

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

New technology in the 21st century has had immense impact upon societal structures. Advanced technology has facilitated User Generated Content (UGC), where the previously inactive audience become participants in the production and publication of news. It involves 'amateur' photographs, videos and blogs. Blogs are increasingly popular (Pavlik, 2008). Blogs are frequently updated opinion journals, characterised by interactivity with links to other sources on the net and reader commentary (Singer, 2005). Moreover, in the 'digital age' of the 21st century there has been a proliferation in television channels available to the public. The power of the citizen over the press has increased. However, what then, if any, is the role of Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) when the public can easily pursue their own interests and participate in shaping media content?

In fact the role of PSB is even more important in the digital age. Digital technology is expensive; PSB has a democratic duty to ensure equality in consumption and production. Digital technology increases the opportunity for citizens to pursue what interests them, but this also increases PSB's responsibility to widen the scope of these narrow interests. It must also ensure cultural cohesion. Although new technology has increased the visibility of the views of the many, this has also led to the need for PSB to filter the proliferation of information. Therefore, PSB, a public good, should be publicly funded, although free market advocates try to argue otherwise. Publicly-funded PSB moves in away from corporate elites and insidious competition that drives down quality and innovation. PSB, a public good, should not be based within the market system, but in its rightful position within the social system.

New technology in the 21st century such as UGC has radically changed the nature of political journalism by blurring the boundaries between producer and consumer. Rosen (2005) asserts that the public now *own* some of the press. This represents a shift in the balance of power; professional journalists are no longer the sole sovereign (Rosen, 2005). We now witness the emergence of 'accidental journalists'; ordinary people who write articles with first-hand experience on critical events. For example, the best coverage of the Indonesian Tsunami came from 'amateurs' (RISJ, 2009). There is also the emergence of citizen journalists. Blogging software has facilitated the feasibility for ordinary citizens to create and publish content on the Internet (Paulussen et al, 2007) with global reach (Wall, 2005).

Consequently, the result of the impact of UGC has altered what constitutes as the democratic role of the media. It no longer follows the Trustee or Market model. UGC has pushed for the democratic role of the media as a facilitator of civic participation and active citizenship. Grossman (1998) states that technology is changing our democratic political system, public opinion now plays a vital role, it has allowed the inauguration of an 'electronic direct democracy' with representative government. The media can now produce not only well-informed, but engaged and active citizens (Grossman, 1998). Participatory democrats advocate for societal structures to enable citizen involvement (Parry and Moyser, 1994).

Public journalism views democracy as the participation of citizens in public dialogue and the press as an instigator of such dialogue (Glasser, 1999). Barber (1984) purports that new technology can strengthen civic education, equal access to information and bring people together into networks that make real participatory debate possible across distances.

Therefore, where new technology in the 21st century creates opportunity for the people to be truly represented through direct participation and public discussion is there any role for PSB?

An equally important dimension of democracy as the amount of participation is the equality of participation (Parry and Moyser, 1994). Verba and Nie (cited in Parry and Moyser, 1994) state that to increase citizen participation without any accompanying changes could reinforce inequality. It remains doubtful if all citizens have some control over the press. One person one vote is possible, but one person one voice in any other citizen activity is not (Parry and Moyser, 1994). UGC is limited to those with a computer. There exists a digital divide. Digital devices to go online are expensive, and the low-income inner city groups, often ethnic minorities, have less access to devices and the bandwidth for high-speed Internet service (Pavlik, 20087). This gap in access to digital technologies increases the economic disparities that exist and social mobility and equality are affected; those with less access to digital media may be educationally disadvantaged (Pavlik, 2008). This affects both interrelated activities of political consumption and production. Bloggers tend to be white, male and affluent. Furthermore, Haas (2005) purports that weblogs that depend on other contributors, while they allow independent, alternative, citizen journalism, adopt similar gate-keeping techniques as that of the mainstream media (MSM). For example, Slashdot use selective procedures (Haas, 2005). Publicly funded PSB is highly important in the 21st century where it has a democratic role to ensure that all equally hear of important content and have a chance to access feedback channels.

New technology has allowed civic participation. *Democracy* derives from the Greek, meaning *power to the people*. But what if *the people* do not want to participate? What about non-public action, should it not also be a part of democratic theory (Peters, 1999)? What about those that cannot take part in conversational journalism, such as the aged, children and foreigners (Peters, 1999)? The ‘effectiveness’ of participation is dependent on if the active participants are representative of the concerns of the inactive (Parry and Moyser, 1994). As was demonstrated above, bloggers tend to be one of the same. PSB has a salient democratic role to represent or make assumptions on the views of those voiceless many.

Moreover, although the high multitude of channels and mediums available in the digital age has increased the people’s power (i.e. it allows them to express their views and also aids them to further investigate what interests them), it creates the problem of *detrimental selective attention*. Gardam and Levy (2008) found that the Internet tends to be used by people to investigate their predisposed interests and connect with those similar to themselves. Civil society may become *atomised*, whereby people just relate to others that have similar interests and think alike (Langer, 2009). But Gardam and Levy (2008) found that TV on the main channels was beneficial to discover the unknown and exposition to others’ beliefs. PSB is of importance more than ever to widen the scope of these narrow interests and engage in civic education. Otherwise, what people hear and know will be limited in scope. Furthermore, the

Internet's fragmentation and segmentation of audiences means that there is no longer a common public sphere, but many (Manning, 2001).

There exist problems where the media through UGC creates an arena for public discourse. Blogs are fragmented and open-ended in nature. Dialogue is good for democracy, but can destruct it (Peters, 1999). Constant interaction on every issue means there is no closure. Peters (1999) points out that it is wrong to say listening is passive.

There is a dichotomy between diversity and cohesion (Gans, 1980). There is a need for the media to reinforce and institute commonality on moral values and ethics to facilitate democratic stability. Advanced technology with so much information and scattered opinion, makes PSB more vital to filter information and retain cohesion. PSB channels remain key destinations for many because of its perceived: familiarity, trust, serendipity and cohesive power (Gardam and Levy, 2008).

The significance of participation is based on the accepted definition of democracy (Parry and Moyser, 1994). What about democracy as stability?-participatory democracy ignores this necessity. Realists advocate that although the public have an idea of what issues affect them, democracy is the outcome of leadership (Parry and Moyser, 1994). PSB has a democratic duty and responsibility to uphold. It must control the flow of information to the people. For example, UGC on the Internet has allowed the feasibility for any citizen to become a producer or disseminator of news. This truth is reminiscent of Hobbes' (1968) anarchic state of nature, where the people are free to do as they please, but this leads to a hellish world. Critics of liberalism assert that by allowing man to be completely free, may allow the rise of irrational fundamentalists and political extremists (Barber, 1984). The only way out of the state of nature was by instituting a governmental body (Hobbes, 1968). Therefore, PSB as 'the state' has a duty to regulate and ensure unwanted views do not prevail and unknown voices are heard. Furthermore, Peters (1999) argues that under public journalism the image of politics is distorted, it places people from public debate to private pleasure. It relies on a rational public for its participatory democracy, whom favour entertainment and drama (Peters, 1999). PSB has a democratic duty to retain power and ensure all key issues are covered.

As demonstrated above, PSB is a necessary public good, thus it should be publicly funded. Henderson (2009) articulates that everyone should pay for PSB as they would pay for state education, NHS and defence; it is a necessity for an advanced democratic society. However, every potent viewpoint has a contradictory stance.

Friedrich Hayek (as cited in Scammell, 2005), an advocate of the New Right, asserts that individual freedom is of utmost importance and democracy is the preferred political system only in so much that it protects this freedom. In fact, Hayek deems state interference as the predominant threat to securing this freedom and should be limited, whilst the 'invisible hand' of the free market encouraged as it ensures the flowering of individual liberty. Such a theorist would undoubtedly promote the free market as an arena to fund any proposed PSB. However, the media situated within a free market may not allow this desired individual freedom to

manifest. Curran (2002) articulates that the media in the free market entails the concentration of media ownership (where this concentration is predominantly in the hands of right wing activists), high-entry costs and the prioritization of high sales and ratings, and in turn the minority are neglected for the majority's benefit alone. There is no true individual freedom as Hayek advocates.

Nevertheless, the liberal doctrine believes that the most important democratic role of the media is watchdog of the state and this must be conducted apart from the state. Proponents of the free market point to the weaknesses of publicly funded organisations due to their dependence on political elites who control their economic input (amount) and thus have unruly influence on their output. Proprietor owner Rupert Murdoch is such an advocate. Murdoch (1989) purports that the publicly funded BBC is dependent on government and thus its broadcasters dare not offend and fall to the feet of their oh-so powerful politicians whom control their fate.

Nonetheless, despite these cries, advocates of the free market fail to acknowledge one of the most powerful types of elites capitalist societies face; the commercial elite. Lindblom's (1977) *Politics and Markets* recognises this threat to society, whereby businessmen use their resources to 'indoctrinate' citizens to accept the corporatist's interests. This theory is reminiscent of Lukes' (1974) radical theory of power, where the powerful covertly exert their control over the powerless and make the powerless unconscious of their own interests. Although somewhat extreme, it is apparent that the free market does cater to the corporatist elite where these elites are far harder to catch and to make accountable than politicians who are put under the media's spotlight of scrutiny for democracy's sake. Curran (1996) argues that owners gain greater legitimacy within their organisations than politicians do influencing PSB organisations. Therefore, publicly funded PSB has more freedom from the inconspicuous corporatist power.

However, Murdoch (1989) asserts that competition creates quality; the nature of the digital market where suppliers ferociously compete with each other for market share and funds is conducive to the quality of the suppliers output. In short, if PSB is funded commercially it would be forced to compete with other digital broadcasters for income (advertising) and to efficiently do so would have to heighten the quality they supply. Standards would be raised. But, a market dominated PSB would not put the consumer, let alone the citizen first, it would put the sales ratings and the nature of competition first and this has adverse consequences. What about the citizen? Blumler (1992) purports that the US television landscape characterised predominantly by commercialism is based more on giving the consumer what they want: eye-catching, entertaining, hedonistic, meaningless experiences, rather than what they need: mind-stretching, soul-searching programmes. Broadcasters place premiums on huge stars, themes, formats that have previously retained success specifically because their financial backers require assurances (Blumler, 1992). It thus leaves no scope for inviting neither new talent nor originality in programme content (Blumler, 1992). On the other hand, public-funded broadcasting allows the safeguard of money readily available and therefore the abdication of fear towards originality, experimentation with new diverse programme formats,

contents and the surge of new talents. Ofcom figures (as cited in Gardam and Levy, 2008) reveal that PSB, in particular, BBC 1 and BBC 2 (publicly funded) provide the majority of original programme content.

Commercially-funded broadcasters' need to secure funding has led to the erosion of quality, especially in the coverage of public affairs. Holtz-Bacha and Norris (2001) although admit there may be a causality problem, nevertheless infer from their study that commercialization does make a difference and watching public television is associated with higher levels of political information than watching commercial television.

Blumler (1992) states that private television is accountable to the market unlike public television that receives its funding from the public and is based in the social system. Therefore public television because of its funding has an obligatory duty to serve the public. Where PSB is publicly funded it places more obligation on PSB to be produced with the public's needs in mind, whether they want to buy the product or not.

In conclusion, it is clear that PSB is of utmost importance in the 21st century: to ensure equality in access to media consumption and production, to widen the public's spectrum, ensure cultural cohesion and filter the proliferation of information. It has a democratic duty and thus should be publicly funded not commercially. Public funding ensures quality, innovation in media provision and shielding from corrupt corporations. Moreover, it ensures that PSB is made accountable to the public by placing it in its rightful system; the social system. PSB is of high importance for democracy to blossom.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Barber, B. (1984). *Strong Democracy Participatory Democracy for a New Age*. University of California Press.

Blumler, J. (1992/2000) New Roles for Public Television in Western Europe: Challenges and Prospects. In *The Media, Journalism and Democracy*, M. Scammell and H. Semetko (eds.) Aldershot: Ashgate/Darlington

Curran, J. (2002). *Media and Power*. New York: Routledge

Curran, J. (1996) 'Mass Media and Democracy Revisited', in Curran and Gurevitch (eds) *Mass Media and Society*, Hodder Headline Group: London.

Gardam, T. And D. Levy (2008) (eds) *The Price of Plurality. Choice, Diversity and Broadcasting Institutions in the Digital Age*. Published by the Reuters Institute for Study of Journalism and Ofcom: http://www.ofcom.org.tv/psb_review/psbplurality.pdf

Gans, J.H. (1980) *Deciding What's News*. Constable and Company Limited: London.

Glasser, L. T. (1999) 'The Idea of Public Journalism', in Glaser, T. (1999) (ed.) *The Idea of Public Journalism*. The Guilford Press: London.

Grossman, L. (1998) 'Changing Conceptions of Democracy', at Democracy and Digital Media Conference, MIT, May 8-9, 1998. Papers available at http://web.mit.edu/mit/conferences/democracy/index_papers.html- accessed 11/03/09.

Haas, T. (2005). 'From "Public Journalism" to the "Public's Journalism"?' Rhetoric and the reality in the discourse on weblogs.', *Journalism Studies* 6(3) 387-396.

Henderson, R. (2009) *Why PSB Matters*. : <http://www.transdiffusion.org/emc/thirdprogramme/whypsbs.php> (Accessed 1/05/09)

Hobbes, T. (1968) *Leviathan*. Penguin Classics: England.

Holtz-Bacha, C. and Norris, P. (2001). "To entertain, inform and educate". Still the Role of Public Television in the 1990s? *Political Communication* 18(2) April, pp 123 – 140.

Langer, A. (2009) 'Political News in the Digital Age', *Honours Lecture*.

Lindblom, (1977) *Politics and Markets*. Basic Books: New York.

Lukes, S. (1974) *power: A Radical View*. Oxford.

Manning, P. (2001) *News and News Sources: a Critical Introduction*. London: Sage Publications.

Murdoch, R. (2005). Freedom in Broadcasting. MacTaggart Memorial Lecture 1989. In Franklin, B (Ed.) *Television policy: the MacTaggart lectures*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Murdoch, R (2005). Speech to the American Society of Newspaper Editors, April 13 2005. Available at: http://www.newscorp.com/news/news_247.html- accessed on 11/03/09.

Parry, G. and Moyser, G. (1994) 'More Participation, More Democracy?', in *Defining and Measuring Democracy*, edited by Beetham, D., SAGE Publications Ltd: London.

Peters, J. D. (1999) 'Public Journalism and Democratic Theory: Four Challenges', in Glaser, T. (1999) (ed.) *The Idea of Public Journalism*. The Guilford Press: London.

Paulussen, S. Heinonen, P. Domingo, D. and Quandt, T. (2007) 'Doing It Together: Citizen Participation In the Professional News Making Process.', *Observatorio (OBS) Journal*, 3 (2007), 131-154.

Pavlik, J. (2008). *Media in the Digital Age*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Rosen, J. (2005) "'Bloggers vs. Journalists' is over' presented at the Conference Blogging, Journalism & Credibility: Battleground and Common Ground, MA, Harvard http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/webcred/wpcontent/webcredfinalpdf_01.pdf- accessed 10/03/09.

RISJ (2009) (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism) at: http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/fileadmin/documents/Publications/Whats_Happening_to_Our_News.pdf- accessed 10/03/09.

Rosen, J. (1999) 'The Action of the Idea: Public Journalism in Built Form', in Glaser, T. (1999) (ed.) *The Idea of Public Journalism*. The Guilford Press: London.

Scammell, M. (2005) Rethinking the Media's Duties to Democracy: watchdog, information and representation. Draft paper.

Singer, J. (2005). 'The political j-blogger: "Normalizing a new media form to fit old norms and practices', *Journalism* 6(2) 173-198.

Wall, M. (2005). 'Blogs of war': Weblogs as news' in *Journalism* 6(2); 153-172.