

## CURRENT DEBATES

# The Public Service Publisher – an Obituary

Des Freedman

### *Introduction*

In 2005, the British communications regulator Ofcom released its review of public service broadcasting (PSB), the remit governing the majority of broadcasters throughout British broadcasting history. While supporting a continuing role for PSB in a digital era, Ofcom found that the arrangement whereby commercial broadcasters provided public service programming in return for access to the airwaves was breaking down because of the declining value of analogue spectrum in the run-up to the switchover to digital television. In this situation, Ofcom, as the body with statutory responsibility for ensuring broadcast diversity and with specific oversight over commercial channels, concluded that the BBC was likely to end up as the near monopoly provider of PSB. It therefore recommended the creation of a new competitive supplier of PSB content, a Public Service Publisher (PSP), whose role would be to facilitate the creation of innovative and publicly engaged material.

As a publisher (and not a broadcaster), the PSP would focus on commissioning material from the UK's independent media production sector which would be distributed on a range of new digital platforms including the Internet and cellphones. The PSP would take advantage of the interactive and participative possibilities of non-linear media and would rely, in turn, on an open 'shareware' rights model which more adequately reflects the nature of content creation and distribution in an online environment. Furthermore, the PSP would, like the BBC, be publicly funded and not financed through advertising, subscription or sponsorship.

Working with a small group of new media entrepreneurs, Ofcom drew up more detailed proposals for the PSP throughout 2006 and 2007 and published two discussion papers which firmly identified the PSP's provision of public service content with the participatory and interactive possibilities of digital media. Respondents to the

second document included the major broadcasters, industry trade bodies, new media producers, public interest groups and trade unions, who adopted a range of contrasting perspectives on the PSP idea. Then, in March 2008, after more than three years of discussion and consultation, Ofcom announced the abandonment of plans for a PSP, arguing that the idea had served its purpose in focusing attention on the role of digital media in the future PSB environment, and insisting that public service content could be delivered without the need for a new dedicated organisation.

This paper provides a brief introduction to the background to and the details of Ofcom's proposal for a PSP, considers the likely advantages and disadvantages of the PSP in relation to the public interest, and concludes by reflecting on the impact of Ofcom's assumptions about markets and publics on future forms of public media. Despite the demise of the PSP idea, it nevertheless raises fundamental arguments about the shape of public service media in a digital age.

#### *The context of the PSP: the crisis in public service broadcasting*

The stability and underlying justification for public service broadcasting have come under increasing pressure in recent years from a range of political, economic and technological factors:

1. Terrestrial audiences have declined given the competition from cable, satellite and Internet platforms, with the total share of the five terrestrial channels falling from 77.7 per cent in 2002 to 66.8 per cent in 2006 (Ofcom 2007b: 2).
2. This has contributed to a fall in terrestrial broadcasters' advertising revenue of some 7 per cent from 2002 and 2006 (ibid.: 3). Additionally, the licence fee has failed to keep pace with inflation and its whole future is set to be reviewed in 2011.
3. The massive growth in the number of media outlets and platforms has led to a sustained questioning, primarily by commercial interests, of both the need and justification for the 'imposition' of public service obligations in what they describe as an increasingly 'competitive' environment. What, many critics ask now, is the *point* of public service broadcasting in a multi-channel age?
4. Market-oriented assumptions increasingly dominate the UK media sector and are further legitimised by media policy-makers and regulators through successive acts of market liberalisation and

### *The Public Service Publisher – an Obituary*

deregulation (for example, relaxation of media ownership laws, adoption of self-regulatory codes and loosening of media content rules).

We are left with a situation in which public service and commercial principles are locked together but are seen less as complementary forces (as they were during the period of the BBC/ITV ‘duopoly’) than as mutually exclusive ways of organising broadcasting. Given the ascendancy of neo-liberal visions for broadcasting, it is the PSB model which is very much on the defensive.

### *Plans for a Public Service Publisher*

In 2005 Ofcom, released its detailed three-part review of public service broadcasting. While supporting a continuing role for PSB in a digital era, Ofcom found that the traditional arrangement, or ‘compact’, whereby commercial broadcasters provided public service programming in return for access to the airwaves was breaking down because of the declining value of analogue spectrum in a multi-channel and digital environment. With its oversight of both analogue and digital spectrum and its remit to stimulate the UK communications market, Ofcom was especially concerned about the viability (as well as the plurality) of the broadcasting business in a changing environment. In the run-up to digital switchover, scheduled to start in 2008 and to end by 2012, the main commercial terrestrial channel, ITV, has already scaled back its level of non-news regional programming as well its religious and children’s programming, as it claims that it has no financial incentives for continuing to produce such ‘unprofitable’ genres. Despite its power to fine broadcasters for not meeting their full obligations, Ofcom has shown no inclination actually to do so.

In this situation of a likely ‘market shortfall’ in the provision of PSB, Ofcom concluded that the BBC was likely to end up as a ‘near monopoly provider of PSB’ (2004: 13) and so recommended the creation of a new competitive supplier of PSB, a Public Service Publisher (PSP). The PSP would in no way resemble a traditional broadcaster but, instead, would focus on seeking out material – what Ofcom now describes as ‘public service content’ – from the UK’s independent production sector (similar to the lines on which the commercial but not-for-profit ‘publisher-contractor’ Channel 4 is organised). A budget of some £300m – equivalent to 10 per cent of the more than £3bn generated by the licence fee each year – was initially mentioned, a sum roughly comparable to the ‘implicit subsidies’ received by commercial broadcasters for their access to the airwaves.

This money would come not from advertising or sponsorship but from either general tax revenues, a levy on the commercial broadcasters or, as was to become most likely, from a 'ring-fenced' (in other words, dedicated) portion of the licence fee.

Ofcom continued its work on the PSP by setting up a Creative Forum and convening a series of workshops involving industry experts on a range of content-related topics including factual, social action, arts, interactive entertainment and drama. The proposal was further refined by the acknowledgement in *Digital PSB*, published in July 2006, that the 'PSP would be focussed on creating content and services that make full use of the interactive and participatory nature of new media technology' (Ofcom 2006: 27). The paper also highlighted the importance of addressing specific *community* needs through the PSP and of allowing both geographical and 'religious, ethnic or interest groups to develop compelling offerings' (ibid.: 28).

Ofcom fleshed out and scaled down the proposal in its discussion paper of January 2007, *A New Approach to Public Service Content in the Digital Media Age*. The budget was now to be more like £50–100m a year – roughly equivalent to the BBC's spending on its web service, *bbc.co.uk* – and the PSP would focus on commissioning and distributing exclusively *broadband* content to be accessed on a range of digital platforms including the Internet, mobile devices and DTV.

The PSP was further considered as part of Ofcom's second review of PSB, launched in September 2007, to consider the prospects more generally for public service broadcasting (Ofcom 2007b). However, in March 2008, Ofcom announced that it was abandoning plans for a PSP, insisting nevertheless that the debate had been invaluable in drawing attention to the importance of digital media in delivering public service content in the future. 'I think we can safely declare this question resolved', argued its chief executive, Ed Richards; 'the PSP as a concept has served its purpose' (quoted in Tryhorn 2008). But, as this article seeks to consider, *what* purpose and *whose* interests have been truly served by the PSP debate?

#### *Key features of the PSP proposal*

According to Ofcom (2007a: 6), the PSP 'would meet public purposes using the tools, technology, insights and culture of digital media'. Content and services would be commissioned on the basis that they facilitate:

1. **Participation.** Far from the old model of the 'passive viewer', the PSP would rely on 'active participants who produce, modify,

*The Public Service Publisher – an Obituary*

comment on, judge and repurpose content’ (ibid.: 28). According to Andrew Chitty, MD of Illumina Digital and a contributor to the report: ‘Any new vision of Public Service Content has to be underpinned by the idea of user participation. This is the defining quality that separates successful networked content from broadcast media’ (ibid.: 28).

2. **Personalisation.** No longer would the audience need to be conceptualised as a homogeneous and ill-defined mass, but as a series of discrete individuals with different and quite specific needs.
3. **Permeability.** ‘PSP-supported projects and services blur the distinction between producers and consumers’ (ibid.: 30), thus further undermining the need for traditional ‘gatekeepers’ and enhancing the possibility of genuine dialogue.
4. **Community mediation.** Communities, however defined, would be able to use the participative facilities of the PSP to enhance cohesion and to empower themselves in ways that they – and not government or an out-of-touch broadcaster – decide is appropriate.
5. **Sensitivity towards location.** Taking advantage of mobile technologies, PSP content would be ‘delivered to users dependent on where, as well as when they want to engage’ (ibid.: 31).
6. **Collaborative authorship and diversity.** The PSP would involve and articulate a wide range of new and existing voices who, by working together, ‘will foster the diversity of views that is felt to be disappearing from Public Service Broadcasting’ (ibid.: 31).

Examples of possible PSP content, mentioned in Ofcom’s discussion paper of January 2007, include:

1. *Pulse* – a multimedia archive that would allow users to post their own material to create interactive, constantly changing community interfaces that combine oral history with contemporary events.
2. *City Confidential* – an urban thriller set in the world of a cutting-edge newspaper which focuses on celebrity, corruption and culture. Aided by user-generated content and audience suggestions, this would be an online drama which takes advantage of both televisual conventions and viewer participation and could be accessed on TV, online, mobile phones and public screens located in major urban spaces.
3. *DB<sup>2</sup>* – an online community aimed at providing much-needed content for diabetes sufferers. It would feature a range of educational, informational and interpersonal services, much of it created by the diabetes community itself, to facilitate better

management of a crucial health-related issue. Given mainstream broadcasters' and portals' reluctance to engage with such issues, this service could be extended to other patient communities.

4. *Genie* – an online space in which scientists and ordinary citizens could come together to discuss and make decisions on the future of UK energy policy. Films would be made reflecting different positions on issues such as nuclear storage, energy security and the viability of renewable technologies; through further online and offline deliberation, a final 'energy document' would be disseminated both to the public and politicians.

Ofcom emphasised that, in all cases, services would be multi-platform and fully interactive and would deal with topics of public interest with which commercial organisations are increasingly reluctant to engage. This would involve three overlapping types of content (ibid.: 36):

1. Content-led services which would use digital media to empower individual users of, for example, health or government services and so increase the efficiency of those organisations;
2. Narrative experiences whereby new fiction and fact-based content would be professionally produced to take advantage of the possibilities of networked media;
3. Community-generated content whereby a range of user groups would be able to produce material for themselves (instead of relying on 'experts' to do so on their behalf) and thus facilitate better community cohesion.

Ofcom also argued that the PSP would be encouraged to embrace an open 'shareware' rights model that would more adequately reflect the nature of content creation and distribution in a digital environment. In particular, Ofcom acknowledged that, as the public service remit of the PSP required a more open and flexible use of intellectual property, 'the PSP will need to innovate not only in terms of content, but also in the use of that content. In the participative media environment, a key part of its public service remit will be to make much of its content available to users and to allow extensive re-use, interaction and modification' (ibid.: 41). This would require balancing possibilities for commercial exploitation and audience repurposing of content in what Ofcom called 'multi-party exploitation of public service content' (ibid.: 42). In the case of *City Confidential*, for example, this might involve a range of both free and paid-for services including local versions of the drama, supporting websites which allow users to reflect on issues

### *The Public Service Publisher – an Obituary*

concerning their own cities, computer games and other software, and a DVD which could combine content produced by the original creator with contributions supplied by other users.

In conclusion, the PSP would, in theory, increase the plurality of public service content in the UK, facilitate new forms of dialogue and communication, stimulate the independent content production industry and provide audiences with a variety of personal, educational and social benefits.

#### *Issues arising from the proposal*

The idea of a PSP was initially welcomed by some significant figures. Former Culture Secretary Tessa Jowell greeted it in Parliament on 2 November 2004 as a ‘very interesting proposal’ and one to which ‘we will give proper and detailed consideration’. And on 14 June 2007 culture minister Shaun Woodward insisted to Parliament that ‘what we can be certain about is that the concept of Public Service Publishing is bound to play an important place in the future but what we can be less certain about is what form it should take and how it should be financed’. PACT, the trade association for independent production companies, claimed that ‘an injection of additional investment through the PSP could help unlock the creative and economic potential of UK new media producers’ (2007). Even some media reform groups, desperate to secure a viable future for PSB, cautiously embraced its spirit. For example, Jocelyn Hay of the Voice of the Listener and Viewer, the well-respected lobby group for quality broadcasting, welcomed it as an idea with some potential while the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom (2007) acknowledged the PSP as ‘an innovative proposal that is citizenship based’.

However, the PSP proposal also met with strong opposition. The BBC questioned why another organisation would be needed to provide public service content when the Corporation itself was investing so heavily in digital content. Rights holders represented by the British Copyright Council opposed any talk of a new ‘open rights’ approach, while a range of corporate voices, from the Guardian Media Group to News International’s chief lobbyist Irwin Stelzer, warned that a PSP would only stifle innovation and replicate activities that were already taking place through market incentives (as opposed to ‘top-down’ regulation).

For proponents of public service broadcasting, there were individual elements in Ofcom’s PSP which deserved support: for example, the emphasis on public engagement, user participation, community needs and a less restrictive rights model. However, Ofcom’s PSP proposal

could not be separated from the organisation's general determination to secure a more competitive and liberalised media environment. The PSP, therefore, had to be seen as part of a wider restructuring of the British media which involved not an expansion but a restriction of PSB, a way of seeing public service content not as a cultural and social phenomenon in its own right and with its own logic and values, but instead viewing it primarily in relation to the impact which it has on the wider media market. Such a conception of public service has important implications not simply for specific initiatives like the PSP but for the future of public service media as a whole and as they evolve into a whole range of contexts and forms. This makes it extremely important to identify any underlying weaknesses in the PSP proposal, as with any other plan for the delivery of public service content, if public service media are to play a crucial role in years to come. These weaknesses are explored in the next five sections.

*What kind of pluralism?*

Ofcom's exhortation that a PSP is necessary to facilitate a plurality of PSB providers depends on a very narrow conception of pluralism which focuses on plurality of *supply* but not of voice or vision. Compare Ofcom's definition to a previous argument about pluralism driving a new broadcast institution in the UK:

Plurality is at the heart of successful PSB provision. It involves the provision of complementary services to different audiences... a range of perspectives in news, current affairs and in other types of programmes; and it provides competition to spur innovation and drive quality higher. (Ofcom 2004: 7)

We do not see the fourth channel merely as an addition to the plurality of outlets, but as a force for plurality *in a deeper sense*. Not only could it be a nursery for new forms and new methods of presenting ideas, it could also open the door to a new kind of broadcasting publishing. (Annan 1977: 235)

Back in 1977 the Annan Committee on the Future of Broadcasting used the language of radical social change in its proposal for an Open Broadcasting Authority which laid the basis for what eventually became Channel 4.

We see the fourth channel not just as another outlet or even just as a means of giving a more varied service to the audience. It should be the test-bed for experiment and symbolize all the vitality, new initiatives, practices and liberties which could inspire broadcasters. (ibid.: 472).

### *The Public Service Publisher – an Obituary*

Indeed, Ofcom presented its ideas for the PSP as following directly in the tradition of Channel 4: ‘Just as Channel 4, in its early years, had guaranteed funding and a remit to pursue public purposes with innovative ideas, we believe a new PSP could be created with similar ambitions for the digital age’ (Ofcom 2004: 13). However, the major difference is that Channel 4 was created not simply to add capacity to British broadcasting but to deal with what was perceived to be a politically and culturally stifling consensus. As Anthony Smith, one of Channel 4’s creators, put it in the *Evening Standard*, 25 October 2004:

The ‘duopoly’ of BBC and ITV was a pair of millstones which inhibited or shunned new people and ideas. So Channel 4 was given – and retains – a structure and a function different from all the other channels. Its role was to invest in undiscovered talent, and to employ it to amuse, shock, gratify, confirm, undermine. Its remit was not to succeed but to try, in interesting ways.

Channel 4, despite accusations by Smith of cynicism and commercialism in recent years, was originally designed in response to the failure of existing broadcasters to articulate public debates and divisions in the UK at the end of the 1970s. The PSP proposal, despite its eagerness to paint citizens as creators of content, was far more limited in its remit, often viewing the public as ‘users’ and ‘consumers’ of services and seeing public service itself as simply an adjunct of the market.

The BBC adopted a different approach to the question of pluralism arguing that the situation in the digital age in no way resembles the restricted broadcasting environment of the twentieth century and that, as a consequence, there is no shortfall in plurality: ‘Arguably, there is not only greater plurality in the Internet market today than there was in the broadcasting markets of the 1950s or early 1980s, but more plurality on the Internet than in broadcasting in 2007’ (BBC 2007: 3.5). There is, therefore, no need for a new organisation when ‘healthy competition for quality’ (ibid.: 3.6) means that the BBC, together with a huge range of other suppliers, are already producing innovative online content that is helping to ensure that diverse consumer needs are met. ‘In this case’, argued the BBC, ‘additional intervention by regulators should perhaps move away from the model of a single new public or quasi-public body acting as content commissioner, and more explicitly promote and support plural content creation, and wide public access to it’ (ibid.: 3.10).

*Sustainability of public broadcasting in a 'knowledge economy'*

In a market-driven age, it is highly unlikely that the PSP would ever have been given the same creative and financial freedom that was granted to Channel 4. The success of the PSP was to be measured in part by its contribution to the health of the wider media economy and not simply in relation to the creation of public knowledge. According to Andrew Chitty, the PSP 'would call into being a new wave of creative businesses that would serve the UK well in the changing media landscape' (Ofcom 2007a: 27). Indeed, it was locked into a rigid economic model based on the belief that, as it is competition which drives innovation and delivers quality, 'the PSP could be the senior partner in joint venture or venture capital style relationships' (ibid.: 40). This reflected an underlying belief that, although the PSP ethos would fit a non-profit organisation, Ofcom's understanding was that 'not-for-profit organisations may be less efficient in delivering good value for money' (Ofcom 2004: 82).

Ofcom's focus thus appeared to be on the capacity of the PSP to assist in the further development of a thriving domestic creative sector—an approach that resonates with the government's desire to foster a 'knowledge economy' based on the exploitation of culture and creativity. Drawing once again on the impact of Channel 4 in stimulating a more competitive commissioning sector, one prominent new media producer argued that the PSP 'could have the same galvanising impact on the interactive media sector [as C4 did on the independent production sector]—turning acknowledged creative excellence into real economic value' (Ofcom 2007a: 37).

However, first of all, there is little evidence that the creation of a thriving independent sector has, in itself, translated into a more mature and innovative broadcast environment (as if everything that public broadcasters do is elitist and deeply conservative). Second, this framing of the role of the PSP reveals a great deal about the current obsession with entrepreneurial skills and purely economic conceptions of value. In fact, when Channel 4 was first under discussion, the then broadcasting regulator, the Independent Broadcasting Authority, suggested that independent production companies would provide, at most, 35 per cent of programming, with the majority of programmes coming from the existing ITV companies. In its first year of transmission, some 29 per cent of Channel 4's programme hours were supplied by 'indies' with the rest coming from ITV and foreign acquisitions. This was enough to help stimulate a new sector, but it is not the case that the channel depended exclusively on independent

### *The Public Service Publisher – an Obituary*

producers in the way that Ofcom enthusiastically discussed them in relation to the PSP. The crucial point here is that it was the creation of added economic value, rather than of public knowledge, which was a recurring theme of the regulator's plans for a PSP.

#### *Technological determinism*

PSP discussion documents are also littered with determinist accounts of technology and content production. The whole premise of the PSP commissioning *broadband* content is that it would necessarily facilitate participation and a decentring of traditional media gatekeepers: 'While traditional media technologies primarily concentrate on the distribution of ideas, the interactive media technologies are concerned with handing active control and the ability to communicate to citizens' (Ofcom 2007a: 11). This assumes an *automatic* correlation between digital communication and enhanced political representation. Citizenship, however, is not produced spontaneously through limited 'user participation' (for example, dialling a phone number on *Pop Idol* or uploading a video on YouTube) but through a more fundamental engagement and confrontation with different, conflicting perspectives and positions. While there are many characteristics of digital media which can aid deliberation and participation, it is far from inevitable that this will be the eventual outcome. It depends, of course, on the specific uses to which the technologies are put. Similarly, just as traditional broadcast media relied on a hierarchical 'one-to-many' model, there are nevertheless many examples of 'old' media contributing to public knowledge and action, not least of which involve the news bulletins and documentaries of public broadcasters like the BBC and, in the US, National Public Radio and the Public Broadcasting Service.

#### *The funding of PSB*

Some of the opposition to the idea of a PSP was focused on the possibility that it would be financed out of the licence fee which provides the BBC with the vast majority of its revenue, thus undermining the stability and future of the Corporation. Thus Jocelyn Hay of the Voice of the Listener and Viewer confirmed to a House of Lords committee that 'we certainly would not support the idea of any top-slicing of the licence fee going to subsidise commercial companies' (Hay 2005) while the CPBF 'emphatically' opposed any use of the licence fee to sustain the PSP, recommending instead a small cross-subsidy of all commercial providers (CPBF 2007).

Indeed, the PSP debate served its purpose, not simply in highlighting the importance of digital media, but in fostering a consensus among government, media regulator and the BBC's commercial competitors that the BBC should no longer have exclusive access to the licence fee. There is now increasing agreement that public money for PSB should be 'contestable', that is, open to competitive bidding. This was expressed most clearly by the House of Commons Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport which, although it rejected plans for a PSP, nonetheless concluded that 'public funding should be made available beyond the BBC on a contestable basis, to sustain plurality and to bring the benefits of competition to the provision of public service content that the market would not provide' (House of Commons 2007: 52). PSB, in this scenario, would be reduced to a handful of individual programmes, competitively allocated, in 'minority interest' areas like news, current affairs and religion which commercial providers had either no obligation or little interest to serve. It would thus lead to the complete fracturing of the PSB system on which British broadcasting has been based since its inception.

The problem is that discussions concerning the PSP took place in the context of political, commercial and regulatory challenges to the existing delivery of PSB, and that the proposals have served only to highlight the view that funding for PSB cannot be allowed to rise indefinitely. As the former culture secretary Tessa Jowell put it in a parliamentary debate on 2 November 2004: 'I like the idea of locking in the funding which is currently available to public service broadcasting'. But if the delivery of PSB is to become increasingly identified with a PSP operating on a budget approximately one-fiftieth of current licence fee revenue, or indeed with any other kind of digital platform, this puts more pressure on the provision of PSB in general and on the future of the BBC in particular.

*Is there an alternative?*

Ofcom's argument for a PSP was based on a notion that existing PSB commitments, particularly those of the main commercial channel ITV, are unsustainable after digital switchover. Why should this be the case? Surely, it is a regulator's job not simply to accept market developments as inevitable but to devise ways of addressing the fundamental problem of, in this case, sustaining PSB at a time of great technological change. In part, this is because, as Ofcom itself acknowledges (2007a: 24), it relies on a highly economic account of PSB based around market failure rather than on a positive account of its cultural significance.

### *The Public Service Publisher – an Obituary*

But it also points to an uncritical approach to market logic at the top of the broadcasting establishment. As the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom argued in its response to Ofcom:

We do not think that a new ‘Publisher’ of broadcast material should be seen simply as providing limited ‘public service content’ and addressing ‘the particular shortfalls that can be expected in the PSB arena’. We think that those shortfalls should themselves be addressed, and we note that one of the causes of the shortfall – changes in spectrum policy [that are likely to involve the sale of spectrum to the private sector] – is the result of Ofcom’s own proposals. (CPBF 2007)

Proponents of public service media need to challenge policy proposals which are predicated on the inevitable collapse of the profits of commercial terrestrial broadcasters or, indeed, on the notion that private ownership is the single most efficient or desirable way of facilitating media content. According to Georgina Born: ‘There are serious questions as to whether Ofcom is right in its analysis that a loosening of ITV’s PSB commitment is unavoidable, and in its assumption that Britain’s commercial broadcasters cannot be held to PSB purposes through content regulation’ (Born 2005). She suggested that, rather than simply tinkering around at the edges of broadcasting by creating a PSP, the authorities should tighten the regulation of the existing commercial broadcasters in order to guarantee fulfilment of their public service obligations. Whatever the specific merits or demerits of the PSP, proponents of public service media cannot afford to accept market developments as ‘inevitable’ and need to think imaginatively and critically in drawing up alternative policy suggestions and scenarios.

### *International implications*

The PSP debate may resonate strangely in countries like the US and Australia, where free-market logic rules much of the media, or in countries like China, where government control of media is of the utmost concern. Why, non-UK residents may ask, should public funds continue to be monopolised by a state-owned corporation and not by smaller, more dynamic independent producers?

First, the PSP idea should remind us to be cautious when we hear ‘innovative’ new proposals about the future of public broadcasting coming from more commercially motivated sources. It is vital that non-commercial media should not be relegated to outlying areas of our media and that new digital technologies should not be used as, above all, instruments of cost-cutting. Quality does not come cheap and the

Internet, with all its possibilities, cannot be expected to do away with the costs of R&D, scriptwriting, production, newsgathering and fact-checking.

Second, it is important to stress that, whatever the Murdoch press may say, the BBC is *not* a state broadcaster but a unique proposition: an organisation paid for by the public, formally independent from vested interests and, theoretically, accountable only to licence fee payers. While, in reality, the BBC is tied to—and expresses the views of—elites in many different ways, it nevertheless provides a space in which market forces are held at bay and in which publics are able to articulate their voices in competition with those of more powerful groups.

Third, it is no longer the case that the independent sector in the UK is a hub of small but energetic grassroots players. Quite the opposite: it is a rapidly consolidating area of the British media where venture capitalists are increasing their influence and where a handful of large independent companies dominate production.

The crucial point is that those who are most vocal in their support for a smaller and less influential public service broadcasting sector are precisely those commercial groups—purely commercial broadcasters, ISPs, online content producers—who have most to gain from media systems in which non-market actors and objectives are marginalised. The struggle to defend PSB in the UK is thus linked to the struggle to beat off cuts to public broadcasting in the US through the need to develop a common understanding of the importance of all non-commercial spaces if we are to seek to create genuinely pluralist media environments. The marginalisation of PSB in the UK will only add to the confidence of companies like Fox, Viacom and Clear Channel who want to increase their share of US media markets and further galvanise those politicians who see little need for government support for public service broadcasting in the digital age.

Non-UK readers can take much from Ofcom's PSP proposal in its recognition of the need for financial support for less commercially viable areas of programming, as well as its determination to take advantage of the participatory and interactive possibilities of digital media for public knowledge. Such arguments are just as valid in environments with more fragile public service media ecologies in that they draw attention to the shortcomings of market approaches to media and of the wholly instrumental considerations which today all too frequently govern media policy decisions. However, the PSP debate should remind supporters of public service media in all countries that they may undermine their own position if they accept the argument that public service media, while fulfilling certain social purposes,

*The Public Service Publisher – an Obituary*

are necessarily subservient to or dependent on wholly commercial media interests. service media have a different history and a different logic.

*Public service broadcasting and the ‘public interest’*

In media systems dominated by for-profit organisations whose main concern is to maximise readerships, ratings and revenues, proponents of public service and non-commercial media argue that they have an especially important role to play. Such projects are described by both media theorists and policy-makers as essential to the creation of pluralist media environments in which multiple forms of finance, ownership and content are more likely to facilitate diversity and stimulate meaningful competition and public engagement. Public service broadcasting, in particular, has proven to be a crucial example of the ‘corrective surgery’ which is necessary to compensate for the tendency of markets to under-serve minority audiences and to produce powerful private monopolies in the production and circulation of media content.

Yet public service broadcasting is not merely the medicine that it is sometimes necessary to take to counter the ills of purely commercial television and radio. In many ways, it is a different kind of cultural institution with its own vision of broadcasting based on contrasting values and commitments. While there are many versions of what is ultimately a philosophy rather than a particular channel or set of programmes (see Blumler 1991), there are nevertheless some core normative principles common to different conceptions of the public service broadcasting ‘idea’.

Firstly, public service broadcasting is based on the rejection of ‘the market definition of broadcasting as the delivery of a set of distinct commodities to consumers rather than as the establishment of a communicative relationship’ (Garnham 1994: 18). Public service broadcasting’s main goal is not to sell audiences to advertisers or to subscription broadcasters but to provide ‘a medium for the performance of a valuable public service’ as the first government enquiry into broadcasting put it in 1923 (quoted in Curran and Seaton 1991: 297). Broadcasting, according to this view, should facilitate public knowledge and not private transactions. Secondly, this involves the characterisation of its audiences as rational citizens with a broad range of interests and needs that must be met irrespective of their purchasing power, geographical location or social position. Thirdly, public service broadcasting attempts to foster, independent of government and vested interests, what Scannell

and Cardiff (1990: 277) describe as a 'shared public life', the 'we-feeling' of membership of national or regional communities that may be counterposed to the 'I-feeling' engendered through the market's emphasis on individual consumer preferences. Finally, through achieving all the above, public service broadcasting is seen as a profoundly democratic phenomenon and as a key means by which public opinion is realised and cemented. Acknowledging Jürgen Habermas' emphasis on the idea of a public sphere and communicative rationality, Scannell (1989: 136) describes public service broadcasting as a 'public good that has unobtrusively contributed to the democratisation of everyday life'. These claims provide an instructive framework for considering the future of public service media as they move from traditional broadcasting platforms and into more fragmented and participatory online spaces.

Ofcom's 'market failure'-led notion of public service broadcasting is different from the robust 'common good' interpretations of public service broadcasting described above which understand it not as an accessory to market relations but as a countervailing force to them, as a pole of attraction with a very different dynamic from that of private accumulation. We can see this dynamic in key institutions of the public sector in the UK—the National Health Service, free comprehensive schooling as well as the BBC—which serve the public interest and help sustain democratic citizenship. Colin Leys contends that these public services 'are the defining features of a civilised society, which capitalist market production, if it persists at all, should exist to pay for, and to which it should be subordinate' (2001: 220). Leys argues strongly for the existence of a 'non-market domain' (*ibid.*: 224) in which essential services are provided, the market is kept at bay and boundaries between the public and the private are well policed in order to prevent the infiltration of the former by the latter.

This idea has been applied most significantly to the BBC, one of the major non-market British institutions, as well as to those commercial broadcasters which have been forced to use their profits to produce programmes and cater to audiences in ways specified by public authorities. It is a conception of broadcasting which is, as James Curran and Jean Seaton argue, is 'rooted in a view of society that stresses social association and mutual obligation, and tacitly rejects the neo-liberal view of society as an aggregation of contracting and exchanging individuals' (1991: 297).

Yet it is precisely this latter view which in recent years has come to challenge notions such as the common good, public interest and public service. The emergence of neo-liberalism in the early

### *The Public Service Publisher – an Obituary*

1980s together with its associated trends towards deregulation and marketisation involved a radical reconceptualisation of the definition of the public interest. Far from there being an identifiable common good that lay beyond the sum of individual transactions facilitated by the market, the public interest was best expressed in relation to individual consumer choices and preferences. The public interest could now be quantified using opinion polls, ratings, surveys and circulation figures – the evidence so beloved by Ofcom and in the US the Federal Communications Commission – and legitimised according to this data. The downside was that more subtle and broad conceptions of the public as diverse but overlapping groups of citizens have been sacrificed for a far more instrumental view of the public as customers and shareholders.

Marketised interpretations of the public interest are now all too dominant in Britain. For example, the ‘public interest test’ introduced by the government in 2003 to adjudicate on media mergers depends on a definition of public interest based on plurality of ownership, diversity of sources, economic benefits and market effects (DCMS/DTI 2001: 47), a concept of the public interest that is sensitive rather than counterposed to commercial forces. While the ‘common good’ understanding of the concept is still present, an alternative definition of the public interest based on consumer sovereignty and market competition is increasingly influential. Perhaps the best example of this was a high-profile speech in 1999 by the then chief executive of ITV, Richard Eyre, in which he argued that in a multi-channel, viewer-dominated digital world, the old paternalistic system of public service broadcasting would die out to be replaced by the more dynamic and less regulated system of ‘public interest broadcasting’. This is an explicitly commercial view in which the BBC is reduced to filling the gaps left by the other broadcasters and in which ‘regulation as a sort of conscience by rulebook won’t exist. What will replace it? You and me . . . and the viewers’ (Eyre 1999). This is a particularly clear vision of the ‘privatisation’ of the public interest – or, in Habermasian terms, of the ‘refeudalisation’ of the public sphere (Habermas 1989) – a marginalisation of the concept of public service and a privatisation of the concept of the public which Ofcom is fostering with its market-friendly reforms and innovations.

### *Conclusion*

The idea of a Public Service Publisher may now have perished but it has left an important legacy in the debates concerning the future

of public service media in the UK. Ofcom's proposal for a PSP can be seen in many different ways: as an ingenious way of sustaining public service content in the digital age, a bureaucratic response to a structural problem which would have made things only worse, or a flawed argument which (whatever its chances of being implemented) amplified and naturalised the current obsession with 'market value' and economic language inside media policy today. While we will no longer see a PSP in the next few years, it remains clear that defenders of an expansive model of public broadcasting, in whatever country they are based, need to subject broadcasting proposals from pro-market institutions to intense scrutiny. Ofcom's plan for a PSP may have at first appeared to be an enticing prospect to some defenders of public service broadcasting but, as this paper has argued, the proposal was intimately related to a limited and instrumental view of public broadcasting which saw it as an adjunct of entrepreneurialism and not as a cultural institution in its own right.

Public service media proponents can use some of the arguments put forward by Ofcom's PSP proposal to reiterate the importance of non-commercial media which speak to issues of common concern, which recognise the needs of distinct communities and which involve publics as active subjects. However, if we are to build or sustain channels that see communication, as Raymond Williams puts it, not in terms of the selling but the 'sharing of human experience' (1962: 6), we will have to go far beyond the limited terms of debate proposed by Ofcom. The reimagining of public service media in a digital era will require both interventions in formal policy processes whenever opportunities arise as well as a commitment to put demands for democratic, public media at the heart of any vision of the future.

#### **Acknowledgements**

This article is based on research carried out for the Future of Public Media programme at the Centre for Social Media, American University, Washington, DC.

#### **References**

- Annan, Lord (1977), *Report on the Committee of the Future of Broadcasting*, Cmnd 6753, London: HMSO.
- BBC (2007), 'Response to Ofcom's Document on the PSP'. Available at: <http://www.ofcom.org.uk/consult/condocs/pspnewapproach/responses/bbc.pdf>.
- Blumler, Jay (ed.) (1991), *Television and the Public Interest*, London: Sage.
- Born, Georgina (2005), 'Memorandum to the House of Lords Select Committee on BBC Charter Review'. Available at: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200506/ldselect/ldbbr/50/5062106.htm>.
- Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom (CPBF) (2007), 'Response to Ofcom's Consultation Document on the PSP'. Available at: <http://www.ofcom.org.uk/consult/condocs/pspnewapproach/responses/cpb.pdf>.

### *The Public Service Publisher – an Obituary*

- Curran, James and Jean Seaton (1991), *Power Without Responsibility*, 4<sup>th</sup> edn, London: Routledge.
- Department of Culture, Media and Sport/Department of Trade and Industry (DCMS/DTI) (2001), *Consultation on Media Ownership Rules*, Norwich: HMSO.
- Eyre, Richard (1999), MacTaggart lecture, Edinburgh Television Festival. Available at: <http://www.observerunlimited.co.uk/BBC/Story/0,,200890,00.html>. This can also be found in Franklin, Bob (2005), *Television Policy: the MacTaggart Lectures*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 219–27.
- Garnham, Nicholas (1994), 'The broadcasting market and the future of the BBC', *Political Quarterly* 65: 1, pp. 11–19.
- Habermas, Jürgen (1989 [1962]), *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Cambridge: Polity.
- Hay, Jocelyn (2005), Examination of Witnesses, Select Committee on BBC Charter Review. Available at: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200506/ldselect/ldbhc/50/5060806.htm>.
- House of Commons Culture, Media and Sport Committee (2007), *Public Service Content, Vol. 1*, HC 36-I, London: Stationery Office.
- Leys, Colin (2001), *Market-Driven Politics: Neoliberal Democracy and the Public Interest*, London: Verso.
- Ofcom (2004), *Ofcom Review of Public Service Television Broadcasting. Phase 2: Meeting the Digital Challenge*, London: Ofcom.
- Ofcom (2006), *Digital PSB*, London: Ofcom.
- Ofcom (2007a), *A New Approach to Public Service Content in the Digital Media Age*, London: Ofcom.
- Ofcom (2007b), *Ofcom's Second Review of Public Service Television Broadcasting: Terms of Reference*, London: Ofcom.
- PACT (2007), 'Response to Ofcom's Discussion Paper on PSP', March. Available at: <http://www.ofcom.org.uk/consult/condocs/pspnewapproach/responses/pact.pdf>.
- Scannell, Paddy (1989), 'Public Service broadcasting and modern public life', *Media, Culture and Society*, 11: 2, 135–66.
- Scannell, Paddy and David Cardiff (1990), *A Social History of British Broadcasting: Volume One: 1922–1939 Serving the Nation*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Tracey, Michael (1998), *The Decline and Fall of Public Service Broadcasting*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tryhorn, Chris (2008), 'Ofcom scraps "Public Service Publisher" idea'. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2008/mar/12/ofcom.digitalmedia>.
- Williams, Raymond (1962), *Communications*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.

**Des Freedman** is the author of *The Politics of Media Policy* (Polity 2008), *The Television Policies of the Labour Party 1951–2001* (Frank Cass 2003) and co-editor of *War and the Media: Reporting Conflict 24/7* (Sage 2003). He has taught in the Department of Media and Communications at Goldsmiths, University of London since 2001 and is a member of the national council of the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom.

DOI: 10.3366/E1743452109000715