

Conceptual Glue: Public service broadcasting as practice, system and ideology

Patricia Holland

Paper presented to MIT3 Television in Transition 2003
MIT Cambridge Massachusetts USA

The debate on public service broadcasting

As a radical new Communications Bill was making its way through the UK Parliament (UK Parliament 2003), Michael Tracey, a prominent writer on British public service broadcasting now based in the US, circulated a paper on the consequences of the ongoing de-regulation of broadcasting in the United States (Tracey 1998 and 2003). He focused on three areas: the reduction in diversity of children's programming; the growth of 'reality' television and voyeuristic shows; and the narrowing of news and journalist led programmes. His paper was written as a dire warning to the United Kingdom, since the new Bill moves British broadcasting decisively away from a long established public service system and towards a de-regulated market model by weakening positive content regulation, relaxing some of the cross-media ownership rules and throwing domestic channels open to non-European (i.e. US) ownership. 'The need for change is clear', wrote the government ministers who sponsored the Bill, 'across the economy, deregulation brings benefits for consumers and for businesses' (UK Parliament 2002).

[Note to MIT editors: the details of the proposals were true at the time of writing (May 2003). It is just possible that some of the provisions will be modified in the

final Act (due to become law in Autumn 2003). This does not affect the substance of my paper.]

This paper is a small contribution to a renewed debate on the nature of public service broadcasting within a new political mood in the UK, where, in many fields –from education and health care to transport and communications- the ideology of the market is redefining the concepts of public service and the public interest. Within the broadcast media, convergence and rapidly developing technologies are often mobilised as a justification for what is ultimately an ideological shift.

The longer work of which this forms part focuses on one of Michael Tracey's three case studies, that of broadcast journalism, and in particular the type of 'long form' journalism known in the UK as 'current affairs' (Holland forthcoming). But this short paper leaves aside that specific example in order to look more closely at its context, the concept of public service itself.

Three points underlie my arguments:

- First, that, in the face of a powerful ideological challenge from free marketeers, the concept of public service has tended to become ossified. It now tends to be represented in public discourse as something that is worthy, staid and backward looking. Certainly in the case of current affairs, this conservative attitude has sometimes led to criticisms of newer approaches and more popular styles as 'dumbing down' or as not 'really' traditional current affairs as we know it.
- Secondly, the debate over public service has got stuck in a false dichotomy between 'public service' and 'commercial' broadcasting. My concern about this is greater because I have been tracing the history of *This Week*, a current affairs series which ran for 35 years on a commercial television channel. Over most of the history of UK television, 'public

service broadcasting' has not been synonymous with 'non-commercial broadcasting'.

- Finally, in my view, a regulated public service system is a necessary context to enable a broad diversity of programmes to flourish.

Practice, system and ideology

The debate on public service has been part of a wider contest over the structure and form of British broadcasting which has intensified since the mid-1980s, reflecting a general shift in British cultural attitudes -as much as in economic practices- towards a market-based approach (O'Malley 2001). However abstract, cultural attitudes continue to have important consequences for public policy, which is why I intend to focus here on the definitions and approaches which underlie the concept of public service broadcasting. Not surprisingly such definitions have rarely been fixed and programmatic. They have constantly shifted, evolved and changed since the beginnings of BBC radio in 1926. They have been based on usage and tacit understanding as often as explicit statement, and have frequently been adjusted in relation to changing practice (Scannell 1990; Gaber 2002). However, the BBC's first Director General, John Reith's holy trinity of 'entertainment, education and information', and his declaration that broadcasting should serve as the 'interrogator of democracy' creating what was described as the 'symbolic heartland of national life' (Cardiff and Scannell 1987: 159) have remained at the heart of the public service aspiration, informing and invigorating subsequent practice. But recent years have seen powerful challenges to such expansive claims, and the grander aspirations have been significantly narrowed.

Since cultural attitudes can never be separated from both practices and social structures, it is important to bear in mind at least three related aspects:

- public service broadcasting as a daily practice;

- public service broadcasting as a broadly organised social and economic system;
- and public service broadcasting as an ideology.

Over the years the ideology of 'public service' has played an active role in underpinning both programme making practice and the structure of the system. It has held together a wide range of disparate forces, particularly since the launch of Independent –i.e. commercial- Television in the mid-1950s meant that a channel funded by advertising was competing with first one, then two, channels funded by a licence fee. In the 1980s these were joined first by Channel Four, a public trust funded, ultimately, by advertising, and then by a variety of subscription channels from cable and satellite sources. Within this complex economic structure, the public service concept could act as a generative ideal across the whole system, valued by a broad swathe of television professionals, and backed up by legislation and regulatory practices across the spectrum. In the example of television journalism, the ideal of public service has been mobilised as a guarantee of journalistic integrity and independence whatever the channel, and it has had similar purchase, although with a different stress, across the breadth of television genres from sport to entertainment. (I was surprised how often the professionals interviewed for my book, The Television Handbook, ranging from trainees to long established producers, spontaneously mentioned 'Reithian principals' as a measure of the adequacy of their work (Holland 2000 see also Tunstall 1993)).

Thus the public service ideal has acted as a sort of 'conceptual glue' which has enabled sometimes contradictory forces to co-exist in an interrelated system. (Of course such a co-existence has never been straightforward and always disputatious, but the framework of the system has held it in place (see, for example, Potter 1989)). The current challenge is to renew the ideal and to imagine such a system within the new broadcasting conditions which include the proliferation of channels, the convergence of communications technologies and

the imminence of analogue switch off; as well as the ideological shift towards market economics and considerable political pressure from those who would benefit from increased commercialisation. Above all it needs to be rethought within the context of the globalisation of the media industries.

The 2003 Communications Bill pays lip-service to a revised notion of public service within this evolving context. It claims to define 'public service broadcasting' within law for the first time. However, what it envisages are specific 'public service' elements lodged within the output of the different channels –like optional add ons. It describes types of programming which are seen as 'public service' and so should be encouraged. In its view, some broadcasters are 'public service broadcasters', others are less so, others not at all. It implies a differentiation between 'public service', regulated broadcasters, and 'non-public service' commercial ones (Clause 260-262). (In an argument in defence of public service broadcasting, David Lipsey of the Social Market Foundation echoed this view, 'someone who sat down and watched an evening of a PSB(sic) channel, and then sat down and watched an evening of a commercial channel, should be able without hesitation to say which was which' (Lipsey 2002: 24)). In contrast to this, a public service system would take a quite different approach, since it depends on actively ensuring a diverse range within all the programme genres, and on protecting the interests of viewers as active 'citizens' rather than merely as passive 'consumers' (Murdock 1992) across the broad spectrum of channels, however they are funded.

Shifting ideologies

In the current climate in which the market is sexy and commerce rules, a new opposition has sedimented into common sense in which 'public service' is worthy, but lacks vigour and feels stuck in the past when compared with the forward looking drive of a dynamic free market. 'Public service' is criticised as

condescending and paternalist: whereas a 'market driven' system seems responsive to the public in a transparent fashion. For Margaret Thatcher the ITV companies were 'the last bastion of restrictive practices' (Miller and Allen 1994:6) It is a view that has become fashionable amongst some prominent television professionals. For example, the outgoing chief executive of Channel Four, Michael Jackson (2001) described public service as 'a redundant piece of voodoo' which produced blank faces amongst the media workers he mentioned it to.

In the run up to an earlier Broadcasting Act (1990), the Broadcasting Research Unit (headed at the time by Michael Tracey) produced an eight point definition of 'public service broadcasting' which began with the aspiration for universality --of audience access, of appeal, and of payment-- and included distance from vested interests, provision for minority audiences, and guidelines which liberate rather than restrict (Broadcasting Research Unit (1985).

New definitions of 'public service' which are in circulation have moved decisively away from any such priority for universality, independence and diversity. They include --and we should see these as productive ideological constructions as much as actual economic policies- include:

- The extreme market view, in which a television service which has a guaranteed income from taxation or a licence fee simply creates 'a distortion in to market' and so is an illegitimate form (European Union Bangemann Commission 1997 put forward by DG 13 (competition)). This view has no place for the concept of 'public service' --apart from, possibly...
- a bid to define 'public service' as what most people want in a way that can be measured by audience figures, as Rupert Murdoch claimed, notoriously, in his speech to the 1989 Edinburgh Television Festival, 'Anybody who...provides a service which the public wants at a price it can afford, is providing a public service' (Murdoch 1989). The bigger the

audience, the greater the service that is being given to those who make up that audience.

- The 'positive' (pro-public service) version of this market-based world-view is that 'public service' 'compensates for market failure'. 'Some form of market failure must lie at the heart of any form of public service broadcasting' reported the 1999 independent review panel on the funding of the BBC 'Beyond simply using the catch phrase that public service broadcasting must "inform, educate and entertain" we must add "inform, educate and entertain in a way which the private sector, left unregulated, would not do". Otherwise, why not leave matters entirely to the private sector?' (in Franklin 2001: 33) Yet in this description an impoverished public service plays second fiddle to a more highly valued market.
- a compromise redefinition of 'public service' as the presence of specific, worthy types of programming. This is a view that has crept up on us over the years, and is the view which, despite some fine words, is expressed in the Communications Bill, which sees some programmes and channels as 'public service' and some not.

But the history of commercial television in Britain shows that there is no necessary opposition between 'commercial' and 'public service' programming. Indeed to create such an opposition is dangerous as it could lead to 'worthy' programmes being hived off on to their own niche channel, where they become ever more worthy and boring and eventually and wither away. It could also imply that 'public service' broadcasters should be discouraged from making the sort of popular programmes –from sitcoms and soap operas to reality shows and consumer entertainment- which have been so successful across the spectrum of terrestrially based UK channels. Historically the idea and practice of a system has implied cross fertilisation and a situation in which the 'popular' and the 'serious' constantly challenge each other.

A group of producers from ITV made this argument at the time of the 1990 Broadcasting Act (Davidson 1993: 17-26). As the Campaign for Quality Television they contended that public service broadcasting, producing diverse programming, can only exist properly within a diverse system. Diversity of types of funding and ownership (licence fee next to advertising funded, next to subscription funded) had encouraged competition for quality and audience appeal, rather than for profits and audience size. The challenge of the 2000s is to imagine how such a system can evolve within the new conditions, and to ensure that the conceptual glue continues to hold the system together. This is something which the Communications Bill, ultimately committed to a market solution, is not interested in thinking through.

Public Service Broadcasting

Currently all three of the terms, 'public' and 'service' and 'broadcasting', are all open to re-definition:

- the public: precisely who constitutes this taken-for-granted body? what defines this imaginary group?
- The meaning of service; and
- The question of broadcasting itself. In an age of convergence, can broadcasting be seen as a discrete activity any longer?

Broadcasting

First 'broadcasting'. The think tank IPPR (Institute of Public Policy Research) ran a series of seminars which argued that public service broadcasting should become public service communications and should include the whole range of interactive media as well as radio and television broadcasting –particularly as broadcasting itself now expects much more participation from its audience.

'It was argued that what was needed was a space where the public felt they were being listened to – a "civic commons" in cyberspace, with regular consultancy with political figures, on both local and national levels. This open, institutionally recognised discussion could offer the public more of an incentive to engage itself with the political community' (IPPR 2003)

They point out that this gives rise to difficult questions of how, and to what extent sections of the Internet should also be publicly funded and protected by regulation.

Public

Secondly the complex idea of the 'public': Most campaigners have stressed the 'public' aspect of broadcasting, speaking of broadcasting as a 'public good' and stressing the 'public interest' (Eyre in Franklin 2001:43); a campaigning organisation set up to monitor the Communications Bill called itself 'Public Voice'. Such phrases echo powerful arguments about a 'public sphere' in which debate can take place amongst citizens, with each contributing on their own terms despite their differences (an idea most recently surfacing in the IPPR's idea of a 'civic commons') (Dahlgren 1995; Hutton 2001).

There are many things to be said about the problems (limitations and advantages) inherent in a simple notion of 'the public', but I'll focus on just one: the 'public' of 'public service broadcasting' has to be thought of as a national public for practical, as well as historical, reasons. Since legislation is national, regulatory bodies only have control within national boundaries. Citizens are citizens of a nation.

But the media giants who will be buying into UK television as the Communications Act becomes law, are not confined to nations. They seek out

high profile programming which aims to appeal to publics much wider than the national. *ER* and *Frazier* know no boundaries. In the words of Morley and Robins, 'audiovisual geographies are becoming detached from the symbolic spaces of national culture and realigned on the basis of the more universal principles of international consumer culture' (1995:11). The attempt to address smaller publics within a nation becomes more difficult in the face of this sort of pressure. The reporting of the Iraq war has shown how questions arise over the national base of journalism (Fox News and Al-Jazeera, both available well beyond the limits of their originating nations, give radically different, often incompatible world views, throwing into question universal notions of journalistic integrity and independence). Regulation, in this context, may sometimes seem like putting up a defensive shield against alien invaders.

At the same time, the public of the Internet is both dispersed and transnational, often building on cultural, linguistic and kinship links which reach well beyond national boundaries.

So 'public' has to be re-thought. 'Public service' needs to address transnational forms of citizenship and participation. The Children's Television Charter, based on the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child, produced by the international network of children's broadcasters, 'World Summit on Television and Children' (1995) is an example of the sort of thoughtful initiative which is becoming possible.

Service

And finally, what about 'service'? This has been a somewhat embarrassing term. The idea that 'service' is patronising and limiting lurks behind many libertarian worries about the notion of 'public service'. It has provoked strong reactions against 'paternalism'. Some years ago Paddy Scannell argued that a 'politicised concept of public interest' could have greater purchase (1990:24) but I want to I

want to argue that the concept of 'service' remains important because it indicates something about the relationship of broadcasters to their public. Paddy Scannell quotes Raymond Williams on 'the idea of service' which 'is the great achievement of the Victorian middle class, and is deeply inherited by its successors.' (Scannell 1990:22)

'Service', Raymond Williams had argued, was a middle class alternative to 'individualism', in its relationship to other classes. But he went on to point out that this great middle class achievement was not particularly welcomed by the working class people who were on the receiving end. 'This was wrong for me...' he wrote, since his own working class roots remained vividly present to him. For working class people, he argued, the concept of 'solidarity' is preferable (Williams 1961: 313, 315)

We live in an age when 'individualism' has reached beyond the middle classes and well into the working class. Despite the fact that this sort of class language remains deeply unfashionable, the question remains to be asked whether 'service' can still make sense in terms of the practices of the 'experts/professionals/educated classes' in their relationship with to those on the receiving end of their services. But we could also ask whether a renewed commitment to 'solidarity' is also possible, one in which 'solidarity' stands for broad social inclusiveness and accountability of the broadcasting and other communications media, as opposed to trading in the market place. I would argue that the interactivity offered by digital media, and the increasing involvement of the audience within both entertainment and informational programming, shows steps in this direction (Examples include the series of programmes broadcast by *Panorama* (BBC1) during the war in Iraq (March 2003). They included filmed questions to 'experts' in the studio from a wide variety of people in the streets of many globally dispersed cities, as well as a continuous flow of e-mail comments and responses from the viewing audience.)

Many of the diverse ways in which television has commented on current affairs in recent years –I could quote *Mark Thomas, Weapons Inspector* (C4 2003), *Langan Behind the Lines in Afghanistan* (BBC2 2001), *Macintyre Undercover* (BBC1 1999, 2003) –sometimes condemned as trivialising or ‘dumbing down’- could be seen as part of a move which enhances a public service practice (Holland 2001).

The internationalisation of public service

To conclude, an evolving concept of ‘public service broadcasting’ would not reject commercially funded channels, but would ensure that the regulation which restrains them is powerful and backed up by dynamic support for a diverse system. (Which the 2003 Communications Act does not). This would mean that the reference points of programme makers and executives –the standards against which they measure their work, their practice of programme making- are the other parts of the system, not the requirements of their owners. In other words, the link between ownership and control should be broken. By evolving a broader, international concept of citizenship rights and by including the Internet amongst the protected media, the concept of ‘public service’ should move beyond national boundaries, just as global ownership does. Programmes such as current affairs must be protected in any regulatory framework, but the danger of a nostalgic preservation of past forms must be avoided. The public service concept must continuously face the challenge of new channels, formats and delivery systems, as well as the involvement of citizens with an increasingly global consciousness.

Patricia Holland is grateful to the Harold Hyam Wingate Foundation and the Shiers Trust for support in her research on the history of the ITV current affairs

programme *This Week*. She is currently completing this work in association with Bournemouth University.

Bibliography

Broadcasting Research Unit (1985) The Public Service Idea in British Broadcasting: Main Principles Luton: John Libby

Cardiff, D. and Scannell, P. (1987) 'Broadcasting and national unity' in James Curran et al Impacts and Influences: Essays on Media and Power in the Twentieth Century London: Methuen

Dahlgren, P. (1995) Television and the public sphere, London: Sage

Davidson, A. (1993) Under the Hammer London: Mandarin

Franklin, B. (ed) (2001) British Television Policy: a reader, London: Routledge

Gaber, I. (2002) 'A history of the concept of public service broadcasting' in Collins, P. (ed) (2002) Culture or Anarchy? The Future of Public Service Broadcasting London: Social Market Foundation

Holland, P. (2000 2nd edition) The Television Handbook, London: Routledge

----- (2001) 'Authority and authenticity: redefining television current affairs' in Michael Bromley (ed) No News is Bad News; Radio, Television and the Public London: Longman

--- (forthcoming) The Angry Buzz: 'This Week' and Television current affairs, London: I.B. Tauris

Hutton,W (2001) 'Revive a public realm' New Statesman 21 May

IPPR (2003) From Public Service Broadcasting to Public Service Communications: Choice, Competition and Public Interest on the Internet Seminar April

Jackson, M. (2001) 'Channel 4 the fourth way' New Statesman Lecture 31 Oct

Lipsey,D. (2002) 'In defence of public service broadcasting' in Collins,P. (ed) (2002) Culture or Anarchy? The Future of Public Service Broadcasting London: Social Market Foundation

Miller,N. and Allen,R. (eds) (1994) Broadcasting Enters the Market Place Luton: John Libbey

Morley,D. and Robbins,K. (1995) Spaces of Identity; Global Media, Electronic Landscapes and Cultural Boundaries London: Routledge

Morley,D. and Robbins,K. (1995) Spaces of Identity; Global Media, Electronic Landscapes and Cultural Boundaries London: Routledge

Murdoch,R. (1989) Freedom in Broadcasting, London: News Corporation Ltd

Murdock,G (1992) 'Citizens, consumers and public culture' in Schroder et al (eds) Media Cultures London:Routledge

Tom O'Malley (2001) 'The decline of public service broadcasting in the UK' in Michael Bromley (ed) No News is Bad News; Radio, Television and the Public London: Longman

Potter, J. (1989) Independent Television in Britain Vol 3 'Politics and control 1968-1980' London: Macmillan

Scannel, P (1989) 'Public service broadcasting and modern public life' in Media Culture and Society Vol11 No2 April

Scannel,P (1990) 'Public Service Broadcasting: the history of a concept' in Andrew Goodwin and Garry Whannel (eds) Understanding Television London: Routledge

Tracey,M. (1998) The Decline and Fall of Public Service Broadcasting. Oxford: Oxford University Press

--- (2003) 'Tony Soprano's America is not all that it appears to be' London: Campaign for Quality Television Ltd

Tunstall,J. (1993) Television Producers London:Routledge

UK Parliament (2003) www.communicationsbill.gov.uk

----- (2002) 'Summary of our proposals' www.communicationsbill.gov.uk

Williams, R. (1961) Culture and Society: 1780-1950. Harmondsworth: Penguin