

DESIGNING A NEW MODEL OF PUBLIC SERVICE TELEVISION (PST)

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The challenges facing public service television (PST) have been well-rehearsed elsewhere. I believe that some of the main building blocks of a new model for PST for the future can be identified.

First, although some suggest otherwise, there is still a significant future role for PST. A strong case can be made for a substantial, not just a marginal, intervention in the market. And that intervention should include content across all the purposes of PST identified in this paper: information, knowledge, and culture. Without PST investment, there would be fewer UK programmes available, and arguably less editorial innovation and risk taking. Shared experiences should continue to be an important part of PST, via the broadcast of major events but also through the creation of landmark popular programming.

However, reaffirmation of the need for a broad range of public service content should not be seen as underwriting ever-rising funding or as a licence for PS providers to produce just any type of content to attract viewers. While the case for PST's central role in the provision of impartial, independent and in-depth journalism is strong, PST news output will only be of value to audiences if it changes to reflect the opportunities presented by new media to better serve its users. While knowledge building remains a key role, PST must adapt to reflect the new market environment in which it operates, working with the many other expert resources available online. While drama, comedy and entertainment should remain part of the PST mix, there needs to be a renewed search for ambition and distinctiveness – not just across any particular service, but for each piece of content commissioned.

PST's future involvement in some types of content should be scrutinised carefully – for example, questions could be asked about the justification for PST investment in some of the more derivative types of lifestyle and light entertainment programming or online content. And programme volumes in some areas could be reduced, reflecting increased availability of high quality content elsewhere.

While long-form TV programming will remain at the heart of PST, whether on linear channels or (see below) on-demand, the concept of 'television' needs to be broadened to reflect new opportunities presented by digital media. TV news already benefits from the increased convenience and depth offered by online. Having invested in public service newsgathering, it is in the public interest to ensure that audiences can access that resource via a range of different electronic media. Likewise, other genres can be enhanced by an extra online dimension and, in some cases online will largely replace conventional broadcast TV. PST purposes will endure, but the precise format and nature of content should be flexible enough to change over time to meet audience expectations.

For long-form programming, PST should pro-actively rebalance its portfolio of services away from linear broadcasting channels to on-demand, leading audience behaviour not just responding to it. The advantages of on-demand will include:

- A longer shelf life for programmes which increases the chances of each piece of content being watched
- Improved reach among those audiences who are turning away from linear channels
- Potential to unlock access to the rich and varied programme archive
- Cost-effectiveness as, freed from the demands of a 24 hour schedule, less "filler" content needs to be made.

Quite soon, the ideal PST portfolio might well consist of one or at most two "premier" broadcast channels alongside a widening on-demand proposition. The main channels would

be the home of live TV and appointment to view programming, while playing a key role in promoting other services and launching new programming.

In parallel, key PST services should be designed to work well with new devices such as smartphones and tablets. It would be anachronistic to restrict PST to conventional broadcast delivery when the audiences who pay for it demand access via new platforms. Universality, in this world, should conceptually encompass platforms which are or seem likely to become mainstream methods of consumption, although the marginal benefits of extending access to such platforms need to be balanced against the costs of so doing.

In this new model, should we focus on the BBC, or encourage a new more plural system, perhaps through some form of contestable funding? Although contestable funding has many attractions, including testing the market for innovation and efficiency, it also faces significant practical problems in implementation, well-rehearsed elsewhere. At a time when PST funding is under pressure, and the commercial market is volatile, it would be counter-productive to tear up the current system completely and start again. A better approach would be to re-cast the way the BBC operates and is held to account, with more internal plurality of commissioning and production, and a greater diversity of programming sources used.

Over the next decade and beyond one might envisage the BBC as a new type of PST institution which is more open, diverse, and devolved in its approach to commissioning, production and distribution, and one which engages more actively and openly with content producers whoever they are – individuals, other institutions or commercial suppliers. Rather than simply commissioning individual programmes or series from external suppliers, this BBC might contract a completely new service from an external provider. Instead of one centralised editorial function for news, a number of independent and diverse news centres might be established to introduce more internal plurality. Local online services could be tendered from other local news sources, rather than set up inside the BBC – and so on.

In parallel with this development, the BBC would be asked to place more emphasis on expert curation of diverse content sources. Audiences increasingly need help to find and navigate their way to interesting content. This is particularly the case for on-demand programming and content on the internet. It is a non-trivial task to do this well, especially in a world where search and sharing are dominated by major US corporations like Google and Facebook, backed by huge investment and R&D budgets. If it is to be of value, this almost certainly requires special executive commitment and substantial new investment to make it happen. Government can help, too, by ensuring that the regulatory framework is updated to secure continuing prominence for PST content on major on-demand gateways (not just the main broadcast EPGs).

Given the risk that audiences increasingly lose touch with PST, another key building block should be to increase the connection between licence payers and the BBC, with the aim of enhancing a sense of real public ownership of PST and its accountability to audiences. At present, the licence fee is in effect a tax paid by anyone owning a TV receiver. In future, it would make more sense to link the payment explicitly to the provision of BBC services, and use the licence fee contract to build a mutually reinforcing relationship between the BBC and its users. Many commercial companies now encourage their customers to join loyalty schemes which provide benefits to users in return for frequent purchases and information given to the company. Likewise, many charities operate like membership clubs, in which donors are made to feel part of the organisation and have a say in its operations (through annual meetings, voting rights etc.).

There is huge potential for the BBC to borrow the best of these ideas and create a membership or even shareholding scheme for all licence payers, which would ideally help create a closer relationship between the institution and its beneficiaries. Rather than inventing another version of the BBC Trust to “represent” the licence payer, this would have the effect

of directly involving licence payers without an intermediary appointed from among the ranks of the great and the good.

How much should we spend on PST? In the context of the vast increase in high quality AV content available in the UK and the scope for more effective on-demand use of PST content, it is by no means certain that UK PST is currently under-funded, however strongly broadcasters might complain. In any event, whatever the real funding needs for PST, given the likely economic outlook for the next decade, uncertainties about public support for the licence fee, and the arguments over decriminalisation, it seems unlikely that there will be much potential in future for any significant real increase in the amount of public funding available for PST beyond the current settlement.

For this reason, and also because it is in many ways unhealthy for an institution to rely solely on guaranteed public funding, there is a good case for introducing some elements of voluntary funding into the mix over the next decade. Alongside the core licence fee, users of some of the BBC's peripheral services could be expected to pay for access to those services. For example, it would be possible for access to the iPlayer via mobile devices and PCs to be encrypted, and made available only on payment of a small annual charge. All BBC content would remain universally available, free to air, on the broadcast channels, but added convenience would be available for a modest fee. Alternatively, any BBC membership scheme could have different levels attached to it – again with a comprehensive basic level, but some higher levels for enhanced services.

The trade-off obviously is between creating some financial upside for the BBC, and retaining absolute universality for all. It does not seem unrealistic for such choices to be made in the interest of enhancing overall investment in content while retaining an affordable core fee.

Last but not least, the importance of a competitive UK commercial sector must be recognised. The focus of my paper has been on PST provision, and largely on publicly funded provision. However, UK PST has only been so effective to date because it has operated successfully in a wider commercial market (part of which was also regulated). The obligations imposed on the commercial PST sector are now more limited, than before. Existing commercial PSBs like ITV and Five now have a key role to play in helping drive commercial market developments rather than in the delivery of narrowly defined public service goals, although their significance as alternative news providers should not be ignored. More widely, open markets, with their decentralised decision-making, free exchange, scope for trial and error, and speedy ability to exploit technological change, will in future have a key role to play in delivering high quality programming to audiences and in doing so augmenting the effects of PST investment. Policy should be rebalanced towards facilitating such market developments, rather than imposing unaffordable obligations on a small number of commercial broadcasters.

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