

RESPONSE TO CONSULTATION ON PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTING REVIEW

The current situation, with the threat to a plurality of psb providers, has come about because of a variety of factors, but the willingness of governments and regulators to pursue a market-based approach to broadcasting, in which the proliferation of television channels has been seen as a vital objective, has been crucial. The consequences, in the shape of the emasculation of ITV as a public service broadcaster and the financial pressures on Channel 4, may not have been entirely the result of the pursuit of this objective but they are strongly linked to that pursuit.

Given that psb is a highly desirable civic and social good – whether commercially viable or not – discussion has to focus on how we move on from where we are now, even although it can legitimately be argued that different policies might have ensured that we were currently in a rather different broadcasting environment.

Michael Grade, when he was in charge of Channel 4, remarked that ‘it is the BBC which keeps us all honest’. It is an ironic remark, given recent scandals across the industry, but there is still an essential truth in it. In the future the BBC must be funded at a level which ensures that it is able to meet clear public service objectives across the range of its output. But, to pursue Grade’s point, there must also be an ‘all’ to be kept honest. And that, as your review acknowledges, is now a serious problem.

Top slicing the BBC’s revenue is not an attractive option, not least because once the process started, it would be tempting for governments and regulator to keep coming back for more. It will also be difficult to persuade politicians to provide additional funding for broadcasting from general revenue. What seems clear however is there is no shortage of revenue in the non-terrestrial sector but few concomitant public service obligations. One way forward would involve imposing a levy on the total revenue of these companies as part of their broadcasting contract, and that levy would be used to create a psb fund, to which the commercial PSBs and Channel Four would be entitled, and expected, to apply for finance to produce programming which would meet clear psb objectives. The figures published in Ofcom’s last review of the UK communications market suggest that such a levy, if set at 5%, would produce just over £200m annually, not a huge sum but a significant one. The experience of the Canadian Television Fund – which, it has to be admitted, has not been without its problems – would be worth examining in the context of this proposal.

It can also be legitimately argued that the terrestrial broadcasters should continue to be required as part of their licences and agreements to fund some psb programming, not only because that would be desirable in itself but also because it would go some way to preventing the culture in these organisations becoming entirely commercial and totally remote from that found in ITV in its heyday. Thus we would have a situation where non-BBC broadcasters remained part of psb and perhaps continued to retain professional self-respect, a commodity which must be in short supply in some quarters these days.

David Hutchison, Research Fellow in Media Policy, Glasgow Caledonian University.