

VI.2

In Search of the ‘Shared Moment’

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INTRODUCTION

Have we come irrevocably to the end of the discourse of ‘public service’, which was attached so firmly to much of the communication institution of the mid-20th century? Is it possible that the beliefs and ideals that went with public service can be revived in our current media environment? The notion of public service helped at first to sanitise what seemed to be an inevitable monopoly in broadcasting, especially in geographically small countries; then, when commercial competition started up in radio and television, it came to mark the contrast between what people were thought to want and what they might be induced to accept, in their own higher interest and for their own protection. It filled in the gap between citizen and consumer.

Throughout their history the communication media have given rise to an evolving dialogue between the optimism of technological prediction and the pessimism of cultural prophecy. This dialogue has generated a vast international literature as well as a complex history of national administrative practices. We have in the decade of the 1990s crossed the threshold into a whole new phase of this dialogue, as well as of the practices – as the ramifications of the multimedia age have begun to reveal themselves. The old institutions are rapidly evaporating and even the reasons for their existence are rapidly fading from our minds. Essentially, the culture of radio and television (and to a declining extent cable and satellite) was built upon the intimation of a large undifferentiated audience, usually bounded by a national identity, who were brought together electronically and without specific payment, to share an experience. The Internet, on the other hand, presents itself to an unpoliceable mass of audiences, not linked by anything other than the happenstance of surfing or the individual subscription to a particularism. The ‘shared moment’ enjoyed by the early audiences of broadcasting, which made the domestic environment the location of a collective, regional or national, citizen identity has given way to a discord of haphazard loyalties.

OLDER GENERATION PUBLIC SERVICE

The development of the 20th century’s media coincided with a series of administrative experiments in forms of public service around the world. In the

United States, a Federal Communications Commission evolved by stages, taking to itself a series of largely negative and preventative responsibilities in respect of the as yet unknown impact of the mass media of radio and television. Its duties revolved around the vague sense that in the electronic media there lay at stake a 'public interest, convenience and necessity'. Cinema, too, found itself embraced by public institutions in many places, concerned with policing representations on the screen of social relationships, protecting children from certain kinds of knowledge, upholding images of correct conduct between classes and generations and safeguarding the production of indigenous images where these were threatened by foreign competition.

Not only entertainment but other new technologies seemed to require visible governing institutions, belonging morally to nation or society or public. The airways, the telephone system and, in due course, trains, electricity and energy were thought to be so fundamental, so infrastructural, so supportive of all other sectors of economy and society that they could not simply be permitted to function as owned enterprises, outside the ultimate control of public authorities operating on behalf of the wider society. Forms and styles of regulation furnished political agendas with their principal controversies for many decades.

By the end of the 20th century the ideologies which sprang from public service institutions were wearing thin and it was possible for a Democratic Party administration in the United States and a Labour government in the United Kingdom both to offer little more than social compassion in place of institutional development in public service. The Clinton foray into socialised medicine rapidly petered out; the balanced budget took precedence over welfare. As far as the Labour Party, free of Clause Four, was concerned, the means of production, distribution and exchange were never again to be socially owned, or so it seems. In the information and entertainment media the available abundance had defeated the public service imagination. In France the main mass channel was simply sold off into the private sector and there was talk of selling off another one of the four. In the United States the triad of networks had given way to a mass of cable and satellite channels and to much else. In the United Kingdom the BBC had transmogrified itself into a 'management' where once it had seen itself as a vast *atelier*. By this means it had saved itself from the Conservative administration in the mid-1990s, and convinced them, for the time being, that the licence fee, the only truly socialised charging system for electronic media, was worth retaining for the BBC.

At the turn of the century it had become impossible for an older generation of public service broadcasters even to explain what they had meant by public service

broadcasting, a system of broadcasting that prevented as it presented, that offered delight and instruction in order to displace the materials which would, it was believed, fill the airways were the medium wholly or substantially in private hands. Those private hands were no longer attached to people who shared the ideals of public service while earning a crust in the private sector. A generation of small independent television companies which had sprung up in their hundreds across Europe (now in the ex-communist East as well as the West) were in the possession of people who saw glittering markets for media materials opening up. They devised entertainment formats that could be sold across boundaries and across continents, devoid of local allusiveness. The most universal reservoir of common allusion is sex and the moral barriers were duly swept away.

RECONSTRUCTING POLICY IDEALS

Public service had always entailed suggesting to listeners and viewers that something on offer was better for them than something they might have been tempted to switch to themselves. Thus the Light Programme in the 1940s was there to coax listeners from Radio Luxembourg, and in the 1960s Radio One was introduced to overcome the propensity of the young to turn to the illegal pirate radios. BBC-2 was awarded to the BBC because the commercial channel was believed by those in authority to be debasing public taste. By the end of the 20th century the notion of such a possibility had been evacuated from the official mind.

Public service had grown alongside a particular range of technologies and a matching range of ideologies. It drew also upon a tradition of service and a sense of social duty on the part of those who ran the institutions and produced the content, that harked back to empire and to the age of missionaries. The beliefs and attitudes about the nature of society and kind of service society required were not unique to the media; they were present of course in education and in the church but also in such bodies as the Post Office and the providers of utilities, any institution responsible for equal, continual, guaranteed and universal provision of a good or service. The BBC became for a considerable time – in some sense still – the world's supreme example of its kind. It depended upon a complex machinery of motivation on the part of twenty thousand individuals, selected, socialised, trained and indoctrinated into the slowly evolving attitudes that composed the public service mentality.

One cannot over-emphasise the differences in mindset between the provision of television in a closed three- or four-channel environment and the advent of multi-channel choice, even though the latter remains subject to 'light touch' forms of regulation. Though it could be and was described, in slightly sneering tones in the

1970s, as a form of social control, as a subtle means of painless hegemony and false consciousness, it extracted from those who lived by it special forms of social idealism. The cynicism of commercialised culture was largely absent. Political pressure was vigorously withstood, though not always with complete success. Commercial motivation was institutionally treated as improper. Advertising was not merely absent, it was immoral, especially where public information was concerned. The purpose of entertainment was still to educate or at least to edify. Audience size had the status of being something that a producer had seriously to consider; it did not circumscribe the entire nature of a programme. Audience measurement had not yet become the chief determinant of the environment in which programme commissioning took place. That gradually came about during the 1980s and 1990s and in the era of subscription cable and where satellite service has become a staple.

With privatisation the cultural experience of broadcasting has itself altered, with a change in the whole manner by which the audience is sought and addressed. The public space, in which the discussion of broadcasting regulation has always taken place, has somehow seemed to shrink. But, at the same time, cultural bureaucracy has been de-legitimised in all its forms. The continuing public service institutions have all had to re-construct their *raison d'être* in full public view while searching for new terms in which to justify their existence. In the United Kingdom the Arts Council, to take one example, has performed this task awkwardly, but the BBC proceeded to carry off the shift in its own consciousness extremely effectively; government willingly accepted its view of how it was intending to function in the abbreviated public realm and rewarded it with the allocation of further channels in the filling of which its role would appear more 'commercial' than public service. The BBC succeeded in preserving the licence fee under the Thatcher government after this substantial self-realignment and internal managerial transformation. The United Kingdom's Channel Four underwent its own drastic change during the same decade of the 1990s when it took on the role of selling its own advertising and turning ITV into a rival where previously it had been a kind of partner. The French too have reviewed their entire system and went further than any other of the European broadcasting administrations by selling off their main mass channel while suggesting that the same thing might be done with a second one. No broadcasting system in the world in the era of media abundance resembles what it was, in terms of its physical shape and in the way it announces itself to its audience.

The changes we see around us in the media world are generally ascribed to the exigencies of new techniques and technologies (which all share the characteristic

of multiplying the outlets available), but the changes are equally derived from new prevailing economic precepts. Almost every country has come to accept that its future financial success depends on the endless creation of new markets for new commodities which, in turn, depend upon the endless re-development of public tastes and needs. The great national terrestrial channels all survive but on the basis of new identities within a feverishly competitive market of channels. Private capital, demanding freedom to operate internationally and with minimal constraint, has come to impose its own diktats and prevailing political attitude suggests that these should be accepted as legitimate.

One highly illustrative incident in the United Kingdom was the shifting of the main news on ITV from 10 to 11 p.m. in 2001. This was a great test of the extent to which public service concerns still held sway in the commercial sector of television: for the regulatory authority had long ago stipulated that the bulk of the population should be enabled to see one major news bulletin a day within peak hours. The resulting programme had for decades been something which the main commercial channel always pointed to as proof of its public service credentials. Despite vigorous protest in Parliament the change went ahead, only to be followed by the BBC's decision to shift its 9 o'clock news to 10. The purpose of the first change was to rescue advertising revenue and the argument of the BBC was that it felt it had to give itself the same scheduling opportunity as a competitor. The 'shared moment' had had its day. A wave of take-overs within the commercial sector has taken place, where once the entire sector had been constructed by public authorities to provide every region within its own locally owned company. There is no space between the competitors in this marketplace, no space for any redundancy of provision. The attention of every viewer available is urgently required for commercial exploitation or to justify the revenue of the non-commercial competitor.

CONCLUSION

The process of change has much further still to go. But already one can see the glimmerings of an internal contradiction or at least of a positive new horizon. For the world is evolving a single shared agenda, what one might call the post-September 11th agenda. There is a clear set of internationally shared dilemmas, with regional and national versions. This was not the case during the Cold War, nor during the years of its immediate aftermath. There is an urgent need now to understand things which neither West nor Islam had felt were necessary to take in, each about the other. There are the outcomes of the war against terrorism to absorb into the political bloodstream, whatever the interim results of those conflicts. There is a fresh sense of duty, international duty which spills back into

domestic programmes, affecting migrants and refugees, education, welfare, religion and the economy. There are tasks of absorption and socialisation which are urgent if further conflict is to be forestalled. The case for 'shared moments' has a new and compelling momentum and one that is unlikely to be evaded or ignored.

Looking back on the public service media ethic one sees an important bifurcation; on the one hand, people believed that audiences had to be protected against certain images and messages and, on the other, that they had to be manipulated into absorbing other messages. The former tended to prevail and the endless studies of the effects of violence and 'bad language' are the evidence of an obsessive concern to protect. But the latter was also important for it meant the creation of materials which passed with a equal understanding and equal emotional pleasure into a multitude of minds. From the boundless multiplicity of messages of today new homogeneous understandings must be derived. One cannot help but feel that a way will be found, not a way of excluding, but a way of making coherent, of legitimating some of that which we are learning and discarding some of the rest. We will never go back to a few clear streams of news and information but out of the chaos of messages those institutions that are in a position to play a shaping role will inevitably emerge and take on the mantle of international public information. Those existing institutions that cave in to the pressures now will not play that eventual shaping role. Those that stick it out will.