

‘PUBLIC SERVICE’ AND THE JOURNALISM CRISIS – IS THE BBC THE ANSWER?

The allure of the BBC

If journalism is in crisis (Anderson et al. 2014, Pickard 2011) then who or what can save it? Of course, this crisis takes many forms yet whether the crisis affects the formerly stable professional models of liberal democracies or authoritarian environments characterized by clientilism and complicity, one potential solution is regularly proposed: an independent public service news media that is strong enough to defy the pressure of both government and market and to serve citizens without fear or favour. In this heady narrative, it is the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in particular that is often claimed to offer the best prospect of impartial, high-quality journalism that is insulated from narrow considerations of profits or politics.

So, for example, in an interesting collection of case studies that demonstrate how media in a range of countries – from Latin America to Eastern Europe and from Kenya to China – have been ‘captured’ by a combination of government and business interests (Schiffrin 2017), the promotion of ‘transparently funded public service media’ is held up as a key policy measure that would help to address the problem (Nelson 2017). In the same volume, the economist Joseph Stiglitz recognizes that while many public service broadcasters are hostages of state power, there is nevertheless an important distinction between public ownership and government capture: the ‘BBC and other public broadcasters are an example of successful government ownership in that programming is balanced, objective, and representative of diverse viewpoints’ (Stiglitz 2017, 13). In his own chapter, Rasmus Kleis Nielsen (2017, 36-37) then describes the BBC as ‘the

most famous example of public service media' that continues to operate with 'a high degree of autonomy from government and Parliament secured through multi-year charters.'

The attraction of a fearless public service news provider is especially strong in commercial systems like the one in the United States, an environment in which the media's role as a trusted source of information and facilitator of rational dialogue has been comprehensively undermined and contested. News outlets, far from remaining above the ravages of partisan battles and ratings wars, have instead been contaminated by precisely those same forces. Coverage of the 2016 election, for example, was relentlessly negative and extraordinarily light on policy which occupied just one-tenth of all reports, nowhere near the 42% of coverage that was devoted to horserace coverage of the campaign (Patterson 2016). This is a system in which, because of its fundamentally commercial orientation, the 'elite media' were enthralled by the spectacle of a candidate they professed to abhor but which they literally could not afford to ignore. The comment by the CEO of CBS that Trump's candidacy 'may not be good for America but it's damn good for CBS' (quoted in Pickard 2017) was far from a slip of the tongue but an honest description of the system's underlying logic.

So it comes as little surprise to learn that, according to a 2016 poll conducted by the Reynolds Journalism Institute (Kearney 2017, 16), four of the ten most trusted news sources for US audiences are from outside the US, indeed all from the UK: the Guardian, the Economist, Reuters and of course the BBC. This confirms data from the Pew Research Center which revealed that the BBC was one of the very few organisations that was trusted by American audiences from *across* the ideological spectrum – with even those people described as 'consistently conservative' recording that they believed the BBC was 'about equally trusted as distrusted' (Pew 2014, 5). *Forbes* magazine, reflecting this view, notes that the BBC 'is the

global standard bearer for excellence in broadcast radio and TV journalism’, sighing ‘[i]f only U.S. cable news outlets could follow the BBC’s recipe’ (Glader 2017). Bill Moyers echoes this praise when insisting that, in order to counter the influence of Fox News, the US needs ‘a journalism more in the mold of the BBC at its best – unafraid of power and not complicit with it, reporting what conventional journalism overlooked or wouldn’t touch’ (quoted in Hertsgaard 2017). Emily Bell, the director of Columbia University’s Tow Centre and someone who is very familiar with British journalism, has also argued that ‘America needs a radical new market intervention’ along the lines of the BBC, one that is ‘independent of individuals or corporations’ (Bell 2017). In an age of both hyper-partisanship and hyper-commercialism, a public service organization like the BBC that is often seen as independent of the market and of government, that is publicly owned, sufficiently resourced and that is free of advertising, appears to offer a genuinely refreshing alternative.

What these commentators (and many audiences) want is a body to report on US politics that is somehow removed from the corrupting loyalties and bruising skirmishes of everyday life and therefore able to provide a more impartial perspective – perhaps something resembling the role of the ‘stranger’ discussed by the German social theorist Georg Simmel at the start of the 20th century. These wandering figures, for Simmel, have long played a vital role in how societies come to see themselves, precisely because of their ability to take a ‘birds-eye view’ of the world around them, something sadly missing from the silos and echo chambers that are said to dominate the contemporary news and information environment (Pariser 2011).

Because he is not bound by roots to the particular constituents and partisan dispositions of the group, he confronts all of these with a distinctly ‘objective’ attitude, an attitude that

does not signify mere detachment and non-participation, but is a distinct structure composed of remoteness and nearness, indifference and involvement. (Simmel 1971, 145)

Simmel insists that strangers are able, even with the harassment that many of them faced, to exercise a kind of independence not available to what he calls ‘organically connected persons’.

The stranger

is the freer man, practically and theoretically; he examines conditions with less prejudice, he assesses them against standards that are more general and more objective; and his actions are not confined by custom, piety or precedent. (Simmel 1971, 146)

This is a powerful normative evocation of journalism as a fourth estate: news organizations that are protected both from narrowly commercial considerations and partisan affiliations and thus able to speak truth to power. But of course most public service institutions are not ‘outsiders’ in their own domains but instead quite the opposite: constitutive forces of national identity and what it means to be an ‘insider’. They are not strangers but primary definers of the territory in which ‘others’ are designated and recognized as strangers (Ahmed 2000). Far from being able to escape ‘custom, piety or precedent’, public service broadcasters in particular are intimately tied to notions of tradition, heritage and boundary-making. So when it comes to ‘actually existing’ public service institutions like the BBC, Simmel’s moving account of truth-telling and fearlessness does not stand up to meaningful scrutiny. Indeed, I argue in this article that the BBC, as the most important institutional enactment of public service ideals, is perhaps

the ultimate ‘insider’ (at least in relation to its ‘home’ state) and therefore a very unreliable ally in the battle to deliver hard-hitting journalism, to restore trust and to resolve the journalism crisis. Far from retaining its independence from all vested interests and delivering a critical and robust public interest journalism, the BBC is a compromised version of a potentially noble ideal: far too implicated in and attached to existing elite networks of power to be able to offer an effective challenge to them.

When offering this line of critique, I should make it clear that I have little sympathy for the arguments of right-wing critics of the BBC in Parliament, the press and even in its own midst. Consider Robin Aitken, a former BBC journalist, whose book on his time in the newsroom berates the Corporation for being a hotbed of left-wing ideas and a bastion of political correctness (Aitken 2007). The BBC, he claims,

Is passionately against racism, in favour of ‘human rights’, supportive of internationalism, suspicious of traditional national identity and consequently strongly pro-EU; it is feminist, secular and allergic to established authority in the form of the Crown, the courts, the police or the churches. (Aitken 2007, 12-13)

The problem with this line of attack is not only how odd it would be if the BBC was actively in favour of racism and opposed to ‘human rights’ and internationalism (as if those latter two were things to be ashamed of) but that these claims, as I shall show, simply do not stand up to empirical analysis. Indeed, these arguments have long been put forward as a means to weaken the BBC specifically in order to expand the space for commercial provision inside the British media environment (Booth 2016, Green 1991). Precisely because of these attacks, there is an

understandable reluctance amongst progressives to criticize the BBC for fear that they may give ground to would-be privatizers. However, this need not mean ignoring significant problems underlying the BBC's news culture and if we are to celebrate the principles behind public provision of the media, then we also need an honest accounting of the performance of actually existing public service institutions.

The article first explores normative definitions of public service media in more detail and then considers some of the structural and institutional factors that shape the BBC's news output and that constrain its truth-telling potential.¹ The article concludes by urging citizens, in whatever country they are based, not to turn to an admirable but flawed institutional model to rescue them from hyper-commercial polarization or authoritarian capture but to struggle for public media that are meaningfully independent of all vested interests.

Normative dimensions of public service media

Public media – including one of their most historic embodiments, public service broadcasting – stand in contradistinction to environments where the main concern is either to generate revenue for corporations or to generate publicity for governments. They are a crucial example of the ‘corrective surgery’ that is necessary to compensate for the tendency of markets to under-serve minority audiences and counter-hegemonic perspectives and for authoritarian regimes to neglect them entirely. Public service media, argues Nicholas Garnham (1994, 8), are based on the rejection of ‘the market definition of broadcasting as the delivery of a set of distinct commodities to consumers rather than as the establishment of a communicative relationship’. They are designed not to sell or propagandize but to facilitate public knowledge, meaningful dialogue and

collective representation. In principle, they are ‘merit goods’, vital for democratic interaction but unlikely to generate the revenue necessary to sustain their production and thus in need of subsidies and support mechanisms that nevertheless do not compromise their independence. Public service media are the green vegetables that are necessary to offset the impact of the sugary content that would otherwise pollute our bodies and that have, as Paddy Scannell once memorably put it (1989, 136), ‘unobtrusively contributed to the democratization of everyday life.’

Critical and comparative research seems to back up this democracy-enhancing potential.² Ramsey (2017) focuses on public service’s contribution to original content while Curran et al. (2009, 22) suggest that ‘the public service model of broadcasting gives greater attention to public affairs and international news, and thereby fosters greater knowledge in these areas, than the market model’. Other researchers claim that public service media facilitate greater amounts of, for example, creative competition (Padovani and Tracey 2003), source diversity (Tiffen et al. 2014), political engagement (Baek 2009) and social trust (Schmitt-Beck and Wolsing 2010) than do their commercial counterparts. There is, following on from Hallin and Mancini (2004) no uniform model of public service delivery and, therefore, no standard measure of its contribution to democracy.

Yet there are also voices and organisations who argue that public service broadcasting, even as currently organized, constitutes an unadulterated public good. Peter Bazalgette, the chairman of the British commercial broadcaster ITV, has recently described public service television news as generating ‘the trusted news that informs our democracy in an era of widespread fakery, the original programmes that help define our national culture, and the economic growth and international influence that flow from our creative excellence’ (Bazalgette

2017). UNESCO argues that public service broadcasting systems, underpinned by editorial independence, accountability and transparency, can serve as a ‘cornerstone of democracy’ (UNESCO 2008, 54) while the European Broadcasting Union (EBU 2016) found that countries with a strong public service media ethic had a higher degree of press freedom, saw increased voter turnout in elections, less corruption and even lower levels of right-wing extremism than those without a public service orientation.

It is, however, a myth to think that actually existing public service media, as opposed to our normative conceptions of what they ought to be, are somehow *automatically* able to stimulate cosmopolitan viewpoints and higher levels of knowledge about the world, to act independently of elites and to be accountable to their users. Evidence shows that public media have, at different times and in different circumstances (Benson et al. 2017), offered a more insightful and rigorous oversight of political culture than their commercial counterparts and, when they do so, they should be applauded. However, not only does this speak more to the structural flaws of commercial news systems rather than the intrinsic performance of public media, it is also highly contingent. Public service media can be just as intertwined – through funding arrangements, elite capture and modes of governance – with the specific configurations of political power in their ‘home’ states as commercial media. According to Benson et al.(2017, 2), the undoubted democratic possibilities of public service media are, at times, offset by the fact that ‘some publicly funded broadcasters are less than civically optimal, producing content that uncritically reflects the views of those in positions of power or that fails to attract audiences representative of the citizenry as a whole.’ The ability to realize the potential of public-ness depends on the extent to which broadcasters are able, in reality, to extricate themselves from dependent relations and to offer meaningful scrutiny of established power.

For example, with reference to the EBU's list of advantages that accrue from public service media environments, empirical evidence suggests that they are an inconsistent bulwark against right-wing extremism. In Germany, where the market share for public service TV is some 43%, the far right AfD secured an unprecedented 13% of the vote in the election in September 2017; the Netherlands, where public television has a one-third audience share, also saw a vote of 13% for the nationalist PVV; Marine Le Pen and her *Front National* managed to attract a 34% share of the vote in May 2017 despite 30% of the TV audience tuning into public television; finally Austria, where public television has a 35% audience share, nevertheless saw a vote of 46% for the Freedom Party candidate in the presidential election of December 2016.³ (3) Public service broadcasters alone can't guarantee low levels of right-wing extremism, not least because, far from addressing the structural problems and political crises that are exploited by far-right parties, these broadcasters are often attacked by the far right who perceive them to be part of a ruling and corrupt establishment – precisely as we have seen in Germany (Schwartz 2016). It is difficult, in other words, for public media either to transcend the tensions and polarization that mark their wider political environment or to establish themselves as fully independent of power elites.

The structure and performance of the BBC

What evidence is there to support this argument and what are some of the factors that constrain the BBC's ability to represent the whole of the country back to itself and to hold power to account?

Firstly, its governance structure has always been subject to political interference and influence. Appointments to its most senior positions have long been effectively overseen by government ministers and reflect an overwhelming preference for top executives, civil servants and generally what is described in the UK as ‘the great and the good’ – in other words those trusted by the Establishment to ‘hold the line’. ‘In reality’, argues Mills (2016, 24),

the Corporation’s governors and trustees have been appointed by the leader and close advisors of the current ruling party. By convention, they have been non-partisan appointments, unable to interfere with programme making. But these appointees, most of all the BBC chair, have often been highly politicised and interventionist.

For example, the outgoing chair of the BBC Trust, Rona Fairhead, was a non-executive chairman of HSBC holdings for many years and chairman and CEO of the Financial Times. Soon after leaving the BBC in 2017, the government offered her a life peerage together with a role as an international development minister. The incoming chair, Sir David Clementi, is a former chairman of Prudential Insurance and actually got the job after the government invited him to design a new governance framework – in other words, he wrote the rulebook of which he was the first beneficiary. Five of the current 14-strong Board are government appointees – a figure that would have been far higher if not for the vigorous opposition to the government’s initial plan to pack the Board with its own nominations (Tran 2016). This is not the recipe for a truly independent governance structure.

Senior editorial appointments also reflect an underlying commitment to an aggressive defence of the *status quo*. For example, the outgoing head of news, James Harding, is a former

journalist at the *Financial Times* and editor of *The Times*, part of the Rupert Murdoch stable of newspapers while its political editors in recent years – including Andrew Marr, Nick Robinson and Laura Kuenssberg – are (perhaps necessarily) establishment ‘insiders’, loyal to the perpetuation of the ‘Westminster consensus’, a distinctly British version of reporting from ‘inside the Beltway’. There is, in addition, a long history of movement between the upper echelons of the BBC and the governments of all persuasions – a ‘revolving door’ illustrated most recently by the journey of Robbie Gibb from Conservative HQ in the 1990s to top editorial positions at the BBC before departing in July 2017 to be prime minister Theresa May’s head of communications (R. Mason 2017). ‘The circulation of such figures back and forth between the BBC and pro-business factions in both major parties mirrors, at a lower level, the circulation of elites at the apex of the BBC hierarchy, which has been a feature of the BBC since its establishment’ (Mills 2016, 139).

Second, its funding arrangements also prescribe against transparency given that the level of the licence fee (itself a highly regressive form of taxation in that it is a flat fee) is set in secret discussions between the Treasury and the director general, a situation that has *always* laid open the possibility of political intervention and influence. This is precisely what occurred in the 2015 settlement when the government forced the BBC to absorb the enormous cost of providing free television licences for the over-75s as part of the Conservatives’ broader welfare agenda, in return for a small rise in income for the Corporation (Martinson and Plunkett 2015). Ordinary members of the public may pay for the BBC but it is the government that effectively sets the terms of debate and is able to use licence fee negotiations as a lever with which to extract certain forms of behaviour from the BBC.

Thirdly, the BBC has always recruited from the most privileged sections of the population. A 2014 report on social mobility found that one third of BBC executives came from Oxford and Cambridge alone in contrast to 0.08% of the UK population while 26% went to private school in contrast to 7% of the general population (Social Mobility & Childhood Poverty Commission 2014, 206). This applies even to top ‘talent’ where 45% were privately educated and where the numbers of people who went to a non-selective high school could, according to one press report, be counted ‘on one hand’ (Bulman 2017). Research carried out for the BBC found that 61% of all employees had parents from ‘higher managerial position and professional occupations’, roughly double the national average, leading to the Corporation’s decision to remove details of educational backgrounds from the recruitment process (Ruddick 2017).

The BBC’s record in terms of its recruitment and representation of women and the minority ethnic population is also a cause for concern. In 2017, as required by the government, the BBC revealed the salaries of its highest paid stars. The fuss in the end was less about the amount that was paid out at the very top than to the fact that *none* of its highest earners were women or people of colour. While 13% of its workforce comes from a black and minority ethnic background, in contrast to 14% of the general population, minorities make up only 6% of senior management positions (Ofcom 2017, 18) and are likely to be over-represented in some of the *lowest* paid jobs in cleaning and catering. True, the BBC is not necessarily worse than some of its commercial rivals but the idea that a public service broadcaster would automatically address ingrained structural disparities is a fantasy.

These practices are likely to impact on the ways in which the BBC is received by audiences. While loyalty to and trust in BBC services are much higher than those of their commercial rivals (BBC 2017, 15), the numbers are far more complex when it comes to thinking

about the ways in which the needs of *specific* groups are met. So, for example, the wealthiest audiences are significantly more likely to praise the BBC's performance with some 63% of the wealthiest households reporting that the Corporation offers them at least 'quite a bit' of what they need compared to only 47% of the poorest households (ICM 2016, 22). There are also regional and ethnic disparities in terms of audience satisfaction: while 72% of Londoners feel adequately represented by BBC news output, only 52% of those in the South and South East and 50% of those in the North East and Cumbria feel the same way (2016, 41); 45% of minorities agree that 'the BBC is good at representing my ethnic group', a figure that drops to 43% for black audiences, albeit a dramatic increase from 2014 when the figure stood at a mere 32% (2016, 44). The BBC, in other words, reflects rather than transcends the underlying inequalities of the political geography of the UK.

These institutional factors also have important consequences for the actual content of news coverage. While the BBC claims scrupulously to adhere to its obligation to respect 'due impartiality', this is a conception of newsroom behaviour that deliberately bows down to a prevailing neoliberal consensus organised around notions of what is considered in elite circles to constitute a desirable 'middle ground' (P. Mason 2017). This refers to the celebrated 'conventional wisdom of the day', a phrase used by Nick Robinson, formerly the BBC's chief political correspondent and still one of its leading broadcasters, to describe a narrow set of ideas about, for example, economics, immigration and foreign policy that helps to ground its coverage (Robinson 2017). Thus views that run counter to a market sensibility and that would have been part of a mainstream critical standpoint 20 years ago have gradually come to be seen as eccentric, marginal and unrealistic – although of course the growing popularity of the Labour

leader Jeremy Corbyn on precisely such a platform is likely to put pressure on this conception of the ‘middle ground’.

The point, however, is that ‘impartiality’, whilst for some an admirable professional objective, is also a way in which, in recent years, a market consensus has come to be normalized, legitimized and seen to be effectively inevitable. As Owen Jones has argued, ‘the BBC is a perfect vehicle for the Establishment, as it allows the free-market status quo to be portrayed as a neutral, apolitical stance’ (Jones 2014, 120) when it is instead a deliberate political choice. The BBC does not have the shrill, overt bias of, for example, US cable news channels but quietly and paternalistically presides over and protects a ‘centre ground’, partly of its own making, that is being challenged both from left and right. Political centrists may argue that this is precisely what is needed in order to reconcile warring factions in polarized political environments. There is, however, another argument: that a public service broadcaster needs constantly to interrogate what is meant by the ‘conventional wisdom of the day’, to distance itself from routinely reproducing an artificial consensus and, indeed, not to pretend that a consensus is always desirable or possible. These are the lessons of its ‘risk-averse’ approach that was revealed in the BBC’s coverage of the Scottish Independence referendum, Brexit and the rise of Jeremy Corbyn.

This is not to argue that there is no space at all for lively debates on the BBC. At times, it produces content, such as its coverage of the Suez Crisis in 1956 or its criticism of Tony Blair’s drive to war in Iraq in 2003 that is widely seen as uncomfortable for the sitting government and therefore celebrated as evidence of its ability to act independently. However, the parameters of these disagreements are extremely limited and reflect situations in which there are already tensions at the highest levels of government. Far from these occasions demonstrating the limitless independence of the Corporation, they reveal instead the extent to which the BBC is an

important vehicle for capturing disagreements that percolate down from establishment sources. Tom Mills argues that the idea that the BBC's coverage of Suez was in any way systematically anti-government is simply fanciful and that, in the case of the build-up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003, this was 'not a straightforward struggle between an "independent" broadcaster and a bullying government, but rather as the most visible part of something of an imbroglio among the British elite' (Mills 2016, 104).

A number of recent academic studies reveal that while the BBC may be far from monolithic in its reproduction of elite power, it still fails adequately to represent marginalized voices and to highlight the more 'unconventional' wisdoms of the day, such as the anti-war case in relation to the invasion of Iraq, anti-austerity voices during and after the 2008 financial crash and Jeremy Corbyn's election as leader of the Labour Party.

For example, despite claims that the BBC was 'far ahead' of its rivals in challenging the British government's drive to war in Iraq (Benson et al. 2017, 1), comprehensive analyses of coverage show this not to be the case. Justin Lewis (2003) argues that the BBC had the most pro-war content of all TV channels, that it used twice the proportion of government sources and that it was less likely than the other channels to report on Iraqi casualties. Despite repeated criticisms from government, the BBC 'was often the channel least likely to engage in "whingeing and whining"' about the government's case for war. Similarly, in their study of media coverage of the invasion of Iraq, Piers Robinson et al. (2010, 86) conclude that 'whereas the BBC was the focal point for government anger, it was actually Channel 4 that adopted the more critical stance toward the war.'

Researchers at Cardiff University conducted a major content analysis of BBC coverage of business in 2007 and 2012 which discovered that business voices receive substantially more

airtime on BBC network news than its rivals. In relation to coverage of bank bailouts in 2008, ‘opinion was almost completely dominated by stockbrokers, investment bankers, hedge fund managers and other City voices. Civil society voices or commentators who questioned the benefits of having such a large finance sector were almost completely absent from coverage’ (Berry 2013). More recent analysis of the coverage of the deficit debate in 2009 found a similar lack of space on the BBC ‘available to Keynesian or heterodox economists, academics, labour unions or other representatives of civil society who might have advocated countercyclical or anti-austerity policies’ (Berry 2016, 850)

Justin Schlosberg (2016) assessed coverage by the main TV news bulletins of the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn and concluded that BBC evening news bulletins gave nearly twice as much airtime to critics of the Labour leader than to his supporters during a critical period in 2016. This was in stark contrast to the more balanced approach taken by ITN, its main rival. Schlosberg also looked at the language used in the bulletins and found that ‘the Labour leadership and its supporters were persistently talked about in terms that emphasised hostility, intransigence and extreme positions’ (Schlosberg 2016, 4), a perspective that appeared out of step with the BBC’s own editorial guidelines.

Even in its mobilization of ‘facts’, the Corporation seems far more prepared to draw on sources closest to power. For example, Cushion et al. (2016, 11) examined the use by the BBC of statistics in the run-up to the Brexit campaign and found that ‘*statistical claims that routinely feature in the news appear to reinforce rather than challenge* the institutional voices that have traditionally dominated broadcast programming and shaped public debates’ (italics in original). They also found that of the statistics generated by political parties, some 83% of all those used came from one party alone, the ruling Conservatives (2016, 12). The authors argue that this isn’t

evidence of a systematic bias towards the Conservatives *per se* but rather towards the authority of government – whichever government happens to be in power.

So in some of the key issues of the day, the BBC marginalized those voices that were not part of the established consensus and normalized those closest to official sources. It may have been ‘impartial’ when debating issues *within* a narrow window of elite disagreement but was far more partial about debates it judged *not* to be reflective of the ‘mainstream’. Far from being a hotbed of liberal dissent as Robin Aitken suggested earlier, the Cardiff researchers concluded back in 2013 that the BBC ‘tends to reproduce a Conservative, Eurosceptic, pro-business version of the world, not a left-wing, anti-business agenda’ (Berry 2013).

Conclusion

There is a term to describe high levels of entanglement between state and media where the former uses funding, advertising and direct or indirect subsidies to manage and control the latter: ‘media capture’ (Schiffrin 2017). This is a form of soft power rather than crude or coercive pressure that is placed on media to guide them into submissive coverage of the state’s affairs. In recent literature, as I mentioned at the start of this article, this is seen as directly relevant to media environments in places like Latin America, Eastern Europe and the Middle East. Indeed, very often, as I noted, it is precisely the public service model and, in particular the reputation of the BBC, that is held up as an answer to the insidious and anti-democratic consequences of ‘capturing’ states and ‘captive’ media. Yet, as I have tried to show, this is a frame that is just as relevant to the UK given just how hard it is for the BBC to remain meaningfully independent

either of the governments who surround it or of the establishment from which it draws in senior personnel and its ‘conventional wisdom’.

Of course it is far from a stable and predictable relationship but it is nevertheless a very close one. The *Guardian* journalist Charlotte Higgins describes the relationship between the BBC and government in terms of a ‘curious dance’ and a ‘delicate waltz’ (2015, 147). I believe that what is required is a more aggressive step in which each party stands their ground – perhaps something like capoeira. Yet this is unlikely to happen given the long-standing administrative and political connections between the two partners – a relationship full of unspoken assumptions, bureaucratic procedures and stubborn hierarchies that help to define and to police a ‘centre ground’ that, despite (or because of) the occasional flare-ups between government and broadcaster, works for the long-term interests of the establishment.

James Curran has famously argued that the abolition of the ‘taxes on knowledge’ and the commercialization of the British press in the mid-19th century ‘did not inaugurate a new era of press freedom’ (Curran 2002, 81) but of corporate control. Perhaps the same argument can be made in relation to public service broadcasting in the UK. The creation of the BBC has certainly inhibited and countered prospects for a wholly commercial media system in the UK, but it seems to have replaced one form of social control, based on market forces, with another that is based on state patronage and elite consensus. Public service has come to be as effective a form of regulating public discourse as market forces were in the second half of the 19th century.

Why does this matter? It matters for audiences in the UK because the BBC, through its domestic news output, has been a key institutional mechanism for reinforcing in recent years a particular form of ‘common sense’: that the UK’s foreign policy interventions are necessarily legitimate despite the odd mistake; that neoclassical assumptions provided for a rational and

rewarding economic system despite the odd hiccup and crash; that opposition to austerity is the domain of ‘militants’ and the ‘hard left’ even though their arguments would have been widely accepted forty years ago. This is done in calming tones and with a well-established voice of authority but it nevertheless represents the strategic interests of powerful elites far more than it does the disparate and messy views of domestic audiences.

It matters to audiences outside the UK for two reasons. First, it reminds us that if we want comprehensively to address the issues that matter in any country, then neither a journalism that is based on ratings alone nor one that is aimed at nurturing the ‘conventional wisdom of the day’ will be enough. Indeed, it appears to be the case that by not taking seriously the grievances of voices who lie outside of this consensus and by continuing to operate within a narrow and comfortable ‘centre ground’ even while that centre ground is under siege from other forces, mainstream journalism can find itself in the position of being increasingly out of touch. Second, it suggests that the solution to the crises of journalism that emerge either from classic forms of ‘media capture’ or from a polarizing commercial model will have to be found closer to home if they are to confront structural and behavioural issues as they exist in specific media environments.

The vision of a truly public media – one that is genuinely accountable to and representative of publics – remains as relevant as ever. The problem is that actually existing public media, including the BBC let alone other iterations, have been severely constricted in their ability to realise these ambitions. We need instead to look at ways in which we can stimulate independent public media provision that fits specific configurations of power. In some countries, it may be possible to fund new and diverse sources of public interest journalism from the revenue generated by spectrum sales or cross-subsidies from digital intermediaries and other revenue-rich

organisations (see Pickard 2015); in others, we will need to struggle for constitutional guarantees for transparency and independence. In all places, however, we will surely need ‘media movements’ – ‘networks of citizens and associations that aim to achieve social transformations through collective actions’ (Segura and Waisbord 2016, 3) – in order to foster public communication that is independent not of the public interest but of state and corporate capture. If we are to conceive of a democratic communications system that is not controlled by billionaires or bureaucrats, politicians or moguls, then we ought not to limit our imagination to the structure and performance of a flawed and compromised institution, no matter how admirable its reputation, but to recreate a new model from the ground up.

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Notes

¹ The article focuses on the BBC's news provision as distinct from the many other services and content provided by the Corporation, because of its *central* contribution to the political culture of the UK. This reflects current regulatory debates on pluralism where, according to Ofcom, 'news and current affairs play the primary role' in delivering public policy goals concerning the democratic role of the media (Ofcom 2012, 9). It is also by far the contested policy area. The article also focuses on the BBC's domestic content, as opposed to its international services, because that is, after all, its central remit, where the vast majority of its resources are concentrated, and where the key ideological battles take place. That would be the case for anyone who wants to copy the BBC model: domestic, not international, services are likely to be the key legitimating forces. Indeed, it is a testimony to the BBC's reputation that its World Service operation appears *not* to have the same relationship to 'soft power' as Voice of America, Russia Today or the China Global Television Network, all of which are more regularly understood in relation to the foreign policy objectives of the host government. This is despite the fact that biggest expansion of the World Service since the 1940s – with some 11 new language services due to come on line by 2018 – was funded by the UK government and announced in its 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review, a fairly explicit link to the UK's strategic interests.

² See Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (2016) for a comprehensive overview of the literature on the various impacts of public service media.

³ Figures on TV audience market share taken from Benson, Powers and Neff (2017, 5).