

## Public Service Broadcasting as a Digital Commons

Graham Murdock

A swelling chorus of commentary claiming that because in the age of the smart phone and the tablet anyone can access whatever they want, whenever they want, there is no longer any need for publicly funded institutions that offer a comprehensive service. The version of this argument put by Martin le Jeune, former head of public affairs at Sky, is typical.

“Judged from the point of view of the *consumer*... broadcasting is in a very healthy state. There is a good deal more choice for people; they have more ways to access good content” and “*If the market is providing more, the state (through direct and indirect intervention) could and should do less.* (Le Jeune 2009:3) [italics in the original]

In common with a number of critics he sees public service organizations continuing to have a role but a much more restricted one,

“tightly focused on delivering what the market cannot do, or does only to a limited extent. That might indicate a smaller but rather more intellectually distinguished corporation: impartial news and current affairs, factual and documentary programming, children’s television, classical music, speech radio – and little more” (Le Jeune 2009:25).

This projected future enjoys continuing currency. It features prominently in the consultative Green Paper issued by the British Government in July 2015 inviting responses to a series of questions over the BBC’s future role and organisation, in the lead up to the renewal of its governing Charter. Among the key questions put is whether;

“Given the vast choice that audiences now have there is an argument that the BBC might become more focused on a narrower, core set of services” (Department for Culture, Media and Sport 2015: 23).

There is no matching question asking for comments on possible directions for further expansion. In a communications environment increasingly organised around digital networks however, there is a compelling case for extending the BBC's public service remit. There are three reasons for this:

Firstly, successive cuts to public expenditure have seen a major contraction in the public information and cultural facilities previously available in local communities. Public recreational spaces have been sold. Libraries and museums have closed, reduced their opening hours, or have only been kept open by volunteers. These cuts render the maintenance of PSB as a comprehensive cultural and informational resource open to all and free at the point of use more essential than ever.

Secondly, this is particularly true of households on low incomes. Despite repeated claims that smart phones and tablets have brought the internet within the reach of 'everyone' research reveals persistent patterns of exclusion by age and class. Recent British figures, show that the elderly and the poor are least likely own a tablet or smart phone. In 2015 90% of young people aged 16-24 owned a smart phone compared to only 18% of those aged 65 and over (Ofcom 2015: 65). At a time of widening income gaps and cuts in welfare budgets they are also the group most likely to have difficulty meeting the subscription costs for commercial cable and satellite services. For them, PSB is likely to remain their major, and for some, their only, point of access to a diverse range of cultural and information resources which suggests that maintaining a comprehensive publicly funded service, free at the point of use, remains a policy priority.

Thirdly, users accessing commercially provided 'free' digital facilities now encounter a system where the most popular on-line activities are dominated by a handful of mega corporations - Google, Facebook, Amazon, and Apple – all based outside the UK and generating profits by harvesting and selling users' personal data.

In a recent speech, the President of the European parliament, Martin Schultz, characterised the power of these digital giants as totalitarian, arguing that the decisions now being taken behind closed doors were constructing a future without public consultation in which corporate priorities take primacy over the public interest.

“Facebook, Google, Amazon” he argued “must not be allowed to shape the new world order. They have no mandate to do so! It is and must remain the proper task of the democratically elected representatives of the people to... take decisions which apply to everyone” (Schultz 2016).

In the UK the BBC offers the only effective institutional base for a comprehensive alternative to this corporate annexation of the internet. It currently operates one of the UK’s most popular web sites, with a unique audience of 40 million, placing it third behind Google (with 46 million) and Facebook (with 41 million). Sky, the only other UK broadcaster to make the top ten, attracted only 28 million (Ofcom 2015: 358)).

In a 2005 paper (‘Building the Digital Commons: Public Broadcasting in the Age of the Internet’) I argued that PSB institutions should take full advantage of the internet’s networking and participatory potentials to become pivotal hubs in the public provision of on line resources. In the decade since then, this idea has steadily gained momentum. One of its most insistent champions has been the BBC’s Controller of Archive Development Tony Ageh who has advocated developing a new ‘Digital Public Space’ in which public broadcasters would play a central coordinating role. He envisions it as:

“...an ever growing library of permanently available media and data held on behalf of the public by our enduring institutions. Our museums and libraries; our public service broadcasters (all of them); our public archives; government services” (Ageh, 2015)

making

“the vast archival wealth of nations – our Collective Abundance – here in Europe and well beyond, accessible. It would permit, encourage and even require contributions from the whole of our society. It will be a place where conversation thrives, where all

contributions are welcomed and where every story, no matter who tells it, has value” (Ageh 2012: 9)

and be freely available for everyone to use

“for research or for amusement, for discovery or for debate, for creative endeavour or simply for the pleasure of watching, listening or reading” (Ageh 2015).

A variant of this idea has been incorporated into the Corporation’s formal policy proposals outlined into its recent manifesto for change, *British, Bold and Creative*. This imagines an Ideas Service with the BBC providing a platform for collaboration that;

‘would bring together what the BBC does across arts, culture, science, history and ideas and add to it work done by many of this country’s most respected arts, culture and intellectual institutions... for curious audiences around the world, the BBC would create and manage an online platform that, working with partners, would provide the gold standard in accuracy, breadth, depth, debate and revelation. It would offer audiences the thrill of discovery and the reassurance of reliability.’ (BBC 2015:70)

This initiative would aggregate content from multiple sources, working across broadcast and on line, providing audiences with content to share, curate and mutate, and encourage participation in citizen science and other collective projects. As the document concedes however, implementing this vision remains a work in progress, an ambition rather than an accomplishment.

The labels may be different, ‘digital commons’, ‘public space’, ‘ideas service’, but they are informed by the same basic ambition of deploying the centrality of broadcasting in everyday life to construct and coordinate a public digital network that reinvents the cultural commons for contemporary conditions, grounded in the core commons values of shared access and collaborative activity.

This aim has animated a range of recent BBC initiatives, from the *Listening Project*, in partnership with the British Library to the collaboration with the LSE on a major survey of contemporary social class and the recent *Global Philosopher* exercise in generating transnational debate on public issues. But a comprehensive effort to build

a digital commons that utilizes the full range of platforms - broadcast, podcast, website - needs to tackle a series of issues that have not so far been given the attention they require

**Infrastructures.** Given the escalating climate crisis it is imperative that any plan to utilize digital systems more extensively addresses the ecological impact of the infrastructures and machineries involved. Cloud storage for example consumes very significant amounts of energy.

*Proposal* The BBC's purchasing policies for operating equipment and infrastructure should impose stringent requirements on suppliers to meet specified environmental thresholds on the procurement of raw materials and the ecological impact of production practices. Subsequent use should also be subject to strict rules on energy consumption and disposal.

*Proposal* suppliers should also be subject to strict requirements on conditions of work and minimum levels of pay at every stage of the production and distribution process.

### **Software.**

*Proposal* The BBC should support the open source movement by using non-commercial operating systems and software wherever possible.

*Proposal* The Corporation should take the lead in developing a public search engine as an alternative to commercial search engines, allowing users to locate material according to its veracity and social value rather than its popularity.

**Participation.** A properly inclusive digital commons needs to mobilise participation from the widest possible range of sources. It reaches beyond the major public cultural institutions-libraries, museums, theatres, archives, universities, concert halls-to include the dense networks of voluntary community and freelance initiatives.

*Proposal* That the commercial internet companies be charged a fee for their proprietary use of users' personal data and that the money raised be placed in a fund for the production of new digital cultural resources to be added to and accessed

through the broadcast commons. These might include: subsidies to local associations wanting to digitalise their archives; grants to teachers developing new educational materials; support for investigative research on key public issues; support for crowdsourced proposals in areas of citizen science.

**Internationalization.** Public cultural institutions across the world are now in the process of digitalizing their holdings offering an unprecedented opportunity to construct a global on-line resource. The *Europeana* project, although still in its early stages, demonstrates the immense gains from transnational co-operation. At a time of exacerbated divisions and animosities facilitating access to materials that illuminate events and situations from within contrasted experiences and perspectives is a priority.

*Proposal* The BBC should take the leading role in developing networking arrangements with cultural institutions outside the UK and in enabling users to search for and find relevant material across the full range of available international sources through the public search engine.

In the recent *Culture White Paper*, the government announced ambitious plans for collating digital public collections declaring that;

“We want to make the UK one of the world’s leading countries for digitised public collections content. We want users to enjoy a seamless experience online, and have the chance to access particular collections in depth as well as to search across collections” (DCMS 2016: 39).

For reasons I have outlined, the BBC is the institution best placed to coordinate and build on this ambition, incorporating the ‘public’ as active contributors as well as consumers. The Charter Review offers an ideal opportunity launch this project.

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