

The people's broadcasters

Christopher Day

Public service broadcasting and citizenship

It is during national crises that we discover how essential our public services truly are. Over the past two years, with the Covid-19 pandemic thrusting the country into its biggest crisis since the Second World War, the UK's public service broadcasters (PSBs) – the BBC, ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5 – have proven themselves to be indispensable.

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When we wanted reliable and trustworthy news, they provided it. When the government needed to tell us about new restrictions, PSBs provided the platform – 28 million people watched the prime minister announce the first lockdown.¹ When schools were closed, PSBs ramped up their provision of educational content. And when national events such as Prince Philip's funeral occurred with the public stuck at home, it was our PSBs who let us share in them together.

People use the PSBs in different ways, with some watching television (either live or on demand), others listening to radio and podcasts, and still others relying on the BBC's website and social media feed for updates. We consume media in increasingly personalised and fragmented ways and, as a result, some have argued that the era of public service broadcasting is over.²

- 1 House of Lords Digital, Culture, Media and Sports Committee (2021) *The Future of Public Service Broadcasting*, Parliament UK. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5801/cmselect/cmcumeds/156/15605.htm>
- 2 See, for example, Booth P (2019) ‘Why there should be no such thing as “public service broadcasting”’, <https://iea.org.uk/why-there-should-be-no-such-thing-as-public-service-broadcasting/>; and Glover S (2018) ‘I say this in sadness, but unless the BBC gets its act together it may not be here in 15 years’, *Daily Mail*, 1 March 2018, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-5447965/The-BBC-not-15-years.html>

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But they are wrong – the changes to the media landscape have made public service broadcasting more important than ever. PSBs’ culturally distinctive programmes are what bind us together as a nation, reflect our society and tell us about who we are – we can see ourselves, our friends, our families and our cities, towns and villages in them. Services such as Netflix, Amazon Prime Video and YouTube can provide us with entertaining content, but cannot encourage the shared sense of citizenship that comes from the presence of PSBs – these UK-based and UK-owned broadcasters create a tangible connection between individuals and our nation, region and localities.

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The differences between our PSBs and the multinational streaming services are evident when comparing the UK-set programmes offered by both types of media outlet. *Sex Education*, one of Netflix’s hit programmes, is set in Wales. But if this wasn’t explicitly spelled out, no one watching would believe it given the array of Americanisms – it’s set in a ‘high school’ where college sports are hugely popular (with plenty of American footballs), there are no uniforms and the corridors are lined with lockers. It’s an odd amalgamation of British and American culture, concocted in the hope of appealing to audiences across the West. It doesn’t tell us anything about Britain and British society and culture, and it is impossible to imagine any of our PSBs creating such a programme.

Now compare this with *Small Axe*, a series of films that premiered on BBC One in 2020 and whose focus on West Indian immigrants to London firmly places it within a particular time and location. It tells us something about our own country, and the people who live here. We gain a greater understanding of our fellow citizens from watching it. The same could be said about *Derry Girls*, Channel 4’s sitcom evoking the final years of the Troubles in a Catholic community in Northern Ireland. Now on its third series and popular with the public and critics alike (it even received a coveted reference in *The Simpsons*), it has introduced new audiences to a complex historical conflict that has continuing political resonances today. Would any broadcaster without a public service remit have dared to take on a programme about a period in British history that is still so highly contentious?

We could talk about many other programmes that needed our PSBs to be made – the BBC’s *Hollow Crown* series of Shakespeare history plays, for

example, or *It's A Sin*, which has won numerous awards since it was broadcast in early 2021 and was rejected by several broadcasters before being commissioned by Channel 4. One function of PSBs is to produce the content about Britain that other broadcasters won't; they are able to take risks, which means accepting some programmes will be failures but enables others to succeed wonderfully.

The PSB ecosystem, within the wider range of broadcasting outlets, is set up in a way that incentivises producing the best possible programmes. As David Hendy, the official historian of the BBC, puts it, “public service broadcasting is always, in the most fundamental way, *for us*”.³ It is not for shareholders and it is not about maximising profits. It is about delivering the best for viewers and listeners, and that means programmes that are culturally distinctive and develop Britons' understanding of the society in which they live.

Only PSBs provide meaningful investment in these programmes that reflect Britain. In 2019, they spent £2.8 billion on original UK TV content, compared with £727 million by UK-based commercial providers (such as Sky) and streaming services.⁴ Each year, PSBs show around 32,000 hours of first-run original UK content; this compares with the paltry 182 hours of similar content from the US-based streamers in 2019.⁵ Without the windows into our own society provided by PSBs programming, our understanding of our country and our shared sense of community would be diminished.

Moreover, it is only our PSBs that provide a range of programming that ensures everybody's interests are catered for – drama and factual programmes predominate on the streaming services, making up 71 per cent of Netflix's library compared with less than 20 per cent of programmes on PSB channels.⁶ The wide range of programmes available from our PSBs is what makes them so essential to national wellbeing, showing us the nation in its entirety and connecting us to it.

3 Hendy D (2022) *The BBC: A people's history*, Profile Books, p xii

4 Ofcom (2020) *Small Screen: Big debate consultation: The future of public service media*, Ofcom, p 11. https://www.smallscreenbigdebate.co.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0032/208769/consultation-future-of-public-service-media.pdf

5 Ibid, pp 9–10

6 House of Lords Select Committee on Communications and Digital (2019) *Public Service Broadcasting: As vital as ever*, Parliament UK, p 12. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201919/ldselect/ldcomuni/16/16.pdf>

“The wide range of programmes available from our PSBs is what makes them so essential to national wellbeing”

It is our PSBs, for example, that bring us those national sporting events around which much of the country congregates – major international football tournaments, the FA Cup and Scottish Cup finals, the Grand National, Wimbledon, the Olympics and Paralympics, and rugby finals. Without the universality of access that PSBs bring to these events, we might lose such shared moments of national belonging – just imagine if the opening ceremony of the 2012 Olympics had been behind a paywall. A peak audience of 9.2 million people watched Emma Raducanu’s victory in the 2021 US Open final after Channel 4 bought the rights; what would otherwise have been a minority event behind an Amazon paywall became a moment of national celebration.⁷

As well as broadcasting the sporting events around which we gather, PSBs are also our most prominent news providers. Political polarisation is one of the major trends of our time. On social media, people split into their own echo chambers, listening to opinions they already agree with and sometimes refusing to respond civilly when they do hear opposing views. Public service broadcasting helps counter this by providing everyone with impartial news and current affairs programmes.

Despite the constant and vitriolic criticism of the BBC on social media and in newspapers such as the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Telegraph*, ‘Auntie’ remains by far our most trusted news outlet. In 2020, when Ipsos MORI asked people who said they follow the news which one news source they were “most likely to turn to for news you trust the most”, the BBC was the most popular choice, picked by 62 per cent of respondents.⁸ A commercial broadcaster, Sky News, came a distant second, with only 8 per cent of respondents selecting it. The public trust our PSBs far more than other news outlets, and we damage them at our peril. A University of Zurich study found that “environments with weak public broadcasting services are less resilient to online disinformation”.⁹ Reliable information is key to a

7 Sherwin A (2021) ‘Emma Raducanu: 9.2 million watch US Open triumph on Channel 4 after deal with Amazon’, iNews website, 12 September 2021. <https://inews.co.uk/news/emma-raducanu-9-2-million-watch-us-open-triumph-channel-4-deal-amazon-1195043>

8 Ipsos MORI (2020) ‘Trust, accuracy and impartiality in news market context survey’. <https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2020-05/trust-accuracy-impartiality-2020.pdf>

9 Humprecht E (2020) ‘Why resilience to online disinformation varies between countries’, Democratic Audit website, 24 March 2020. <https://www.democraticaudit.com/2020/03/24/why-resilience-to-online-disinformation-varies-between-countries/>

functioning democracy, and to the involvement of citizens in politics – PSBs give people access to trusted news stories at a time when they are increasingly exposed to mis- and dis-information from other sources.

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We need only look to the other side of the Atlantic for a cautionary tale. The US has no strong PSBs, and Americans cannot coalesce around a single broadcaster. Liberals and conservatives gravitate towards news sources that reflect their own views, perpetuating the cycle of polarisation, with people failing to hear views that are opposed to their own and often hearing contradictory ‘facts’. Their broadcast news is built on subjectivity; ours on objectivity. The former emphasises differences; the latter highlights what we have in common. Watching and listening to our PSBs, with their responsibilities laid out in the current constitutional and regulatory regimes, is the best way to ensure people hear views from outside their own ‘tribe’.

It can never be a perfect system; people will always accuse the PSBs of bias one way or the other, and there are constant questions about what ‘impartiality’ means in practice. But it is the constant striving for impartiality that is important, for it is this that ensures that we hear reliable news and are exposed to views that are different from our own. PSBs maintain an informed citizenry, capable of discussing divisive political issues without descending into abuse and hatred.

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Politically, PSBs are the media outlets best able to bring people of different political persuasions across the country together. Britain and the world may be becoming increasingly digital but, nonetheless, 1.5 million homes (5.3 per cent of the UK total) do not have access to pay-TV, subscription streaming, home broadband or smartphones.¹⁰ And, with the cost of living rising, many others are cancelling their streaming subscriptions – from January to March 2022, 1.51 million subscriptions were halted across the

10 Ofcom (2020) *Small Screen: Big debate consultation: The future of public service media*, Ofcom, p 19. https://www.smallscreenbigdebate.co.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0032/208769/consultation-future-of-public-service-media.pdf

UK.¹¹ Only PSBs can reach and provide quality entertainment to everybody, regardless of wealth or location – 99 per cent of households use some BBC services in any given week.¹²

Programmes on our PSBs are for everybody, making sure that people are not excluded from their vision of Britain and its citizens. Channel 4, for example, has a remit “to appeal to the tastes and interests of a culturally diverse society” and one of its goals is to “inspire citizenship and stimulate debate among viewers”.¹³ It is our PSBs that expose us to our fellow citizens, and allow us to understand all that we have in common.

PSBs represent the *entirety* of Britain, unlike many other media outlets that are London-focused or foreign-owned. The current government constantly refers to its ‘levelling up’ agenda, and its goal of reducing inequality between London and other parts of the country is admirable. Greater regional equality would help foster a society in which people felt they had more in common with fellow citizens elsewhere in the country and PSBs, often using their own initiative, are at the forefront of this agenda.

In 2019, 48 per cent of spending by PSBs on new programmes was outside London – up from 38 per cent in 2010.¹⁴ Channel 4 opened its new headquarters in Leeds only last year, and more than half of its content budget is spent outside London, with “Channel 4 commissioning in the UK’s nations and regions... worth nearly £1 billion to regional economies”.¹⁵ The BBC, too, is committed to reaching the entire nation, with channels for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, 40 local radio stations and funding for the Local Democracy Reporting Service. Through the range of services and programmes provided by PSBs, a sense of

11 BBC (2022) ‘Households cancel streaming services to cut costs, report says’, BBC News website, 18 April 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-61139483>

12 Barwise P and York P (2020) *The War Against the BBC*, Penguin, p 31

13 Kantar Media (2017) *Channel 4 Corporation Remit*, Ofcom, p 29, https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0018/104094/Channel-4-Corporation-Remit-Research-Report-2017.pdf; Channel 4 (no date) ‘Channel 4’s remit’, Channel 4 website, <https://www.channel4.com/corporate/about-4/what-we-do/channel-4s-remit>

14 Ofcom (2020) *Small Screen: Big debate consultation: The future of public service media*, Ofcom, p 18. https://www.smallscreenbigdebate.co.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0032/208769/consultation-future-of-public-service-media.pdf

15 Channel 4 (2022) ‘Channel 4 hits new records with nations and regions commissions’, Channel 4 website, 15 March 2022, <https://www.channel4.com/press/news/channel-4-hits-new-records-nations-and-regions-commissions>; Carrell S (2022) ‘Privatising Channel 4 will harm UK “levelling-up” plan, warn TV bosses’, The Guardian, 31 January 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2022/jan/31/privatising-channel-4-harm-uk-levelling-up-plan-warn-tv-bosses>

community is built within our local areas, our regions, and our nation. At every geographical level, PSBs encourage a shared sense of citizenship.

“At every geographical level, PSBs encourage a shared sense of citizenship”

Our public services are the mechanisms through which we engage with the state, and with our fellow citizens. Their goal is to give us the best possible service – think of the NHS, almost universally supported because it is motivated to supply the best care possible rather than making large profits. As we all benefit from the NHS, so we all benefit from PSBs providing us with quality programmes that tell us about who we are, and who we could be. Public service broadcasting cannot, by itself, be a panacea for all the problems bedevilling our democracy, but if its ability to function effectively is damaged by funding cuts or changes in ownership, those problems can only be exacerbated. It is public service broadcasting that shapes our sense of what it means to be British today and pulls us closer together, rather than pushing us apart. Our PSBs are the people’s broadcasters, creating and reinforcing bonds between all our citizens, and it has never been more important that they are able to keep bringing Britain together.

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