

SUBMISSION TO A FUTURE FOR PUBLIC SERVICE TELEVISION INQUIRY

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Technical change, financial uncertainty and the fear that unscrupulous people might get control of the airwaves, gave birth to public broadcasting in Europe. Today, technical change, financial uncertainty and growing oligopoly control over the platforms through which media is disseminated, are a problem again. So this is the moment to strengthen publicly funded media, to defend it and to ensure that it has the independence to hold Governments to account, invest in changing technologies and nurture innovation in programming across the board.

It is often suggested that internet and commercial channels have made the need for publicly funded, universal access, redundant, but there is no evidence that supports this assumption. There is, on the other hand, a growing body of evidence suggesting that people living in more commercially driven media environments, without the stimulus of high quality non-commercial programming, are far more narrowly informed than those living in countries in which there is a well supported media public sector (Esser et al 2012, Aalberg et al 2012). This has become more, rather than less, important as evidence grows of the way in which the internet, rather than broadening access to services that 'inform, educate and entertain', in fact narrows access, because of the impact of social media and the algorithms that are employed to make it operate effectively.

Unfortunately, at this moment of change, this Government has chosen to attack public broadcasting, rather than to defend it, on the premise, as the DCMS paper on BBC Charter Renewal makes clear, that private sector media organisations have a natural right to provide services and that publicly funded organisations should only be given the right to exist in the case of market failure. A key argument given is that the BBC is "crowding out" the commercial sector.

On the contrary, the BBC has shrunk since 2010, by between 16-20%, as Governments have insisted that licence fee payers should take on the costs of Government policies. In fact a far greater concern than "crowding out" is the likely further diminution of this vital national asset. The BBC is critical to the creative ecology of the United Kingdom. If it shrinks any further we would be in serious danger of damaging our globally renowned creative sector. Commercial companies, providing high quality programming to the BBC and Channel Four, would suffer substantially if the BBC were to shrink further.

There is also little doubt that, should the BBC lose even more of its in-house programme-making potential, most of the creative programming provided in the UK will, in a very short time, be owned by multi-national corporations with no particular stake in producing distinctive British programming. The speed of the take-over of British independent production companies by American-owned corporations is already a matter of deep concern.

There is no evidence, as the Green Paper suggests, that greater market competitiveness would be a spur to higher quality. On the contrary, there is ample evidence that, in markets with high levels of commercial competition and weak public sector delivery of services, the most usual outcome for the majority audience is a drop in quality, as time is given over to cheaply made programming for mass audiences. Indeed, as Lord Grade himself said in his 1992 MacTaggart lecture, the most likely reason for the high quality of the drama produced by the commercial sector in the UK, is the need for commercial companies to compete with the BBC for quality.

Competition for higher quality is a public good that is not recognised or celebrated in the 'rationale for the BBC' as it has been drafted in the DCMS charter renewal document and is absent in discussions about the future of Channel Four. The commercial sector has so far risen to the challenge of competing for quality with public broadcasting but the existence of a strong BBC, with financial muscle and creative freedom, remains essential to upholding that quality. If the BBC is allowed to wither any further, there is no reason to assume that it will be able to uphold the standards the public expects of it. Already, the insistence that the BBC outsource an increasing share of its programming means that it is now in direct competition for talent with organisations with far deeper pockets, such as Sky and, in the future, Netflix and Amazon. There is a strong case for arguing that the BBC should receive enhanced funding in order to maintain its position in the field and to protect the future of the UK creative industries.

Arguments about the deleterious effects of the non-existent expansion of the BBC has meant also that, in one area in which there is clear market failure: the delivery of local news, the BBC has in fact been prevented from getting involved for fear of interfering in this virtually non-existent market. It is clear from this example alone that the concept of market failure is being used by the commercial sector, not as a means of enabling intervention where it is required, but of preventing it at all costs.

If British cultural production and creation is to be safeguarded into the future, and audiences are to be well-served, it is essential that not only is the BBC allowed to continue to grow as a market for cultural products, but also that it continues to provide a role in both production and training for cultural workers. It is also essential that the BBC is given the freedom to innovate without the constant fear of Government interference.

Recommendations

Better Safeguards for Independence

According to the BBC's audience research (2015): "audiences think the BBC has lately been underperforming on its delivery of 'fresh and new ideas'." Audiences are also concerned that the BBC's provision of "high quality journalism" has slipped. These changes to the public perception of the BBC have coincided with a

period in which the BBC has been subject to successive attempts by the Government to exert control and a steady erosion of funding. The best recipe for delivery of innovation and courageous journalism is steady funding, freedom from coercive control and broader representation in Governance structures.

Recommendation: The BBC license fee should be maintained and if necessary increased. In the future the level of the license fee should be decided by a body that is completely independent of Government in order to protect it from political pressure. This body should also hold an enquiry into the best means of ensuring that the license fee continues to be paid by a majority of citizens, irrespective of the platform by which it is received.

Freedom to Innovate in technology

There has been rapid change in the sector towards increased personalisation of information. It is important that alternatives to personalisation are also considered, taking into account the needs of licence payers as citizens, as well as consumers. Already evidence suggests that increasing personalisation of information is leading to a more polarized politics and an increased danger that large swathes of the population stand to be cut off from public debate. If technical innovation only takes place in the commercial sector it is very unlikely that these concerns will be addressed. The development of the BBC computer and the iPlayer are good examples of what a public sector organisation can achieve if it is not impeded. The BBC should be an incubator for innovation in the communications field rather than being encouraged to out-source technical developments to private sector companies where the bottom-line is the only measure of success.

Recommendation: The BBC should be encouraged to invest in innovation in technology.

Freedom to Innovate in Programming

The internet has provided a perfect opportunity for public service television to nurture and encourage the next generation of creative talent at relatively low cost and without taking up precious programming space.

Recommendation: It is time to establish an independent commissioning body with a brief to nurture innovation and new talent. This body should be staffed by people from a wide range of backgrounds and tasked with helping to establish independent, online channels, using BBC and Channel Four cross-promotion, to help build audiences. This initiative should be funded, not by top-slicing existing programming budgets, but by levies raised from the profits of some of the largest media companies in the UK including Google, Facebook, Sky and BT.

Local News

There is clear evidence of market failure in the delivery of news to local areas in the UK. Large swathes of the country have access only to one monopoly news provider or have no local news service at all.

Recommendation: The BBC should be encouraged to fill the gap where the commercial sector has failed. It should start to provide local news services, where possible in conjunction with independent local journalists, but always within impartiality guidelines.

Channel Four

Channel Four has not entirely lived up to its original brief to provide minority programming for under-represented groups because that brief has always been in tension with the requirement to attract advertising. However, if Channel Four was to be sold off to a Global media company, it will be under even greater pressure to deliver commercially and its public service remit will be forgotten.

Recommendation: Channel Four should remain in public ownership and its brief to provide minority programming for under-served audiences should be re-enforced.

References

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