission to Chancellor by All Tax Committee of the Film Industry', n.d., c. January 1960. Number of cinemas: CUST 118/594, 'Submission to Chancellor of Exchequer by All Industry Committee of the Film Industry', n.d., c. March 1959.

²⁸TNA, T233/2038, 1957 Finance Bill, memorandum regarding notes on clauses on entertainments duty, 1957, 8; 'Entertainments duty', budget proposals document, n.d., c. March 1958, 37.

working-class families now lived in relatively modern housing with utilities and consumer durables.²⁹ Moreover, Spraos argued that the two main circuits were still reluctant to raise prices to economic levels and – given that they set the price leadership for the industry – this also accelerated the decline of independent cinemas and smaller chains.³⁰ It had been widely believed that, owing to this new investment, attendances would stabilise at around 600 million and that 1959 would show a flattening of the demand curve. However, the decline actually accelerated, with quarters 1–3 of 1959 witnessing falls, compared to a year earlier, of 18.3, 20.4 and 23.0%, respectively.³¹ This weighed heavily in the government's decision to scrap entertainments duty on films in 1960.

The popular and serious theatre

The main traditional working-class theatre format – variety theatre/music hall – was even more catastrophically impacted by television than was cinema. By the early twentieth century, variety had reformatted its target market as a respectable family audience and, as such, was a more direct competitor to cinema, and later television, than other entertainments such as sports and dance halls, which had more segmented audiences. Music hall had originally been a distinct format from variety, developing from drinking halls, with entertainment laid on for the customers. However, by the 1930s this format had virtually disappeared and there was no clear distinction between variety theatre and music hall.³² Variety theatres were similar in décor to larger cinemas, with palatial fittings and high standards of comfort, but presenting a bill of various live entertainment – mainly singers and comedians, but also incorporating a wide variety of other specialities, from magicians to circus acts. High fixed and variable costs were offset by having two evening shows each day, six days per week, with price points substantially higher than for cinema.

Variety theatre had witnessed a slump in the 1920s, but staged a revival from around 1928 to the late 1940s via the new high-speed variety format, imported from the USA, with no breaks between performances, other than the intermission. Top-tier variety theatres also drew increasingly on American film actors such as Danny Kaye and July Garland to top their bills. This strategy boosted turnover despite the launch of talking pictures. The merged variety/music hall format was in good financial shape by the start of the 1950s, but shared cinema's problem of under-investment in what had been luxurious theatres.³³

²⁹TNA, T233/2038, 'Entertainments duty', budget proposals document, n.d., c. March 1958.

³⁰Spraos, *op. cit.*, 112–13.

³¹TNA, CUST 153/9, 'Entertainments duty'. Note by Customs and Excise', 26 November 1959.

³²O. Double, *Britain Had Talent: A history of variety theatre* (Houndsmills, 2012), 38.

³³*ibid.*, 51–55.

In common with serious theatre, variety theatres were in concentrated ownership. Around 42% of London theatres and 70% of the best provincial theatres were owned by a group of companies loosely linked by personalities, cross-shareholdings and similar, headed by Theatre Enterprises (London) Ltd, a private company formed by Prince Littler in 1942 to take over the Stoll enterprises. Most of the remaining theatres were in the hands of small private companies or individual businessmen (often with diverse business interests, including cinema or hotel ownership).³⁴

Variety's demise during the 1950s was much sharper than the contraction of cinema audiences. In 1950 there were 21 London variety theatres, with a combined weekly capacity of 424,745. By 1960 only four were left and their capacity had declined by over 80%.³⁵ C&E argued, in October 1956, that it was, 'mostly the small provincial halls putting on inferior variety entertainments that are closing down along with the larger . . . "variety palaces" in the London suburbs. Other theatres, particularly those in the West End of London, seem to be more prosperous . . .'.³⁶

While the variety theatre trade had reacted to the launch of the BBC in 1922 with a radio boycott, written into artists' contracts, many leading variety entrepreneurs and agents, such as Lew Grade, Prince Littler and Jack Hylton, were only too eager to move into television, following the launch of ITV and the lucrative opportunities it offered to promote their stars to a national audience.³⁷ Many top-rank variety artists were also keen to make this transition. However, the relationship between television and variety theatre was not completely antagonistic, as evidenced by variety theatres adding television personalities to their shows to swell audiences, on account of the huge publicity impact of this new medium and its celebrities.³⁸

TV was a much closer substitute for variety theatre than radio, given that it was a visual medium, capturing the whole of a variety performer's act, rather than just the verbal element. While people had gone to see radio stars in the 1920s, to find out what they looked like, a live performance added relatively little to what could be seen on television. Indeed ITV soon captured many of the best British variety performers via *Sunday Night at the London Palladium*, launched in September 1955, with a line-up that few, if any, provincial variety theatres could match.³⁹ As with cinema, variety's decline was subject to cumulative causation, as falling numbers of theatres

³⁴TNA, CUST 153/12, 'Financial organisation of the theatre industry', unsigned, March 1955.

³⁵Double, *op. cit.*, 70.

³⁶TNA, CUST 153/11, 'Entertainments duty review', note by C&E, 30 October 1956.

³⁷Double, *op. cit.*, 88.

³⁸*ibid.*, 72–73.

³⁹*ibid.*, 75.

undermined the carefully designed schedules that enabled variety acts to get a full year's work by travelling between theatres.

In common with cinema, the 1955–1964 commercial property development boom hastened the demise of many variety theatres, when their owners realised they were worth more as building plots for offices or redevelopment as bingo halls, bowling alleys and dance halls.⁴⁰ Attempts to repack the variety theatre format to make it more relevant to post-war audiences were undermined by the format's key entrepreneurs, such as Lew and Leslie Grade, and Val Parnell of the Moss Empires chain, who rapidly shifted their interests into television production companies, leaving variety to die.⁴¹ Nor were policymakers at all concerned about its demise. A 1956 C&E review argued that variety theatre was not worth saving: 'No great social harm seems to be involved when low grade variety turns and striptease acts fail to thrive through lack of public support and the patrons go instead to the cinema or stay at home and watch television'.⁴² In fact, striptease was only introduced into mainstream variety as a crisis measure during the 1950s, along with other unsuccessful attempts to modernise its offering, such as skiffle and rock 'n' roll bands.⁴³

The serious theatre appeared extremely vulnerable to television, given the substantial number of serious plays broadcast by the BBC. Indeed, in the first half of the 1950s it appeared that serious theatre was even more severely impacted by television than cinema. According to *The Stage Yearbook* the number of theatres with permanent repertory companies fell from 94 in 1950 to 55 by 1955.⁴⁴ However, repertory theatres developed strategies for attracting larger visitor numbers, by opening their buildings during the daytime, for coffee, exhibitions, etc; providing food in the evenings, and improving the professionalisation of theatre management.

Moreover, the very same policymakers who saw no intrinsic cultural value in variety were very keen to support elite performance arts.⁴⁵ In common with classical music concerts, ballet and opera, they found ways to exempt the serious theatre from entertainments duty, to placate its advocates in the civil service, parliament and the cultural elite. As a March 1956 C&E memorandum noted:

[Entertainments duty] comes essentially from entertainments of the lighter type . . . In practice, all entertainments with any considerable claim to cultural standards escape under one or other of the exemptions. These . . . cover nearly all serious music, ballet,

⁴⁰Hanson, *op. cit.*, 117–18.

⁴¹K. Nathaus, 'All dressed up and nowhere to go?' Spaces and conventions of youth in 1950s Britain', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 41, 1 (2015), 40–70, here 48.

⁴²TNA, CUST 153/11, 'Entertainments duty review', note by C&E, 30 October 1956.

⁴³Double, *op. cit.*, 81–83.

⁴⁴G. Rowell and A. Jackson, *The Repertory Movement: A history of regional theatre in Britain* (Cambridge, 1984), 86–87.

⁴⁵*ibid.*, 87.

classical drama, and a fair proportion of the more notable modern plays, including the productions of most repertory companies. In addition . . . the most deserving entertainments of this nature may qualify for help from the Arts Council or from local authorities . . . [giving] a kind of financial preference and protection.⁴⁶

A 1956 entertainments duty review estimated that ‘about three-quarters of the [theatre] duty is paid by musical comedies and variety shows and only one-quarter by stage plays, including of course farces as well as serious productions’.⁴⁷ Conversely, in the extensive Whitehall discussions of entertainments duty’s impacts, there is no evidence of any case being made by officials for protecting working-/lower middle-class theatrical entertainment. In common with some other indirect taxes imposed on individuals, such as purchase tax, lower income groups often faced the highest incidence of taxation.

High-commitment entertainments

Our framework suggests that high-commitment entertainments – appealing to niche, knowledgeable audiences – would be much less strongly impacted by television than low-commitment entertainments such as cinema and variety theatre. These demanded more from their audience, in terms of cumulative investments in knowledge of the entertainment form and its conventions. Monetary costs were also higher, for admission prices and for the typically longer and more expensive journeys to access venues that were fewer in number than cinemas or variety theatres.

Testing this hypothesis for serious theatre is problematic as – in common with classical music concerts, ballets and operas – they were doubly protected by government, being typically shielded from entertainments duty, while also being subsidised by Arts Council, local authority and other public sector support. Spectator sports provide a better test, as they have similar features – a knowledgeable audience, prepared to pay much higher admissions than cinema ticket prices and make longer journeys to venues. However, spectator sports were only weak substitutes for television, as commercial sports organisations – unlike cinema and theatrical impresarios, who rapidly shifted their business interests to television – were typically hostile to having their events televised. Moreover, some commercial sports had another major source of funding, in addition to admissions, sharing in substantial betting revenues.

The BBC had occasionally broadcast football matches since April 1938, together with sporadic highlights of league matches from 1955 onwards. However, regular football broadcasting did not start until *Match of the Day*

⁴⁶TNA, CUST 153/10, ‘Entertainments duty’, C&E (56) 5, 12 May 1956, unsigned.

⁴⁷TNA, CUST 153/10, ‘Entertainments duty review’, 14 March 1956, unsigned.

Table 3. English football league attendances and revenues, 1938 and 1948–1960.

Year	Attendance (Millions)	Average gate revenues	
		Nominal (£ million)	Real (1938 = 100)
1938	27.9	1.661	100
1948	40.2	3.578	151
1950	40.6	3.801	155
1951	39.5	3.786	141
1952	39	4.135	139
1953	37.1	4.541	149
1954	36.4	4.431	144
1955	34.1	4.215	130
1956	33.2	4.355	129
1957	32.7	4.311	123
1958	33.5	4.448	123
1959	33.7	4.557	126
1960	32.5	4.549	124

Source: Stephen Dobson and John Goddard, *The Economics of Football* (Cambridge, 2001), 57, 76.

launched in 1964.⁴⁸ As shown in Tables 1 and 3, football dominated commercial sport in the 1950s. English Football League (hereafter EFL) match attendances peaked in the 1948/49 season at 41.3 million. From the 1950/51 season to 1955/56 attendances declined by 3.6% per annum, and from 1955/56 to 1960/61 they experienced a slightly smaller fall of 3.0% per annum.

However, unlike the fall in attendances during the first half of the 1950s, the decline from 1955/56 to 1960/61 was concentrated in leagues 2–4, with first-division attendances declining by only 1.8% per annum.⁴⁹ Moreover, a cap on footballers' salaries helped to keep costs under control – if providing a raw deal for the players.⁵⁰ The only league football club to fail during the early post-war decades was Accrington Stanley in March 1962, and that was generally attributed to internal mismanagement. Professional football also responded entrepreneurially to the threat from television, for example by introducing floodlit games during weekday evenings, which proved popular with supporters.⁵¹

Football was also strongly associated with gambling, especially via the football pools, introduced by Littlewoods in 1922.⁵² Organised working-class sports betting had become substantial in the 1880s and had considerably expanded by the 1930s, mainly focused on horse racing, football and, from the mid-1920s, greyhound racing.⁵³ Ross McKibbin argued that

⁴⁸S. Dobson and J. Goddard, *The Economics of Football* (Cambridge, 2001), 80–81.

⁴⁹Political and Economic Planning, 'English professional football', *PEP Broadsheet*, 32, 496 (June 1966), 107.

⁵⁰S. Dobson and J. Goddard, 'Performance, revenue, and cross-subsidisation in the Football League, 1927–1994', *Economic History Review*, LI, 4 (1998), 763–85, here 768–74.

⁵¹TNA, CUST 153/10, 'Entertainments duty review', 14 March 1956, unsigned.

⁵²M. Clapson, *A Bit of a Flutter: Popular gambling and English society c.1823–1961* (Manchester, 1992), 171–72.

⁵³McKibbin, *op. cit.*, 147–78.

betting on sports was not strongly associated with watching the sports on which the bets were placed.⁵⁴ Conversely, Andrew Davies identifies drink, gambling and sport as the three cornerstones of traditional, male-orientated, working-class culture.⁵⁵

While this is difficult to test, evidence on the proportion of bets placed on-course provides lower-bound estimates for the association between spectating and betting, for horse and greyhound racing. In January 1964 the Government Social Survey commissioned National Opinion Polls Ltd to examine national gambling habits. Some 2418 people were interviewed, with 2180 interviews being completed. Their findings showed that only 17.3% of horse racing bets were made on-course, although for greyhound racing the proportion was substantially higher (59.4%). However, in terms of gross stakes per head, 44.3% of horserace gambling was on-course, and 63.3% of greyhound racing.⁵⁶ The data therefore suggest that, at least for these sports, gambling was substantially associated with watching the sports that the bets were placed on.

The importance of betting to horse racing finances is shown by a 1956 C&E analysis comparing net (of entertainments duty) trade receipts and totalisator turnover for horse racing from 1950 to 1955, shown in Table 4. Admissions and other trade receipts were found to be dwarfed by totalisator bets (even ignoring other on-course betting). The review concluded that horse racing appeared to be 'able to maintain itself better than most [entertainment industries] ... the betting interest gives a degree of stability that most other sports lack'.⁵⁷

Table 4. Net (of duty) trade receipts for horseracing, 1950–1955, and totalisator on-course betting turnover.

Year	Net trade receipts	Totalisator betting turnover
	£ million	£ million
1950	1.95	15.9
1951	1.86	15.9
1952	2.30	16.1
1953	2.27	16.6
1954	2.15	16.1
1955*	2.20	15.5

Source: TNA, CUST 153/10, Entertainments Duty Review, 14 March 1956.

Notes: * Provisional figures.

⁵⁴*ibid.*, 168.

⁵⁵A. Davies, *Leisure, Gender and Poverty: Working-class culture in Salford and Manchester, 1900–1939* (Buckingham, 1992), 358–59.

⁵⁶TNA, RG23/331, 'Survey into gambling 1964', Tables 2 and 3, n.d., c. February 1964.

⁵⁷TNA, CUST 153/10, 'Entertainments duty review', 14 March 1956.

The role of youth culture

By the 1950s the youth market was substantially more important to the entertainment industry than it had been in the 1930s, as teenagers and young adults had considerably more discretionary spending power. Full employment, the raising of the school leaving age to 15 in 1948, and the removal of 18–20-year-old men from the labour force for two years' compulsory National Service made juvenile workers relatively scarce, raising their wages relative to adults. For example, young adult women (18 and over) saw their relative wages rise from 47% of adult male wages in the late 1930s to around 60% after 1945 (where they remained until the early 1970s).⁵⁸ The proportion of earnings young people retained for their own expenditure also rose substantially, as rising incomes reduced pressures for working teenagers and young adults to give most of their earnings to the household (and, in some cases, they could credibly threaten to move out if they considered that the share of their income they were allowed to keep was unfair).

While the inter-war era had witnessed growing purchasing power for young people, it has been argued that a distinct youth culture in Britain only emerged after 1945.⁵⁹ Much of their new discretionary income went to entertainment and socialising, although this also included a range of new or expanding activities such as snack bars, cafes, and record and clothes shops. Nevertheless, they represented a key demographic group for mainstream venue entertainments.

Table 5 shows the results of two Government Social Survey reports on leisure participation by age group, for May 1951 and the 12 months to October/November 1959. Unfortunately, the 1951 survey omits the 16–19 age group and covers only a single month. This may skew attendance for particular leisure activities, but it is unlikely to distort the age composition of participants. The bottom half of the table converts this data into relative values for each activity by age group, with the 35–44 group set at 100.

In May 1951 the 21–34 group was substantially more active in all entertainments shown, relative to the 35–44 group, apart from for sports, where the margin was smaller. In 1959 the differences are broadly similar, although the 21–34 group was relatively more focused on sports and less on theatres and music halls. However, the most important finding is the key importance of the 16–19 age group for all activities (except theatres and music halls), in the 1959 data. Males and females aged 16–19 were 63 and 31 times, respectively, more likely to go dancing than their counterparts aged 35–44, and 4.1 and 6.0 times, respectively, more likely to visit the cinema. The

⁵⁸H.E. Joshi, R. Layard and S.J. Owen, 'Why are more women working in Britain', *Journal of Labour Economics*, 3, 1 (1985), S147–S176, here S158.

⁵⁹S. Todd, 'Flappers and factory lads: youth and youth culture in inter-war Britain', *History Compass*, 4, 4 (2006), 715–30.

Table 5. Average visits to various entertainments by age and gender, May 1951 (annualised), and for the 12 months to October/November 1959. Averages and age relatives (35–44 group = 100 for each gender).

Age	Cinema	Theatre etc.*	Sport	Dancing	Cinema	Theatre etc.*	Sport	Dancing
1951 (May, annualised)					1959 (12 months to Oct./Nov.)			
Frequency (males)								
16–20	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	50.5	2.0	3.3	31.6
21–34	36.4	1.9	5.2	4.8	26.5	1.5	2.1	2.3
35–44	16.1	1.0	4.9	1.2	12.2	1.2	0.9	0.5
45–54	13.7	1.8	4.2	1.0	9.9	2.2	2.9	0.8
56–64	5.6	0.1	3.4	0.5	6.9	2.1	1.0	1.8
65 and over	7.8	0.6	1.6	0.0	2.6	1.0	0.2	0.9
Total***	18.6	2.2	4.2	1.8	15.6	1.6	1.6	4.8
Frequency (females)								
16–20	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	61.4	2.8	1.8	28.3
21–34	26.5	1.1	0.0	2.4	28.5	2.1	0.4	6.4
35–44	17.8	1.7	0.0	0.7	10.2	2.5	0.1	0.9
45–54	14.9	1.4	0.0	0.6	11.4	2.3	0.2	2.0
55–64	10.2	1.0	0.0	0.1	14.0	2.9	0.1	0.9
65 & over	6.0	0.7	0.0	0.0	4.5	1.1	0.0	0.4
Total***	16.3	1.9	1.0	1.0	17.4	2.2	0.3	4.0
Grand total	17.4	2.0	2.4	1.3	16.6	1.9	0.9	4.3
Relatives (to 35–44 age group) males								
16–20	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	414	167	367	6320
21–34	226	200	105	400	217	128	238	455
35–44	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
45–54	85	188	85	80	81	183	322	160
56–64	35	13	68	40	57	175	111	360
65+	49	61	32	0	21	83	22	180
Relatives (to 35–44 age group) females								
16–20	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	602	112	1800	3144
21–34	149	64	0	333	280	86	432	713
35–44	100	100	0	100	100	100	100	100
45–54	84	86	0	83	112	92	200	222
56–64	57	57	0	17	137	116	100	100
65+	68	42	0	0	44	44	–	44

Sources: TNA, RG23/218, W.F.F. Kemsley and David Ginburg, 'Consumers expenditure on entertainments', Government Social Survey report, c. June 1951, Table 9; RG 23/229, 'Consumers expenditure on entertainment and betting . . .', Government Social Survey report, c. November 1959, Table 1.

16–19 group was also much more likely to attend sports events than older people (although the high relative values for female teenagers hides very low absolute numbers of women attending commercial sports, for all age groups).

Dancing was not discussed in any depth in most official enquiries into entertainment expenditure, as many dance venues were exempt from entertainments duty. However, it was a mass participation activity throughout the early post-war era and, according to the survey, the second most frequently attended commercial entertainment for women. In 1946 there were estimated to be three million dancers in Britain each week, a 50% increase compared to the 1930s.⁶⁰ Unlike cinema, the transition from

⁶⁰J. Nott, *Going to the Palais: A social and cultural history of dancing and dance halls in Britain, 1918–1960* (Oxford, 2015), 81.

austerity to modest affluence by the mid-1950s only intensified the dance hall boom, with estimates of four million weekly dancers in 1953 and five million in 1955 (although other data suggest that the five million mark was not reached until 1959).⁶¹

According to the 1959 Government Social Survey report summarised in [Table 5](#), dancing ranked second to cinema among the most frequently attended leisure activities for males and females aged 16–19 (31.6 and 28.3 visits respectively per year). Moreover, expenditures per visit were much higher than for cinema (4s, 1d and 1s, 6d respectively).⁶² Like cinema and variety, dance halls became dominated by the Mecca and other chains, although a wide variety of other buildings, ranging from working men's clubs to masonic lodges, regularly hosted dances.⁶³

Social interaction in dance halls was carefully policed by their managers to protect their reputation as respectable venues. Potential troublemakers were kept out, alcohol was typically not served, and dancing was also informally policed, via conventions such as the requirement to have appropriate clothing and a knowledge of basic dance steps. Dancing can be regarded as a high-commitment leisure activity, given the necessary investments in learning dance steps, together with purchasing clothing and cosmetics, and other costs. However, unlike most high-commitment activities, it enjoyed a truly mass (although highly age-segmented) audience, owing to its central importance to youth culture, providing venues for socialisation and courtship, with the ritual of dancing giving participants the licence to approach members of the opposite sex, based on conventions governing when a girl could be asked to dance.⁶⁴

The composition of the national cinema audience was tracked by the Hulton Readership Surveys (1950 and 1952–1955) and the Screen Advertising Association (1961) using the same age groups. Their findings are summarised in [Table 6](#), which shows the age composition of cinema-goers for 1950, 1952–1955, and 1961, together with their gender and socio-economic composition. The surveys show the large and rapidly growing youth market; the proportion of customers aged 16–24 rose from 30.2 to 44.0% over the 1950–1961 period. The table also shows a switch from cinema's inter-war domination by female patrons to a majority male audience by 1955, together with substantial proportionate growth of the DE socio-economic group, that already dominated film admissions.

However, while the dance hall chains carefully cultivated their youth market, the cinema chains failed to modify their appeal to reflect the tastes

⁶¹*ibid.*, 81–87.

⁶²TNA, RG23/228, 'Enquiry into expenditure on entertainment and betting on football pools, horses and dogs, for Central Statistical Office', n.d., c. 5 December 1959.

⁶³Nathaus, *op. cit.*, 52.

⁶⁴*ibid.*, 58–59.

Table 6. The percentage composition of the British cinema audience by gender, socio-economic class and age.

Year	1950	1952	1953	1954	1955	1961
Men	48.8	49.6	51.7	49.5	50.6	53.3
Women	51.2	50.4	48.3	50.5	49.4	46.7
Class AB	9.1	7.8	7.2	6.3	5.9	n.a.
Class C	16.0	13.5	13.3	13.1	13.8	n.a.
Class DE	74.9	78.7	79.5	80.6	80.3	n.a.
16–24	30.2	33.6	35.7	33.2	34.3	44.0
24–34	24.0	25.3	23.8	24.6	22.4	23.0
35–44	18.3	16.4	16.8	16.8	15.8	14.4
45–64	22.3	20.7	19.8	20.7	22.0	13.8
65+	5.2	4.0	3.9	4.7	5.5	4.8

Sources: 1950–1955, Hulton Press, *Hulton Readership Surveys* (London, 1950 edn, p. 48; 1955 edn, p. 46) 1961, Screen Advertising Association, *The Cinema Audience: A national survey* (London, 1961), Tables 1 and 2.

of an audience that had become substantially younger, more male and more working class. This was partly due to Britain's strict (by international standards) official censorship. The Second World War had brought about a substantial relaxation of film censorship, regarding sex, violence and swearing, which had continued into the late 1940s.⁶⁵ However, censorship was tightened again during the 1950s, with the British Board of Film Censors (hereafter BBFC) frowning on films such as *The Wild One* (1954) or *The Blackboard Jungle* (1955) that drew large teenage audiences in the USA.

Moreover, official censorship was buttressed by the stricter internal policing policies of the British film industry's leading entrepreneur, J. Arthur Rank – whose empire dominated both British film-making and exhibition. A devout Methodist, conservative in both politics and temperament, Rank had first become interested in cinema through making not-for-profit religious conversion films. The Rank Organisation's policy during the 1950s was to produce healthy family entertainment, the antithesis of the films that appealed to 1950s youth culture.⁶⁶

Rank and his lieutenants, John Davis and Earl St John, frowned on not only the newly introduced X certificate films and other films featuring what they considered gratuitous sex and violence, but also genre films popular with the youth market, such as horror, science fiction or even musicals. Even Rank's most popular film series of this era, the *Doctor* films, had initially faced considerable internal opposition from the conservative Davis and St John. The Rank Organisation disapproved of films with *Doctor* in the title and insisted that the lead actors in *Doctor in the House* (1953), which launched the series, should wear sports jackets, rather than white coats, in all publicity photos.⁶⁷

⁶⁵J. Richards and J.C. Robertson, 'British film censorship' in R. Murphy (ed.), *The British Cinema Book* (Houndsmills, 2009), 71–72.

⁶⁶V. Porter, 'Methodism versus the marketplace: the Rank Organisation and British Cinema' in Robert Murphy (ed.), *op. cit.*, 269.

⁶⁷*ibid.*, 271–72; Geoffrey, Macnab, *J. Arthur Rank and the British Film Industry* (Abingdon, 1993), 223–24.

Moreover, 1950s films rarely featured working-class characters in leading roles, despite the working class dominating cinema admissions and representing a growing share of the cinema audience.⁶⁸ This contrasted with the 1960s, with the emergence of the British new wave, declining censorship, and a growing proportion of films designed to appeal to the youth audience. However, by 1960 cinemas and dance halls had more competition for the teenager/young adult's discretionary spend, which was increasingly targeted by a range of sectors, such as clothing, records, radiograms, magazines, cosmetics and snack bars.⁶⁹

The disproportionate number of teenagers and young adults visiting dance halls, cinemas and other venue entertainments during the 1950s may explain the much greater visibility of youth culture compared to the 1930s. It may also at least partially explain the era's reputation for youth rowdiness and violence in cinemas, in dance halls and on the streets, given the declining proportion of older evening visitors to town centres, whose presence might have moderated their behaviour. A similar argument was proposed by Dominic Sandbrook to explain the rise of football hooliganism from the late 1960s – attendance had shifted to younger people and while in earlier times older supporters (often including their fathers and grand-fathers) would act as a restraining influence, their proportionate numbers had since dropped substantially.⁷⁰

Was TV 'framed' for the decline of cinema and variety theatre?

It has been argued that television was not the only, or even the prime, factor behind the decline of venue entertainments. An alternative argument might be summarised as the 'suburbs killed venue entertainment' thesis. For example, Docherty, Morrison and Tracey blamed the decline of cinema primarily on a new phase of industrial capitalism characterised by rising real wages, comfortable homes, the emergence of the nuclear family and, particularly, mass working-class suburbanisation. The alleged cause of these trends was the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act, which 'led to the clearing of slums, the growth of new towns, the rebuilding of city centres and, crucially, the resiting of large sections of the working class'.⁷¹ However, the data they put forward to support this claim are based on a much longer period, between '1931 and the 1970s'.⁷² Moreover, a more careful analysis of the chronology of the decline in the cinema audience and the spread of suburbanisation shows this explanation to be implausible.

⁶⁸Porter, *op. cit.*, 271–72.

⁶⁹S. Manning, *Cinemas and Cinema-Going in the United Kingdom: Decades of Decline, 1945–65* (London, 2020), 69–89.

⁷⁰D. Sandbrook, *State of Emergency: The way we were: Britain 1970–1974* (London, 2011), 561–62.

⁷¹Docherty, Morrison and Tracey, *op. cit.*, 25. See also Hanson, *op. cit.*, 94–96.

⁷²Docherty, Morrison and Tracey, *op. cit.*, 25.

Over the 14-year period of 1925–1938, 3.79 million new houses were built in England and Wales, compared to only 3.51 million in the 14-year period of 1947–1960. Yet throughout the inter-war era, cinema substantially expanded. Moreover, while the number of public sector homes developed over the 1947–1960 period (2.35 million) was substantially larger than during 1925–1938 (1.11 million), a much larger proportion of council housing was located in inner-city areas, much closer to urban centres than typical inter-war municipal housing developments.⁷³

The 1951–1964 Conservative governments' housing policy sought to minimise population relocation from inner-urban residential districts to the suburbs or beyond, as working-class suburbanisation would threaten Conservative majorities in suburban and rural council wards and parliamentary constituencies. As J.E. Beddoe, Principal Private Secretary to the Ministry of Housing and Local Government, reminded his Parliamentary Secretary in March 1958, one of the key aims of housing policy was to block the migration of urban working-class families to rural areas which were 'Conservative seats, and usually marginal'.⁷⁴ They therefore focused on developing new public housing at high densities in inner-city areas, including a rapidly rising proportion of high tower blocks. This was accompanied by a moratorium on any further New Towns in England and Wales during the 1950s. Thus, in contrast to claims that new town and similar developments were typical of this era, nationally, the decentralisation of population they produced was substantially weaker than for inter-war housing.⁷⁵

It was true that cinema chains were reluctant to build cinemas in New Towns (given the rapid contraction of the cinema audience) as they would have to recoup both fixed and variable costs – whereas existing cinemas only needed to recoup their variable costs to remain open. However, New Towns did not represent a substantial proportion of the British population. During the period 1953–1966 only 104,170 houses and flats were built in new and expanded towns in the South-East, comprising a very small proportion of new housing, even in the region that dominated new town development during the 1950s.⁷⁶ New municipal estates were less conveniently situated for access to town centres than the areas from which their populations had relocated, but they were still typically within town boundaries (in contrast to inter-war municipal houses, that were often built some distance beyond urban boundaries), and their residents would find it easier to get to a cinema

⁷³Sources: 1925–1938, P. Scott, *The Making of the Modern British Home: The suburban semi and family life between the wars* (Oxford, 2013) 84; 1947–1953, TNA, T227/808, note by R.W.B. Clarke, 5 August 1955; CSO, *Economic Trends Annual Supplement* (London, 1981), 48 and 59.

⁷⁴TNA, HLG 111/143, J.E. Beddoe to Parliamentary Secretary, Ministry of Housing and Local Government, 26 March 1958; P. Scott, 'Friends in high places: government-industry relations in public sector house-building during Britain's tower block era', *Business History*, 62, 4 (2020), 545–65.

⁷⁵J.B. Cullingworth, *Housing and Labour Mobility* (London, 1969), 61–62.

⁷⁶TNA, LAB 8/3347, 'Geographical mobility and the industrial selection scheme', note by D.D.R. Love, October 1966.

than people living in typical 1930s suburban housing. Arguments regarding the decentralisation of the cinema's audience to distant suburbs are more appropriate to the USA, where post-war suburbanisation was much more rapid and relocated populations over much greater distances (assisted by wider car ownership).⁷⁷

Despite having rejected the hypothesis that cinema's and variety's downfalls were largely due to post-war population dispersal to the suburbs, the underlying factors behind their catastrophic declines must nevertheless be found in changes in housing and family life. Twentieth-century Britain witnessed a long-term trend from social life based around the local community towards a much more private, family-centred social life, based around the modern home with its growing range of utilities and rising standards of comfort. Yet this still raises the question, 'Why did the mass building of suburban working- and lower-middle-class houses not trigger a decline in cinema and variety audiences in inter-war Britain?'

The answer is that before 1950 people did not have an acceptable alternative. While radios (licensed or unlicensed) had achieved almost 100% diffusion by 1939, radio could not compete with the visual spectacle of cinema, nor could it fully project variety acts – as their visual content was often at least as important as the audible component. People were therefore prepared to travel to town centres and back, despite this often involving an hour's round trip by bus or bicycle, because their choice was either the bright lights of the city or no acceptable entertainment.

By contrast, the television, once acquired, could be accessed at virtually no extra pecuniary cost, in the lounge (which, by the mid-1950s, was typically substantially more comfortable than a 1920s parlour). Moreover, television avoided the dissatisfaction of travelling to see a film or show that might prove less enjoyable than expected – as, if a TV programme did not appeal, it could be switched off without any significant time or monetary cost. The near-zero marginal cost of TV contrasted with cinema, where bus fares and admission tickets were purchased before the consumer knew whether the film was worth watching. Moreover, it was easier to predict whether a television programme would be enjoyable, owing to the large proportion of series, serials or formatted non-fiction programmes. Serials also drew the viewer back, via their cliffhanger element, while most serialised programmes developed an element of viewer loyalty.

The spread of television accelerated a longer and more fundamental shift in the location of popular entertainment and leisure consumption from the

⁷⁷G. Bekker, *Entertainment Industrialised: The emergence of the international film industry, 1890–1940* (Cambridge, 2008), 405.

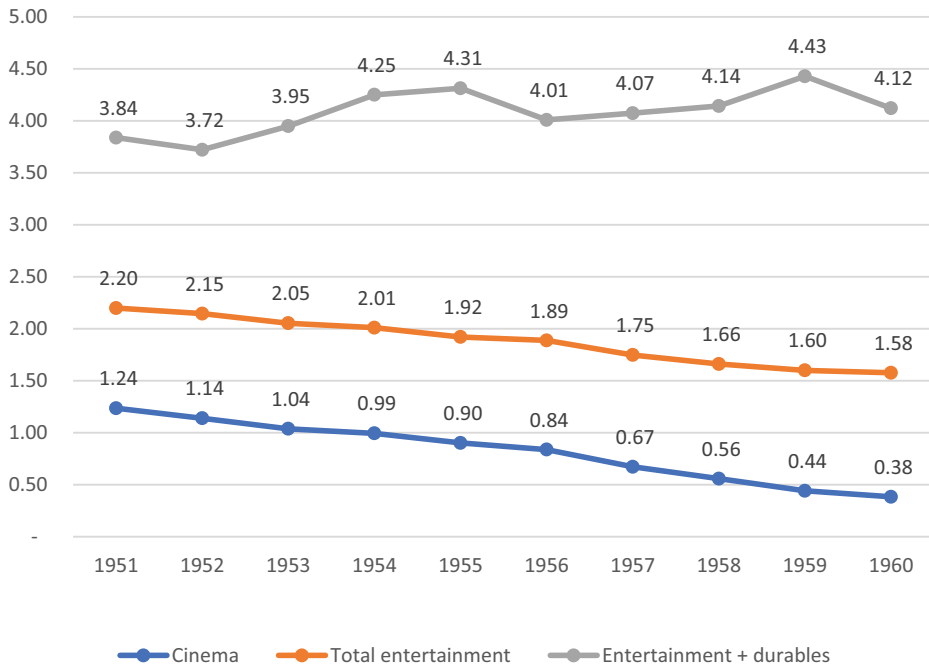


Figure 2. Consumer expenditure on cinema, all entertainment, and household durables, as a proportion of total consumer expenditure, 1951–1961, at constant (1958) prices. Source: Central Statistical Office, *National Income and Expenditure 1962* (London, 1962), 21–22. Notes: Durables exclude vehicles, furniture and floor coverings. Total entertainment expenditure includes the hire of television or radio and radio/television relay services.

community to the home. As a March 1959 C&E memorandum argued, in addition to television,

many social factors are combining to make the cinema less attractive . . . They include the growth of other forms of entertainment more acceptable to modern tastes such as (apart from television) record players, skiffle groups and dancing . . . evening (floodlit) football matches, and also better housing conditions, time spent on home decorating and similar . . . activities.⁷⁸

This is demonstrated in [Figure 2](#). During 1951–1960, cinema’s share of consumer expenditure fell from 1.24% to a mere 0.38%, while all entertainment expenditure fell from 2.20% to 1.58%. This implies that families were devoting less of their money to entertainment as the 1950s progressed, which seems implausible in an age of rising affluence. However, if television and household consumer durables (excluding vehicles, furniture and floor coverings) are added to the figures, the downward trend in leisure spending disappears and there is a slight long-term rise in spending on this broader bundle of leisure goods.

⁷⁸TNA, CUST 153/9, note for meeting between the Economic Secretary and a deputation from the film industry, 2 March 1959.

Conclusions

The factors highlighted in the introduction – the degree of commitment demanded for a leisure activity, the ease with which television could substitute for the incumbent entertainment medium, the presence of addictive elements, and the extent to which the activity appealed to a youth audience – constitute strong determinants of the differential impact of television on the main 1950s venue-based entertainments. However, television had one key feature that no incumbent commercial entertainment format could replicate – audio-visual entertainment beamed into the home, without the bother of waiting for a bus to see a film that might turn out to be less interesting than the BBC and ITV evening schedules.

Weak ‘supply-side’ responses to television, especially by the cinema and variety theatre sectors, no doubt hastened their contraction, as key entrepreneurs and agents decided to embrace, rather than fight, this new entertainment format, switching to commercial TV and repurposing, or selling, their lucrative portfolios of large, well-sited buildings. However, a stronger defence would be unlikely to have more than slightly slowed their decline, as evidenced in the USA – where a powerful film/cinema lobby failed to block a rapid shift from film to TV and found it necessary to make peace with television by the mid-1950s – largely on the networks’ terms.⁷⁹

The trend away from mass urban venue entertainment is generally seen as a negative development, but there is also a strong, although rarely articulated, argument that the rapid diffusion of television was a positive social innovation. The huge popularity of 1950s television implies that viewers had much greater entertainment value for money compared to the pre-television era. Moreover, despite being disparaged by some cultural commentators, there is no strong evidence that television was qualitatively inferior to the incumbent entertainments it disrupted. The BBC and ITV provided largely impartial news and current affairs programming (compared to the newspapers) and united the nation culturally, with audiences often encompassing a substantial proportion of all households. While the Queen’s coronation was a live event with public participation facilitated by this new medium, television was soon creating its own collective moments. For example, the science fiction series *The Quatermass Experiment* (July–August 1953) had an audience of five million viewers for its final episode, equivalent to around double the number of households with televisions. Then, in December 1954, Nigel Kneale’s adaption of

⁷⁹See W. Boddy, ‘The studios move into prime time: Hollywood and the television industry in the 1950s’, *Cinema Journal*, 24, 4 (1985), 23–36; Bekker, *Entertainment Industrialised*, 405–06.

Nineteen Eighty-Four created a political storm owing to what the newspapers claimed to be horrific content, but again drew a huge audience and, despite the primitive available broadcasting technology and limited budget, is still regarded as arguably the best adaption of Orwell's masterpiece.⁸⁰

Television's rapid diffusion also created a British television industry second only to that of the United States. Meanwhile, contrary to the dire predictions of the late 1950s, Britain's cinema and film industries did not 'die', but instead reached a new competitive equilibrium in the 1960s, partly due to a belated move to films that showed working-class life and/or appealed to youth culture. Even variety reinvented itself, by migrating its artists to television, with former variety acts featuring prominently in both BBC and ITV programming well into the late twentieth century. Moreover, most spectator sports faced no crisis during the 1950s (with the exception of 'crazes', such as speedway) and eventually developed contractual arrangements that enabled them to thrive in the new multi-media environment.

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⁸⁰See L. Cooke, *British Television Drama: A history*, 2nd edn (London, 2015), 23–31; Joe Moran, *Armchair Nation: An intimate history of Britain in front of the TV* (London, 2013), 102.