The Purposes of Broadcasting – Revisited

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In 1960 the then Conservative government commissioned a report on the future of broadcasting in the UK. This it did for four reasons. The first was that, because of considerable hostility to 'commercial' television from across the political spectrum, ITV had been introduced in 1954 for only a ten year 'experimental' period, and this was now drawing to an end. Second, there was mounting criticism that ITV companies were making very considerable profits by lowering programme standards. Third, a second TV channel was to be allotted, and there was a great deal of debate about whether this should go to the BBC or ITV. And finally, the BBC Charter was due to expire in 1962.

The committee which wrote the report was chaired by the industrialist Sir Harry Pilkington, and a particularly notable member was Richard Hoggart – who had recently published *The Uses of Literacy* (1957) and appeared for the defence in the *Lady Chatterley* trial. Its secretary was Dennis Lawrence, a career civil servant in the Post Office.

Much to the fury of the numerous newspapers who had shares in ITV companies, the Committee was highly critical of ITV and decided to award the second channel to the BBC. The Committee in general, and Hoggart in particular, were accused of being, among other things, do-gooders, roundheads, puritans, socialists, authoritarians, paternal, prim, patronising, moralistic, censorious, and out of touch with public opinion. Later Hoggart himself , in his book *An Imagined Life* (1992), described this reaction as 'the usual dreary, underdeveloped litany of fear', and as manifesting an 'Islamic-fundamentalist-like fury'[i].

The anti-BBC, anti-intellectual and stridently populist tone of the aggrieved reaction against Pilkington carries many a pre-echo of subsequent attacks on the public service broadcasting

system and the BBC in particular. The fact that they all come from exactly the same quarter – 'free market' politicians and economists, and a press which is very far indeed from being a disinterested observer of the broadcasting scene – shows just how deep run the roots of the current campaign against not just the BBC but against public service broadcasting in all its forms. And, by the same token, much of the Report's defence of public service broadcasting is as directly relevant to today's battles as to those of fifty years ago.

From this perspective, the most important part of the Report is Chapter Three, entitled 'The Purposes of Broadcasting'. It was actually written by Dennis Lawrence, but is highly Hoggartian in spirit.

It is of course important to understand that when the Report talks of broadcasting it means public service broadcasting, as embodied in the BBC and ITV, since there was no other form in those days. Now, of course, there is absolutely no shortage of weighty books and articles about public service broadcasting, the public sphere and so on, but in 1960 such serious analyses of broadcasting were rare – and particularly so in official reports. And the Report was nothing if not serious about the public purposes and responsibilities of broadcasting.

In its consideration of those purposes and responsibilities, the Report argues that 'television is and will be a main factor in influencing the values and moral standards of our society', and thus 'by its nature broadcasting must be in a constant and sensitive relationship with the moral condition of society'. Inevitably this immediately led to the Report being caricatured by its populist critics as calling for broadcasting to play a moralising role in society, whereas what it was in fact doing was simply pointing out that social attitudes, assumptions and values will inevitably be reflected in and to some extent influenced by broadcasting, as well as other forms of modern communication. Consequently, it was important that broadcasters respected the medium and assumed a responsibility for its output, its audience and indeed the

wider public and society. An observation that is as valid now as when the Report was published.

However, the most significant part of 'The Purposes of Broadcasting' for current debates about the future of the BBC in particular and of public service broadcasting in general is its robust and combative dismissal of the populist approach to television – an approach which thoroughly infused many of the attacks on the Report and which has become a hallmark of the many onslaughts on public service broadcasting in the intervening years.

The Report notes the argument, familiar even then, that certain programmes are popular with large audiences because they are 'what the public wants', and that 'to provide anything else is to impose on people what someone thinks they ought to like'. But as the Report points out: 'The public is not an amorphous, uniform mass; however much it is counted and classified under this or that heading, it is composed of individual people; and "what the public wants" is what individual people want. They share some of their wants and interests with all or most of their fellows; and it is necessary that a service of broadcasting should cater for those wants and interests. There is in short a considerable place for items which all or most enjoy. To say, however, that the only way of giving people what they want is to give them these items is to imply that all individuals are alike. But no two are …. A service which caters only for majorities can never satisfy all, or even most, of the needs of any individual. It cannot, therefore, satisfy all the needs of the public'.

Thus, far from advocating narrowing of the range of television programmes so as to include only those which were 'good' for people, as the Report's populist critics suggested that it did, it actually argued, conversely, for a wide range of programmes aimed at a wide range of audiences: 'No one can say he is giving the public what it wants, unless the public knows the whole range of possibilities which television can offer and, from this range, chooses what it

wants to see. For a choice is only free if the field of choice is not unnecessarily restricted. The subject matter of television is to be found in the whole scope and variety of human awareness and experience. If viewers – "the public" – are thought of as "the mass audience", or "the majority", they will be offered only the average of common experience and awareness; the "ordinary"; the commonplace – for what all know and do is, by definition, commonplace. They will be kept unaware of what lies beyond the average of experience; their field of choice will be limited. In time they come to like only what they know. But it will always be true that, had they been offered a wider range from which to choose, they might and often would have chosen otherwise, and with greater enjoyment'.

Back in 1989, Rupert Murdoch opened his infamous MacTaggart Lecture at the Edinburgh Television Festival by stating that: "For fifty years British television has operated on the assumption that the people could not be trusted to watch what they wanted to watch, so that it had to be controlled by like-minded people who knew what was good for us'. But nearly thirty years earlier, the Pilkington Report had detonated the rank hypocrisy lurking behind this kind of populist rhetoric, arguing that 'giving the public what it wants' has 'the appearance of an appeal to democratic principle but the appearance is deceptive. It is in fact patronising and arrogant, in that it claims to know what the public is, but defines it as no more than the mass audience; and in that it claims to know what it wants but limits its choice to the average of experience. In this sense, we reject it utterly. If there is a sense in which it should be used, it is this: what the public wants and what it has the right to get is freedom to choose from the widest range of programme matter. Anything less than that is deprivation'.

Furthermore, far from desiring moral conformism on the part of the broadcasters, the Report openly encouraged the expression of dissenting and minority viewpoints, arguing that 'television must pay particular attention to those parts of the range of worthwhile experience which lie beyond the most common; to those parts which some have explored here and there

but few everywhere'. Indeed, it stated that television should focus a particular spotlight on what it called society's 'growing pains', because 'it is at these points that the challenges to existing assumptions and beliefs are made, where the claims to new knowledge and new awareness are stated. If our society is to respond to the challenges and judge the claims, they must be put before it. All broadcasting, and television especially, must be ready and anxious to experiment, to show the new and unusual, to give a hearing to dissent. Here, broadcasting must be most willing to make mistakes; for if it does not, it will make no discoveries'. Or as Richard Hoggart himself put it in *Speaking to Each Other* (1970): 'In all its recommendations, the Report sought to extend intellectual and imaginative freedom, to give more room for variety and dissent. Its view of society was based on the idea of change and possibility, on the view that there are within the huge majorities lots of overlapping minorities, on thinking not only about what we are but what we might become if we were given more varied chances'.

The Pilkington Report played a key role in paving the way for the many invigorating changes that television underwent in the 1960s. In particular, it required the Independent Television Authority to ensure that the ITV companies took their public service obligations far more seriously than they had done hitherto, and the greatly improved programming that resulted caused the BBC to sharpen up its own act considerably. Far from being the near-relation of Mrs Grundy, as painted by the populist press, the Report was actually a harbinger of *The Wednesday Play*, *Z Cars*, *World in Action*, *Coronation Street*, *Seven Up!* (and its successors), and many other ground-breaking programmes which had their birth in the decade at the start of which the Report was published. However, the caricature of the Report as an elitist, moralistic, killjoy charter has been far too useful to the enemies of public service broadcasting – most of whom almost certainly haven't read it – to have been allowed to fade into the obscurity which it deserves.

According to Hoggart, in *Speaking to Each Other*, the Pilkington Report was best understood as an argument 'about freedom and responsibility within commercialised democracies. It touched on the interrelations between cash, power and the organs for intellectual debate; it had to do with a society which is changing rapidly and doesn't understand its own changes; it had to do with the adequacy of our assumptions and vocabulary to many current social issues'. Today British society, and indeed the world with which it is increasingly deeply and intimately connected, is changing even more rapidly than in the1960s, and public understanding of those changes is at a woefully low ebb – a situation for which the media, including the public service broadcasters, must take their fair share of blame. Thus we desperately need an analysis of both the strengths and weaknesses of public service broadcasting as it currently exists, as well as a blueprint for its future, which is as profound, challenging, well-informed and intellectually self-confident as was the Pilkington Report when it was published in 1962.

[i] I have analysed press reactions to the Pilkington Report in 'Pilkington, populism and public service broadcasting', *Ethical Space*, 12: 1, 2015.