In 29 years the word ‘documentary’ has spread all over the world to describe almost all films of social significance… The word has now overflowed its original intention and is often applied to radio programmes, books, articles and paintings. Indeed, it has been so tortured and transformed even within the limits of cinema that, at times, it must be a wise Grierson who knows his own child. It is, however, perfectly at home in television. Indeed, so many opportunities occur in television for ‘the creative interpretation of reality’ [sic] through the visual image that Flaherty himself has said that the eventual future of documentary lies there.

Duncan Ross

The emergence of television as a new mass medium that challenged and eventually surpassed the pre-eminence of cinema offered new opportunities and new challenges for documentary. Some documentarists responded enthusiastically to the promise of television. Duncan Ross, for example, who had been Paul Rotha’s assistant producer for Britain Can Make It before joining the BBC in the late 1940s, saw television documentary in the Griersonian tradition of ‘the creative treatment of actuality’. The public service ideology of British broadcasting – as mandated by royal charter for both the licence fee-funded British Broadcasting Corporation and its commercial rival Independent Television – chimed with the educative and socially purposeful ethos of the documentary project.² And, for the documentarists, television offered a potential audience many times larger than they could hope to reach either in the cinema or through non-theatrical distribution: 90 per cent of British households owned a television set by the 1960s. The audiences
for some of the landmark documentary television series such as *The World at War* dwarfed those for documentary in the cinema. For all these reasons there was much truth in the view that documentary was perfectly at home on television.

However, television documentary would take shape in a different institutional context than documentary film. It soon became apparent that television would not be able to subsist on a diet of existing documentary films: indeed the strict guidelines on television advertising disqualified most sponsored documentaries from the airwaves. Instead television would need to produce its own documentary content – which in turn gave rise to the emergence of new documentary forms and styles shaped by the specific technological and aesthetic contexts of the medium. In particular the ‘liveness’ of early television formalized a different relationship between the text and the spectator: and in this sense television documentary was particularly suited to the adoption of *vérité* techniques that gave rise to new documentary modes such as the current-affairs documentary and the observational or ‘fly-on-the-wall’ documentary. At the same time, however, the emergence of the drama-documentary mode demonstrates some continuity with existing practices in documentary film. Susan Sydney-Smith has argued ‘that new forms of post-war popular television . . . were closely related to those documentary forms developed earlier by film and radio’.3 This chapter maps the various different lineages of television documentary in Britain between the advent of commercial television in 1955 and the deregulation of the industry signalled by the Broadcasting Act of 1990, which brought about fundamental changes in the political and cultural economies of British television. It focuses especially on the relationship between the institutional contexts of television and documentary practice. Indeed, a feature of television documentary that has generally been overlooked is that many landmark programmes and series that have been seen as representing particular lineages or taxonomies were often in the first place the outcome of very specific institutional and ideological conditions.

**Institutional contexts**

Although there had been a limited BBC television service in London between 1936 and 1939, when it was suspended upon the outbreak of the Second World War, the history of television as a mass medium really begins with the resumption of regular broadcasts in 1946. Over the next decade television grew from a London-centric service for a few to a