

Rethinking the Principles of Public Service Media for the Digital Society Roundtable: Summary of Discussion

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Introduction

To mark the centenary of the BBC's formation, the British Academy held a roundtable discussion examining the role, achievements, and future of public service media in the UK. The event brought together the research, policy and professional communities to revisit the 2016 [Future for Public Service Television Inquiry](#), and provided an opportunity both to reflect on developments in broadcasting and media systems since its publication and to amplify the relevant findings and recommendations of the inquiry in today's social, cultural and political context.

The discussion also looked ahead to the future of public service media in the digital era, building on and contributing to the [British Academy's current work](#) on the question of 'what makes a good digital society?' Historically, in the realms of culture and media, public service media organisations have played a vital role in the development and provision of high quality cultural and media content at a national scale.

Overview

The event brought together experts to rethink some of the underlying principles of public service media¹ (PSM) for the digital age. This included discussions around the changing nature of the cultural and social environment within which PSM is immersed, and the synergies between PSM and new forms of digital media infrastructure. The discussion addressed these points in relation to the underpinning principles of PSM and how they might be revised for the digital age as well as reflecting on the history of the BBC, Channel 4 and ITV as models for public service media organisations in the UK.

The event was co-chaired by Professor Georgina Born OBE FBA, Professor Ian Christie FBA, Professor Sonia Livingstone FBA and Professor Robin Mansell FBA. The event also featured provocations from Lucy Crompton-Reid, Wikimedia UK and Bill Thompson, BBC.

The discussion took place under the Chatham House rule. This note summarises the main points discussed at the roundtable, and also builds upon the discussion, developing further some of the points that were covered at the event. It is intended that this note helps to prompt and provoke further thought on the evolving role of public service media and that it is useful for interested stakeholders in sectors including media policy and regulation. The note summarises the key themes discussed over the course of the event, illustrates some of these points with specific case studies, and concludes with some reflections on rethinking the principles of public service media for the digital society.

¹ The European Broadcasting Union defines public service media as "broadcasting made, financed and controlled by the public, for the public. Their output, whether it be TV, radio or digital, is designed to inform, educate and entertain all audiences. PSM broadcasters are often established by law but are non-partisan, independent and run for the benefit of society as a whole." (<https://www.ebu.ch/about/public-service-media>). In the UK public service broadcasters comprise of the BBC, ITV, STV, Channel 4, Channel 5 and S4C.

Summary of key themes discussed

Technology and public service media

Participants noted that when discussing PSM, and in particular the future of PSM, there is often a pervasive discourse around technology acting as a disruptor and leading to specific outcomes. However, while technology can undoubtedly act as a disruptor it is vital not to be deterministic about technology. Rather, all stakeholders concerned with PSM should think broadly about a range of alternative potential futures for PSM. This includes considering a range of financing models, incentives and regulatory options in relation to technology when thinking about the future of PSM.

Diversity and complexity – in society and in broadcasting

The UK has witnessed many shifts in society over recent decades. This includes a move from a relatively monocultural mass society to a complex fabric of overlapping communities and individuals. There has been an emergence of super-diverse cities such as Birmingham and Leicester.

The BBC can be characterised as having two complementary responsibilities in relation to this, as it aims both to ‘bring the nation together’ in its position as a mass broadcaster, while also catering to particular communities, for example, through the Asian network or through regional and local programming. The BBC must navigate being both the voice of a nation that brings people together on occasions such as the death of Queen Elizabeth II, and also being a voice for the diverse and different communities that make up the UK. The changes in society have therefore provided the BBC with opportunities, but also with challenges. Participants discussed how there is a need to combine these two perspectives and highlighted the approach of embracing ‘difference in unity’.

Broadcasters can also play a role in orchestrating and enabling encounters between different communities.² The increasing diversity in society can act as a catalyst for media organisations to re-think their models, to invite the participation of stakeholders and communities, and to build from the bottom up.

Participants noted also that today, the word ‘broadcasting’ stems from the era in which media output involved a one-way process. A major cause of disruption is the two-way, interactive systems created through new forms of digital media, and it is vital that public service media addresses head-on the challenges posed by the existence of this return path, for instance, in relation to representation and in responding to the cultural mood. Again, inviting the participation of diverse stakeholder groups is one means to these ends.

The last couple of decades have also seen a move towards intense personalisation of media consumption, driven by an increase in personalised (algorithmically-driven) technologies/platforms, and by an individuated concept of the consumer (by contrast with that of citizen, community or public) that underlies the design of these technologies. This has led to a consequent fragmentation that has not previously existed. This personalisation can be in tension with the goals of PSM outlined above: universality in the sense of bringing the nation together, as well as catering to particular communities while enabling encounters among diverse UK communities. It can be difficult for media organisations, as for others, to fully understand the cumulative influence of organisations’ algorithmically-driven personalisation strategies on how people think about and engage with media and what interventions might be productive to mitigate its deleterious effects [see case study 1 below]. The complex and constantly-evolving relationship between social media networks and PSM requires serious attention.

Case study 2 below explores the mission and work of Wikimedia UK, who in common with the BBC sits within the current PSM landscape and aims to serve the public interest. Wikimedia UK exemplifies the new kinds of public interest interventions that can arise from independent non-profit organisations and that complement the existing PSM ecology.

Recommendation systems designed on PSM principles: case study 1

Professor Georgina Born OBE FBA presented a [case study](#) on her collaboration with computer scientists on translating core principles of PSM into the design of recommendation systems (RS) for cultural content (music, film and books) – a key application of AI.

Recognising that RS have cumulative effects on the content users engage with, affecting the development of individual taste and wider cultural experiences, the project prototypes an approach to the design of RS based on PSM principles of universality of address and content diversity. The study resulted in the development of a new metric, commonality, which innovates by providing an alternative, non-personalized design for RS. Implemented to enhance diversity (defined in several ways), the commonality metric helps to measure and promote a shared and diverse cultural experience among users – strengthening cultural citizenship across populations of users and cumulatively over time.

The project contributes to wider currents in RS design, including fairness and diversity metrics, developing ‘public good’ implementations of digital media and machine learning systems.

² Born, G. (2012) ‘Mediating the Public Sphere: Digitisation, Pluralism, and Communicative Democracy’, in Christian J. Emden and David Midgley (eds.) *Beyond Habermas: Democracy, Knowledge, and the Public Sphere*. London and New York: Berghahn, pp.119-146.

Wikimedia UK: case study 2

Lucy Crompton-Reid, Chief Executive, [Wikimedia UK](#), gave an overview of how the organisation operates within the PSM landscape. Wikimedia UK's mission is to help enable a democratic and equitable society through knowledge that is accessible by everyone. In common with the BBC, it aims to serve the public interest.

Wikimedia's key principles include openness, transparency, privacy and freedom of expression, and it seeks both to empower people to access and engage with knowledge and also to contribute to building this knowledge base. Lucy noted the importance of many people contributing towards one article, proposing that the more an article is edited, the more balanced it becomes, thereby finding a consensus or middle ground rather than showing impartiality in the sense of expressing different points of view.

An ongoing challenge is how to ensure that there is diversity amongst content contributors to Wikimedia, including in terms of gender and racialised groups. Knowledge equity is a key strategic theme for Wikimedia UK, and the charity works in partnership with cultural and educational institutions across the UK to develop and deliver initiatives to increase both the engagement and representation of marginalised people.

Regulation and rights

The internet and other technologies have brought about a paradigm shift in the consumption of media, including PSM. However, participants noted that the regulatory landscape has not always kept pace, and that a negative rights approach foregrounding the primacy of free speech has become dominant since it is the default approach of tech companies – especially those that are US based and take their lead from the US First Amendment. Additionally, participants noted that this negative rights approach differs from the positive regulatory framework that has historically underpinned public service media organisations, and that has enabled them to meet their mission and obligations.

Participants stated that a new social contract for the regulation of media platforms is required, since the regulation of the online environment is too important to be left to the market alone. Positive state intervention and the prioritising of societal and collective needs are necessary in order to support the social and cultural contributions associated with PSM, as opposed to relying purely on a freedom of expression and negative-rights approach. An international coalition building on the work of the Council of Europe which espouses a positive rights approach was advocated, and participants also noted Prof. Damian Tambini's arguments for a new social contract in this context that would aim to reconcile liberty with an ethic of responsibility.³

Models of provision and financial viability

Participants noted that in terms of financial viability, neither a subscription model, nor a free access model, nor a voluntary community model can fully sustain the principles of PSM. Subscription models might lead to more targeted and desirable content, but also to financial challenges and inequalities of access. Moreover, in this model accountability shifts to subscribers rather than to the general public. Voluntary community models can align well with the specialised interests of content generators or particular audiences, but they attract mixed levels of financial sustainability and tend to support smaller and more localised initiatives, rather than existing PSM.

If it is the case that none of these models on their own can sustain the values of PSM, is there a model that combines elements of these or potentially other models that could work? Participants noted that there are some other models in existence, for example the corporate social responsibility (CSR) arm of a bigger entity (such as when a corporate studio allocates resources to the production of media content). It was highlighted that the current media landscape is one where the link between institution and content is weaker than it used to be, and also one where there is more fluidity between model types. For instance, traditional broadcasters are becoming more like Netflix in the way they produce content, but Netflix is moving towards some traditional broadcaster behaviours, such as releasing weekly episodes of series. Finally, it was noted that some audiences (particularly young people) tend not to differentiate between who is providing a given category of media content and may not always be aware if they are receiving content from a PSM or not.

³ Tambini, D. (2021) 'A theory of media freedom', *Journal of Media Law*, Vol. 13 Issue 2 (Nov. 2021) pp.135-152

Looking to the future

In the final part of the discussion participants drew out some central threads in relation to rethinking the principles of PSM for the digital society.

Articulating the impact and effectiveness of PSM

If the remit of PSM is to improve the world in certain definable ways, how can the extent to which PSM meets these goals be accurately measured, or fully articulated? Some aspects can be measured – for example, through broadcasting figures, website views, and qualitatively through respected critics' judgements about the quality of the content produced and transmitted. But other aspects are harder to capture, for example the extent to which PSM acts as an educator or as a vehicle for bringing about positive behavioural and social change. This means that PSM organisations may not always be able to fully articulate their successes using conventional metrics and so receive full credit for their impact and work. Work is needed to develop creative means of linking PSM goals to quantitative and qualitative assessments of whether they are achieved.

The role of PSM alongside changing needs, expectations and demands of audiences

Unlike many other broadcasters the primary goal of PSM cannot be summarised as meeting the existing expectations and demands of audiences. PSM has always been regulated to seek excellence, innovation and diversity in its output; and creative output and audience expectations develop interactively through time. This means that PSM must also provide what audiences 'need' – which can be a challenge to define. Additionally, there may be instances where what certain audiences want are things that lead towards negative outcomes such as extremism and division, and so PSM may need actively to choose not to provide what an audience wants in such cases.

The evolving role of the BBC

Ongoing questions for the BBC to consider include its role in relation to stewardship of the PSM ecosystem, how it fits within and/or differentiates itself from market-driven frameworks, and its role in relation to the provision of technology including any shift to 'digital first' provision, including as an innovator and market leader. This will require that issues of PSM prominence in the online world are addressed as a matter of urgency.