

THE JOCELYN HAY VOICE OF THE LISTENER & VIEWER LECTURE 2017
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TRANSCRIPT

**Why Public Service Media matters more than ever in the age of
Brexit, Trump, Facebook and Twitter**

LORD PUTTNAM CBE

I'm trying to do something which in a sense is quite ambitious this evening, but I should explain. I gave up doing lectures some while ago when I discovered the moving picture. I discovered what was quite incredible that it's people's memory of what they've seen and heard on the screen which is rather greater than my miserable delivery of text which I was so neurotic about, which is absolutely true, that I literally used to have a red pen that told me when to pause. That's pretty sad, one way or another.

Jocelyn was a friend to all of us and certainly a friend to me. She was a truly remarkable woman. I was thinking about her the other day. Last week I was in Oxford where I delivered a similar event, for the centennial of Leonard Cheshire. I'd worked for Leonard - he was a great friend - and actually they were very similar people. They were people that when they would very nicely ask you to do something, it wasn't really asking you to do something at all, it was an instruction. And certainly in Leonard's case the instruction could come from way, way, way after the grave because I still found myself doing things ten years after he was dead, remembering he'd actually told me to do that as well. And I think Jocelyn to an extent had very much the same quality. She was a force of nature.

Searching around for this evening I've discovered something at the BFI Library, which I didn't know was there, which absolutely delighted me. It was a movie made by John Grierson, 1935, called *The Voice of Britain*. It's actually rather wonderful. It's an hour and a quarter long. Anyway I've just pulled out a short extract from it because I thought you'd be intrigued to see the people the BBC dealt with in its earliest days, 1935, eighty years ago, in its early days and what they had to say about broadcasting and affairs of state. So here we go:

[Plays a video clip from The Voice of Britain, a documentary describing how radio broadcasting was a new means for distributing knowledge and opinion to a mass audience. It features Ramsay Macdonald, Stanley Baldwin, George Lansbury, Sir James Jeans, JB Priestley. It includes a clip of George Bernard Shaw who describes the power of the microphone to expose when speakers are not being honest.]

The film is honestly quite wonderful. It was made by John Grierson. It's a really, really well made piece of work. But my only caution here is to all of us at VLV is there is this tremendous danger, especially I found it watching the movie, that we drift in to a kind of nostalgia for the BBC of *Larry the Lamb* in our childhood, which is inappropriate and not that helpful. We must always remember that we only have a very few more members than the Flat Earth Society which, interestingly enough, if you go on their website it says, 'We have members all over the globe'. You couldn't make it up could you?

Let me first, if I may, set out my heretical credentials as exposed only too clearly by Barry Norman in 1981.

Plays video clip from a television interview of Lord Puttnam by Barry Norman where Lord Puttnam says that despite the audience having a very high level expectation of quality in television, the financial model isn't sustainable with only one channel which relies on advertising (ITV) and one which relies on the licence fee (BBC One). He points out that the licence fee isn't enough to support the BBC to supply what people expect so that television in the next decade will need to find another area of funding. We need to accept that TV is a form of

technology like the telephone where the amount you pay depends on your consumption. He suggests that eventually it will have to be funded on a pay-as-you watch basis because he didn't see any government being willing to subsidise television as a service.

A little later on in the clip Barry Norman actually loses it with me. He does obviously see this as the end of the world as he envisaged it, but I sort of stand by a lot of what I said and what I think what I was recognising was that there was a problem. And the first step in solving a problem is recognising that one exists.

And the truth is, in the late 1970s, just two years prior to that interview when, for example, someone like me as a film producer could not work in television you had to make a choice: you either went as an employee to ITV or the BBC or you couldn't have anything appear on television. It was binary and that clearly wasn't helping anybody but we had quite a good lobby that eventually pushed and created Channel 4. So I'd say that two men had some real vision and understood there was a problem: Willy Whitelaw, on the one hand, and Rupert Murdoch on the other and out of it evolved Channel 4 and Sky.

In one case I think the thinking was genuinely altruistic. In the other case, if you like, slightly less so as described by John Maynard Keynes. *[Shows slide 'Capitalism is the extraordinary belief that the nastiest of men, for the nastiest of reasons, will somehow work for the benefit of all of us'.]*

And, you know, Keynes was never wrong.

Now all this becomes for me really very personal and I'll try and explain why. My dad was a journalist. He loved Fleet Street. He believed passionately in news and spent his entire life trying to convey that. He was a very idealistic man. He had a friend during the war named Ed Murrow. Ed Murrow shared my dad's idealism. Whereas my dad was in the press, Ed Murrow rather transferred his to television. Here's Ed Murrow, or a replica of Ed Murrow from the movie, in 1958. This is exactly what he said in October 1958 at a celebration of his career:

[Plays clip of the 2005 film 'Good Night and Good Luck']

'Our history will be what we make it. If we go on as we are, history will take its revenge and retribution will not limp in catching up with us. Just once in a while, let us exalt the importance of ideas and information. Let us dream to the extent of saying that on a given Sunday night, a time normally occupied by Ed Sullivan is given over to a clinical survey on the state of American education. And a week or two later a time normally used by Steve Allan is devoted to a thoroughgoing study American policy in the Middle East. Would the corporate image of their respective sponsors be damaged? Would the shareholders rise up in their wrath and complain? Would anything happen other than a few million people would have received illumination on subjects that may well be determine the future of this country and therefore the future of the corporations? But to those who say people wouldn't look, they wouldn't be interested, they're too complacent, indifferent and insulated I can only reply, 'There is in one reporter's opinion considerable evidence against that contention.' But even if they are right, what have they got to lose? Because if they are right and this instrument is good for nothing but to entertain, amuse and insulate, then the tube is flickering now and we will soon see that the whole struggle is lost. This instrument can teach; it can illuminate and, yes, it can even inspire. But it can do so only to the extent that humans are determined to use it towards those ends. Otherwise it is merely wires and lights in a box.'

That's what he said. Now what I find particularly extraordinary about that speech is the two examples he happened to choose. One is 'How about devoting an hour to an analysis of the state of American education?' As you know, as well as I do, the American tertiary education is not great and hasn't been great for a long, long time. That was one suggestion. Even more telling, devote an hour to American policy in the Middle East? Try to imagine if 60 years ago the United States had devoted itself to analysing what its responses were and its responsibilities were in the Middle East. How very, very different our world might be today. So I regard that as an extraordinarily serious piece of work.

That begs the question where did it all go wrong? A very good film came out two years ago called *The Best of Enemies* that identified, I think pretty accurately actually, the 1968 debates between Gore Vidal and William

Buckley as being the moment where it became evident that an important shift had taken place. Here's again a short clip from this movie *The Best of Enemies*.

Plays clip from The Best of Enemies a documentary with the premise that debates on television have become 'theatre' to entertain rather than 'illuminate' the audience. It also raises the issue of polarisation where we no longer have a collective experience of hearing both sides of the argument rather than living in echo chambers.

I think it's pretty accurate to see that as roughly the dividing line when we headed off in a direction that we're still finding it very, very difficult to rein in from. In 2003 thanks to Elspeth [Howe] and others like her, we managed to take this very complicated piece of legislation, the 2003 Communications Act, through the House, particularly through the House of Lords, but through both Houses and we established a couple of very interesting things. One was a Public Interest Test in respect of mergers and takeovers and it was the very first time, interestingly, that the word *citizen* appeared in any UK legislation. It turned up because, to her enormous credit, Tessa Jowell, having been given instructions by her officials that she may not use the word citizen in legislation, said, 'If you think I'm going to the despatch box to tell the British public that they are not citizens you're crazy.' And that's how we got it in: it was literally that. But there were some wonderful people involved. I got a lot of credit, but in truth Lords Crickhowell, Fowler, McNally, George Thompson, the late George Thompson, Elspeth [Howe]: they were real heroes. We knew exactly what it was we were trying to struggle towards and I would say Elspeth, looking at you [in the audience], we got two thirds of what we hoped for. We ended up with an incomplete and not wholly satisfactory Bill, but something a lot better than had gone before it.

During that debate there was a lot of discussion. These three words cropped up: reciprocity, equivalence and sovereignty. Now as someone who has watched the word sovereignty echo around the Chamber, the House of Lords, more in the last few weeks than it has ever in the entire history of the place, it's a sort of wonderful irony here. But what we were arguing for at that point was that if we were going to have American ownership of British broadcasting, there had to be some form of reciprocity. Of course there wasn't. The Americans would not even think about a non-US citizen owning a US broadcasting outlet at that point.

And equivalence: the notion that somehow or another we were very, very major creators of content and there ought to be some equivalence in terms of the sale of content. And the last one was sovereignty. I remember during the debates Melvyn Bragg dragged up, and quite rightly, the word. He said, 'What about dignity? How about having the dignity to say, 'No. These are the things we want. This is the way we think it should be. No.''

And I thought it was a very, very interesting time. Now why was that, in my judgement, overwhelmingly important? Well, if I'd forgotten, I was brutally reminded in January when I read this. *[Shows series of slides from the Edelman Trust Global Barometer Report 2017]*. I don't know how many of you have read the Edelman Trust Report. It is done each year. This year is a particularly sobering version because in the end this is all about trust. We are in the trust business. Whether we like it or not, broadcasting, the media are in the trust business.

So where are we? We're not in great shape. Trust in retrospect has been eroded since the first report in 2001. Quite dramatically. The trust gap has widened in almost every country, but certainly in all the advanced democracies. But without trust, belief in the system fails. Now what do we mean by the system? The system, we need a system. I'm used to people saying that the system doesn't work. I'm prepared to say, 'Alright the people who've been running the system may deserve some quite big important questions.' But we need a system. Once you reach a point where there's not a belief in a system, that's much more dangerous than believing that the system doesn't work. So we're in a sense in deep trouble.

Here's where it becomes really worrying: concerns have turned into fears. And as we all know, once you start dealing with fears, when people become frightened they're capable of doing extraordinarily stupid things. In fact, I think we just did one last July. But people do strange and stupid things when they're fearful.

And Roosevelt was right, FDR, was right when he said, 'The only thing we have to fear is fear itself'. The problem is the word 'only': I think it was an overstatement. But fear becomes endemic and it gets worse and worse. And the echo chamber, the echo chamber that we're all very aware of now, amplifies the fears and accelerates the cycle. So we've got ourselves in to a very dangerous vortex where we're not even prepared to believe that we can return to a trusted environment. And that's scary.

We have reached a point this year, this is what was really important about 2017, where unsourced rumour is more trusted than an official announcement so people are more prepared to trust something that they hear, as it were, on the grapevine than they are to trust an official announcement: so scary times.

Now I'm kept sane at the moment by John Oliver.

Plays Clip of Last Week Tonight with John Oliver (HBO) which talks about Donald Trump's lies and how difficult it is to report on news in America as a result. He says that we should make extra efforts to fact-check content before we share it on social media and we should stop trusting outlets which repeatedly get things wrong.

I had tea this afternoon very fortunately with Mr Sulzberger, the son of the publisher of the *New York Times*. He was saying actually the biggest single issue is how deeply they get into the fact-checking world which is obviously massively important and probably one of the few defences they've got against what's going on, but it's extremely expensive and you have to now do it more and more rapidly.

And at a speech I attended recently by the now former, but was at the time, head of GCHQ, he made the point that we're into a world now where, his phrase not mine, data verification becomes the singularly most important thing in our lives because inaccurate data has reached a point now when it becomes catastrophic if it goes wrong. This is not a point where you get a few facts wrong. Everything gets, as they used to say in my school, "tits up" when the data is inaccurate.

Now, Phil Harding I think nailed it absolutely in the VLV newsletter [shows slide with quote] when he said, '*Impartial and accurate broadcast news based on a compact of trust between the broadcaster and the audience is an essential part of the foundations of the British democratic system.*' That is it. That's where we're at. If we lose trust, we lose everything. And we're on a slippery slope away from, certainly, the democracy that all of us in this room feel is part and parcel of our heritage.

So what facts? How do you deal with facts? Well here's a lovely example, a very short example, of the late Brian Hanrahan reporting from the Falklands:

Plays a video clip of a documentary about Brian Hanrahan reporting from the Falklands in 1982 under restrictions imposed by the Ministry of Defence when he manages to tell a story without saying how many planes left on a sortie from a ship.

Now I'm not silly enough, I hope I'm not silly enough, to believe that the acquisition of facts, hard facts, is all that easy. But in fact it can be very, very difficult as illustrated by this.

Plays a video clip of the assassination of President Kennedy.

We still don't know if it was the single sniper. We still don't know. So facts are tough, but we have an obligation to attempt to flush them out.

Now just last week someone I'd genuinely never heard of before, and I kind of slightly hope I never have to hear about again, but a fine legal mind apparently, Judge Napolitano entered for all of us an entirely new era of untruth:

Plays an episode of Fox & Friends programme broadcast by the Fox News Channel in which it is alleged that President Obama spied on Donald Trump. It includes an interview with Fox News Senior Judicial Analyst, Judge Napolitano, in which he says that GCHQ passed transcripts of Trump's phone conversations onto President Obama.

Well, you'll be interested to know that the Senior Legal Analyst, the judge there, is off air until further notice. Fox have probably conceded that he's not the most reliable source in the world, but the problem with this, which is really worth pointing out, if you go on YouTube and look at this clip, alongside it is all the other newsfeeds that picked up from it, all of which drop the equivocation. They move from being 'alleged' to 'fact'.

So what happens is, you have this extraordinary situation where someone can make a claim - the claim has got no credibility whatsoever - but the other newsfeeds pick it up and it's fact. This is very, very dangerous. I think

this is the ultimate, if you like, the slippery slope. So this happens to be a sort of entertainment show, Fox & Friends, but people look at it as a news show. So it's news, it's entertainment masquerading as news. This goes on and on. And here's another, I think, brilliant example of how dangerous this becomes:

Plays Clip from the TV drama 'The Newsroom' in which a news presenter interviews a guest about citizen journalism which is unverified.

[Laughter] Well, you're right. It is absolutely great. That's where we are.

Martin Sorrel last weekend said this to the *Financial Times*, 'Google, Facebook and the others are media companies and have the same responsibilities. They cannot masquerade as technology companies any longer.' We're trying to address that actually in the Digital Economy Bill right now. It is an absurdity to pretend that somehow by covering yourself as a technology company you have no responsibilities to the truth of what you do, the accuracy of what you do or the way in which you play a role in the, as it were, the public sphere and the public place.

Things are changing very, very rapidly and one of the problems I think is this: I just put this together. *[shows slide with pictures of professional TV equipment]*. There's £4,500 worth of kit here that you would have used 20 years ago to inform yourself: complex, expensive, bulky, etc. etc. *[Then shows slide with picture of a mobile phone]* All of that is on there, the whole lot at one tenth the cost.

So we are having to deal with something very, very different. And it is this new consumer that we're having to address and the new consumer appetites has started a kind of arms race for content.

[Shows slide of article about Netflix growth] Netflix are brilliant in many respects at exploiting this. They found a gap in the market and, I'll come on in a second to why we actually allowed that gap in the market to occur because we were there before they were interestingly, but they created a gap in the market and created something very special. And this is why consumers like it.

Plays Netflix Advert in which a man and woman watch a programme on TV where the woman admits she has been watching the series already in advance.

It's an amazing product, there's no question about that. It's an extraordinary product and it's a phenomenally successful product. It's streaming subscribers go up and up and up and here's the sadness: when I was on the Channel 4 Board, not many people know this, we negotiated for almost two years for a thing called Kangaroo. Kangaroo was going to be basically Netflix because it was going to aggregate ITV, Channel 4 and the BBC in a single place so the consumer, who was seen to be the most important element in this, could go to one place and see the best of whatever it was they wanted to see on Kangaroo. For reasons entirely due I suppose to the technological leap that iPlayer represented, the BBC pulled out at the very last minute. I'm sure they had their own reasons and, Lord knows, iPlayer has been a phenomenal success, but we could have had, without doubt in my view, our own Netflix and we let it go.

Not for the first time: when I was a very young man, Alistair Milne was denied the right by Mrs Thatcher to put a satellite up and experiment with satellite television. It wasn't felt to be part and parcel of what public broadcasting ought to be doing, another kind of horrible missed opportunity.

Now I've done two TED talks. I did one on climate change, but I did one a couple of years ago on the duty of care and whether the media ought to subscribe to the same duty of care that we expect of care workers, health workers, the police, the armed forces. The concept of the duty of care is not a complicated one at all, but somehow or other the media have managed to escape from those obligations on the grounds that it somehow or other it impinges their freedoms.

Plays TED talk video clip in which Lord Puttnam argues that integrity is essential in maintaining standards. He says that artists, journalists and those governing society should accept responsibility for maintaining a sustainable social agenda and encouraging an active, informed debate even among the disaffected sectors of society.

What I'm proud of about that, and that's pre-Brexit, pre-Trump, that actually it was obvious to anyone that was watching that there were this group, a large group of disillusioned, disaffected, disappointed people who were not being addressed and that what we were doing was storing up for ourselves an immense problem.

We have had some successes. One of the great successes of that 2003 Act was a decision, an important decision I think, to deregulate the Advertising Standards Association. The Advertising Standards Association had established itself as a very responsible, very good organisation. There was no reason to keep it under the regulatory issues that had been dealt with in the past and it was freed up and continued to be a real success story.

Now the ASA, under its Chairman Lord Smith and brand new Chairman Lord Curry, has established a fantastic track record to the point that *[shows slide of Persil washes whiter advert]* 'Persil washes whiter': you can't say that anymore, you've got to prove it. So a lot of the advertisements that you were brought up with as children have become challenged and challengeable, but, and there's a wonderful 'but' here, I recently addressed the centennial evening of the IPA, the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising: six hundred ad luminaries. I asked them - I was very complimentary about the ASA - 'You've got a lot to be proud of, but who knows which single body, group of people, refuse to be regulated under the ASA rules? One group of people refuse absolutely to be regulated. Does anyone know who it is?' It's politicians. So whilst you can regulate 'Persil washes whiter', no one could do anything about the £350 million a week battle bus *[shows picture of Brexit campaign bus with advert on the side saying that we send £350 to the EU and this could be used to fund our NHS instead]* because politicians refuse to fall under the ASA's remit.

I think this is a new and really interesting battle to have in Parliament. If we're to develop trust, and trust is the subtext of everything I am saying today, if we are to develop trust how is it possible to develop trust when the people we most need to trust refuse to be judged in the way that a product is or Unilever is? This is an absurdity. Now, to be absolutely honest, the ASA are not crazy about the idea of being given the responsibility, but irrespective of whether they're crazy about it, we'd be crazy not to ensure that they do.

[Shows slide BBC Reality Check on Twitter] The reality check issue the BBC have certainly grabbed hold of is a very, very important one. And I actually do think that this whole business of fact-checking will become the norm. And we're going to have to adjust our viewing habits and our reading habits around that. And that is going to be quite interesting and quite challenging.

James Purnell said less than a month ago, 'We will only get the best out of our culture with the right regulation. Ofcom should have the power to intervene with on-demand environments, not just linear ones, to secure prominence for public service content.' I think this is actually very important. This is an amendment coming up tomorrow in the Digital Economy Bill, the notion that public service broadcasting has due prominence.

I've got one issue with it which is I do think we've now reached a point with technology where each of us ought to be enabled to program our own mobile devices with what we see as our own little set top box. So I'm not in favour of the idea that you create something that's so punishing that we're all stuck with an EPG which is fixed and standard, but I do think it's that the default mechanism ought to have public service broadcasting at its heart, and James agrees with me, it should solve some of the problems.

The other big amendments tomorrow are about plurality and the fit and proper test. I say the 'fit and proper test', but I've now been told I mustn't call it that any more. It is actually the Broadcast Standards' Test because apparently 'fit and proper' is insulting and upsetting and a lot of people would become offended by it.

This is a major, major issue and I think we may, please God, have a breakthrough certainly over the next few months. There seems to be a general acknowledgement at last from Government that plurality has to be defined much more closely than has been the case in the past and that the Broadcast Standards Test has got to be rigorous and transparent. And one of the reasons for this is interesting, this may be contentious and Claire I'm sure will bring it up, I think it is not helpful having the Secretary of State having to make decisions which are arguable and subjective in an environment where actually it is quite, quite possible to come up with much more concrete, much more sensible, much more serious regulation whereby Ofcom literally can go to the Secretary of State of the day and say, 'Secretary of State it is very clear in these circumstances, for these reasons, this is the

judgement you should be making.' She wants that, I want that, I think this government wants that. And we may well make an important move towards that tomorrow. I really hope so.

The last thing I'd like to say is this: I'm a child of the 60s. A lot of what you hear. A lot of the quasi idealism is built on exactly that fact. So I was brought up with Eldridge Cleaver, a sort of heroic figure, who said, 'You're either part of the solution or you're going to be part of the problem.' And only recently I realised that a 100 years earlier Abraham Lincoln said, 'You cannot escape responsibility tomorrow by evading it today'. That I think is where we are at. We are confronted by a very, very complex media ecology. It's not going to get easier. If anything it's going to get harder, but we certainly are not going to deal with the problems of the future by pretending they're just going to go away. Right this week we're dealing with problems that we inherited by not really grappling with them 14 years ago. I have no idea what the problems 14 years hence will be, but we have an absolute obligation to do our best to future-proof legislation in such a way that it's got some chance of dealing with the monoliths, and I mean monoliths, who undoubtedly will emerge over the next ten or 15 years.

Thank you very much for listening to me.