Television, Quality of Life and the Value of Culture

Submission to the Puttnam Inquiry on *Public Service for the Twenty First Century*

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This submission forefronts two concepts that need to be central in discussions about the future of television in the UK: *quality of life*, and the *value of culture*. It makes four main claims, as follows.

- **Television can importantly contribute to quality of life, but we should not understand that contribution in terms of 'consumer preferences'**
- **Instead, television's contribution to quality of life should be thought of in terms of what it enables people *to do and be***
- **Television markets, if not well constructed and regulated, are unlikely to enhance cultural quality of life adequately, because good television is a particular form of 'merit good' and is therefore likely to be under-produced**
- **Digitalisation does not remove the fundamental problems surrounding cultural markets and quality of life – it makes a public service 'common provider' *more* important**

1. **Television can importantly contribute to quality of life, but we should not understand that contribution in terms of 'consumer preferences'**

In the last twenty years, much debate about television has been a slanging match between advocates of markets (i.e., of much greater marketization of the television system) and advocates of public service. Too many contributions on either side treat markets and public service as ends in themselves, sidelining discussion of what the ultimate purposes of the television system ought to be.

One useful and potentially productive way to conceptualise the ultimate goal of any media or cultural system is in terms of its contributions to people's quality of life in the areas reached by that system.

The problem of course is that there are many different ways of understanding quality of life. Mainstream economics, which has exerted considerable influence over television policy (and public policy in general) in recent decades, often conceives of quality of life in terms of 'welfare', understood in terms of *consumers' subjective preferences*.

There are major problems in thinking of quality of life in terms of consumers' subjective preferences. For people are often mistaken in their appraisals of their own preferences and desired goals, not because they are stupid, but because often they lack information about what kinds of rewards products will provide, and the social consequences of their choices.

In the case of cultural goods,[1] such as television, it is hard to know much at all in advance about what kinds of rewards and pleasures that an individual cultural product might offer. We very often only really know whether we value the experience produced by a cultural product once we have fully tried it. Even trailers, or familiarity with a star name, or source material, can be deceptive. Cultural goods often give greatest reward and pleasure precisely because they surprise, enlighten or delight us by offering a new perspective on the world. The benefits of particular television programmes for individuals, communities and society only become apparent in retrospect. One factor that contributes to this feature of television (shared by many other cultural forms) is that each television programme is in a sense a new product, different from others – sometimes only marginally, but sometimes considerably.

This difficulty for consumers in accurately knowing their cultural preferences is one of the reasons that assertions that media markets necessarily 'give people what they want' are either naïve or made in bad faith.[2] This feature of cultural goods also means that even the more sophisticated expression of that viewpoint, that media markets contribute to people's welfare by efficiently meeting consumers' subjective preferences, is dubious. And it means that to define the kinds of well-being or quality of life that might be enhanced by television in terms of consumers' subjective preferences is mistaken. We need a different conception of quality of life.

2. Television's contribution to quality of life should be thought of in terms of what it enables people *to do and be*

The 'Capabilities Approach' offers a superior conception of quality of life and its relation to policy. Developed by (among others) two leading neo-Aristotelian thinkers, the US philosopher Martha Nussbaum and the Indian economist Amartya Sen (Nussbaum and Sen 1993), the Capabilities Approach has served as an important basis for debates about international 'development'. The approach emphasises that 'it is not only what people *have* that is important for their well-being but what they can *do* or *be*' (Sayer 2010: 234). Capabilities are simply the abilities of people to achieve 'functionings' such as being able to have good health, or move freely from place to place. The focus therefore is on which functionings should be enabled by public policy, why, and how. It can and should be applied to television (but hasn't been, much).

What kinds of *cultural* functionings might a good television system enable in the population who receive it? Different genres might enable different functionings. In news and current affairs, there is a social need for serious, rigorous and yet accessible information that would allow people to participate meaningfully in democratic life; such a view is of course widely accepted. In 'entertainment' genres (drama, factual entertainment, comedy, talk shows, children's programming) there is a need for a wide range of skilful representations of experiences, so that people can better understand their own emotions, motivations and development. Culture matters for quality of life across a wide range of genres, and there is a danger of elitism in leaving this importance to the market.

[1] I define culture here simply as 'informational and aesthetic-expressive products': a narrow definition, but a common one.

[2] For other reasons why commercial media do *not* give people what they want, see the US legal scholar Edwin Baker (2002)'s comprehensive discussion.

Capabilities and functionings can be construed as *needs*, but unlike some other treatments of needs, there is a strong emphasis on freedom. For the capabilities approach does not decree or imply that everyone must achieve functionings whether they want to or not: 'the ability to choose is itself crucial for well-being' (Sayer 2010: 234). So the approach avoids the paternalism that both left and conservative-libertarian critics would rightly question in television policy, emphasising the very great variability in people's inclinations and practices. But equally it moves beyond the idea that services should be provided on the basis of subjective consumer preferences, by forefronting the need for public deliberation over which cultural functionings a society should enable, and how.

3. Television markets, if not well constructed and regulated, are unlikely to enhance cultural quality of life adequately, because high-quality television is a particular form of 'merit good' and is therefore likely to be under-produced

The difficulty of knowing in advance what kinds of rewards and pleasures good television might offer (discussed in 1 above) means that good television can be understood as a 'merit good': a product or service of significant social benefit in which individual consumers are likely to underinvest (Freedman 2008: 20) and which therefore markets are likely to under-produce. Other examples would be preventive healthcare or education, in which many individuals and families might underinvest because of a lack of information about the benefits of exercise, diet, or learning, or because of fears that their investments will be worthless. This is why even nearly all governments invest in health information and in universal public education, to correct this particular form of market failure.

Even if it is accepted that quality of life (understood in terms of capabilities and functionings) is a good way to think about the goals of cultural systems, and that television can be thought of as a merit good because of certain fundamental features of how it is consumed, some people might object to the preceding paragraph on the basis that there is a false analogy. They might claim that culture should not be treated like health and education, because health and education are simply more important than culture, more a matter of life and death.

Health and education are indeed important but culture matters too, and contributes to quality of life in particular and distinctive ways, as we have seen briefly above. What's more, health and education were, in previous centuries, not thought of as aspects of society that democratic systems should nurture but as societies developed, people and governments recognised the vital contribution of health and education to quality of life. With industrialisation of culture since the 1920s, and with expanding leisure provision, culture has become more and more central to people's lives. This has only been intensified by digitalisation, which allows access to culture to become more mobile, flexible and frequent. Culture *matters* more than enough for its social value not to be left to the market.

The increasing importance of culture means that it should be considered alongside merit goods in the health and education sectors, as requiring public, democratic provision to prevent under-supply of goods that have a significant effect on people's quality of life. In the realm of culture, consumers will generally over-value in advance the familiar, and underestimate the benefits of the fresh, the innovative and the challenging, because of the problems surrounding knowledge and investment in unfamiliar experiences.

This means that, in marketised systems, while some people will have their cultural needs met, and will expand the range of cultural functionings they can pursue, many will not –especially the poor and less educated, who tend to have less opportunity to take cultural risks on products with which they are unfamiliar. Because culture remains a key marker of social distinction in modern societies, that will only increase problems of inequality.

4. Digitalisation does not remove the fundamental problems surrounding cultural markets and quality of life – it makes a public service 'common provider' *more* important

The above mentioned digitalisation does not significantly alter the problem of under-production of television as a merit good that enables quality of life. Where digital markets allowed a number of competing services offering high quality provision, along the lines of HBO, this would probably be consumed mainly by white middle class educated people, even if such programmes were offering products that working class people valued once they were exposed to it. So programmes crossing class, ethnic and other social divides are likely still to be under-produced; the 'merit good' problem remains. Furthermore, digitalisation, especially the likely proliferation of subscription services (whether consumed via PC, tablet or 'traditional' TV screens) *intensifies the problem of cultural fragmentation*. A version of the current ecology of a generously and universally funded BBC, alongside public service oriented commercial providers, must surely remain the prime means by which such cultural fragmentation is countered, by providing trusted sources of varied representations, good explanations, innovative humour, and so on. And only if this public service ecology is a universal provider, across all major genres, can it serve this purpose, by enabling a wide range of cultural functionings, and providing a real alternative to control of distribution by the oligopolies that now dominate in the realm of digital media, as they did in the analogue era (again, because of the nature of cultural markets – see Hesmondhalgh 2013).

To undermine or reduce this public service ecology would be to throw away a huge advantage that investment over 75 years has built up. The BBC and the commercial public service providers have accrued and adapted huge skill and experience in providing programmes that have enhanced life in Britain. The success of the iPlayer and its equivalents in providing a new means of accessing television in the digital age puts the current public service players, especially the BBC, in a strong position to provide widely shared knowledge and aesthetic experiences, which might redress the massive fragmentation that marketization and digitalisation have already brought about and are likely to intensify further. The iPlayer needs to be made universally available, and BBC programming—aimed at all citizens irrespective of background and geography—needs sufficient support to ensure that a sufficient number of people continue to watch programmes via it to justify a universal licence fee.

References

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