

## **Submission to *A Future for Public Service Television: Content and Platforms in a Digital World***

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### **Online challenges for public service television in a digital age**

Convergent media landscapes proliferate globally at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, where new commercial operators native to online publishing are challenging not just the mode of transmission but the very nature of television itself. Netflix, for example, premiered its exclusive content in 2012 by releasing all eight episodes of the comedy-drama, *Lilyhammer*, at the same time. Thus shaking some of the founding principles of scheduled television and capitalising on a new trend of binge watching television series. Since its UK launch in 2012, Netflix now has 4.4 million subscribers, whilst 1.2 million people subscribe to Amazon's Prime Instant service (Ofcom Communications Market Report, August 2015<sup>1</sup>). Amazon, of course, also recently signalled its intent for original programming in the UK by signing the former Top Gear presenters Jeremy Clarkson, James May and Richard Hammond for 36 episodes of a new motoring show rumoured to be named "Gear Knobs".

With 78% of households reportedly having a broadband connection, and already 30% of these defined as "superfast" (Ofcom, 2015<sup>1</sup>), the *infrastructure* for on-demand streaming of content previously reserved for broadcast are becoming increasingly widespread. This is reflected in viewing habits too, with traditional TV viewing falling across all age-groups since 2012 – the decline most pronounced among 16-24 and 35-44 year olds, and viewing of ITV channels most affected (Ofcom, 2015<sup>1</sup>). Despite these challenges, in the UK, public service broadcasting remains integral to the video-on-demand market where the BBC iPlayer remains one of the most popular (according to Ofcom, 31% of adults using it in the past year<sup>1</sup>). Broadcasters are also taking advantage of cross-platform promotion and audience engagement, for example through hash-tags and references to social networks.

The threat to news and journalism is even more acute in this landscape, given how audiences are already turning to laptop/desktop computers (48%), smartphones (27%) or tablets (18%) as their *main digital news device* (according to the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2015<sup>2</sup>). Again the challenges to UK public service media are from international online native brands, such as: *Huffington Post*, *Yahoo News*, *Google News*, *BuzzFeed*, and the increasingly popular *Vice*. Whilst television remains the primary source of news for 41% of respondents in the Reuters study, 38% claimed online and social media was their primary source (radio and newspapers were both 10% each).

These challenges are even more pronounced given the transnational operation of online or mobile specific publishers, which erodes any idea of easily applied regulatory frameworks to globalised online content. This provides a compelling case for protecting investment in public service television on its own. However, how and why should this extend to online and mobile content? To demonstrate the potency and importance of public service television to the web, and indeed vice versa, I will in the following section briefly highlight some examples from the BBC's pioneering role as a technological innovator and what it has meant for developing high quality content on the web. This is followed by a series of general recommendations in light of the challenges faced by public service television as a whole, to reinforce its *commitment to* and *inclusion of* web and mobile.

### **Freedom to innovate as a core purpose of public service television**

The BBC has a rich history as a technological innovator, and also in developing forms and practices that take advantage of such technological advances. Whilst the obvious examples concern broadcast technology and standards, the Corporation's contribution to innovation is much broader than that. In the mid-1990s, for example, the Corporation's ambitions in delivering programme content online helped precipitate a drive in online audio and video experimentation - allowing producers to deliver new services, or make use of material that would not otherwise have made it on to their traditional broadcast channels. The BBC was particularly well placed to take on such a challenge given its diverse programming teams and also its commitment to providing forums for public debate. In other words, the motivations for the Corporation's move online were anchored in its historical commitment to civic engagement and public service. Moreover, it did so independently after first exploring formal partnerships with commercial organisations. Indeed, I would argue that the findings from the independent panel on the future funding of the BBC in 1999 still ring true - whereby they rejected external pressures to turn BBC Online (including news and sport) into a commercial operation, as they expected it: "to become a core part of the BBC's public service in the next few years. We also expect that closer convergence will take place between websites and broadcast services, so that the BBC's domestic audience will increasingly access BBC output via the website." (Davies et al., 1999,

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<sup>1</sup> Ofcom Communications Market Report, published 6<sup>th</sup> August 2015, available from: [http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/research/cmr/cmr15/CMR\\_UK\\_2015.pdf](http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/research/cmr/cmr15/CMR_UK_2015.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> *Digital News Report 2015*, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, available from: <http://www.digitalnewsreport.org>

p. 65)<sup>3</sup>. Of course this has proven to be correct with the BBC leading the way in terms of on-demand audio and video following the launch of the iPlayer in 2007. The BBC also transformed how traditional news narratives are enriched with video content through the EMP (Embedded Media Player) launched in 2008, that also facilitated the ability to select from multiple simultaneous live feeds (enhancing diversity of coverage ranging from political events, to music festivals and sporting occasions).

It is important to note that this innovation has been driven by the BBC's stated public purposes, which means developing opportunities that commercial operators would not always have been able to or interested in catering for. Three examples are worth highlighting here: firstly, the BBC's innovation in relation to sustaining citizenship and civil society (public purpose 1) through the launch of Democracy Live in 2009. This website brought together for the first time on BBC Online live and on-demand video footage of all the proceedings from UK national political institutions and the European Parliament, thus enhancing the connection between the British public and their elected representatives (Thorsen, 2011)<sup>4</sup>. Secondly, innovation in relation to promoting education and learning (public purpose 2) through education technology, from the initial BBC Micro (released in 1981) to the recent BBC Micro Bit (released in 2015). Through developing accessible hardware in this way the BBC is addressing computer literacy and digital skills gap in the UK, targeted specifically at schoolchildren. Thirdly, innovation in stimulating creativity and cultural excellence (public purpose 3) through the BBC Antiques Roadshow companion mobile app. Launched in 2013 it represented the Corporation's first live and synchronous play-along mobile app. Linked via a unique digital audio signal to an app, it also enabled real-time multi-screen interaction with a streamed iPlayer catch-up programme. Whilst the application's "guess the valuation" interaction is entertainment oriented, the possibilities this opens for civic participation with catch-up television are boundless. Such projects are made possible by the Corporation's obligation to "Delivering to the Public the Benefit of Emerging Communications Technologies and Services" (public purpose 6), the long-term investment in research and development at the Corporation, directly linked to the licence fee and predictability of 10-year funding cycles. Indeed, it is hard to imagine how some of these functions, fundamental to the BBC and public service television, would be commercially self-supporting.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the principles and challenges described above, it is clear in my view that a commitment to developing online and mobile services are integral to the future of public service media. To secure independent public service television in this context, the Inquiry should consider the following recommendations:

- **Public service television needs to be understood as a multi-platform, multi-screen approach.** This may mean referring to "public service media" (rather than PST or PSB), to embrace the increasingly platform agnostic way people experience and interact with content, but it *does not* mean relaxing the principles of quality television programming or universality. Multi-platform, multi-screen must not erode television, instead it should be viewed as an opportunity to *enhance* the "public service" commitment of publicly funded media organisations. For example, by investing in civic-oriented multi-screen functionality in the area of contextualisation enhancement. Funding therefore should be associated with the delivery of public service content as a holistic approach, to ensure appropriate diversity and plurality, rather than specific platforms. Rather than viewing converged media landscapes as a threat to public service television, the opportunities afforded by online and digital platforms should be harnessed to broaden the spectrum and reach of quality programming.
- **Websites are an integral part of public service television** in a multi-platform, multi-screen media landscape and needs to be at the core of any public service investment strategy. Not just as an alternative or on-demand delivery platform (such as the BBC iPlayer, ITV Player and All4), but as vehicles for original and interactive public service content. This is particularly important for public service media to continue acting as a forum for public debate and sustaining civic engagement for the purpose of a functioning democracy.
- **Websites are also a crucial part of delivering public service journalism** – ranging from in-depth investigative features, to live streaming of events with multiple feeds, to the transparent and constantly evolving narratives of live blogs. Public service media should be opened up to enable citizens to use these platforms to engage with programmes, content, ideas and fellow citizens. Moreover, public service news providers should simultaneously engage and reflect the views of diverse and marginalised audiences, which means investing

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<sup>3</sup> Davies, G., Black, H., Budd, A., Evans, R., Gordon, J., Lipsey, D., Neuberger, J., & Newton, T. (1999). *The Future Funding of the BBC: Report of the Independent Review Panel*: Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

<sup>4</sup> Thorsen, E. (2011) 'The Second Digital Wave: BBC News Online, Embedded Video and the iPlayer', in Burns, M. and Brügger, N. (eds) *Histories of Public Service Broadcasters on the Web*, Peter Lang: New York

in new forms of journalism. Websites and mobile apps are particularly well suited to such experimenting, and their increasing relevance on traditional television programmes can lead to a trickle-down effect.

- **Research and innovation should remain an integral part of what constitutes “public service”**, since this a) enables PSBs to meet the demands of contemporary and future audiences, and b) ensures that advances in media technology are developed for the purpose of sustaining citizenship and civil society.
- **Technological innovation should be universal** – just as the founding principles of the world wide web, and indeed the principles of public service television, are anchored in universality. This means a commitment to platform neutrality, especially across mobile operating systems (e.g. Apple’s iOS or tvOS, Google’s Android or Microsoft’s Windows 10). It also means investment in accessible and adaptable technologies for websites and mobile apps, to cater for both diverse and marginalised audiences. Finally, it means UK public service television continuing to support and actively contribute to open standards – such as the BBC’s Universal Control protocol<sup>5</sup> - in collaboration with DVB, EBU, DTG, and W3C.
- **Funding must be governed by transparent processes and long-term predictability**, to enable the type of environment capable of fostering technological innovation and investigative journalism.

### **Biographical note**

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<sup>5</sup> Companion Screens, BBC Research & Development, available from: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/rd/projects/companion-screens>