

Public Broadcasting and the Public



2011 marks the 20th anniversary of the Public Broadcasters International (PBI). PBI is an annual conference for public

broadcasters around the world to collectively share experience, solutions and best practices in the wake of the challenges faced by the industry.

This year the PBI 2011, hosted by MediaCorp, was held in Singapore from October 26 – 29. Member organizations discussed and addressed a number of key issues and strategies in all fields of activities relevant to today's evolving media landscape. Altogether 20 speakers from worldwide public media were invited to present in 6 different sessions, ranging from the Digital Switchover, Changing Financial Models, Public Service Broadcaster's Role in Extreme Situations, Public Broadcasting Strategies in the Digital Age, and the challenges ahead.

One such challenge is how public broadcast services can be reinvented in the face of new media. Paula A. Kerger, President and CEO of PBS (Public Broadcasting Services), USA, was invited as the keynote speaker and she shared the spirit and experience of innovation and collaboration which guided PBS forward and stayed relevant to the society.

The presentations of PBI 2011 can be accessed on the PBI website : <http://www.publicbroadcastersinternational.org/2011presentations.asp>

The following article is written by Phil Harding based on his speech at the PBI 2011 Conference. Previously an award-winning producer, editor and senior executive at the BBC, Phil Harding has recently worked as a consultant with several media groups and public broadcasters in Egypt, Taiwan, Kenya, Argentina and the United States. He also broadcasts for the BBC, both as a contributor and as a presenter.

This article looks at one of the key concepts which underpins public broadcasting and then considers how it has changed in the digital age.

In recent years public broadcasting has come under fierce attack from polemical critics and commercial rivals. This perhaps reached its apotheosis in James Murdoch's lecture at the Edinburgh Television Festival in 2009 when he argued that the only guarantee of media independence is the profit motive.

From their corner, public broadcasters have argued that, on the contrary, they are the only truly independent media because they are free of commercial and political pressures and have only one thing to consider: the public interest.

In order to justify its existence, public broadcasting has to be – in the broadest sense - a moral force in society acting and operating on behalf of the population as a whole. Its whole reason to exist is to serve the public, to act in the interests of the public, to act in the public interest.

This phrase 'the public interest' is one that is used an awful lot by public broadcasters. It is one of crucial importance. But for a phrase that is so important, it is one that is infuriatingly difficult to define with any precision.

Let's start with one or two things that it's not.

In the public interest is not the same as what the public are interested in; though of course broadcasters will always hope that with imagination and creativity they can persuade the public to be interested in their output. But there will be a lot of things that the public will be interested in that are not what we would call in the public interest. Some of those are things public broadcasters will not and should not bother to do. If public broadcasting becomes indistinguishable from commercial broadcasting, then what is the point of public broadcasting in the first place?

Secondly, the public interest is not the same as the interests of the state or the government or any ruling elite. Public broadcasting does not exist to further the interests of any party or political grouping. Now politicians will often deliberately choose to blur this distinction and argue that public broadcasters are there to further their interests. And emphatically they will be wrong. Distinguishing between the public interest and the state interest is vital. It is an important part of the job of a public broadcaster to call to account governments and those in power. And, as history shows, when that happens is usually when the rows start.

Interest in the Digital Age

So if that is what the public interest is not, then what is the public interest?

At its very simplest, acting in the public interest means quite simply acting on behalf of the public as citizens. Public broadcasting should speak to everyone as a citizen and encourage access to public life by developing and broadening knowledge. By doing this it will help people better understand themselves by better understanding the world.

So, among other things, acting in the public interest will include ensuring accountability of those with power over others' lives, exposing wrong-doing and protecting public health. At times of major crisis, as recently with the earthquakes in Japan and New Zealand and the shootings in Norway, public broadcasting will become the point of a national coming together and a place of national refuge. Within minutes of the devastating earthquake in Japan, the audience had turned to NHK in vast numbers for the latest news and information. Public broadcasting at its best.

Supporting and advocating freedom of information and freedom of expression are also important elements. Acting in the public interest means making as much information available as possible.

The Public Interest in the Digital Age

So if those are some of the basic principles of public broadcasting and the public interest, what about the advent of the digital age? Does the advent of digital media make the public interest more or less relevant? Does it even make it totally redundant?

I would argue that the new era makes defending the public interest even more important for public broadcasting.

Digital technology leads to the proliferation of media. Where once there were only a few channels, now there are hundreds. The internet multiplies choice to near infinity. Mobile devices and on-demand services mean that the consumer can receive media anyplace, anytime, anywhere. As a result audiences fragment and atomize into smaller and smaller special interest groups. Media consumption becomes more and more customized and individualized. This means that the public spaces begin to disappear. To recast the phrase of the architect Mies Van Der Rohe, with digital "More Often Means Less".

The advent of hundreds of digital news and comment channels – many of them often partisan or coming from a particular viewpoint - means that it is now perfectly possible for a viewer to seemingly get a complete view of the world without ever having to come into contact with any view or opinion which does not match his or her own. This electronic-echo effect, where viewers merely get their own views reflected back to them, is unhealthy for a functioning democracy. It leads to division and polarization. Viewers' opinions are never challenged as they merely receive reinforcement for their existing views.

The more audiences fragment and the more such channels proliferate, the more important it becomes for there to be at least one strong core impartial service which acts as a universal link and a national point of reference. Such a service guarantees that there is at least one media space where the citizen can receive a wide variety of views and debate and measure them.

In the virtual world as we see the open democratic public spaces gradually disappearing, the importance of public broadcasting to be able to create and maintain that space becomes ever more important.

In the digital age, public broadcasting can truly live up to its ideals and be the meeting place where all citizens are welcome and all are considered equals.

Digitilisation has had profound financial effects too. The loss of readers and audiences coupled with the migration of advertising to the internet – where analogue dollars have not been replaced by digital cents – has meant that many commercial media organizations are in big financial trouble.

The financially stretched commercial media of the future are going to be much less able to devote any resources to any content that is not going to offer an instant return. They are going to be much less willing to fund difficult or original programming and very reluctant to embark on the sorts of tricky and expensive investigations that hold powerful institutions and politicians to account.

There are of course some very honorable exceptions to this – some newsrooms still stand out – but around the world the trend is unmistakable: in commercial media, expensive journalism in the public interest is in decline.

The fragmentation and diversification of media and the ensuing economic pressures on commercial media mean that public broadcasters are in an even more important position to act on behalf of the public because others will not do it.

The technical realities of the digital age also raise some important questions for the public interest. It is one of the paradoxes of the digital age that on the one hand we have fragmentation of media but when it comes to the tools and buttons we actually use, we are in the hands of just a few organizations who handle most of the traffic.

Just about every media organization in the world uses Google, Facebook and Twitter. We all use these companies - and one or two others. They are astonishingly clever and useful. But our reliance on them has led to an interesting psychological paradox. In reality they are big commercial organizations and yet we often treat them as if they were a helpful close friend. Google reinforce that impression with their bright cheerful helpful logo. The companies have been very skilful in building up this image as their brand.

But in fact these are not benevolent charities, they are very good, very hard-headed, successful commercial companies which have become near-monopolies on which we – and most media organizations - have become increasingly dependant.

I would argue that in the digital world of the future, it is going to be increasingly important to heavily scrutinize these organizations (and their successors) and call them to account. Public media is going to be in a uniquely important position to do this – on behalf of the public – acting in the public interest.

Relationship with the Public

There is one other big change arising from digital. It totally changes the relationship between the viewer and the broadcaster, the provider and the consumer.

The digital age means that in the future public media will not only be able to act on behalf of the public but also will be able to work with the public. Blogs and social media mean that broadcasters get instant feedback on the selection and treatment of material. Citizen journalism and user generated content means the public can be invited to contribute to the output.

But now we can go further and invite the public to become an integral part of the whole editorial process. Public broadcasters can take the audience into our offices and into the newsrooms, and into the editorial conferences and programme meetings.

For some time now, the BBC World "Have Your Say" programme has invited some its audience to join its morning editorial conference as possible topics are discussed for the day's output. Not only has this made for some really interesting ideas but it has also changed the whole relationship with the audience. In fact they no longer are the audience, they are part of the programme team.

In the UK, The Guardian Media Group has started publishing its daily newslist on the web and invited readers to contribute their own ideas on topics, angles and treatments direct to the newsroom journalists. Several newsrooms have started putting the raw data from their stories on the web and have invited their audiences to do their own analysis. This sort of crowdsourced mass data journalism is going to become an increasingly important part of public interest journalism in the future.

All of this makes for a new and much more equal relationship with the public: the very public who fund public media and of course to whom public media should be accountable. This idea of making the public a part of the organization, rather than just a consumer of it or a contributor to it, is a very important development. For the first time, through the creation of a virtual common editorial space, the digital age offers the very real opportunity for public media to be not only owned by the public in name but also for it to be owned by the public in practice too. The consequence of this is that if the public feel a part of public media then it will also lead to greater political support from the public who will then pressure the funders for proper resources.

All of these are important developments. All illustrate why public broadcasting will be even more important in the years to come. If public broadcasters continue to operate in the public interest in the ways I've been describing, then these new opportunities opened up by the digital era offer a very bright future indeed.

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