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Introduction: Where Next for Public Service Broadcasting?

SUZANNE FRANKS AND JEAN SEATON

Abstract

Good quality information is a public utility: the rich and powerful will always have access to what they need to know, but poor people do not. Indeed, increasing inequalities in access to decent information underlie other more obvious inequalities. Bad information does not respect borders and yet democracy depends on informed citizens. The case for public intervention in what used to be called broadcasting, now including digital media—but which needs to be thought of as a public information space—is at a tipping point. This collection of essays sets out these vital challenges and offers some innovative solutions.

Keywords: public service broadcasting, media, digital media, BBC, governance, access, inequalities

GOOD QUALITY information is a public utility: the rich and powerful will always have access to what they need to know, but poor people do not. Indeed, increasing inequalities in access to decent information underlie other more obvious inequalities. Bad information does not respect borders and yet democracy depends on informed citizens. The case for public intervention in what used to be called broadcasting, now including digital media—but which needs to be thought of as a public information space—is at a tipping point. The role of publicly funded, but politically independent institutions, like the BBC and our other public service broadcasters, which can begin to re-engineer the information space, providing a stock of cultural capacity and nourishing imagination, has never been more vital.

Yet, the BBC and public service broadcasting (PSB) more generally, are under greater threat than at any time in the century since the BBC was first created. Accusations have for years been thrown at the BBC by the tabloid and right-wing press that it was ‘biased’, ‘elite’, ‘metropolitan’, ‘out of touch’, an establishment conspiracy to dupe the public, that it was inauthentic and consequently sinisterly controlled (all of which accusations have uncomfortable echoes in European history). And these have been eagerly replicated all

over the world in the attacks on the media. In the UK the government’s refusal to appear on the BBC, while characterising it as an elite ‘enemy of the people’ has become normal. There has been the appointment of political friends into positions on the BBC Board, or to head Ofcom, based on their politics rather than their capacity, merit or experience.

This collection of essays sets out these vital challenges and offers some innovative solutions. Opening the collection is a contribution from Mark Thompson, who for many years was at the helm of the BBC as Director General, and then helped turn the *New York Times* around. He is now the Chair and Chief Executive of CNN and based in in the US. Few are better placed to consider the worldwide health of PSB and what is required for it to be preserved and enhanced as a keystone in our national and cultural life. In his article, Thompson considers the immediate threats facing PSB on a global stage and offers some concrete and practical suggestions directed at those who are concerned with the state of our democracies and our wider information systems.

There follow three articles discussing the overall architecture of how we govern and regulate public service media in the modern era. Diane Coyle is a distinguished economist and a professor of public policy at Cambridge,

but in a former life she was a BBC trustee, vice-chair, and then acting Chair of the BBC Trust. She does not underestimate the difficulties of establishing effective governance for a complicated public body such as the BBC, but insists that if the BBC is to deliver the maximum societal benefit it is vital to ensure that the governance works properly. In her view a unitary body is not the best vehicle, but she argues against yet more disruption and reorganisation in the current climate. She raises vital questions about the right governance (and indeed the correct processes) for the BBC.

Catherine Johnson and Dan Martin are academics with a longstanding interest in the challenge of platforms to the contemporary media environment and Johnson has served as an advisor to government and parliamentary committees. Their contribution to this collection tackles the vital role of global platforms in redefining the way that public service media connect with their audiences. In particular, they consider how policy makers need to ensure the core values of universal appeal and universal access survive intact in the current media landscape, to preserve the ongoing legitimacy of the public service mission.

This opening section is completed by the article from Jackie Hughes which considers the role of regulation in supporting PSB. She is a longstanding member of the key UK regulatory body Ofcom and her argument is framed around the urgent need for transparency and fairness in the way that media are overseen, in the face of changing technologies and political pressures. Ofcom needs the right people and the right statutes to perform adequately and yet recently there have been concerns about its capacity to act in the public interest.

For over fifteen years an increasingly fallacious argument has ruled policy discussions—that the problem has been to ensure competition, to make sure that the BBC did not ‘get in the way’ of other broadcasting and information competitors. Leaving aside the unfair advantages of extravagantly funded lobbyists whose only concern (understandably) was the commercial self-interest of the businesses they represent—not the public interest—it was always a flawed argument. Now, it is ridiculous. The BBC faces the biggest competitors, the best financed businesses in the world in

the streamers and the social media. We need policy to pivot to *protect* the BBC.

Two contributions to the collection focus on the benefits and values associated with the public service mission. Pat Younge built an outstanding career as a producer across the UK TV industry. Assisted by Rosaleen Hughes from the British Broadcasting Challenge, he offers a passionate defence of the range and depth of content available to audiences from PSB as a whole—reminding us that religion, sport, innovative genres from *Bake-Off* to *Strictly* and groundbreaking drama such as ITV’s *Mr Bates vs the Post Office* are all part of the rich cornucopia of PSB. The article makes clear, echoing the conclusions of Martin and Johnson, that this broad and diverse offering must remain freely and universally available to avoid the cultural, social and political divisions of any two-tier system of national broadcasting. And the article goes on to highlight the significant role that PSB has in supporting the creative industries across the UK. The newer streaming services do provide some fantastic content, as Mark Thompson’s article reminds us, but not the same innovation, diversity and cultural depth which we experience from the public service media. Nor do they offer us programmes about our condition.

Richard Sambrook held senior positions in BBC News and later conducted various reviews examining fairness and independence in the conduct of BBC programming. Together with respected academic Stephen Cushion he is well placed to examine the state of impartiality—that key and much debated core principle of PSB. Their article considers the way that regulators are reacting to changing patterns of consumption and the implications for understanding what impartiality means and why it is so important to preserve.

Many of the emerging challenges that this special collection identifies are associated with changing technologies and, in particular, the new world of platforms. We now understand much better how social media providers use algorithms to push the public towards what they apparently like, producing closed information systems in which polarisation is created. Furthermore, malign external players seek to destabilise common understandings of reality in their own interests. The USA is looking to Europe for standards in internet regulation and Europe looks to the UK for

standards in PSB. The BBC is in a key position to play a key role as EU media policy now recognises that institutions are crucial and is developing in this direction. The BBC and the PSBs could become a guarantor of public safety—a kind of insurance like the NHS. This is as much a matter of technology as of editorial control. Right now, the dangers are clear—both internally and internationally—and there needs to be a policy leap, not incremental change. The BBC needs to address directly the challenge of digital networks which no longer prioritise the needs of the UK public.

Damian Tambini considers how the BBC's remit and governance must change to respond to the challenges posed by social media and disinformation. The narrow 'market failure' analysis of the role of PSB should be replaced by an understanding of the constitutional role of the sector in sustaining the health of our democracy. Tambini has studied broadcasting policy both as an academic and as a policy expert and proposes here how, in the forthcoming BBC Charter revision process, the emphasis needs to shift from concerns about market failure to improving the constitutional checks and balances which keep the corporation independent while holding it accountable. Helen Jay takes this argument further in considering how future debates on PSB might offer a model for a 'public service internet'. Formerly, Helen was Head of Policy at Channel 4, where she led the public policy, public affairs and corporate communications team. She is now pursuing academic research in media policy and her contribution arises from the work she has done in looking at the way we might reimagine public service institutions in a digital age and offer an alternative for a platform society.

The BBC has had such severe cuts over the last decade that it is in danger of being unable to deliver its remit. Paddy Barwise is an economist with a longstanding expertise in how we should best pay for public media in the context of changing patterns of media consumption. He examines a range of alternatives and makes a powerful argument for using the forthcoming BBC Charter review as an opportunity to move from a licence fee model to a universal household levy, along the lines of the German system. Whether people pay the licence fee or not, and whether they actually

consume the BBC's output now, in the future or never, the BBC ensures the entire broadcast network is accountable and answerable to every citizen.

The accompanying article by Annika Sehl, a distinguished academic based in Munich, gives a detailed analysis and explanation of how German public service media funding is organised and shaped. If we are seriously contemplating a version of a household levy in the UK, it is interesting and valuable to understand the way it has evolved over many years in the German political and regulatory system.

The final section in this collection positions the debates on public service in different geographical contexts—first close to home and then in a global perspective. Three articles examine the political dynamics of PSB in the UK nations beyond England. Two media academics from Aberystwyth, Sian Nicholas and Jamie Medhurst, discuss how Welsh voices have not thrived in the shadow of London. Andrew Liddle is a Scottish journalist and political commentator; he highlights how the relative independence of BBC Scotland is proving to be a mixed blessing. Bob Collins is a former Director General of RTE. He brings a deep understanding of the way that broadcasting in Northern Ireland is enmeshed in the longstanding bitter divisions of that nation. His argument is that the BBC in Northern Ireland needs to bolster both its governance and resources to address the challenges of properly serving all parts of its community. The predicament of the BBC in Northern Ireland is also, in more divided times, relevant to debates elsewhere.

Frances Cairncross, herself a former journalist, is the author of a high-profile report on the future of journalism in the UK and, in particular, how we might address the problems facing local news organisations, with the implications this has for a vibrant local democracy.¹ Her contribution considers the current role of the BBC in supporting 'local democracy reporters' and how this might be made more sustainable in future.

We shift from the local to the global with Martin Moore's contribution on the digital

¹F. Cairncross, *The Cairncross Review: a Sustainable Future for Journalism*, 2019; <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-cairncross-review-a-sustainable-future-for-journalism>

landscape. He has been at the forefront of debates within the academy, while also contributing to innovative campaigns to foster high standards in the media and protect democracies from the dangerous effects of a chaotic information order. He sets out in this collection how the global need for reliable and verified information is more vital than ever in a world where our digital spaces risk becoming ‘epistemological junkyards’, as Moore strikingly characterises them.

The TV and film industry is the UK’s sixth largest export industry, bringing international investment and creating many skilled and desirable jobs. Because of the BBC and the other PSBs, the UK is the world’s second biggest exporter of TV programmes after the US, and the biggest exporter of TV formats, contributing significantly to the country’s high global soft power ranking and to its economy, but also to the articulation and reinforcement of its values. Alban Webb wrote an award-winning book on the history of the BBC World Service and its decades-long role as a trusted source and an agent of public democracy. His concern with the shaping of public diplomacy informs his analysis of how recent governments have withdrawn funding from the World Service only to reinstate it to address specific diplomatic needs. He argues that this *ad hoc* basis for funding the World Service is unsustainable, yet the core purposes of the organisation are more important than ever as a tool of soft power and need to be preserved and indeed enhanced.

The final article provides another dimension to the positioning of public service media in the world. Isabel Hilton has covered China for many years and is an esteemed expert on the way that the Chinese have sought to promote their influence overseas. She reminds us that China has spent billions setting up a media system to disseminate its view of the world and challenge and undermine the

narratives of the BBC and other Western public service media in relating to emerging powers. The conclusion is that we need to appreciate and safeguard the immense benefit of the BBC in the international arena—lest it be drowned out by other voices. This of course links back to the opening argument made by Mark Thompson, highlighting the urgent need to preserve the intrinsic value of PSB, amidst global uncertainty.

PSB requires editorially independent and innovative providers. In the UK, the BBC is the central node in the ecosystem of PSB, but it cannot fulfil its role if it is not properly funded. The BBC is at its best with an expeditionary challenge and confident of a public interest purpose. Reimagining it at appropriate scale, guaranteeing its independence, and unleashing the whole armoury of ingenuity, engineering creativity and art the BBC can convene, is essential in the face of an information emergency. Minds may be closing and hearts hardening: religious, political, social and cultural intolerance is on the rise. The challenges facing PSB are existential, both for the effectiveness of the ecosystem and for the survival of liberal democracy. As Maria Ressa, a personally brave and audacious journalist and information warrior, wrote, ‘Without facts, you can’t have truth. Without truth you can’t have trust. Without all three, we have no shared reality, and democracy—and all meaningful human endeavours—are dead.’²

Suzanne Franks is Professor of Journalism at City, University of London and a former BBC TV journalist. She has published widely on the history and development of broadcasting. *Jean Seaton* is Professor of Media History, University of Westminster and Director of the Orwell Foundation and has published extensively on the history, politics and policy of the media especially the BBC.

²M. Ressa, Nobel Peace Prize lecture, Oslo, 10 December 2021; <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2021/ressa/lecture/>