Everything for Someone:
For An Inclusive Definition of Public Service Broadcasting

Submission to the Inquiry on 'A Future for Public Service Television: Content and Platforms in a Digital World'

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This submission evidences the necessity for a broad and inclusive definition of 'public service broadcasting' (PSB). It does so within the context of the worrying normalisation of a limited definition of PSB in both academic and policy contexts; this limited definition runs counter to public conceptions of the term. It argues that reducing the scope of PSB risks damaging the value of the concept as a whole, and is a troubling development of cultural elitism. As such, definitions must encompass the idea that PSB represents 'everything for someone'.

1. Everything for Someone

It is pointless to discuss how PSB can best be delivered unless there is consensus on what constitutes it. Given the need for PSB providers to repeatedly evidence both that their output represents PSB and that PSB represents some kind of social good, there is a necessity for clarity about what it is. In debates about PSB there is rarely little dissent from the view that it can function as a social good; debates instead rest on what kind of social good is appropriate, and the extent to which the 'intervention' of funding that social good makes to 'the market'. This submission rejects the notion that PSB should function solely, or even primarily, to fill the gaps left by market failure. The provision of social goods is typically seen to be of importance irrespective of whether the market can supply them, and public funding ensures their provision. Just as the existence of bookshops doesn't mean that libraries should only supply the volumes that can't be found in those bookshops, so PSB providers should not be forced to evidence that they only do what the market can't.

Definitions of PSB throughout the world – typically drawing on the UK, Reithian model – insist that PSB can only function if services are universal. This is conventionally understood as being in terms of access; that all citizens have a right to the material and services offered by PSB, partly because they have paid for it, but primarily because all citizens should have

equal access to public services. Debates about PSB, then, often focus on modes of delivery to ensure that access, and, as such, changes in technology such as multi-channel platforms and online services have represented challenges and opportunities to that universal access. While these debates are important, concerns over changes in technology risk crowding out discussion of content.

Universality should not be understood solely in terms of access. Universality must also be considered in terms of content. A universal PSB enables all citizens to see their lives reflected and valued within content, and this is only possible if PSB encompasses as wide a range of genres and programming as possible. It is easy to forget how radical and inclusive the decision that the BBC should 'inform, educate and entertain' was when the Corporation was instituted, with the inclusion of 'entertain' representing a commitment to popular culture that might not have automatically been seen as necessary for PSB. Yet that triad persists and has been implemented in many countries across the world; UNESCO states that 'Through PSB, citizens are informed, educated, and also entertained" (2011: np). In the UK, the notion of entertainment has persisted in PSB definitions, and it has been part of Channel 4's remit since its inception. As such, PSB has been understood as constituting mixed programming whose aim "was not simply to provide 'something for everyone' but, at whatever level, 'everything for someone'" (Crisell 2002: 125). Too often, debates about PSB focus on 'something for everyone'; that is, that PSB services reach as large a percentage of the population as it can. However, PSB must also represent 'everything for someone'; that is, that a public service offers all forms of culture desired by citizens. A library that only offers books on certain kinds of topics isn't a public service; and a PSB provider that fails to deliver all components of 'inform, educate and entertain' similarly isn't a public service.

2. The Problematic Hierarchies within PSB

Despite claims to universality, discourses within which debates about PSB function often hierarchise different kinds of PSB provision. This is evident in both academic and policy material. For example, the Government's recent White Paper proposes instituting a "public service content fund" which would enable broadcasters other than the BBC to deliver "quality and pluralistic public service content" (DCMS 2016: 71). While the fund would aim to encourage innovation in content coupled with programming intended to reach a more diverse audience, the White Paper also highlights particular kinds of programming that it categorises as "underserved genres"; these are children's programming, religion and ethics,

formal education, and arts and classical music (72). The White Paper cites Ofcom research as evidencing the 'underserved' nature of these genres. While Ofcom research does indeed demonstrate this, the genres the White Paper lists are not the only ones Ofcom finds to be underserved, as it states that "There has also been a recent decline in spend on new UK comedy, with spend falling by 30% in real terms since 2008" (Ofcom 2015a: 12). The marginalisation of an entertainment genre such as comedy is repeatedly formalised within policy. For example, the Digital Economy Act (2015) requires Channel 4 stipulates the channel produce news, current affairs and film, ignoring other genres (Channel 4 2015: 13). There is a worrying trend of some aspects of PSB being seen as *more* public service than others, with news and current affairs typically hierarchized over entertainment. The BBC's move of BBC3 to an online service demonstrates this, given that BBC3 was the largest commissioner of television comedy in the UK by far (BBC 2016: 80) yet its budget has been significantly reduced. Such hierarchisations are highly problematic yet seem to be becoming normal. Indeed, the Review this document contributes to itself refers to "*specific* public service genres, including current affairs, drama, news and sport" (Future of TV 2016: np, my italics) as if there are some kinds of services that aren't specifically PSB.

These hierarchisations run counter to the public's views of what PSB is and should be. After all,

> "even today the public, both in the BBC's research and in a recent largescale survey conducted by Ofcom, continue to define public service broadcasting (PSB) not as a narrow set of particular programme categories which the market may fail to provide, but as a broad and integrated system of programmes and services. To them, PSB includes soaps, drama, sport, comedy and natural history just as much as (and in some cases, even more than) the traditional 'public service' categories of current affairs, arts and religion." (BBC 2004: 7)

The BBC's most recent survey of its audiences found that they "felt strongly that the BBC's mission to inform, educate and entertain was still highly relevant" (BBC 2016: 32). Ofcom's annual survey of audience opinions on the importance of different kinds of programming to PSB only started asking about comedy in 2014. Yet those results show that audiences see comedy as more important to PSB than high-quality drama (Ofcom 2015b: 10). That the public might have a quite different view of PSB to policy-makers and academics has been recently evidenced in the public's angry response to the BBC's decision to close its recipes website, a decision it quickly changed following an outcry. While content such as recipes has

been categorised as 'soft', not in keeping with the 'core' notions of PSB policy-makers insist on, this categorisation clearly does not match the value audiences place upon such material (Sweney 2016).

Throughout its history the BBC – and the concept of PSB as a whole – has often been criticised as "elitist and paternalistic" (Harrison 2006: 50). Yet the inclusion of entertainment in PSB has instead often evidenced a much more inclusive, universal approach to public service which actively responds to how the public defines such services. While this submission has referred to comedy and cookery, it also acknowledges the broader conceptions of PSB and entertainment, and argues for the value of them, including programming such as quiz shows, chat shows, popular factual, panel shows, reality television and so on. To exclude genres or particular kinds of programming from conceptions of PSB is to reinstate elitist, paternalistic notions of culture counter to the ideals of a public service. Similarly, to hierarchise some kinds of programming as more PSB than others is to engage in similarly elitist and paternalistic activity, and to impost a rarefied conception of PSB upon the public whom it is intended to serve. It therefore remains vital that while PSB continues to deliver 'something for everyone, it also offers 'everything for someone'.

3. Recommendations

- Definitions of PSB must be as inclusive as possible, and hierarchisations of different kinds of PSB content must be rejected at every opportunity.
- The triad of 'inform, educate and entertain' must remain fundamental to PSB, and each component of that triad must be valued equally.
- PSB must be understood as a significant and successful bastion against cultural elitism, and continue to function as such.
- Policy-makers and academics must engage more actively and openly with the public that PSB serves, and draw on that public's views of the PSB value of a wide range of content.
- The value the wide range of programming makes towards PSB must be formalised, in both policy and funding. If a 'public service content fund' is to go ahead it must not be used to prioritise particular kinds of programming based on elitist governmental views of culture.

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