A 'Public Service Internet'—Reclaiming the Public Service Mission

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Abstract
This article looks forward, locating debates on public service broadcasting firmly within contemporary and future debates about technology regulation. Public service broadcasting has been a dominant theme in UK media policy since the creation of the BBC in 1922, aimed at delivering positive democratic and cultural outcomes. However, despite this rich heritage, and amidst widespread concerns about the social and democratic implications of 'digital dominance', the public service mission has failed fully to transcend its broadcasting origins and provide a model for a 'public service internet'. The article reviews the relationship between the for-profit business models of the dominant technology platforms and potential civic and individual harms, past and failed attempts to reimagine 'public service' institutions in a digital age and identifies opportunities for scholars, activists and policy makers to reimagine public service alternatives for a platform society.

Keywords: public service media, public service broadcasting, platform regulation, media policy

Introduction

PERHAPS IN CONTRAST to others in this collection, this is not a piece about the challenges facing the public service broadcasters. Previous contributions may have articulated the imperative that the public service broadcasting institutions transform themselves into public service media organisations, able to deliver content in many different forms and reach audiences in different ways. Some may also have narrated the political challenges and threats our public service broadcasters have faced in recent years. All these contributions are absolutely justified—indeed, as the Head of Policy at Channel 4 until 2021, I bear the scars of fighting just to preserve the institutions we have. But should those political and institutional challenges determine the limits of our imaginations? Are alternative futures even possible?

My focus is on the motivations, values and philosophy that drive the idea of public service broadcasting (PSB). Turning the current debate on its head to ask not how can we battle the political winds to ensure the survival of the existing PSB institutions, but could we actually *expand* the PSB vision—creating new public

service models in an age of Big Tech? Could policy makers, experts, industry, also ask the question: what if the public spirit that has motivated British broadcasting for 100 years also underpinned the latest tech developments in AI, in social media, in information distribution? Our current regulatory conversations on tech range from how to protect children from unsafe content (the focus of the government's Online Safety Act) to how to protect against AI robots wiping out human existence. How different would these conversations be if there were public service-orientated institutions operating in these spaces alongside the commercial players? And is it too late to act? How can we reclaim and reimagine the public service mission in our platform society?

Digital dominance

A small number of companies (characterised as 'Big Tech') now hold more concentrated power than any other corporations in history.[1] This power is exacerbated by the particular

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[1] M. Moore and D. Tambini, eds., *Digital Dominance: The Power of Google Amazon Facebook and Apple*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018.

characteristics of digital platforms (including network effects, their global operations and their 'free' services), which mean that they are 'natural monopolies' and therefore are inclined to operate at significant scale and to dominate their respective markets.

These platforms are also characterised not just by their scale and concentration of power, but a shared focus on profit maximisation. Platforms generate revenues in a wide range of ways (such as e-commerce, advertising sales, subscription, hardware and software sales), but the dominant theme is they are run as for-profit entities.[2] This was not always true, however, as Ben Tarnoff and Rana Foroohar have highlighted.[3] Much of the early innovation of the Internet was supported by public investment—for example, the framework and protocols of the Internet were developed under the US Defense Department's Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) in the late 1960s, and Tim Berners Lee invented the World Wide Web while working within CERN, a government-funded research laboratory in 1989. Indeed, Google's founders were initially opposed to the idea of a business model based on advertising, believing 'advertising would inherently corrupt the search engine … they even considered whether search should be left in the public domain, where it wouldn't be as easily manipulated'.[4] However, under pressure from investors to find a consistent revenue stream, they experimented with AdWords, a targeted advertising technology, and found it to be highly profitable. In so doing, they established a business model that would become standard for platform technology companies.

Recent critics, such as Shoshana Zuboff, Tim Wu and Siva Vaidhyanathan, as well as the testimony of whistleblower, Frances Haugen, have focussed on the direct relationship between this profit-maximising business model and subsequent civic and individual harms. They argue that far from being isolated incidents of errors and misjudgement, many of the harms increasingly associated with digital platforms—ranging from anxiety, extremism, loss of privacy and misinformation—is in fact evidence of the system working. This is because they are natural consequences of the way the business models are currently designed, relying on data extraction, persuasive technologies, 'engagement' and the need to keep users 'sticky', that is, encouraging platform users to stay as long as possible on their sites in order to monetise their attention. Crucially, there is evidence that it is divisive, emotional and potentially harmful content that drives attention online and, therefore, not only are companies not incentivised to remove harmful content, they are actually incentivised to promote it—regardless of the ramifications.[5] Fukuyama expands on the democratic implications of this, arguing that 'the content we actually see in our feeds is selected by complex AI algorithms that are designed primarily not to protect democratic values, but to maximize corporate revenues. It is thus unsurprising that these platforms have been blamed for propagating conspiracy theories, slander, and other toxic forms of viral content: This is what sells.'[6]

Public service as a solution

Concerns about democratic objectives becoming subservient to a profit motive, a glut of untrustworthy information, audiences who are addicted to content considered to be potentially harmful for them—weren't these problems, at least in part, that public service broadcasting was created to solve, in the broadcasting context at least?

John Reith's original vision was indeed to use the power of broadcasting for a moral purpose, arguing that 'to have exploited so great a scientific invention for the purpose and pursuit of entertainment alone would have been a prostitution of its power' and, therefore, the responsibility of the BBC's founders was to carry 'everything that is best in every

[2]N. Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism*, Cambridge, Polity, 2017.
[3]B. Tarnoff, *Internet For The People*, London, Verso Books, 2022; R. Foroohar, *Don't be Evil: The Case against Big Tech*, London, Penguin Technology, 2019.
[4]Foroohar, *Don't be Evil*, p. 59

[5]C. E. Robertson, N. Pröllochs, K. Schwarzenegger, P. Pärnamets, J. J. Van Bavel and S. Feuerriegel, 'Negativity drives online news consumption', *Nature Human Behaviour*, vol. 7, no. 5, 2023, pp. 812–822.
[6]F. Fukuyama, 'Making the Internet safe for democracy', *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2021, pp. 37–44.

department of human knowledge, endeavour and achievement, and to avoid the things which are, or may be hurtful'.[7] While the elite paternalism that characterised much of Reith's particular approach to what is 'best' looks old-fashioned now, many other theorists have continued to advocate for the cultural, social and political importance of PSB in Britain.

Indeed, over the years *The Political Quarterly* itself has been a platform for many of these defences, with scholars such as Nicholas Garnham, Andrew Graham, Jean Seaton and Steve Barnett all championing the contribution of public media and the BBC in particular. Central to these arguments is what Graham referred to as the 'very particular role played by the media in a democratic society' and the importance of media that treats its users first and foremost as citizens participating in a society, rather than as consumers in a marketplace.[8] Public service broadcasting has been championed as a proactive intervention, one aimed at fostering positive notions of democracy, citizenship, representation and dialogue.

We can see this in the public service objectives set out in UK legislation. Among other things, the BBC is required to help people understand the world around them, to represent diverse communities from across the UK and to support learning. Channel 4 is required to reflect cultural diversity and 'promote measures intended to ensure that people are well-informed and motivated to participate in society'. More broadly, key tenets of public service broadcasting include providing quality, range, accessibility and operating independently of state. These purposes have evolved over the years and at the time of writing the government is, through the Media Bill, in the process of updating the wider public service remit set out for broadcasters under the 2003 Communications Act. There remains, though, a consistent approach of UK policy makers setting public-purpose goals for these organisations to deliver against.

As we reflect on the significant shifts to our information and communications environment that we have seen in the last two decades,

should it only be the responsibility of legacy broadcasting organisations to deliver to public service objectives? If we were looking afresh, would we not also expect that digital platforms could, and should, also play a role? This is not just a question for media 'content providers', although it is important to consider the distinctive contribution of public service media in the context of increasingly globalised output from streaming companies like Netflix, Amazon and Apple, and the user generated content of YouTube. The influence and mechanics of the platform society go far beyond content provision, to include algorithms, search and social media. How might the public service intervention differ if it were not limited to broadcasting, or even 'media', but also delivered public purpose goals in these technology spaces?

These, however, do not seem to be questions we have asked ourselves in the policy debates around our internet and communications platforms. While many of the core concerns around digital harms are related to their democratic impact (such as disinformation, electoral integrity and extremism), there are few concrete legislative solutions being proposed to address those issues, particularly in the UK. The Online Safety Act, as passed, is firmly focussed on minimising individual rather than civic harms—and indeed, initial proposals in the 2017 Internet Safety Strategy Green Paper to promote 'digital citizenship' were lost as the Online Safety legislation developed.

Given the potential risks of a wholly commercial platform environment, is it not worth policy makers asking whether alternative, public service based business models for tech could provide better outcomes—for democracy and citizens?

Lessons from history

There have been some past attempts in broadcasting history to develop a public service concept for a digital world—with limited success. In the 1990's, then Director-General, John Birt, notoriously advocated for the BBC to embrace a digital mission and through his digital strategy, launched the BBC's presence on the internet and prepared the ground for the iPlayer. However, at the time, his vision was met with fierce opposition from the commercial sector, who saw this strategy as over-reach for a

[7] J. C. W. *Reith*, *Broadcast over Britain*, London, Hodder & Stoughton, *1924*.
[8] A. Graham, 'Broadcasting policy and the digital revolution', *The Political Quarterly*, vol. 69(B), 1998, pp. 30–42.

publicly funded broadcaster and campaigned successfully for it to be reined in. Ever since, the BBC and its regulators have been careful to balance the corporation's digital ambitions against any potential market impact on commercial competitors.

In 2007, Ed Richards, then Chief Executive at Ofcom, called for a 'Public Service Publisher' (PSP), a publicly funded organisation which would have its 'centre of gravity in digital media and with a remit specifically designed for new forms of content provision—but ones that clearly deliver the purposes and characteristics of PSB'.[9] The PSP would harness the interactive and participative nature of nonlinear media and distribute content across a range of different digital platforms. It may be questionable as to whether the PSP proposal was ever likely to result in a full re-imagining of public service media models, but after three years of debates and policy papers, during which existing industry players pushed back at the idea that a new public service institution was needed, Ofcom declared that 'the PSP as a concept has served its purpose' and that a new body was not necessary.[10]

These initiatives found themselves caught up in intensive commercial lobbying as well as debates about the role and preservation of existing PSB institutions. Even if they had succeeded, however, they remained focussed on the distribution of audiovisual media content rather than other elements of the digital world that have become such dominant forces in our lives, such as search and social. Despite the best of intentions, both practitioners and policy makers have struggled to detach the public service concept from the media organisations that currently serve it, thus stymying its potential as a model for a 'public service internet'.

The possibility of alternatives

So, what could new public service-based interventions look like if we could free our imaginations from the shackles of legacy media?

Scholars of PSB history will know that 'public service' as a concept can mean many things—a set of values, a vision set by leadership, an institutional model, layers of regulation. Importantly, while the model has historically been attached to a specific medium—broadcasting—its interest tends to be much wider. As Polish media scholar, Karol Jakubowicz, put it, PSB 'is not a debate on a specific form of broadcasting, but on values and principles that govern society and social life. It is really an ideological and moral discussion on what kind of society we want to be part of.'[11]

In the UK, PSB refers to a historically specific instrument of policy design, tied to particular institutions with particular goals and supported by particular business models that typically enable the provision of public service to be prioritised over, or in some cases balanced with, commercial incentives. The most high-profile of these institutions is the BBC, which receives public funding, but we should not forget that the commercially funded ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5 are also all part of the UK's PSB 'ecosystem', with public service obligations built into their operating licences. Other countries have taken different approaches in their delivery and regulation of public broadcasting.[12] For example, Canada and Italy have a single PSB which is supported by a mix of public and commercial funding, while Sweden and Australia have more than one publicly funded broadcaster. In Germany, the public media system has historically been highly decentralised, with a joint network of regional public service broadcasters. The mechanisms for providing public funding also vary—Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Finland have all replaced their historical licence fee models with direct taxation, for example. In the USA, PBS receives more of its income from philanthropy and focusses more narrowly on serving 'market failure' genres such as news, documentaries and children's programming, as opposed to broader entertainment genres. The scale of

[9]Ofcom, '*A New Approach to Public Service Content in the Digital Media Age*', Consultation, 2007; https://www.ofcom.org.uk/consultations-and-statements/category-2/pspnewapproach

[10]D. J. Freedman, 'The public service publisher—an obituary', *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2009, pp. 103–121.

[11]K. Jakubowicz, cited in H. Larsen, 'The legitimacy of public service broadcasting in the 21st century: the case of Scandinavia', *Nordicom Review*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2014, pp. 65–76.

[12]D. C. Hallin and P. Mancini, 'Western media systems in comparative perspective', *Media and Society*, 2010, pp. 103–21.

public investment ranges significantly—from Norway, which invests approximately £100 of public funding per head of population in PSB, to the USA, which contributes £2 per head.[13]

This breadth of regional variation shows that the public service concept is not necessarily limited to one specific organisation, business or regulatory model and has typically been shaped in line with the wider culture, heritage and policy objectives of individual countries. This is both a challenge and an opportunity when thinking about how it might be applied to technology. Crucially, while international approaches to PSB have tended to centre around the funding, regulation and content of specific institutions, in keeping with the more networked, decentralised, but globalised nature of tech, a 'public service internet' does not have to mean a single, 'top-down' intervention in the same way. This means there is scope for experimentation—and indeed, there are many different ideas from across the world that we might build on. Some of these come from grassroots communities, some from academics, some from disillusioned technology entrepreneurs. For example, Ethan Zuckerman in the USA has established the Institute for Digital Public Infrastructure, which aims to build and research digital tools, including social networks, that promote civic goals rather than commercial ones. Public broadcasters from Belgium, Canada, Germany and Switzerland have collaborated with NewPublic to form a 'public spaces incubator', which aims to identify formats and tools that will encourage positive, meaningful online conversations that are free of abuse and harassment—in contrast to those offered by the commercial platforms.[14] In the UK, Rachel Coldicutt has highlighted the contribution of 'community tech', in which small-scale community groups develop their own purpose-led tools as an

alternative to 'big tech'.[15] Matt Locke has called for the development of a 'public media stack', which recognises the networked nature of the digital ecosystem and the need to consider more ethical alternatives at each layer.[16] The BBC itself is still thinking hard about these areas through its R&D department, including the development of AI ethics, experimentation on decentralised network Mastodon and how to build technology to serve what it describes as 'human-values'.

Other proposals in the field cover technological solutions such as the promotion and adoption of more ethical software standards, the development of decentralised social networks and the championing of interoperability principles. There are also regulatory reforms such as how to develop 'public utilities' obligations and structural changes like the development of alternative models of ownership such as 'platform co-operatives' or 'data commons', or the creation of new publicly owned and funded institutions.

There is a fascinating and growing body of work and expertise on how we could introduce greater public purpose into our platform society. It will be important to examine these ideas in more detail to address what they have in common, as well as any barriers they face. Currently, however, these are typically disparate, self-initiated projects rather than policy-designed interventions with incentives, scale or funding attached—or a coherent vision that could unite them. Despite the many decades worth of policy debate on PSB, this is an issue on which policy makers have so far remained silent.

Conclusion

Debates on how best to regulate technology are likely to be at the foreground of our political agenda for many years to come. However, to date, these debates have focussed only on

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[13]EY report for Ofcom, *International Perspectives on Public Service Broadcasting*, 2020; https://www.smallscreenbigdebate.co.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0026/204587/international-perspectives-on-psb.pdf

[14]Public Media Alliance, 'Public broadcasters collaborate to reclaim online public spaces with creation of "Public Spaces Incubator"', Press Release, 8 February 2023; https://www.publicmediaalliance.org/public-broadcasters-create-public-spaces-incubator/

[15]R. Coldicutt and A. Dent, *The Case for Community Tech*, London, Promising Trouble, 2022; https://www.powertochange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/PTC_3912_Community_Tech_Report_FINAL-1.pdf

[16]M. Locke, 'The public media stack', *Medium*, 8 January, 2019; https://matlock.medium.com/the-public-media-stack-4c6c2accdbb

how to minimise harm—not on articulating a positive vision of the kind of society we want to be part of and the role of platforms in helping to deliver this. Given what we know about the implications of mass communications on our democratic and public life, is it not time to push for more ambitious reforms, centred on articulating the democratic function we want our digital platforms to serve? To achieve this, we will need political imagination, be prepared to be expansive rather than narrow in vision, and celebrate rather than denigrate the public service mission that has underpinned British media for more than a century.

Above all, we must look up. Those who believe in the ideals of public service must see beyond the current institutional broadcasting debates and also engage in conversations on platform governance and ethics, competition and oversight. Those who are already immersed in digital policy can be reminded of the UK's track record in creating alternative media environments. Far from public service broadcasting being a relic of a bygone age, it could be the key to shaping a better digital future.

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