

"What is important about Public Service Broadcasting and how should it be funded in the 21st century?"

Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) places objectives such as universality, accuracy and fairness above entertaining viewers and making profits. It is a type of communication which prioritises diversity, “serves the public interest and fulfils a democratic role” (p.6, Harrison, 2006). But are these principles still relevant in a highly competitive society, now overwhelmed by multiple TV channels and less likely to engage in fundamental PSB remits such as news?

A 2007 research publication (Hargreaves and Thomas) found that people trust broadcast news more than newspapers because it is required to be impartial. Moreover, they found that 95% of people are very satisfied with the level of choice they are given in regards to broadcast news. This is not surprising considering the BBC, ITV and certain radio stations with PSB obligations, are required by law to provide high quality news services.

PSB channels remain overwhelmingly the main source of news for most people (Hargreaves and Thomas), and the BBC and ITV currently provide news programming for fifteen different English regions. But will these high standards continue after the 2012 digital switch over, particularly if the government decides to relax PSB obligations?

There have already been substantial moves away from strict PSB regulation. For example, the 2003 Communications Act aims to maximise competitive pressures on communication companies by lifting foreign ownership restrictions on UK broadcasting. Also, the Conservative Party has already suggested that if they were to win the next election they would scrap the impartiality requirements for some commercial broadcast news services. It is clear that we are now a far cry from the

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BBC/ITV duopoly and Reith's vision that broadcasting would be primarily educational rather than focused on popular preference (Curran and Seaton, 2003). So, is there any point in saving what is left of PSB?

I believe citizens' interests in PSB need to be fully protected and enhanced- now more so than ever. Several issues are severely threatening the PSB industry, including audience disengagement (particularly among the young) and a lack of advertising. Audiences now have access to more channels than ever before but often choose to ignore the available PSB agenda. This tempts broadcasters to marginalize news and other PSB obligations for brighter, bolder, more entertaining programmes. After the digital switch over it will become even less practical for broadcasters to pursue impartiality, analysis and other PSB remits if large audiences are watching unregulated commercial broadcast channels instead.

If PSB is not maintained and applied more widely across the broadcast industry, providing impartiality and diversity over popularity will be seen as a hindrance rather than a unique selling point. Without a continuing regulatory requirement for high quality broadcasting, which is outlined in the 2003 Communications Act, there will be unavoidable commercial pressures for cheaper, less original journalism.

The fragmentation of audiences in a multi-channel environment will only result in smaller advertising revenues for PSB channels such as ITV who will look to save money in other ways, for example, through cross-media ownership. So far concentration of ownership has produced fierce competition, which, some people argue, leads to better standards and more consumer choice. However, when news programmers are forced to check mass audience appreciation and viewing figures all the time, quality, diversity and minority groups are pushed to one side.

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More specifically, if PSB obligations are disregarded altogether, commercial, biased and unregulated broadcast channels are more likely to be imported into Britain from abroad. For example, Rupert Murdoch would be able to import a specifically tailored English version of Fox News into Britain on top of the American version imported already. I am extremely concerned that highly opinionated news programmes will erode the fair principles of broadcasting and therefore undermine the foundations of democracy.

Of course, it should not be suggested that the consumer is incapable of choosing the best channel he or she would like to watch. What can be suggested, however, is the need for a wide choice of channels that are not concentrated in the hands of a few media moguls. After all, an academic uses multiple sources to better inform and portray his opinion. Similarly, a scientist carries out many experiments to prove his theory; broadcast audiences should be allowed the same privilege.

As the media industry continues to grow, it is inevitable that more branches of it will become unregulated and be free to embrace PSB or reject it. For example, the Internet is a fast growing platform for news and other information and is largely unregulated. Is it not unfair then to impose or maintain PSB obligations on some broadcasters while other media outlets, including user-generated content, are free to be partial? I believe it makes it more important to fix some broadcast channels to PSB obligations by law when so much of the Internet and all newspapers are free from statutory regulation.

It can be argued that PSB comes hand in hand with an overly paternalistic attitude: “we know what is best for the audience”. Indeed it is often said that the public is best served by free markets and free choice. However, broadcasters are now faced with accusations of “dumbing-down” and “infotainment” on a daily basis, so something

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has to be done to secure standards. Simon Bagge encapsulates these accusations when he wrote, ‘Television news has never been so slick. But it’s never been so hollow, either. Whatever channel you tune in to, news is a triumph of style over content.’ (Broadcast Magazine, March 2006).

By controlling certain aspects of television we recognise the importance of communication tools within democracy and treat ‘the box in the corner of our living room’ with the caution it deserves. When the NHS was exposed to free markets a “post-code drug lottery” soon developed. Ultimately the public suffered and the government had to step in to secure universality. Good, impartial broadcasting pumps life through the arteries of society to the very heart of our democracy, should this really be left to market forces?

It has been argued that PSB standards, such as objectivity and accuracy, are impossible to achieve in the 21st century. However, if and when they are not achieved, PSB channels are held accountable. It is this essential accountability which is often lost within commercial TV channels. ITN could not regulate Fox News when English citizens complained it was biased about the Iraq War because it did not have the power to fine or suspend a U.S licensed broadcaster. On the contrary, there have been numerous examples where Ofcom have fined PSB channels for not sticking to their obligations in the UK. In May 2008 Ofcom fined ITV £5,675,000, the highest fine ever imposed by a UK TV regulator, for abusing premium rate services in it’s programming.

PSB is vital to the broadcast industry, British society and democracy as whole because it serves the public good regardless of class, ethnicity, majority or minority. It remains a beacon of light for audiences swept along by a tempestuous media tide. It pursues truth when others pursue profit, it promises honesty when others spin.

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The question now is how should it be funded?

Firstly, the BBC licence fee is crucial and should be maintained because it separates journalism from commercial pressures and extreme government intervention- although the latter is often called into question. In 2006 the Pilkington Committee stated: “We are convinced that financing the BBC out of licence revenue is more than an important feature of the Corporation’s constitution. We are sure it is essential for the BBC to remain free from any other commitment...to pursue any objective whatsoever...”- and I agree wholeheartedly.

However, Ofcom have suggested that the government nibble away at the BBC licence fee to fund other channels in a process known as “top-slicing”. Just this month (April 8th 2009) the House of Lords Committee announced that part of the TV licence fee should be used to help commercial channels pay for news and public service programmes. They believe the BBC will become too dominant in news and current affairs when other commercial broadcasters face financial problems.

Jocelyn Hay, Chairman and Founder of Voice of the Listener and Viewer, rightly points out that “top-slicing” will weaken the BBC at a time when it needs to be at its best¹. Indeed, the government should be able to use taxpayer’s money (other than the licence fee) to fund PSB channels when financial pressures threaten their ability to provide competitive news programmes. Also, the government should use the money that will become available when analogue airwaves are sold off in the digital switch over, to fund other PSB channels.

If the license fee is not maintained and extra funding is not given to PSB channels outside of the BBC, broadcasters may be forced to charge people on a subscription

¹ I attended a talk given by Jocelyn Hay to a Liberal Democrat society in Sheffield in February 2009- ‘How to make the BBC the best’

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basis. This would certainly limit people's ability to access a wide range of broadcast services. For example, Murdoch has decided to capitalise on sport broadcasting and now many live football matches are only available through subscription on Sky. If PSB funding ceased it would not be long before people were charged to view anything from a soap opera to the news.

Competitors argue that subsidising the BBC distorts the market- but should we even be thinking of broadcasting as a market to be capitalised? It should also be remembered that the cost to the viewer through the licence fee is considerably less than the subscription fees people pay for commercial channels. Subscription services maybe compatible with a free 'undistorted market', but they are not compatible with the basic PSB principle of universality. A subscription channel is mainly interested in generating income for owners and shareholders so it will bend its efforts to make itself 'popular' at all costs. Money becomes the principal.

Another way to fund PSB in the 21st century would be to try and boost advertising or extend and promote product placement. However, this would interfere with editorial integrity, and, with Google now claiming as much advertising revenue as ITV, is this option really feasible? Instead, more PSB company partnerships could be created to pool resources (particularly news resources) and save money.

PSB faces it's "test of time"; it speaks a language of 'us' when modern discourse is of 'me'; it commits itself to that which is excellent when common practice commits to what is buyable (Tracey 1998). But this 'excellence' is one of the main reasons why the BBC is regarded as one of the most credible broadcast corporations in the world. Right now the government stands at a crossroads, it needs to choose 'us' over 'me'.

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