

February 22, 2015

I am responding to Ofcom's Consultation on Public Service Broadcasting as the founding Director of the University of Leeds Centre for Television Research (now a School of Media and Communication); as an academic (officially retired but still involved) whose research and writing has focused principally on a) the values and practices of public service broadcasting in Britain and a number of other European countries and b) media-politics relations, also in this country and comparatively in other advanced liberal democracies; and as a scholar, much of whose past research was facilitated and respected by the BBC. Although independent-minded, I have never been regarded as an implacable or predictable critic of broadcast political journalism.

I welcome Ofcom's considered review of the present state of public service broadcasting in the UK and especially its thorough and valuable provision of detailed information and analysis of trends in its performance in recent years. I also welcome Ofcom's evident recognition of the need to maintain and strengthen a strong public service sector in British broadcasting in the future. A cornerstone and distinctive feature of the British system, the BBC in particular has served as a model for emulation throughout much of the democratic world. If it was appreciably to decline, if its resources were significantly reduced, if the public service motivations of its executives and producers were to be deflected by other pressures – then British viewers and listeners, as well as our society and politics as a whole, would lose much of value that communication at its best can deliver.

All that said, Ofcom's review seems to me to be unduly sanguine about PSB's future prospects. By presenting the most likely (and acceptable) scenario for PSB as one of an 'evolutionary path', more or less in line with present provision and performance, Ofcom has under-estimated the dangers ahead, one of which is that it could become a road to attrition. Ofcom's specification of concerning 'transformative possibilities' (more on-demand viewing, new market entrants, audience fragmentation, reduced funding, and cost inflation) seems to ignore the additional levels of threat that it has itself identified elsewhere in its review, such as the widening generation gap in patronage of PSB services, a diminishing sense of the distinctiveness of those services among members of the younger generation, the ever-increasing centrality of the Internet in people's lives, and reduced spend over recent years on many areas of public service programming, especially current affairs, accompanied by an increased spend on entertainment. More broadly, Ofcom has failed to recognize the risks a) that PSBs will gradually but increasingly adapt to an increasingly fierce competition from ratings-hungry commercial providers and b) that PSB managements and editorial personnel will become so heavily preoccupied with sundry environmental developments and challenges which they will have to face in the future, especially technologically-based ones, that they will lose sight of their programming-related challenges.

The latter danger is vividly illustrated by the BBC's recently published Future of News report, which spells out in great detail foreseeable technological developments, to which the Corporation will have to adapt, while asserting that the essential core of its journalism practice will remain the same, namely that of getting the story and informing

people well about what is going on. There is nowhere to be found in this paper any recognition of a tension between getting the story and shaping it for public consumption in today's hectic and pressured news environment and fidelity to the professed principles of public service journalism.

Mention of that tension leads to my second main area of concern about Ofcom's review. Before outlining it, however, it is important to appreciate (as Ofcom does) that in public service broadcasting, and especially the BBC, Britain has a valuable resource for civic enhancement. Over many decades, the BBC has demonstrated its commitment and worth in the abundant resources and scheduling time it has devoted to public affairs coverage; its superiority over commercial broadcasters for the provision of 'hard news', including the absorption of political information by audience members, which has been repeatedly confirmed by independent academic research; its creation and use of a large corps of specialist correspondents to provide explanation and background on news events; and its imaginative decision to put on this year a 'democracy season' of programmes across its television and radio channels. (Two notes of reservation may be in order here, however: the growth of so-called interpretive journalism means that anchors, correspondents and reporters probably enjoy more speaking time on air than do politicians; and, so far as I am aware, nowhere in the otherwise admirable set of programmes asking, for example, 'Can democracy work?', have questions been raised about mainstream journalism as a possible contributor to democracy's problems.)

In this connection, it is astonishing that Ofcom's review refers nowhere at all to today's 'crises' of widespread political distrust, public alienation from politicians and political institutions and skepticism about what political campaigning can offer and elections can achieve. Whether understandable or not, these are dangerous for democracy and citizenship. Yet Ofcom has said nothing about the need for PSBs to consider how they might respond (other than simply report on) this situation. An explanation of this lacuna may lie in an assumption among many journalists – and Ofcom itself? – that failings of the political system are the sole source of the democratic predicament and that how the media present political affairs has nothing to do with it. But that would be to ignore the undeniable facts that a) politicians are highly dependent on the media for getting their messages across to the electorate; b) politicians tend to regard themselves as involved in a competitive struggle to capture headlines and media agendas; and c) to do so, they try to take account of and cater to journalists' news values and workways. In short, although there are no easy answers to the crisis of public disenchantment, ignoring it altogether is the worst possible response.

One possible way forward has occurred to me. It concerns the BBC's purpose, as stated in the current Charter and Agreement, of 'sustaining citizenship and civil society'. Among its list of PSB objectives, Ofcom refers to this as a matter of 'Informing our understanding of the world - To inform ourselves and others and to increase our understanding of the world through news, information and analysis of current events and ideas'. A problem with this formulation is that every editor of every major news outlet could plausibly claim to be committed to such a purpose. There is a case, I submit, for Ofcom to reconsider its statement of civic purpose and to strengthen and sharpen it along something like the following lines:

Sustaining citizenship by –

Providing information and analysis of current events and ideas

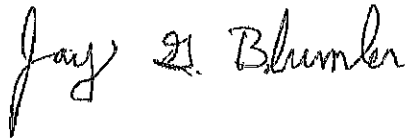
Presenting the main options among different ways of dealing with current issues

Ensuring that the experiences, problems and voices of all sectors of society likely to be affected by proposed policies are presented and heard

Holding wielders of significant political, economic and cultural power to account for how they are exercising it

Providing navigable avenues of comprehending exchange and dialogue between citizens and public decision-takers, affording the former opportunities to influence the latter and the latter to know the former well.

Such a statement could be connected with an expectation that the BBC will take account of these objectives at executive, editorial and specialist correspondent levels, not to guide daily reporting, but to institutionalize procedures for periodically reviewing its output in these terms. It might also provide the BBC Trust, the adequacy of the role of which has occasionally been questioned, useful criteria to apply when holding Management to account for its news and current affairs performance.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jay G. Blumler". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Jay G. Blumler
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