

## Public service broadcasting: when the status quo won't do



*Public service media across Europe are facing new commercial and political challenges. Des Freedman, who is speaking today at the event 'The Future of Public Service Media in Europe' here at the LSE, writes about challenges for public service broadcasters in the UK. Des is project lead for the [Inquiry into the Future of Public Service Television](#). He writes here in a personal capacity.*

Academics like to talk of 'critical junctures': moments of great instability when different pressures and crises come together to produce the possibility of dramatic change. I don't think it would be too controversial to argue that we are facing a major conjuncture in relation to the public service media landscape. With the pace of technological change, the emergence of very powerful new producers and platforms, shifts in consumption habits and a far more competitive advertising market, this is a pretty unstable set of circumstances. And that's without even talking about the latest variables – Brexit, the election of Trump, the attacks on the independence of broadcasters across Europe and the rise of xenophobia as a mobilizing force – and the multiple anxieties that these reflect.

Brexit poses a particular challenge for UK public service broadcasters (PSBs) because it raises questions about what kind of content and services are required to address (and perhaps to heal) the divisions that have been exposed (and that have intensified) in recent months. It forces us to think about the media's involvement in what [Mark Thompson](#) has called a 'crisis of public language' and the failure of large sections of the media to cultivate an informed and reasonable debate that connects to and, where necessary, challenges, the preoccupations of millions of people in this country.

In an example of exquisite timing, we managed to publish our [report](#) into the future of public service television exactly five days after the EU referendum result. The Inquiry spent months and months organizing events up and down the country and taking evidence and then Brexit happened. You might think this an example of sloppy planning but Lord Puttnam, who chaired the Inquiry, was adamant that questions concerning the relationship between PSBs and accountability, representation, independence and diversity – issues with which the Report was centrally concerned – were all connected to the seismic political shifts that gave rise to the 'leave' vote and that will be played out for years to come. Television – particularly because of its status as the most popular news source, key site of leisure activity and its role as an engine of cultural integration – is one of the key institutions that ought to be forensically examined if it's to operate effectively in the public interest.

One of the main aims of the Inquiry was simply to raise the salience of TV as a policy issue and to stimulate a debate on the purposes and place of public service television in the UK today. Because for the last six years, at least in relation to media policy, Parliament has been rather more preoccupied with the rights and wrongs of press regulation and the development of a broadband infrastructure. We have had a Royal Charter on press self-regulation and two pieces of legislation related to the digital economy in which TV has featured only marginally. Given the central role that TV plays in our daily lives, we believe that it's vital that we try to put the idea of TV as an entire ecology back on the media policy agenda rather than discussing it in silos: every decade or so in terms of [BBC Charter Review](#) and [terms of trade for indies](#) or every few years in terms of [Channel 4 privatisation](#).

But the other central objective was to highlight how important it is to think imaginatively about *change*. Where our public service broadcasters have failed to meet the challenges of the present age, to protect their own independence, to stand up to the powerful and to successfully represent

the full diversity of their audiences, then it isn't enough to fall back on the status quo. Populist voices on the right are very effective at attacking the failures of what they describe as the 'liberal media'; why are progressives so often wedded to an uncritical defence of a media system that is intertwined with elite voices and interests and failing to deliver meaningful plurality?

The public may **benefit from public service content** but we need to radically improve what is an increasingly fragile ecology. PSBs, therefore, should continue to receive special privileges such as EPG protection and universal funding (such as in the case of the BBC) and other privileges that will have to be developed in a platform age. However, PSBs will have to earn these privileges – they will have to constantly raise their game and generate the innovative and relevant content and services that their audiences are demanding in a rapidly changing environment; we need to foster new types of public service content for the digital age; we need our public service media to cater more effectively for *all* audiences; we need urgently to address some of the barriers to entry both on- and off-screen; and, crucially, we need public service media that are strong enough to scrutinize and challenge the lies and misrepresentations that surround us.

*This post gives the views of the author and does not represent the position of the LSE Media Policy Project blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.*

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December 2nd, 2016 | [Featured](#), [Public Service Broadcasting/Media](#) | [1 Comment](#)

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