

Barret Stanboulion of Publicsquare open response to Ofcom's Second Public Service Broadcasting Review - Phase One: The Digital Opportunity

As we enter what I call the “Social Age,” I make the case that public service content, as a precursor to functioning democratic society, should achieve the broadest possible reach. Without weakening institutional incumbents, but learning that plurality must be just that in the publicsquare, in its diversity of voices and through its suppliers and access.

There is no challenge to the underlying merits and function of public service broadcasting however the topology is opaque, complex and evolving. More of question: where next and how so, better? It's operation is also a preserve of the 'great and good' and as an outside but keen observer, within and adjacent to the industry, some things are difficult to express value-free, without fear, and in this free-form; as useful, solicited insights.

Fundamentally my issue lies with the changing nature of plurality and arguably basic disingenuous tenets in commissioning and production and given terms of reference (probably produced through addressing the gap between actual, and, stated, aims).

First, the elephant in the room no one dares talk about is the dominance of consolidating “factory farm” producers (“Super-Indies”) who have heightened a formal decoupling of the hybrid PSB/Market ecology that historically characterised and satisfied UK production on both scores.

Super-Indies have contributed to high quality, entertaining and eminently exportable fare. The opportunity cost though has heightened a dramatic primacy of access to commissioners, and execution in ideas, which has crowded out viable PSB fare, and, participation at a supplier level.

Characterized anecdotally (and pithily) in four main ways

Programme making and supply has gone industrial. Bulk and derivative supply in film-making and the exploitation of programme and format rights have sought to commoditize output in order that volume revenues may securitize large commercial businesses.

In turn they are becoming less ‘independent’, more corporate and process-driven, and encroaching by volume and value, a huge percentage of commissioning supply, increasingly commercial and international market-driven.

As broadcasters’ own (commercial) position becomes challenged operating norms are dictated vicariously through Super-Indies, manifest through, greater centralization and control of ‘brand voice’, risk-aversion and tokenism, and, even a formal de-coupling of the hybrid PSB/commercial ecology (separate briefs, separate objectives).

The Super-Indie model as a bi-product obfuscates contribution, valorisation and creative endeavour. That is to say ‘commoditized ‘finished product’, comprising packaging, developing, tendering and gaining access to broadcasters, is an effective barrier to entry - overriding original ideas and creative contribution, per

se. 'Ideas' are also now separated from individual creators, who unless directly employed by a large company, will as outsiders have little recourse to retain rights (trading IPR being an important secondary exploitation activity) subsumed and assigned almost as a precondition. This lack of access and ownership by individuals restricts opportunities for new entrants to seed new businesses. This is in contrast to the enormous and creatively vital diversity in suppliers that were created at the formation of Channel 4. For younger generations it is also a sad cultural indictment that the overhang of our forbearers' success cannot extend the same opportunities and voice to the 'up-start'. Rather than truly fostering a climate of new ideas and sustainable new businesses to house them, the labour and youth-experience of bright young things powers second-generation industry; in the absence of having their own sustainable first generation terms and vehicles on any meaningful scale. The poor translation of public purpose onto emerging platforms is arguably evidence of this.

The net effect of the changing nature of programme supply and associated threshold for risk in both schedules and programme content diminishes access to diverse suppliers and individuals and elevates the economic, over the cultural, considerations of output.

Output is not adapting to demand fast enough because it is being securitized and stultified by narrow commercial risk-averse objectives. Moreover, the prism of Super-Indies is confusing the transition of the old successes towards a new social contract and PSC model.

Second, acknowledging a nuanced differentiation between the role of media (in society) and the media business. As politics should proverbially be a broad church of representation and relevant experience of and by the people, the notion of public service media, applied to broadcasting, should be a public sphere, whose function is to hold a social and cultural mirror for us all to access and contribute to.

In either case participation, or access, should not be predicated upon professionalized entry for careerists, but a porous membrane that allows in wider ideas, people, expression, curiosity and diversity; and filters rubbish out, irrespective of means of execution. I speak of an unholy alliance of "institutional plurality" and corporate media over plurality of supply and voices from the non-commercial, non-institutional, unstructured and even innocent endeavour. The commercial needs of the sector, and the explicit actions of regulation in content, though symbiotic, are not the same; but imperceptibly so at institutional level. Policy wonks conveniently lump the distinct roles of market intervention and editorial intervention as alternate basis of justification when they could be separate in some cases. At the same time pre-supposes that a variety of suppliers are incapable of upholding a common or minimum editorial standard of agreed societal benefit, voluntarily, or directly-mandated.

Here are four (again pithy) unbundled aspects of the role of media (in society)

Public purpose and plurality should simply equate to the value placed on truth and provenance, originality, diverse viewpoints and insightful expression, of and by society; accessible to all, voices facilitated though not necessarily mediated through institutions. No institution, or any amount of good governance, can override the function of public service content that accords voice and form, to scrutiny, new artistic and societal insights and alternative elements of reportage

and grassroots experience outside institutional channels. Prescriptive conditionality further diminishes naturally-arising efforts of budding journalists and dramatists unable to navigate the media business. Corralled through a single central body would further seriously challenge how plurality exists in practice.

Ensuring a nursery-slope for 'nurturing' expression described above is an approach worth considering in PSB; distinct from winning reality shows, ring fencing genres and institutions, or, by subsidizing a commercial element of their operations.

There are certainly expert tick boxes and sophistry in defining the public good and accounting for it but they not need always be the prescriptive tail wagging the fluid, plural dog. Decoupling some of the burdens of administration from content creation could make easier the challenge of finding, funding and expressing new forms and voices at the nexus of uncategorised talent and future solutions in tomorrow's vocabulary – which we are grappling at to express today.

A populist "Boggle" may not be the answer but incorporating elements that are unmediated, un-patrician, speculative, decentralized networked media, representing the breadth and diversity of voices, talents, and scrutiny is not far off a putative future unregulated (or not possible to regulate) content world.

Solutions

Public service content must achieve the broadest possible reach without weakening incumbents who can leverage their trusted brands in new ways. It must be treated as a valuable endeavour not market failure.

Whilst hybrid objectives and sensibilities, for good or for bad, may be de-coupling the business end, public service content can never be a stagnant-pool dangerously disconnected to the seas of market, fashion and technological mediation, its sense-checkers.

No ambiguity however exists in delivering to commercial profit-making standards within organisations with stated social aims or performance metrics. Even commercial broadcasters and businesses should recognize the viability and benefits of public service values to their brands, and that their contribution is merited in the digital climate.

At the same time we mustn't throw the baby out with the bathwater by sweating existing world class brands through Byzantine regulatory objectives and apologetic praise-starvation.

A two tier expansion would see existing institutions, well capitalized, building on their brands to deliver public value. Characterised by regulation, high levels of accountability, editorial and governance benchmarks, and forward looking (with managed risk) to compete on a global stage where Britain retains a competitive advantage (in both creative industries and civil society institutions). Other broadcasters could contest for funds administered through the BBC and Channel 4 (as could other large public or quasi-public institutions) on the same basis.

At the same time a new national social enterprise investment initiative could look at broadening reach. Through the objective of adding new and vital capacity, and reducing the burden of accountability at the outset, in favour minimal but qualifying criteria, at individual, project, institution or enterprise level (think Nesta meets Dragon's Den!).

Characterised by; a seed capital approach with a more speculative R&D approach to staged efforts based on a 'cultural fund portfolio'; appended by a retrospective approach to analyse and understand benefits after completion. Retrospective criteria could include PSC tagging, a new entrants/ suppliers/ start-up count, and evaluation approaches defined organically through participation numbers, voting, impact and integrity, voluntary and self-administered codes of conduct and regulation approaches, and fraud-prevention. Success would gain 'PSB credits' for further larger and more ambitious projects.

The temptation of creating a world-class Indie sector that successfully captures talent and profit in its dam cannot dominate and occupy all the slots that will see TV cease to be a medium for genuine democratic and cultural exchange. The historic confusion that has given rise to these entities must not be further justified at the expense of new types of vehicles suited to expressing the fundamental social mission of public service content.

We are entering a social age, where civil society, social values and the benefits of cooperation will become imperative to effective and equitably-functioning of business and state. The new publicsquare like the old filters our collective whim and turns it into functioning collaboration, marketplace, exchange, expression: Interdependence, the public record and common interest that will ultimately re-shape our world.

Public service values are critical at this juncture and content and communications central to it. It must be extended with the broadest reach possible, and pro-actively through investment, new means and mechanisms, in as many forms, and from as many sources, which merit the tag.

Ends.

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