

MAINTAINING RELEVANCE: CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND THE CASE FOR PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTING

GEORGIE McCLEAN

(Refereed)

Manager of Policy and Research, SBS Strategy and Communications
& Doctorate of Cultural Research Candidate, Centre for Cultural Research,
University of Western Sydney

SBS has been the subject of some heated debates about funding models, commercial activity, perceived ‘populism’ and the continued relevance of publicly funded media. These debates and challenges are not unique to SBS or to Australia. Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) in many contexts is facing a ‘crisis of legitimacy’ as it struggles to retain audiences in the face of new technologies, rapidly globalising media, and the rejection of traditional patterns of media usage, particularly among younger generations. Debates around commercialism and the role of PSB in the market also continue in Europe, despite the plurality of models and funding arrangements. Public broadcasters have faced accusations of irrelevance. This is particularly the case in relation to cultural diversity, as old models of representation, universalism of access and nation-building are unable to keep pace with increasingly complex and diversifying societies.

Public broadcasters are increasingly required to justify the ‘public value’ they provide and their contribution to media environments in which consumer choice has multiplied dramatically. This ‘value’ is often defined in traditional public interest terms, describing media as a ‘public good’ and referencing social policy objectives. These classic notions of public interest also are set out in the context of broader industry policy concerns including media diversity guarantees and the stimulation of local cultural content from national creative industries.

Views of the role of public service broadcasting can be grouped into three main camps:

- Market failure – characterised as ‘liberalism with a human face’, allowing for a place for ‘unpopular’ services and the notion that not all niches are profitable;
- Quality and diversity of voices – in which the perceived public interest is served by content of a range or calibre higher than that produced for profit;
- Public value and democratic principles – the vision of a desired public culture, greater participation in public life and genuine cultural pluralism

Cultural diversity and increasingly complex relationships between citizens and national public life have the potential, along with other forms of fragmentation amongst contemporary audiences, to pose one of the biggest challenges to public broadcasting in all these models. If not managed effectively and engaged with creatively, claims to ‘public value’, legitimacy and relevance, as well as claims on public funds, are undermined.

Public service broadcasting is the focus of much recent debate internationally. It is challenged by economic interests, increasing competition from commercial media, globalisation, new technologies and funding limitations.

In this paper, I will explore recent debates around the value and continuing relevance of public broadcasting with reference to policy frameworks in Europe and the UK.

It is timely to reflect on these developments in relation to the Australian broadcasting environment, on the eve of digital multichannelling and a few short years out from the proposed analogue television switch off.

I will tie these discussions to the challenges posed by contemporary cultural diversity, which is proving difficult for many public broadcasters to grapple with, and reference the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) model in this context.

Media as a public good

Media, particularly public service media, have been described as a ‘public good’ that contribute to stronger society and more dynamic national identity beyond the individual audience of any specific program. As Wildman notes, ‘It is doubtful.. that liberalisation of trade for any industry has been subject to as much scrutiny or aroused as much passion as it has for the cultural industries, films and television programs in particular’ (Wildman 1995).

Media industries generally tend to be highly regulated, assisted and subsidised. Even so called ‘free markets’ generally include local content quotas, broadcasting restrictions (such as classification) and business model guarantees facilitated through policy frameworks of the value of their spectrum, licence or brand position. The mix of advertising, subscription or public funds create models for returns on investments in content development, production, marketing and distribution – which in themselves are not sustainable as individual supply and demand consumer products. In the Australian context, the value of competition-protected commercial licences is rarely factored into considerations of market value.

Public service broadcasting is seen as providing for many of the ‘public good’ benefits of media not catered for in liberalised markets.

Filling ‘market gaps’

The first response to debates about public broadcasting tends to be the ‘market gaps’ or market failure position. I use the term ‘market’ here, not in the sense of commodity exchange, but in reference to a broader understanding of cultural economy.

In their analysis of European public broadcasting Bardoel and van Cuilenburg asserted that ‘To make the media take on their democratic and cultural mission, governments will have to intervene through policy measures whenever the market proves to be failing’ (De Bens 2007:19).

This was supported by the UK Independent Review Panel’s rationale for public service broadcasting, which claimed:

...some form of market failure must lie at the heart of any concept of public service broadcasting. Beyond simply using the catch-phrase that public service broadcasting must ‘inform, educate and entertain,’ we must add ‘inform, educate and entertain *in a way* that the private sector, left unregulated, would not do’ (Davies 1999: 10).

The market failure model, described by Karol Jakubowicz as ‘liberalism with a human face’ (Jakubowicz 2007: 115) is broadly supported by many commercial operators who are happy for state funded broadcasters to pick up any programming forms that do not prove commercially viable or are unattractive in a ratings sense. The worthy, the unpopular and, often, the serious are then left to public broadcasting.

The market failure argument reflects the understood minimum requirements of media for democratic society, acknowledging that, left to the market, media diversity and some of the public interest considerations of the fourth estate would not survive.

This is because, as Netherlands based academic Irena Costera Meijer notes, ‘not every niche is a market niche, commercial networks only serve the commercially attractive audience groups, not the population as a whole’ (Costera Meijer 2005) and would render many potential audience groups invisible in the media landscape.

The European commercial television sector has repeatedly put the argument to the EU that public service broadcasting is no longer necessary, and no longer deserving of public protection or subsidy, because it is producing similar content and similar social and market functions to commercial broadcasters (Jakubowicz 2007: 126).

In these arguments, there is a somewhat ironic alignment of the positions of the advocates of ‘pure’ public service broadcasting, producing ‘worthy’ quality content in the public interest irrespective of the engagement of the audience, and the pro-market lobbyists, who wish to see public service broadcasters operating only where the market has no interest.

The market failure argument confines publicly funded media to a marginal position in contemporary media environments. It relegates public broadcasting to a reactive and compensatory role, rather than leading in the development of new content forms, technologies or relationships with audiences. Public broadcasters, however, can lead in innovation as they do not rely on proven market success for development.

The Quality Model

Theorists such as De Bens maintain a firm distinction between commercial and public interest media. While he acknowledges that privatisation has stimulated creativity and innovation, he claims that ‘...it should be obvious that those media that appertain to the public service model (e.g. public broadcasters) or that profess to embrace quality (e.g. quality newspapers) will show a much stronger propensity to preserve culture against gross commercialism.’ (De Bens 2007: 9)

The role of media in building citizenship and civic engagement has been described as under threat. Many commentators have pointed to economic pressures moving news industries ‘down market’ (Norris 2000) and an increased speed in communications (Barnett 2003) as failing to allow for the proper deliberative processes of democratic public debate.

This has been blamed on the loss of audiences from major networks to new alternatives, including subscription and web-based services, causing networks to turn to entertainment-based, celebrity- and consumer-driven programming away from serious news and current affairs coverage (Norris 2000).

Along with the surge in demand for popular media content to fill multiple new platforms, cost to return ratios have become less profitable, causing many networks to turn to content which is cheap to acquire (mainly American exports trading on economies of scale) or to produce (such as game shows, reality television and ‘infotainment’ that also fill local content quotas).

The pressures of the new economies of media and the decline of the centrality of public service broadcasting have been compounded, particularly in Europe, with the emergence of a fragmented, multichannel television environment (De Bens 2007). The erosion of public service broadcasting, it is claimed, has led to an impoverished and challenged public sphere by fragmenting the ‘mass audience’ into multiple self selecting niches. (Neuman et al. 1992).

For those heralding the media decline, these tendencies have meant that the increasing volume of media has not translated into increased diversity of voices or views. In fact:

A possible and ironic danger for the receivers and users of information in Western Europe is that, in spite of the massive increase in capital investment, and the equally extraordinary multiplication of media outlets, they may well end up with a reduced choice of programme type, as well as with a lower quality of information.

(Weymouth and Lamizet, 1996)

The increased availability of content and information does not necessarily equal more informed citizens. Public service broadcasters also have greater obligation to represent a range of views and diversity of voices in their content and commentary, thus enriching public culture.

Despite their perceived role in ‘preserving culture’, public service broadcasters internationally have competed in similar territory, most obviously for ratings, with their commercial rivals. In the UK, this has been attributed to a desire for status as much as revenue, because the financial viability of public service broadcasters does not depend wholly on audience share (Norris 2000:106). Another concern is relevance, as no broadcaster or producer would wish to see their programming as marginal.

In fact, greater accountability to taxpayers (or licence fee payers) via audience focused strategy and programming, is now required of contemporary public broadcasting. However, this sets up a tension with another public media principle, universalism of access. Universalism requires public media to be inclusive and, as we all know, audience preferences do not always align to ‘quality’ content.

In an increasingly personalised media use environment, if audiences, particularly younger and culturally diverse audiences, are not choosing to engage with public media, the result can be, according to Jakubowicz, a ‘crisis of legitimation’ (Jakubowicz 2007).

Public Value

The BBC, in their *Building Public Value* white paper prepared for the 2006 Charter Review, claimed a much loftier place for public service broadcasting than the market failure or even quality positions. They claimed that public service broadcasting generated ‘social capital’ because ‘*a programme may make me more likely to vote, or to look at my neighbour in a more positive light. Public value is a measure of the BBC’s contribution to the quality of life in the UK*’ (BBC 2004).

The BBC has argued that public value is a much better measure than market failure and is needed to justify a broader service of public interest and contribution to media overall. This is a notion of measurable value, in which quality is only one factor.

Channel 4’s *Next on 4* strategy document echoes these principles. It describes ‘Television’s social and democratic role’, as central to its case for continued Government support. The document states:

Through its ability to reach more people every day than any other form of media, television plays a unique role in reflecting and influencing social attitudes ... By representing diversity and alternative viewpoints, it allows viewers to form opinions on groups of people they have never met.

The continued relevance of public broadcasting is also emphasised, claiming television’s role ‘... as a mass medium exposing mainstream audiences to alternative views and lifestyles – to

challenge prejudices and promote understanding’ and asserting that ‘given the increased diversity in British society, along with the changing mix of nationalities coming into the country, television can play an important role in helping different communities understand and relate to each other’ (Channel 4 2008).

These bids for Government support are based on the notion of public value and democratic principles. They promote a vision of a desired public culture, greater participation in public life and genuine cultural pluralism.

Public value and cultural democracy require that public service broadcasting is genuinely engaged with the diversity of views and voices in society and provides a platform for greater participation in national (and international) public life.

The Question of Relevance

Cultural and linguistic diversity are key arguments for the maintenance of the regulation of media. They are understood to be poorly catered for in an open market (Barnett 2003: 162). The promotion of cultural diversity is dealt with in the European Parliament’s *Audiovisual Media Services Directive* 2007. Article 1 of the Directive emphasises ‘respect for cultural and linguistic diversity’.

Cultural diversity is, then, an important rationale for public service broadcasting overall, as well as a significant challenge for individual organisations. If they do not effectively engage with increasingly cosmopolitan societies, there is a danger that public broadcasting organisations will become relics of past perceptions of nations and publics well out of step with the multicultural realities of their audiences.

A recent report by Trevor Phillips, chairman of the Equality and Human Rights Commission in the UK, commissioned by Channel 4, found that ‘most white viewers felt broadcasters were doing a satisfactory job in representing multicultural Britain, but all other ethnic groups felt their performance was “very poor”.’ The report further states ‘broadcasters and producers have to develop a new respect and understanding of their audience in a superdiverse society’ and ‘cultural institutions, the media in particular, can play a major role in providing a society with that awareness of its own diversity, in a way that is not divisive and fragmenting’ (Phillips 2008:10).

A 2007 Ofcom research paper revealed low use of public broadcasting (although higher for Channel 4 than the BBC) amongst culturally diverse Britons. It found urban ‘ethnic’ audiences in countries are spending far more of their television viewing time with satellite services (Ofcom 2007). The fragmentation of the public sphere and the implications of this for contemporary citizenship, particularly in relation to political and religious division, are of concern for public institutions.

Satellite communities

This trend of movement to satellite by culturally and linguistically diverse communities is reflected all over Europe. Media services are not consumed in isolation and audiences have critical agency in choosing how they understand the information they are exposed to.

However, the editorial approaches, modes of address and cultural currency of the differing services reference very different sets of cultural understandings. This divergence in news viewing in particular between cultural groups, has the potential to inform very different worldviews, amongst different segments of the population.

According to Christine Slade and Ingrid Volkmer (at the 2007 CPRF conference):

In [the] new European transnational public sphere the European media environment has been utterly transformed: no longer monolingual it has become a fragmented set of sub national publics in self referential spheres. (Slade and Volkmer 2007)

This self-referential nature of the trans-national flows of media can further alienate ‘different’ audiences from the national ‘public sphere’. Attempts to realign these relationships may be very difficult.

The SBS example

SBS, in its triennial funding submission to Government, will be making the case that SBS is the media organisation best placed to communicate with and reflect Australia’s complex culturally diverse society and facilitate this kind of exchange.

SBS has been internationally lauded as an innovative model for engagement with diversity within the broadcasting sphere. It is still the world’s most multilingual broadcaster. The model, which has diversity and difference at its core, avoids many of the problems of relevance to culturally diverse groups experienced by more traditional models of public broadcasting. The challenge is now focused on moving beyond early models of cultural representation into a more complex and multi-layered approach, inclusive of generational and cultural change. A recent Newspoll survey revealed that 76% of Australians found value in SBS and this figure increases to 84% of culturally and linguistically diverse Australians (Newspoll 2008).

Radio’s services in 68 languages have provided a significant resource for Australian language communities and for links between these communities and services in settlement, employment, health and education. SBS Radio remains connected to diverse communities and enables intercultural communication and a new focus on youth programming, with plans for nine more digital channels to better cater for changing language needs.

SBS Television is seen as charged with the task of reflecting contemporary Australian society through news, documentary and, increasingly series drama and entertainment. SBS TV has focused its recent profile on its ability to tell local Australian stories – often set in unconventional locales, the Torres Strait, remote communities in the Kimberly or ethnically diverse Lakemba in Western Sydney – in a way no other broadcaster can.

Online offers opportunity to add unique views to discussion based around content, through sites such as *Salam Café*, a young Muslim satirical panel show. There are plans for online language hubs for culturally and linguistically diverse communities to access diverse in language content from all SBS platforms and aggregate user generated content into national multilingual public spaces.

Thinking about the three main rationales for public broadcasting described earlier in relation to SBS provides an interesting case study for debates around public broadcasting.

Market failure: SBS provides for the limitations of the market by offering services that no others can or do, often in the form of content that would not find an audience in a pure ‘media market’. It cannot, however, confine itself to the ‘worthy’ or the unpopular, nor should it seek to. Programs like *EastWest 101* or *The Circuit* engage with popular TV genre dramas in the form of cop shows or courtroom dramas. They use these vehicles to explore issues of racism, cultural exchange, characters and tensions that are rarely reflected on Australian television screens.

Quality: SBS produces, commissions and acquires news, documentary and entertainment programming of an editorial standard required of public broadcasting. It seeks quality from the world's content and curating this for Australian audiences. Quality arguments are, however, subjective and can tie broadcasters to existing traditional forms which may be averse to risk taking or experimental commissioning.

Public value: Perhaps most importantly, SBS provides an important vehicle for a socially inclusive society in which Australians from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are able to participate in Australian public life. Through radio talkback, online forums and the provision of relevant news and information from a range of perspectives in multiple languages, content which delivers on the SBS Charter enables audiences to participate more directly as active cultural citizens of Australia.

Conclusion: the continuing case for Public Service Broadcasting

Rigorous, creative engagement with pluralism and cultural diversity develops distinctive content, which tends to be in short supply in thinly-resourced digital markets, despite their offer of apparently endless choice.

Whatever the platform or delivery mechanism, media which provide access to good information, a sense of being part of a national culture and opportunities to engage with public life are still required to empower audiences as active multicultural citizens.

SBS creates and curates distinctive programming that ensures a much greater diversity of views, cultural forms and perspectives are reflected in Australian media. It also offers significant opportunities for Australians of all cultural backgrounds to access information and to develop insights that enable greater engagement with Australian public life.

As digital multichannelling approaches, and the prospect of endless media choice but little real media diversity looms, SBS offers a unique PSB model to counter the potential disengagements of large sections of our population. The challenge is to create services that deliver truly distinctive content reflective of contemporary diverse societies, and to make that content accessible, watchable and compelling.

REFERENCES

- Barnett, Clive. 2003. *Culture and Democracy: Media, Space and Representation*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- BBC. 2004. 'Building public value: Renewing the BBC for a digital world.' http://www.bbc.co.uk/thefuture/pdfs/bbc_bpv.pdf
- Channel 4. 2008. 'Next on 4.' http://www.channel4.com/about4/next_on4.html
- Costera Meijer, Irene. 2005. 'Impact or Content? Ratings vs Quality in Public Service Broadcasting.' *European Journal of Communication* 20(1):27–53.
- Davies, Gavin (Chairman). 1999. 'Report of the Independent Review Panel: The Future Funding of the BBC.' ed. Media and Sport Department for Culture.
- De Bens, Els ed. 2007. *Media Between Culture and Commerce*. Bristol, UK: Intellect Books.
- Jakubowicz, Karol. 2007. 'Public Service Broadcasting: A Pawn on an Ideological Chessboard.' In *Media between Culture and Commerce*, ed. Els de Bens. Bristol: Intellect Books.
- Neuman, W Russell, Marion Just, R and Ann N Crigler. 1992 *Common Knowledge: News and the Construction of Political Meaning* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Newspoll. 2008. 'SBS Image Tracking.'

Norris, Pippa. 2000. *A Virtuous Circle: Political Communications in Postindustrial Societies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ofcom. 2007. 'Communications Market Special Report: Ethnic minority groups and communications services.' http://www.ofcom.org.uk/research/cm/ethnic_minority/

Phillips, Trevor. 2008. 'Superdiversity: Televisions' Newest Reality.' Equate Organisation.

Slade, Christina and Ingrid Volkmer. 2007. 'Transnational media and citizenship: Arabic language television in Europe.' In *Communications and Policy Research Forum*, ed. Franco Papandrea and Mark Armstrong, University of Technology Sydney: Network Insight.

Wildman, Steven S. . 1995. 'Trade Liberalization and Policy for Media Industries: A Theoretical Examination of Media Flows. .' *Canadian Journal of Communication* Vol 20 (No 3).