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Public service broadcasting in the digital age

By Craig Berry

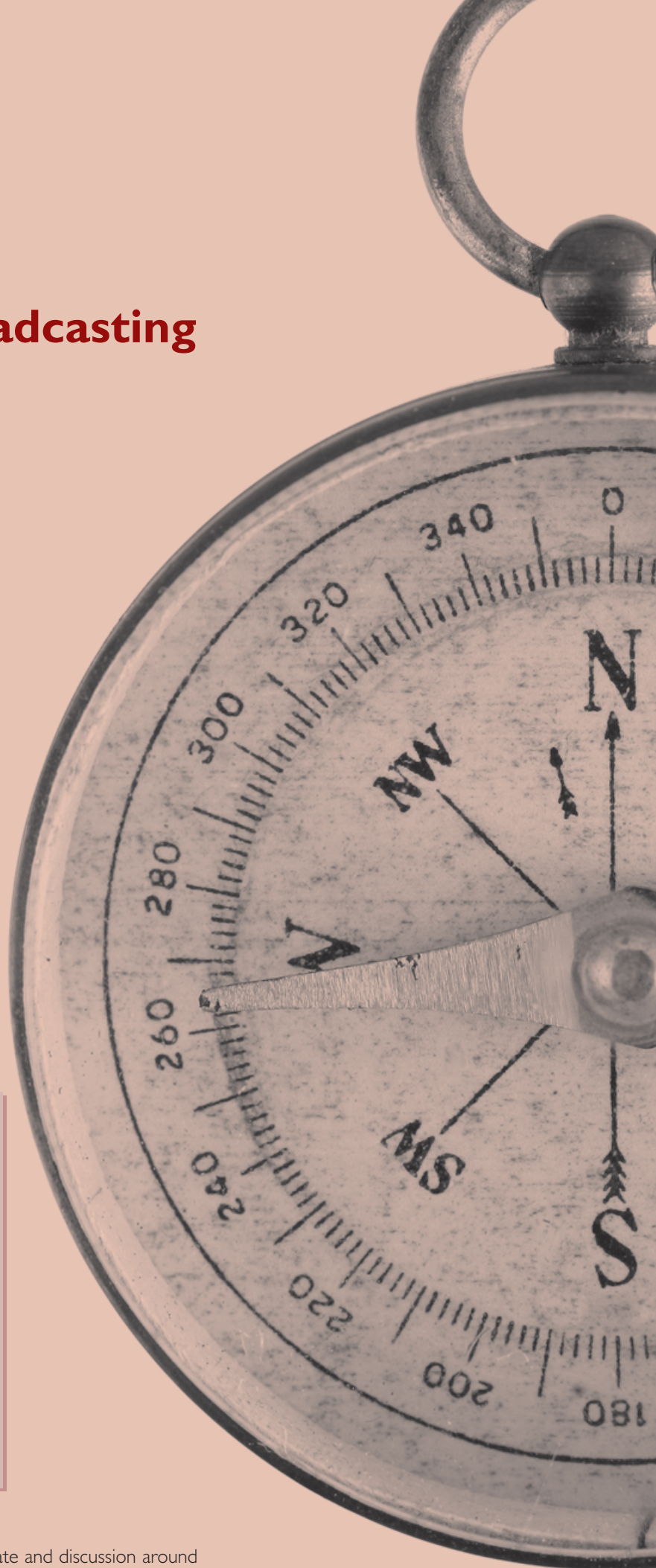
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Context

If there is one industry that has been transformed more than any other in the past decade, it is without doubt the media. Looking alone at the range of media platforms available to broadcasters, rarely a day goes by now without more news of an innovative new way to access audiovisual content over the internet, mobile phones networks, and so on. Television itself is a radically changed platform, one which has moved rapidly from being dominated by a small number of free terrestrial stations in each country to a digital environment giving access to hundreds of channels on the basis of up-front or subscription charging.

This has also heeded internationalisation of the sector; at least in the sense that national stations now exist alongside those produced for a global or regional audience. British viewers, for instance, can choose between Al-Jazeera, Fox, or CNN for their 24-hour current affairs if they want news from further afield than the BBC or Sky provide. This is not to mention the internet, where the national and global media are theoretically indistinguishable, as most ably exemplified by this very website.

In terms of the content of the expanding media platforms, we again see fundamental change. The internet and digital television especially allow consumers to choose between almost limitless options for their news, sport, entertainment. And the sheer amount of information that can be accessed on a news website, for example, far exceeds that which is provided in a traditional television or radio bulletin. The other great shake-up in media content is the advent of 'user-generated content', defined by websites such as YouTube and Wikipedia, in which the content is produced primarily by fellow members of the 'audience'.

It is in this context that some – chiefly private, multinational media firms – have started to question the continued utility of the principle of 'public service broadcasting', or more specifically the existence of publicly-funded broadcasters such as the BBC. The Conservative Leader, David Cameron, has joined in with this, too, arguing that the state should no longer be funding broadcasting services to the extent that it has in the past. Even Richard and Judy have had their say, publicly disagreeing with each other on the issue in a recent interview: Richard suggested that the state should no longer fund the BBC because private broadcasters can produce the same output commercially; Judy retorted that without the BBC, British television might just be 'crap after crap'.¹

The consensus of opinion, to judge from media coverage, is that the BBC is expanding too far into the new media environment,

unfairly disadvantaging the private sector. Such a perspective almost certainly influenced the Government when it announced recently that the television license fee would be increased only at a below-inflation rate – in real terms a cut in funding – over the next decade.

Analysis

This license fee settlement has itself only fuelled the emerging debate about the BBC's future. There are competing interpretations of its meaning, and we probably will not know which is the more valid for many years. On the one hand, funding has been cut and something will have to give: it will not be the digital switchover; and it will not be the planned relocation to Salford, as the money for these is ring-fenced. Furthermore, a precedent has been set that may well lead to continual decreases in the BBC's resources. On the other hand, the deal does represent a guarantee that society will fund public service broadcasting at a high level for at least ten more years. This outcome was never beyond doubt, and in a decade when the broadcasting sector will undergo substantial change, it could prove to be crucial.

Naturally, few would suggest there is no role for public service broadcasting in the contemporary media – the campaigners are in fact arguing vigorously for a much more limited role. Essentially, the charge is that the BBC is 'crowding out' private investment in the new media by using taxpayers' money to provide so many free services. The private sector, with much tighter financial constraints, simply cannot compete. In the interest of fairness, the BBC should avoid replicating services that the market is already providing. An oft-cited example is the news.bbc.co.uk website, which is tremendous but arguably keeps internet users from visiting the profit-making news sites of the BBC's rivals.

It seems somewhat ironic that these attacks on the BBC are being made after a period under the New Labour Government when the BBC has been revived as a creative powerhouse, and firmly re-established itself as a leading global brand. Innovative documentary series like Planet Earth have continued to push back the boundaries of the televisually possible, while the global phenomenon that is The Office has showcased British creative talent to the world. For some, this very success is part of the problem.

Of course, it would be inappropriate to suggest that securing the future of public service broadcasting means that we must blindly defend the current funding levels or the current model of provision. In both cases, the state needs to be flexible in order to meet the challenges of the new media environment. The industry will operate with new business models, and audiences will expect different things. But embracing change should not mean abandoning the principles and goals that remain as legitimate today as ever, and we should utilise the media to help realise them:



Cultural enhancement: providing a forum for creative talent, development of a national culture and identity, promoting minority cultures, facilitating cultural events, and so on.

Promoting education: dedicated schools programming and more general informative shows, encouraging life-long or e-learning, providing information resources, and so on.

Strengthening democracy: serve as a watchdog of government, inform citizens of the democratic process, provide a forum for debate, represent civil society, and so on.

Maintaining social cohesion: a social reference point, recognisable brands encouraging people to use new technology or consider new content, promoting digital literacy, advancing non-discrimination, and so on.²

Furthermore, while some larger media companies have complained about the economic ill-effects of the BBC's activity, this can be countered with numerous examples of where the BBC has stimulated investment in the media industry. Look for instance at Second Life, the web-based 'virtual world' that earns money from the participants in its digital universe. Last year, the Radio 1 launched a music concert within Second Life: the effect of this was to triple the number of Second Life participants, substantially increasing the company's profitability.³

This is the way it has always been of course. Britain's most successful commercial broadcaster is ITV: how could the station have achieved this status if the state had not decided to fund a national broadcaster, generating the initial demand for television? The public and private media have thus long co-existed side-by-side, for mutual gain.

At least some of the goals outlined above date back centuries. For instance, William Shakespeare's theatre company, and others, enjoyed the patronage of King James in the early 1600s. Maintaining the cultural industries in this way was hugely important, and our literary history might be very different if the intervention had not occurred.

Sometimes, it is not enough to rely on the market to provide public goods, even when regulation requires that they at least try to do so. The example of Shakespeare reveals just how valuable public intervention can be, but there are more recent incidences. One needs only to compare the BBC documentary series 'Panorama' to ITV's leading alternative, 'Tonight with Trevor McDonald'. Without wanting to denigrate Sir Trevor, it is quite clear that in terms of providing a level of excellence across the board, few can come close to the BBC.

Even those who accept and admire the quality of the BBC's programming have argued that the public would be better served if the state-funding of broadcasting was constrained to producing only those types of programmes the market does not adequately produce. This would presumably include 'educational' and 'informative' shows, precluding soaps, reality TV, sitcoms, game

shows, and so on. On a basic level, this seems to make sense, but it would be very hard to accept the loss of The Office, This Life, Only Fools and Horses and even Eastenders from British culture. Further, surely it is obvious that the status of the 'informative' shows that we would want to promote would be fundamentally damaged if we separated them out from the 'popular' media.

Such a debate ties in directly with proposals from the Britain's media regulator, the Office of Communications (Ofcom). Ofcom is proposing a new body, a Public Service Publisher, which would commission public service media content across different platforms. These are interesting proposals deserving serious consideration, but it would be wrong if this became the main way of delivering public service programming in the digital age, especially if the commissioners have narrow remits for what they can fund.

Prescription

The goals and potential benefits outlined above are, arguably, too important to be left to chance, or to be marginalised outside of the mainstream media. Indeed, it is the very breadth and importance of these goals that should lead us to reject suggestions that public service can be reduced from its current status to something more like a 'niche' service, only producing the types of 'worthy' programmes and other content that the market may not want to produce elsewhere.

What this points to is a continuation of the mixed economy in the media industry, with vibrant, innovative services available publicly and privately. Clearly, broadcasting differs from education and health, in that we will always expect the bulk of provision to be delivered privately, but public service broadcasting still has a key role to play. To pursue the cultural, educational, economic and other gains that we want to achieve, we have to keep enabling ourselves to harness the possibilities of the new media.

The prescription then, is to listen to but challenge the arguments of those calling for a reduced form of public service broadcasting in the digital age. Our society is being transformed, from one with relatively limited methods of national cultural reproduction to one of near ubiquitous connection to networks of information and communication. But this 'digital space' is still a public space, and we will need to act to make sure it is a progressive one.

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¹ James Silver, 'First name terms', Media Guardian, 19 February 2007

² See Karol Jakubowicz, 'Public service broadcasting: a new beginning, or the beginning of the end?', Knowledge Politics, February 2007

³ Victor Keegan, 'Cherish the BBC, the best innovator of all', Technology Guardian, 21 December 2006

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