

Public Service Television and civic engagement.

A Submission to the Lord Puttnam Inquiry: *Public Service Television for the 21st Century*

By Dr Daniel Jackson.

Biographical note:

[*Dr Daniel Jackson*](#) is Principal Lecturer in Media and Communication at Bournemouth University. His research broadly explores the intersection of media and democracy, including news coverage of politics, the construction of news, political communication, and political talk in online environments. Daniel is co-convenor of the Political Studies Association [*Media and Politics Group*](#).

In most appraisals of democracy today the news media figures prominently. This is for good reason: it is the main channel of communication between elected representatives and citizens; and (self-appointed) watchdog of the powerful. The performance of the news media with respect to civic engagement is thus much debated and often maligned.

My intention in this submission is to briefly draw together some of these strands of research, with the aim of offering some informed views on two of the central challenges laid down by the inquiry outline:

- the social and cultural purpose of TV today.
- the performance of specific public service genres, including current affairs, drama, news and sport.

My primary focus will be TV news (as opposed to television more broadly). This is not to dismiss the important role popular culture can play in cultivating citizenship; but to argue that news, more than any other cultural form, carries the burden of defining the world in which citizens operate.

In this submission, I will essentially argue for the enduring need for public service values in the broadcasting environment, that specifically **puts citizens first**. This means:

- creating newsrooms that have the confidence to take what is important and make it interesting to people; not just chasing audiences;
- challenging what journalists consider as news values;
- creating a regulatory and funding environment that allows such a journalistic culture to flourish, through secure and generous public funding for the BBC and by protecting commercial PSBs' news operations from the worst excesses of the market.

Purpose and role of news media in democracy

A useful starting point for evaluating the role of public service broadcasting (PSB) in civic life is to remind ourselves of the normative function of the news media in a pluralist democracy. In most accounts, these are characterised as:

- a civic forum for pluralistic debate
- a mobilising agent for public participation (during an election especially)
- a watchdog for civil and political liberties (see Gurevitch and Blumler, 1990 Norris, 2000)¹.

While news organizations are sometimes reluctant to accept the responsibility that comes with such power, it is implicit in the core principles of journalistic philosophy, whereby attempts to constrain or censor the news media are seen as threats to democracy itself (Lewis, 2006).

Tensions

But these normative roles also are surrounded by many tensions that surround the ability of our news media to perform their democratic functions. Borrowing from Bennett and Entman (2001), I'll discuss four of these tensions.

Tension 1. Diversity versus commonality.

The media landscape continues to expand rapidly. Media fragmentation and segmentation have expanded the genres of what can be termed 'political'. There is also undoubtedly more news and journalism circulating in the public sphere than ever before, which should be considered a good thing.

However, segmentation and fragmentation do bring potential dangers as well. Firstly, in a commercially dominated system that is driven by the demands of advertisers, audiences can be segmented by technological access and spending power, not cultural or civic needs (McChesney, 2000). The resulting risk is that the market disregards some citizens who are less desirable to advertisers. As Gandy (2000) explains, the targeting of ever more specialised and smaller groups serves to undercut a common public culture. In this sense, segmentation can be implicitly anti-civic and anti-collectivist.

Secondly, changes in the way we engage with media (increasingly mobile, networked, web-based), together with the affordances of these devices and platforms (e.g. algorithms, data-driven, user-led 'pull mediums') are all pointing in the direction of increased personalisation of our media consumption, including news. This has numerous consequences. Two that I would like to highlight here are that for the interested citizen, there has never been more information available to learn about political issues, but conversely, at the same time it has never been easier to *avoid* political fare either. Secondly, as research in online news consumption is beginning to show, increasing personalisation in media consumption can lead to ideological homogeneity (also known as a 'filter bubble'), where we consume news that fits within our ideological biases, and can filter out that which doesn't (Pariser, 2011).

The challenge for PSBs is to maintain a sense of shared identity in their offerings, so as to foster a culture that still values civic life. It should also offer moments

¹ I assert these somewhat unproblematically for the sake of parsimony. There is little doubt they are Westernized notions of journalism/ democracy, and it is arguable that technological change challenges them (as for e.g. peer-to-peer spaces on the internet provide arguably more effective civic forums). See Zelizer

where audiences can (inadvertently or through choice) be challenged by political views that may contrast with their own. This means that PSBs must offer a range of ideological viewpoints from across the political spectrum.

Tension 2. The information necessary for citizens to participate effectively in democratic life, versus the entertainment-driven focus of an increasingly commercial-oriented media.

Here, I will spare readers from the somewhat staid arguments about dumbing down², but instead warn of some other dangers of the increasing corporate and commercial bias of our news media, which emanate from the organisation and structure of the media itself. As profit-seeking entities, commercial media organisations are reliant on advertising as the primary source of their income. As political economists have noted, this dependence can come at the expense of editorial independence (e.g. Hackett, 2001; Herman and Chomsky, 1988).

Whilst many journalists and editors might scoff at such suggestions of advertiser influence, there is growing evidence of other subtle ways in which the relationship between journalism and promotional industries (advertising, marketing and PR) are changing. For instance, a number of recent studies have documented the growing influence of public relations material in the news, raising questions of editorial independence (Jackson and Moloney, 2015; Moloney et al., 2013). Similarly, news organisations – in the search for new income streams – are increasingly working collaboratively with brands through ‘branded content’ and ‘native advertising’ initiatives, which blur the lines between news and advertising).

Whilst the response of news organisations to such accusations is often one of defiance, there is no doubt they are still very real threats – to editorial independence, to the normative concept of a fourth estate and in my view, to democracy. I will explain why, with respect to the next tension.

Tension 3. The need of the media to treat people as citizens on the one hand and as consumer publics on the other.

If we consider the media environment as a whole, there can be little doubt that we are overwhelmingly addressed as consumers rather than citizens. The circulation of goods, the material and symbolic meanings of commodities, and the dominant position of advertising in its many forms make civic culture look diminutive in comparison to consumer culture.

News and journalism are not immune from this process. The consumer model of news is now well established in the UK (see Jackson, 2007). It is precisely because of news organisations’ treatment of the audience as consumer and not citizen that some of the processes described above are able to take place.

According to McChesney, the consequences for democracy of a consumer-centric news media system are serious, as they carry a huge implicit political bias:

² Though you can read some of my thoughts on this and related subjects [here](#) and [here](#).

“Consumerism, class inequality and individualism tend to be taken as natural and even benevolent, whereas political activity, civic values and anti-market activities are marginalised” (McChesney, 2000, p. 36). The news media are thus central in the definition of culture in terms of consumerism and not citizenship. For him, the combination of neoliberal media policies and corporate media culture tends to promote a deep and profound de-politicisation of society, evidence of which can be seen across the western world, and the USA in particular. In the UK - to the extent that it is not with us already - we should not think we are immune to such developments, especially given recent developments in media policy.

Tension 4. Broadcasters’ relationship with the press

UK news broadcasters are mandated to be impartial, accurate and fair. As such, they provide a counterbalance to a highly partisan press. But this is a delicate balance. Studies consistently show that UK broadcasters are susceptible to following the news agendas of the press. This might not be so problematic if our press were a) not so overwhelmingly right wing and b) concentrated in so few hands. In the recent General Election, we saw a super-charged Tory press, aligned with the agenda of the Conservative Party, that was remarkably successful at setting the news agenda of the terrestrial broadcasters (see Deacon et al., 2015; Barnett, 2015). Just as worrying was the 2014 [survey](#) that found that the UK public holds a number of (quite grave) misapprehensions about many key public policy issues, such as immigration, welfare and crime. Such a collective failure is something our news media, including PSBs, should be ashamed of.

We know what to expect now from the UK press. Therefore it is imperative that public service broadcasters offer us news that is distinctive, independent, and as free as possible from the biases implicit in commercial news and broadcasting.

Underwriting all of these tensions are the market forces of a largely commercial media landscape. Compared to the US system, British broadcasting has traditionally remained relatively protected from the worst excesses of the market, but this is not inevitable or permanent, especially given the current political landscape.

The BBC is also not immune from these tensions. Whilst it’s news operations have seen relatively fewer newsroom cuts compared to the commercial sector, the BBC arguably acts too much like a commercial broadcaster at times, and news output is not always as distinctive or independent as it could or should be. But the question here is whether the BBC’s funding model is *driving* this type of news, or whether there are other factors, such as journalistic culture and corporation strategy. I would argue the latter.

Recommendations

The tensions I’ve outlined here will never go away. They are an inevitable part of a media system upheld by markets and capital. But what we can do is **develop ownership and regulatory models that can at least shield news organisations from the worst excesses of the market.**

It goes without saying that this means a strong BBC, but we should also take this opportunity to look again at the remits and regulatory structures of the commercial PSBs.

Here, rather than follow the news agenda of other parts of the market, public service broadcasters should be setting the benchmark for what counts as quality journalism in the UK. But there also needs to be a change of mind-set amongst both corporate managers and those in the newsrooms of PSBs. **This is to put citizens and citizenship at the heart of their news agendas.**

This does not mean journalists only engaging in worthy, dispassionate policy debates, but **making the key public issues more relevant to people's lives.** And it does not aim to create two kinds of news – one for the well informed, and one for the rest – but instead **aims to re-conceive news by focusing on what it is useful for people to know.**

This means we need to challenge journalistic news values. After all, once interrogated, many news values serve neither a commercial or public interest purpose (see Lewis, 2006). Instead, their operational presence is justified by a tautology: it is news simply because it meets our definition of what news is – as David Althiede bluntly puts it: “news is whatever news people say it is” (cited in Lewis, 2006).

In practice, this requires a cultural shift in journalistic practice, but one that would be facilitated by reimagining the public purpose of PSBs. This means recognising the central role of news for defining and nourishing civic culture, and empowering the PSBs – through renewed remits and public funding – to pursue this.

Of course, we cannot force people to be interested or active citizens. But we can think about how to facilitate the conditions in which active citizenship may flourish. Reforming some aspects of how news is made, and the regulatory conditions that support it may be one step towards this goal.

References

Barnett, S. (2015). Four reasons why a partisan press helped win it for the Tories. In D. Jackson and E. Thorsen (eds), *UK Election Analysis 2015: Media, Voters and the Campaign*. Bournemouth: The Centre for the Study of Journalism, Culture and Community. Available from: <http://www.electionanalysis.uk/>.

Bennett, W.L. & Entman, R.M. (2001) (eds.). *Mediated Politics: Communication in the Future of Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Deacon, D., Downey, J., Stanyer, J. & Wring, D. (2015). News media performance in the 2015 General Election campaign, In D. Jackson and E. Thorsen (eds), *UK Election Analysis 2015: Media, Voters and the Campaign*. Bournemouth: The

Centre for the Study of Journalism, Culture and Community. Available from:
<http://www.electionanalysis.uk/>.

Gandy, O. (2000). Dividing Practices: Segmentation and Targeting in the Emerging Public Sphere. In L. Bennett and R. Entman (eds.), *Mediated Politics: Communication in the Future of Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gurevitch, M. & Blumler, J.G. (1990). Political Communication Systems and Democratic Values. In J. Lichtenberg (ed.), *Democracy and the Mass Media*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hackett, R.A. (2001). News Media and Civic Equality: Watch Dogs, Mad Dogs, or Lap Dogs? In E. Broadbent (ed.), *Democratic Equality: What Went Wrong?* University of Toronto Press, pp. 197-212.

Herman, E. & Chomsky, N. (1988). *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. New York: Pantheon.

Jackson, D. (2007). Citizens, consumers and the demands of market-driven news. In R. Scullion and D. Lilleker (Eds.), *Voter as Consumer: Imagining the Contemporary Electorate*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Jackson, D., and Moloney, K. (2015). Inside Churnalism: PR, journalism and power relationships in flux. *Journalism Studies*.

Lewis, J. (2006). News and the Empowerment of Citizens. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 9 (3), 303-319.

McChesney, R.W. (2000). Corporate Media, Global Capitalism. In S. Cottle (ed.), *Media Organization and Production*. London: Sage.

Moloney, K., Jackson, D., and McQueen, D. (2013). News journalism and public relations: a dangerous relationship, In S. Allan and K. Fowler-Watt (eds.) [*Journalism: New Challenges*](#), Centre for Journalism and Communication Research.

Norris, P. (2000). *A Virtuous Circle: Political Communication in Post-Industrial Democracies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Periser, E. (2011). *The Filter Bubble*. London: Penguin.

Zelizer, B. (2012). 'On the shelf life of democracy in journalism scholarship', *Journalism* 14 4: 459-473.