

## Turn on, tune in - pay up?

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It has fallen to me to exercise my prerogative as one of the editors of **openDemocracy's** Media strand to contribute a summation from the USA –though I hope no one will get the idea that, in the spirit of the current administration, I claim the last word as a national birthright.

Living in London this past January until May, I watched a lot of BBC, ITV, and Channel 4 news with the sinking feeling that I had been patched into an American cable. The emulation effect courses eastward across the Atlantic and it is not a pretty picture. British interviewers still do their homework and push politicians in a way an American can only admire and envy, but in documentaries, the level of seriousness (and numbers too, I think) has visibly sunk from the last time I watched British TV, in 1995. In 2001, I can't say that I saw more than one striking long-form piece in the course of five months.

So David Elstein's [0] claim that the BBC and Channel 4 are not so remarkable as to deserve automatic subsidy at the present level has these facts on his side. Look at weakness as well as strengths – why not, indeed? The argument Jean Seaton [0] makes for an emulation effect only works as long as it works. This is, as they say in the academy, an empirical question. It could be maintained that the good done by commercial news, the good of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, when the stiff old BBC needed a swift kick in its public service, belongs to the bygone days when commercial competition was cheeky and insurgent.

Does it matter whether most countries produced a public service broadcast system as a *solution* to spectrum scarcity? I don't think so. The question is how, in the absence of a public service bureaucracy, and however great the dangers of calcification and profligacy, to keep up a public service appeal – a mystique, really, which great organisations need even as they often (make that always) violate their values sooner or later. A number of contributors have pointed out how real these dangers are – as surely are the counterparts over in commercial Charybdis.

With the benefit (or detriment) of American experience, in the face of David's strong case for marketplace virtue, I want to cry out, like the character in Delmore Schwartz's story *In Dreams Begin Responsibilities*, "Don't do it! Do you have any idea what you're letting yourselves in for?" Jean Seaton goes unrebuted when she maintains that the current deregulatory regime displaces all objectives but profit-making. The concentration of corporate power now at play in transnational conglomerates – a concentration about whose Italian extremity Dan Hallin and Paolo Mancini [0] are enlightening in their own contribution – is not heartening. I hope the debate about multinational conglomerates, shortly to begin on this site, will be clarifying on this score.

Inevitably, David reminds us [0], pipers have to be paid. If for this reason alone, his provocation has been (as we say on the site) useful. Fair enough. But which cost effectiveness is one question, and for whom, another. Take the question the other way round. If it is a given that democracy requires probing and accessible news – that this is not a luxury for someone to make money from but an environmental requirement, a necessary condition – then what needs

to be asked is, how may this come about? And then, how do we, those of us who live in democracies, pay for it? It must, like public health or education, be “tackled”. But more than tackled, it must be brought to ground (if I am not garbling my sports metaphors).

In broadcasting, health or education, bureaucracies will bloat up and drift. *Commercial companies likewise*. By some criteria – maybe yours, maybe mine – money is wasted. But as Steve Barnett [0] maintains in his response to Elstein’s challenge, cost-cutting cannot be the only goal of a public good – else the most defensible government program is automatically the leanest, full stop. Never mind substantive purposes.

What follows from the principle that, other things being equal, leaner is better? In general, nothing. Yes, we need leaner bureaucracies – but not so lean that they starve. The point where leanness turns to starvation can’t be identified universally in advance. But as the UK railroads might remind us, you dismantle working bureaucracies at your (and the public’s) peril.

But as David Elstein notes in his response [0] to Barnett’s criticisms – and a generous close it is – surely we have heard enough hymns sung to the high mystic splendours of public service broadcasting, as to the low pleasures of consumer choice. Simply put, David is right to insist that the BBC or any other public service provider deliver the goods it distinctly promises. It won’t do to sing in a chorus of angels if you don’t also hold the tunes. To profess public-mindedness while practicing imitation is the sort of preaching that gives goodness a bad name. The question is, in an age when every paltry company proclaims a “mission statement”, are there, in the ranks of public broadcasting, inspired people who can get excited about a genuine mission?

Finally, David is right to underscore audience fragmentation. It’s not the only reason why news is marginalised, but it’s an important, even a crucial one. The popular tune-out from serious political and intellectual engagement (of which I wrote in an earlier **openDemocracy** [0] piece) comes partly from uninspiring and apparently logjammed politics and partly from the ease of tune-out, that combination of the multiplication of channels, the remote-control device, and the thumb. The technologies and organisations of tune-out exert a tremendous force against public service provisions of all sorts. We need a lot more thinking about how to address it. Neither pro-corporate monomania nor old-school restoration will do the trick– of that, we can all be sure.

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