

## Public Service Media

The principle of 'public service' has been central to broadcasting policy in the UK. Whereas the press operates in the free market and regulates itself according to relevant laws, broadcasting was historically viewed and regulated by government as a 'public service'. The BBC, established in the 1920s, was the first public service broadcaster. But then the principle of public service was also applied subsequently to independent commercial television when it emerged in the 1950s and to Channel 4 in the 1980s.

Of course, the broadcasting landscape today has changed significantly. Many purely commercial channels are offered via cable, satellite and digital services, which are subject to a general broadcasting code, but not any specific public-service obligations. We have also seen a growth in online platforms, including video-streaming services such as Amazon Prime Video and Netflix, which are not regulated in the UK by these broadcasting standards (Ofcom 2018: 6). Is the idea of 'public service' still relevant in this context and, if so, how exactly?

### What is public service media?

Defining what 'public service media' means is difficult. The idea relates to particular non-commercial goals (things that are important socially, culturally, and/or politically) that supporters of public service argue would not be provided if broadcasting were treated just like any other product we buy or consume. A statement of these values is presented in the current BBC Royal Charter (2017). The Charter states that the BBC aims, in a well-known phrase, to 'inform, educate and entertain'. The BBC should also aim to achieve the following five public purposes:

1. Provide impartial news and information to help people understand and engage with the world around them
2. Support learning for people of all ages
3. Show the most creative, highest quality and distinctive output and services
4. Reflect, represent and serve the diverse communities of all of the United Kingdom's nations and regions and, in doing so, support the creative economy across the United Kingdom
5. Reflect the United Kingdom, its culture and values to the world

The Communications Act 2003 sets out the purposes that define public service television in the UK (not just the BBC). Ofcom (2017: 8-9), the UK regulator for media and communication, has developed this subsequently into a framework of the following key purposes and characteristics of public service.

Purposes:

- **Informing our understanding of the world** - To inform ourselves and others and to increase our understanding of the world through news, information and analysis of current events and ideas
- **Stimulating knowledge and learning** - To stimulate our interest in and knowledge of arts, science, history and other topics, through content that is accessible and can encourage informal learning

- **Reflecting UK cultural identity** - To reflect and strengthen our cultural identity through original programming at UK, national and regional level; on occasion, bringing audiences together for shared experiences
- **Representing diversity and alternative viewpoints** - To make us aware of different cultures and alternative viewpoints, through programmes that reflect the lives of other people and other communities, both within the UK and elsewhere

Characteristics:

- **High Quality** – well funded and well produced
- **Original** – new UK content rather than repeats or acquisitions
- **Innovative** – breaking new ideas or re-inventing exciting approaches, rather than copying old ones
- **Challenging** – making viewers think
- **Widely available** – if content is public funded, a large majority of citizens need to be given a chance to watch it
- **Distinctive**

In practice, this means people associate public service media with:

- Trustworthy and accurate news and current affairs
- Programmes that help me to understand what is going on in the UK and the world today
- Local and regional news
- Programmes people want to watch and that people can relate to
- Specialist programmes about history, science, religion or the arts
- A wide range of high-quality programmes for children made in the UK
- Programmes that reflect and portray 'people like me and where I live'
- Programming that reflects the full range of cultures and viewpoints of the people of the UK
- Programmes with new ideas and different approaches
- A range of high-quality programmes
- Programmes that make people stop and think and help them to understand points of view that are different from their own
- Programmes that offer a shared experience with others
- Services that are available to everyone

### **Which media are public service?**

Today, the BBC and the main channels of ITV, Channel 4, and Channel 5 are all classed as public service broadcasters.<sup>1</sup> There are significant differences between them. The BBC is publicly owned and publicly funded through a compulsory licence fee, which viewers are required to pay if they watch or record programmes on TV or stream live programmes online (TV Licencing 2020). Channel 4 is funded through commercial revenue such as advertising, but it is publicly owned and run on a not-for-

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<sup>1</sup> STV in Scotland and S4C in Wales are also UK public service broadcasters.

profit basis. Both ITV and Channel 5 are owned by private companies that are funded commercially. However, unlike purely commercial channels such as Sky or online streaming services such as Amazon Prime or Netflix, the main channels of ITV and Channel 5 are licenced and regulated as public service broadcasters. Through what is known as a 'compact', these broadcasters assume additional responsibilities in exchange for certain benefits (free access to digital terrestrial television and prominence in electronic programme guides) (House of Lords 2019: 58). Whereas all the BBC output is public service, only the main channels of ITV, C4 and C5 are public service.

<b>BBC</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Public</li> <li>• Funded through licence fee</li> </ul>	<b>ITV (main channel)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Private</li> <li>• Funded commercially</li> </ul>
<b>Channel 4 (main channel)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Public</li> <li>• Funded commercially</li> </ul>	<b>Channel 5 (main channel)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Private</li> <li>• Funded commercially</li> </ul>

The BBC is governed by the Royal Charter mentioned above and is regulated by Ofcom as the media and communication regulator. Ofcom also reviews the performance of the other public service broadcasters against the stated purposes and sets quotas for programming they must follow in key areas (e.g., original productions made in the UK, regional programming, and news and current affairs). The rationale is that, without quotas, these things may not be produced in the same way because they are not commercially viable.

### **Public service today**

As suggested above, public service media faces a new environment today where commercial media have proliferated in broadcasting and beyond. While the main PSB channels still attract 50% of viewing of broadcast television (Ofcom 2018: 4), this figure has declined over time. Also, people spend large amounts of time online and nearly half of homes now subscribe to a streaming service (Ofcom 2019).

In this context, some argue that the principle of public service is less necessary today. Given abundant choice, broadcasting should have lighter regulation like other parts of the media. People should be able to choose to consume the media they want and media companies should have the flexibility to respond to consumer demand. Others argue that public service is needed as much as ever today, if not more so. Public service media is valued by audiences and users and, without it, the important non-commercial values mentioned above would be neglected. Public service media should therefore be maintained. Perhaps the principle should even be extended to address problems in areas where there is less media regulation, such as social media.

This debate is very much a live one today. What do you think?

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