Public Service Broadcasting: Markets and 'Vulnerable Values' in Broadcast and Print Journalism

Stephen Cushion and Bob Franklin

Broadcasting began life in competition with newspapers, first with radio in the 1920s and then again with television in the late 1940s/early 1950s. Its ability to reach mass audiences, however, prompted the state to make broadcasting comply with certain licence conditions deemed inappropriate for newspapers where a free market was judged a precondition for an independent press. These regulatory obligations have long since been designated 'public service values' and acknowledged as profound influences on the past, present and future of the UK's broadcast ecology and wider media culture; and by politicians, the public and, of course, journalists themselves. According to Blumler (1992a), however, the values of public service broadcasting have become increasingly "vulnerable" in the face of market forces and commercial competition.

Consequently, our contribution in this short chapter deals with a very big subject. The Introduction offers a definition of public service, its significance and relevance in the UK setting, arguing for its value as an essential ingredient in *any* democratic polity and society. The subsequent sections unravel that conversation in the context of broadcast and newspaper journalism and suggest that for news media to remain a formative constituent in democratic life, the market will require some form of regulation to prevent excessive commercial influence on news output.

Public Service Broadcasting and Public Service Journalism

John Reith, the first Director General of the BBC, was convinced that broadcasting must be organised as a public service, remote from market forces and the search for profitability which he believed would inexorably compromise programming decisions. His terse formulation that BBC programming should aim to "inform, educate and entertain" captured the essence of public service broadcasting and marked its aetiology. Entertainment was unequivocally relegated to third place in the Reithian trilogy. "To have exploited so great a scientific invention [as radio] for the purpose and pursuit of entertainment alone" he claimed would have constituted nothing less than "a prostitution of its powers and an insult to the character and intelligence of the people" (Reith 1925: 17).

Subsequently, public service broadcasting or public service journalism has become an essentially contested concept, difficult to identify with any agreed precision, "although it is undoubtedly seen as a good thing" (Barnett and Docherty, 1991: 23). Across the century post-Reith, the character of public service values has shifted reflecting developments in media technologies, changing statutory requirements for media, the fluid ideological commitments of parties and governments, as well as journalists' changing professional practice. But it has always (a) offered a mechanism for funding the delivery of news and other programming, (b) guaranteed journalistic autonomy and independence from powerful economic and political interests, (c) provided a regulatory mechanism for journalistic content and thereby (d) established a professional benchmark for the quality and range of programme content and (e) delivered programming - especially news and current affairs - which served the public interest; and all this for radio, television and the printed press (Franklin 2001: 1-11).

But in 1985, the Peacock Committee – the "curtain raiser" for a period characterised by "radically revisionist commercialism" (Blumler cited in Franklin 2005: 19) – launched an ideological critique of public service values by media executives and practitioners, as well as academics (Murdoch, R. 1989; Elstein, 1991; Ball 2003) which has sustained to the present day (Murdoch, J. 2009); Eyre declared public service simply, "a gonner" (Eyre 1999). But public service values have also enjoyed stout advocacy with Cushion (2012), for example, illustrating their centrality to democratic cultures.

Vulnerable values, enduring influence: Changing news agendas and public trust in public service and market-driven broadcast journalism

To paraphrase the title of Blumler's edited book (1992a), the values of public service broadcasting appeared considerably more "vulnerable" as the 21st century approached. Even though multi-channel television was still in its relative infancy at this point, Blumler (1992b: 14-15) believed it created difficulties for public service broadcasters: "The impact of new communication technologies (notably cable and satellite), offering both a vastly expanded channel capacity and a simultaneous transmission of programmes and advertising from external sources…was inherently destabilizing". A few years later, in a co-authored article with Dennis Kavanagh, he asked ominously whether public service broadcasting could "withstand the full ravages of competition over the longer term" (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999: 219).

More than 20 years on, this section explores whether the values of public broadcasting have, as Blumler suggested, proved vulnerable to compromise in a more market-driven landscape, as we assess the impact of commercial competition on television news. In doing so, we draw on a number of recent empirical studies comparing the nature of coverage on public and commercially driven outlets and explore the public perception of news delivered by different broadcasters.

Barnett et al's (2012) longitudinal study of UK national television news from 1975-2009 systematically examined the changing nature of news agendas on public and commercial television news, asking whether tabloid (crime, human interest, royalty, celebrity, sport etc.) news had increased or not (see Table 1.0).

Table 1.0: Tabloid news on UK television news nightly bulletins from 1975-2009 (expressed as %)

	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	1999	2004	2009	Difference over time
BBC 6pm	18.4%	18.8%	25.9%	6.5%	17%	28.9%	20.1%	23.2%	+4.8%
ITV early evening	15.4%	22.6%	32.2%	18.7%	29.5%	33%	32.9%	34.4%	+19%
BBC 9pm/10pm	16.2%	17.1%	22.6%	4.9%	13.2%	13.3%	14.3%	19.2%	+3%
ITV late evening	14.8%	18.9%	24.9%	10.9%	26.1%	42.1%	33.1%	34.1%	+19.3%
Channel Four 7pm	/	/	11.1%	5.1%	4.8%	10.6%	16.9%	18.8%	+7.7%
Channel Five	/	/	/	/	/	45.6%	22.9%	51.2%	+5.6%

(Source: Barnett et al 2012)

Table 1 reveals that while all UK television channels enhanced their reporting of tabloid stories, the BBC – a wholesale public service broadcaster – increased its coverage the least (between 3-4.8%). BBC bulletins, moreover, had the most broadsheet agenda, with more serious issues reported such as politics, social affairs and business stories (see Barnett et al 2012). By contrast, ITV, a commercial public service broadcaster, increased its tabloid agenda by approximately a fifth over 34 years. But perhaps most strikingly, Channel Five – a commercial broadcaster launched in 1996 with minimal public service broadcasting obligations – dedicated over half its agenda to tabloid news in 2009. A similar distinction between public and market-driven media was evident in campaign reporting of the 2010 General Election. While over half of Channel Five and Sky News coverage contained no reference to any policies, the BBC had the greatest amount of election news either entirely or significantly about policy issues (Deacon and Wring 2010 cited in Cushion 2012). Overall, then, although BBC bulletins have succumbed somewhat to tabloid news values, they appear, to answer Blumler's concern, to have withstood the ravages of commercialism.

At the same time, it can be observed that UK news compares favourably with the US where a fully-fledged market-driven system has been in operation since broadcasting began. In the 1980s and 1990s it is argued that enhanced deregulation had resulted in the hypercommercializing of US television news agendas (McChesney 2000). By contrast, because commercial public service broadcasters continue to operate with public service broadcasting requirements in the UK, most of them continue to report a relatively high degree of broadsheet and foreign news stories, engage with election policy stories and routinely report ongoing political events (Barnett et al 2012; Cushion 2012; Cushion and Thomas 2013). But this perhaps reflects more than formal regulation since Sky News, a commercial 24-hour news channel with no PSB commitments, has resisted the temptation to take its agenda downmarket or attempt to challenge its licence requirements to be impartial. This is in spite of pressure from Sky's owner, Rupert Murdoch, who is on record stating that he wants Sky News to become more like the US partisan channel Fox News, but this has not happened due to "nobody at Sky listening to me [Murdoch]" (cited in Gibson 2007). Drawing on a longitudinal comparative study of Sky News and the BBC News Channel, little evidence was uncovered to suggest Sky was emulating the partisan antics of Fox or more recently MSNBC (Cushion and Lewis 2009). Moreover, as Murdoch's frustration lays bare the reluctance by Sky's editorial staff to undermine any of its impartiality credentials could be a product of the deeply ingrained culture of independence and integrity long established in UK broadcast journalism. The BBC, in particular, has long maintained a commitment towards these values and its rapport with audiences is built on trust and confidence. In other words, the standards of commercial broadcasters could be indirectly policed by the underlying presence of PSB broadcast journalism in the UK irrespective of whether these values continue to be "vulnerable" in the multi-channel, multi-media age.

Indeed, the figurehead for PSB in the UK and elsewhere – the BBC – has undergone significant challenges to its independence over the last 90 years or so. From the reporting of the 1926 General Strike and Suez Canal, to coverage of the IRA and the war in Iraq, its commercial competitors – most notably in the tabloid press – have been quick to undermine the BBC's credibility and lack of 'value' for licence fee payers. But even when the BBC was under enormous pressure after a BBC journalist suggested the government had sexed up the case for the 2003 Iraq war, the broadcaster continued to be the most trusted news information source (Gunter 2005).

According to the BBC's long standing World Affairs Correspondent John Simpson, the most recent BBC controversy – beginning in 2012 involving Jimmy Savile, a now deceased former children's presenter facing hundreds of allegations of paedophilia stretching back decades – "is the worst crisis" to face the public service broadcaster over

the last 50 years (cited in Sabbagh 2012). Its handling of the affair caused widespread criticism and led to the Director General resigning. But even when the broadcaster was at its lowest ebb in the controversy, a representative poll of the British public suggested the BBC remained valued above rival broadcasters (cited in *The Guardian* 2012). So, for example, BBC journalism (39%) was far more trusted than all its commercial broadcast competitors, ITV (13%), Sky (10%) and Channel 4 (5%), and was by a considerable margin the most likely to be considered a 'national treasure' (44% compared to ITV's 14%). These figures contrast favourably with tabloid newspapers such as the *Mirror* (1%), *The Express* and *The Sun* (both 2%) which are trusted far less. Likewise, in the US, where the public broadcaster operates with significantly less funding than the BBC and is watched by far less viewers (typically 2-3% share of audience) PBS remains significantly more trusted than network or cable television news (PBS.org 2012). For all the crises and controversies PSBs have experienced, they appear to enjoy a higher level of support and confidence in its newsgathering than wholesale commercial broadcasters.

Overall, the evidence presented in this chapter suggests that while the values of PSB continue to be threatened by commercial competition, the main public broadcaster – the BBC – remains editorially distinctive from its more market-driven rivals and continues to operate as the most trusted source of information. The vulnerable public service values concerning Blumler at the end of 20th century have thus arguably not deteriorated to the degree initially predicted. However, this might not be a view Blumler shares wholesale. In a recent co-authored essay with Stephen Coleman, he has observed over the previous decade a "gradual dilution of the civic mission of…the BBC, which has adopted many of the news-reporting techniques of its commercial rivals" (Blumler and Coleman 2010: 145). This was, they write further, "not necessarily…a planned policy by the BBC, but a cumulative effect of absorption in a chase for ratings and diminution of resources devoted to serious political analysis" (Ibid). The BBC, in these respects, has cut its newsgathering resources over the last decade or so (Deans 2012) and has changed its news programming to appeal to wider audiences, such as more effectively engaging with viewers' political interests (Kevill 2002).

Where Blumler might be in more agreement with this section's conclusions is with the perceived systemic impact the BBC specifically and the values of public service broadcasting more generally have had in delivering "profoundly civilizing consequences" in the UK (Blumler and Coleman 2010: 149). For compared to US broadcast news in particular, they argue, public service broadcasting "has (so far) protected political communication in Britain from some of the worst features of other countries' media" (Ibid). As this section suggested, the overarching values of public service broadcasting have maintained a relatively serious policy driven agenda in the UK compared to the US's more commercialized landscape. And the "civilizing" impact can be evidenced not just in the continued rapport for the BBC by the general public but in the continued demand for broadcast news to remain a highly regulated and impartial service. In the US, by contrast, the free market approach has delivered precisely the opposite. Since 1987 broadcasters are no longer required to present news impartially and several channels have become more openly partisan. In some respects US news providers – notably cable television channels -- are beginning to resemble the historically partisan nature of many UK national newspapers, which operate without any formal public service obligations. We now turn to exploring UK newspapers.

UK Newspapers and the Corrosion of Public Service Values

Three developments have prompted concerns about commitments to public service values in UK newspapers, nationally and locally. First, the intensely competitive markets for

readers and advertisers have prompted newspapers to increasingly foreground entertainment oriented copy above “hard” news (Franklin, 1997 and 2005b). Second, shortages of editorial resources have reconfigured journalists’ sourcing practices which in turn have encouraged “Churnalism” rather than “journalism” (Davies 2008). Third, developments in digital media technologies have (in the short term) undermined the funding of a sustainable and democratic journalism and challenged key elements in journalists’ professional identity (Franklin 2013).

Newszak, Compact Editions and the Democratic deficit

Reith’s priorities for public service that articulated a mission to inform and educate above the requirement to entertain, have been reordered since the 1990s when collapsing circulations, the increasingly frenzied search for sales and advertising revenues triggered striking changes in the editorial priorities of newspapers (Franklin 1997, pp15-21). In broadsheet newspapers, an emphasis on entertainment increasingly replaced the provision of information, measured judgement gave way to sensationalism, a focus on trivia replaced discussion of weighty issues and celebrity news achieved greater editorial salience than the coverage of significant international issues. Journalists’ traditional news values became undermined by new commercial values that were primarily motivated by market needs rather than the kind of public service interests Lord Reith championed. “Infotainment” (an emphasis on ‘lifestyle journalism’, health, travel, finance and features) became the new editorial priorities as human interest supplanted the public interest with journalists seemingly concerned to report stories which interest the public more than stories which are in the public interest.

The judgement that broadsheet news was little more than “Newszak” or “McJournalism” (Franklin 2005b) seemed vindicated in 2003/4 when the UK “quality” press became “compacts” and assumed a very similar appearance to the tabloid or “red top” papers (Cole 2008: 183-91). As news disappeared from editorial pages, it was replaced with “views” and columnists’ opinionated commentary began to replace journalists’ factually based reportage. Simon Kelner, the editor of the *Independent* who led the broadsheets’ charge to “compact” format in September 2003, accordingly designated the *Independent* a “viewspaper”; Rusbridger’s preferred term for the *Guardian* was a “broadloid” (Franklin 1997: 7).

Significantly, these changes in journalism have contributed to a growing democratic deficit in the UK. Journalists no longer deliver the same degree of surveillance of the local, national and international communities they serve and fail to deliver the economic, social and political information necessary for readers to exercise democratic accountability over governments (Franklin 2011a: 2-3); newspapers seem increasingly ill suited to the role of fourth estate. The same democratic shortcomings of newspapers are evident in the US (Starr 2009: 28).

One consequence of *newszak*, for example, has been the striking decline in coverage of foreign news which is costly to sustain with shrinking news budgets (Sampson, 1996; Hamilton and Lawrence 2012). Nationally, broadsheets’ legendarily comprehensive and critical reporting of Parliament has effectively disappeared; perhaps predictably the humorous sketch tradition is flourishing (Franklin 1997: 233-49). Even sceptics acknowledge that some part (no matter how small) of the democratic life in the UK is enacted on the floor of the House but it is no longer reported for readers. Finally, the same editorial neglect is evident in the local political arena where newspapers’ coverage of ‘courts and councils’ is much reduced. When there is coverage this too often reflects journalists’ ‘repurposing’ of press releases crafted by local government press officers

(Franklin 2011b: 90-107). Although early in their careers, online citizen public affairs sites show little sign of redressing the deficit, with a study of 48 US sites concluding that they "are, at best, imperfect information substitutes for most newspapers" and that "few citizen journalism sites outside of large metropolitan cities covered local government" (Fico et al 2013).

Churnalism, Sources and the "News Factory"

Blumler identified two aspects of the crisis facing newspapers in the UK; a crisis of financial viability "threatening the existence and resources of mainstream journalistic organisations" and a crisis of "civic adequacy" which is "impoverishing the contribution of journalism to citizenship and democracy" (Blumler, 2011, pxv); both are addressed in *Guardian* journalist Nick Davies' critical study *Flat Earth News* (Davies 2008).

Drawing on a political economy analysis of media, Davies argues that as newspapers try to maintain profitability in the context of declining revenues and job cuts, a static or reduced editorial staff must sustain, or more likely increase, their output of news stories to fill the paper's editorial columns. Squaring the circle of publishing more stories with fewer journalists, demands a growing reliance on "pre-packaged news" bought from news agencies or free-to-use public relations materials issued by government, major corporations and interest groups. Lacking time and resources, hard pressed journalists increasingly rely on these "Information subsidies" (Gandy 1982) not merely to stimulate thoughts about possible stories but to set their editorial agenda and actually deliver stories which directly shape their editorial copy. Davies argues that this is not journalism but "churnalism". Journalists are no longer gatherers but merely "passive processors of whatever news comes their way, churning out stories whether real event or PR artifice, important or trivial, true or false" (Davies, 2008: 59).

A study by Cardiff academics offered empirical endorsement for some of Davies' argument. Comparing published news stories with press releases and agency materials revealed that across a sample of 2,207 published domestic news stories, 60% were wholly or mainly derived from PR/Agency sources with a further 20% being a variable balance of these sources. In only 12% of news stories was there no evidence of journalistic reliance on pre-packaged news sources (Franklin 2011b: 101). Some stories offered unashamedly verbatim replications of PR materials. *The Times* report "George Cross for Iraq War hero" on 24 March 2006, for example, attributed to journalist Michael Evans, simply reproduced a Ministry of Defence press release. To add insult to journalistic injury, deadline pressures mean that there is no time to check the factual accuracy of such press releases; Machill and Beiler found that journalists spend only "eleven minutes [per working shift] checking sources and information" (Machill and Beiler, 2009: 183).

But how do these changes in journalistic practice contribute to the crisis of civic adequacy? First, and highly significantly, Davies illustrates the dominant, skewed and unrepresentative access enjoyed by corporate, governmental and other established voices in public debates hosted by newspapers. When the origins of PR sources cited in press stories were analysed, the corporate sector dominates with 38% of sourced references, followed by public bodies (police, NHS, Universities – 23%), Government and politicians (21%), NGO/Charities (11%) and professional associations (5%) Perhaps most shocking is that while corporate and government voices account for 60% of cited sources in press reports, the opinions of ordinary citizens account for only 2%. In such an uneven public debate, loaded against the public interest, *Vox Populi* is readily overwhelmed by a deafening din emanating from board rooms.

Little wonder that Robert McChesney describes journalists as “stenographers of the powerful” (http://www.fordham.edu/Campus_Resources/eNewsroom/topstories_1771.asp).

Second, the emergence of digital media and more participatory forms of journalism signal the promise of a more plural sourcing of news, but in the short run offer little democratic comfort. Research suggests that as news sources proliferate, their credibility becomes more difficult for journalists to establish, tempting them to consolidate their existing reliance on the ‘tried and tested’ sources in news agencies and public relations (Phillips, 2010: 99).

Digital Media; Decreasing Journalism

The emergence of digital media has been crucial to the radical restructuring of all aspects of news gathering, writing and reporting, including who writes the news and the converged and increasingly mobile news platforms which are used for its production and consumption. Currently six billion people have access to a mobile device which is greater than for any other medium but also exceeds access to networked electricity (Westlund 2013, p22). This last underscores the massive promise and potential of digital media to enrich the number and range of news sources but also the originators and citizen authors of news. Citizen derived reports of the Arab spring, the Japanese Tsunami and the Occupy Wall Street movement confirm their ability to inform and their cosmopolitanising potential (Chouliaraki and Blaagaard 2013 forthcoming).

But in the short term digital media have exacerbated both aspects of the crisis identified by Blumler; financial viability and civic adequacy. Online journalism has won readers and advertisers from newspapers, devastated their funding, prompted job cuts and the closure of hundreds of local and regional newspapers, reducing the independent sources of civic and political information necessary for meaningful citizen engagement, as well as the oversight and accountability of elites (Franklin, 2011a: 3-4). Worse, no alternative business model has emerged to sustain a viable and democratic journalism as newspaper groups experiment with various mixes of pay walls (Franklin 2011a), advertising on mobile devices (Westlund and Nel, 2012), the sale of newspaper Apps (Franklin 2012), crowdfunding (Carvajal, Garcia and Gonzales, 2012), co-creation (Aitamurto 2013), levies on corporate profits (IPPR 2009), public subsidies (Downie and Schudson 2010), or a voucher scheme which allows citizens to choose which news organisations will enjoy funding (McChesney and Nicholls, 2010). Political theorists will surely struggle to conceptualise a viable scheme for democracy that excludes independent and financially viable newspapers?

Other concerns emerge as electronic publishing exacerbates existing editorial problems. Davies’ worries about *Flat Earth News*, for example, in a digital context leading to “creative cannibalism” with news editors requiring journalists to ‘cut and paste’ news from rival papers, repurposing the plagiarised story with a redrafted opening paragraph, but no sign of the original journalist’s byline (Phillips 2011: 289). Similarly, the emergence of the “citizen” or “participatory” journalist, whose endeavours increasingly complement or replace (Neuberger and Nuernbergk 2011: 235-248) the education, training, professional experience, identity and news contacts which the professional journalist brings to news gathering and writing news, is less likely to generate news which is well sourced (in terms of numbers and authority of sources) or informed by the same bedrock professional values and concerns with accuracy, verification and objectivity.

Undoubtedly the most urgent question arising from the continuing decline of newspapers is “who will now originate the news?” Broadcast media have always been indebted to the prints

for their news agenda (listen to R4's *Today* programme in bed and then read the *Guardian* over breakfast), newspapers' online editions typically replicate stories from the printed pages, creative cannibalism is rife and "infomediaries" such as Google News simply "aggregate" (replicate) and distribute, but don't originate news (Bakker, 2012: 627-37). Ultimately, news is a commodity and someone must pay for the production cost to enjoy the highly valued democratic benefits.

Conclusions

In assessing the history and development of the UK's broadcasting and print media, this chapter has suggested that the regulation of newspapers may be required as much as for broadcast media. In our view, this would mean the values long entrenched in public service broadcasting would inform the production of news in the public interest alongside, but superior to the influence of the market place. Lord Justice Leveson, charged with a review into the culture, practices and ethics of the press inquired who might "Guard the Guardians", but our argument here has been that some form of regulation is key to delivering public service and thereby meaningful democratic engagement. It may well be that we need a regulatory mechanism which allows the public via statute to guard the guardian of the Guardians and ensure news and information about public affairs which sustains and nurtures citizen information, understanding and engagement and thereby a democratic polity. These values, after all, represent the enduring presence of public service broadcasting and for all their continued vulnerabilities (Blumler 1992a) they remain at the heart of what the fourth estate can achieve.

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Bioblurbs

Stephen Cushion is a Senior Lecturer at the Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies. He is co-author of *The Rise of 24-Hour News Television: Global Perspectives* (2010, Peter Lang), and sole author of *Television Journalism* (2011, Sage) and *The Democratic Value of News: Why Public Service Media Matter* (2012, Palgrave).

Bob Franklin is Professor of Journalism Studies at Cardiff University, UK. He is the Editor of *Digital Journalism, Journalism Practice* and *Journalism Studies*,. He edits the book series *Journalism Studies: Theory and Practice* (Routledge) and co-edits a series *Journalism Studies: Key Texts* published by Sage. Recent books include *The Future of Journalism: Developments and Debates* (2013); *Journalism, Sources and Credibility; New Perspectives* (with Matt Carlson) (2011) and *Journalism Education, Training and Employment (with Donica Mensing)* (2011). He was Visiting Professor at the Manship School of Journalism and Mass Communications, Louisiana State University, in 2008.