

Public Service Media in the Digital Age

Public Service Media in the Digital Age:
International Perspectives

Edited by

Ágnes Gulyás and Ferenc Hammer

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P U B L I S H I N G

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INTRODUCTION

PUBLIC SERVICE MEDIA AT A CROSSROADS?

FERENC HAMMER AND ÁGNES GULYÁS

“Differences in funding models and media contexts are so fundamental to PSBs that it is not (or is no longer) useful to refer to a norm, or even norms, to which specific broadcasters conform or from which they diverge.” (Burns and Brugger 2011, xix).

Public service media is at a crossroads – or at least it has been perceived to be so in the last two decades. Increasingly, however, the issue is not about which road to take, but rather how to spot where the road is. A key question is about the nature of public service media (PSM) content and what it means in the digital age. Indeed, one could hardly find a media segment that would not provide certain content that serves some sort of public service goal or democratic self-government at large.

Both professional and academic literature have scrutinized the changes in public service media offering different explanations and varied accounts of the implications. An influential Council of Europe (2009) discussion paper, for instance, identified four structural shifts impacting PSM organisations: digitalisation, changing audience habits, political-economic pressures, and commercial competition. An Open Society Institute-funded report on PSM (Steenfadt et al. 2011) suggests a dramatic situation already with its title “Future or Funeral?” The report argues that there are three main reasons for the crisis in public service media in Europe. First, that “PSM is still organised and governed in accordance with ideas from the past” (Steenfadt et al. 2011, 11). Second, that there has been an increasing competition from private media companies and a decreasing willingness from the public to pay for PSM content. Third, that governments in some countries have been concerned with gaining additional control over public service broadcasting (PSB) rather than creating conditions where the organisations could more easily adopt to the new environment (Steenfadt et al. 2011).

Karol Jakubowicz's (2008) thorough assessment identifies further key issues, including the still prevailing ideological objections against PSM questioning its legitimacy on the grounds of conflicting with free speech and competition as well as its elitist nature; its inadequacy in the digital era where there is no frequency scarcity; its still predominantly broadcast approach to service; its insufficient capacity to provide meaningful service; and its chronic inability to tackle funding problems. Bardoel and Lowe (2008) add that relevant regulatory policies in Europe tend to confine public service activities into a restricted realm defined largely by such principles as the production of positive externalities, counteracting market failures and producing over-circumscribed "public value". The issue with such a regime is that it deprives PSM from much of its creative and transformative potential. Jakubowicz's recommendation stresses the importance of mobilisation of the public to create a new regime:

"The main avenues to explore are how to introduce user-generated content into the PSM programme offer – naturally without compromising its quality – and how to turn the audience into a "community of users" and a "social network of partners" in constant dialogue with the PSM organisation. The purposes are accountability and public participation in determining the direction in which the organisation should go." (Jakubowicz 2008, 44).

Some argue, however, that digital transformations have repositioned public service media in such ways that brought about not only challenges and obstacles but also new opportunities. Bardoel and D'Haenens (2008, 353) argue that there seems to generally be a consensus that legacy public service media organisations play an integral part in the new content ecologies and

"new media technologies supplement rather than replace the old ones, and that public content production will remain important in a context of abundant technology and relative scarcity of professionally produced content."

As these different assessments of the transformation of PSM suggest, opinions are often divided about the defining analytic paradigm of the field, and the future of PSM for that matter. Indeed, scholarship on PSM has become an increasingly diverse field; ranging from focusing on examining the threats to free speech because of governmental interventions under the auspices of remaking digital public service media, to analysing emerging crowd-funded grassroots content with some sort of public service status. The present volume aims to explore the defining

principles of public service media in the digital age and examine how certain efforts by media organisations in different countries do or do not accommodate them. The starting premise is that public service media are going through dramatic transformations as a result of technological developments, policy changes, market pressures, and changes in media consumption. The book aims to explore these transformations through analysing case studies of PSM initiatives in different countries. What brings the different studies together is their focus on exploring the changing production ecology of PSM and the shifting roles of audiences. A common theme that emerges from the studies is that the PSM sector is an innovative field with plenty of new initiatives, some of which are proving to be successful while others are not. What is significant though is that these initiatives are taking place, which demonstrates that PSM is not a dying project. The case studies, however, also show that a shared understanding of what public service media is in the digital age has not clearly formed yet. Arguably, this is a key reason why the transformation is proving so difficult, as different perceptions and values about PSM clash, often even within one organisation.

The book is structured in two main parts. Part 1 focuses on incumbent public service providers for whom the digital age presents considerable difficulties. Part 2 provides case studies of new forms of public service media and explores to what extent they are different from traditional PSM.

James Bennett's opening piece in Part 1 offers a production culture analysis of the transformation of the BBC into a public service media (PSM) organisation utilizing interactive, multiplatform and on-demand contents and services. Bennett's study of this hesitant transformation points to a structural mismatch between the digital strategy of the BBC and its goals to transform the Corporation from a public service broadcasting (PSB) firm into a PSM organisation. It has become apparent that a broadcast mindset cannot fulfil the needs of an interactive user group, particularly when this group can produce tens of thousands of real-time instant audience reactions and messages. Bennett argues that apart from the structural mismatch between management goals and audience realities, professional attitudes have also proved to be problematic in the transformation of the BBC to a digital PSM provider. Professional agency, often showing disdain towards content generated and distributed by the prosumer audience, has become a decisive factor in how user generated content is or is not integrated into the BBC brand realm. This attitude, notes Bennett, resulted in such sadly ironical incidents as when an audience vote was simply neglected by the given programme producers because they did not like the choice of the public. The understanding of

the mismatch and conflict between broadcast and digital production cultures, as well as between traditional journalistic values and new audience practices, is crucial in the process of the transformation from PSB to PSM, argues Bennett, because these production experiments together with their occasional failures are integral parts of an iterative process towards creating a new PSM culture.

Lizzie Jackson's study carries on the production culture analysis line pursued by Bennett, analysing the BBC's attempts at user participation and audience interaction since the start of its digital strategy with the launch of its website in 1997. She argues that it has been unclear to the organisation which digital participation tools would replace traditional audience engagement, and how the BBC would and should facilitate such a process. Jackson's study, herself being responsible for a period of time for developing the BBC's online social media endeavours, explores the BBC's interactive experiments and analyses the underlying mechanisms behind such initiatives. Some of Jackson's observations in relation to the difficulties with institutionalising audience interactions vis-à-vis public service contents and/or platforms echo Bennett's points in the preceding chapter. These include the BBC's limited capacity to facilitate truly inclusive and participatory user interactions, the palpable iterative character of "communities of practice", and the subsequent trial and error extensions of such practices towards more interaction and user generated content. Jackson's thorough and extensive account of projects, policies, dilemmas and transformations in the interactive PSM domain reveals, for example, how the first message board experiments were extended to different media formats and domains, and how the Corporation tried to cope with the exponentially increasing task of moderating user generated content.

Jackson's analysis also demonstrates that as a consequence of the exploratory nature of digital interaction experiments, the history of such projects presents an evolutionary scene with numerous extinct formats and ideas, such as the BBC Connector, an audience feedback device, the children's *Adventure Rock*, and the truly visionary *The Action Network*. Summarising the first period of the BBC's digital interaction experiments, Jackson concludes that the pragmatic trial and error strategy turned out to be flawed, because its low capacity to measure costs in the light of expected benefits, and its inability to properly set the appropriate level of intervention in audience participation that resulted at times in feelings of over-control or abandonment. However, in the closing remarks of her chapter, referring to commercial social media and search competitors for audience attention and interaction, Jackson concludes:

“it can be argued there is an opportunity, and furthermore an increasing imperative, to provide an independent alternative which solely foregrounds the public good.”

The next chapter by Michael O'Neill focuses on Channel 4, another legacy PSB in Britain. He outlines Channel 4's digital strategies towards a PSM status as an effort to remodel the channel's mission and identity. This involved a re-conceptualisation from a television content-provider towards a multi-platform educational enterprise targeting primarily a teen and young adult audience, a shift aimed at fulfilling expectations drawn from the channel's public service remit. O'Neill draws his conclusions from analysing key Channel 4 educational projects, including *Battlefront*, a youth “learning-through-collaboration” programme, and *Embarrassing Bodies*, a series on health and body norms and practices. These programmes eloquently present their host channel's aim to transform from PSB to a “public service network” in which not only content and use would go cross-platform, but public service value itself too. For example, *Battlefront*'s efforts to serve young audiences with “tools and resources they needed to manage their own campaigns to change the world”, in Channel 4's own words quoted by the author, indeed suggest a public service provider engaging with digital media transformation. The analysis of *Embarrassing Bodies* illustrates an issue that emerges several times in the present volume, that is, the tension between public service remit and demand for popular content. The discussion of popular health topics by user-audience groups through interactive platforms poses intriguing theoretical and professional questions when they compete with professional sites, such as the NHS's Choices. O'Neill shows that despite some success with the new initiatives, by the end of the 2000s, Channel 4 decreased much of its efforts in the digital exploratory field with the suspension of 4iP, its social-mediatised talent search effort, and moved towards more mainstream content provision.

Public engagement and audience attitudes towards interactive media content are the main focus in a Belgian case study of the Flemish legacy public broadcaster VRT by Koen Willaert, Ike Picone and Karen Donders. Emphasising that the public is the key in the transformation from PSB to PSM cultures, the authors analyse audience expectations of PSM content. They provide a case study of a dedicated “second screen” platform (VillaSquare) developed for a popular late-evening talk show (Villa Vanthilt). The chapter reveals “expectations of and motivations for interactivity” through a set of mixed methodologies, including surveys, in-depth interviews with audience members, and focus group research with programme production crew. The authors identify four user types, each

representing a particular attitude towards the television-online show as well as to interactivity. These user types range from traditional PSB-minded audience “emulated” in a digital PSM environment to “anti-fans” of the television programme. One of the key findings is that there was a “(mis)match” between the audience’s and the programme makers’ expectations of the online platform of the talk show. While the production crew had a narrow view of the interactive users, the study reveals that there was a range of markedly distinct motivations to interact with the show, as well as with other audience members. Another finding of the research is that despite the relative independence of non-linear platforms and contents from the original television programme, the Belgian case suggests that “successful interaction platforms should be strongly integrated with the TV programme”.

The last chapter of Part 1, by Abigail Wincott and Kathleen Griffin, focuses on the BBC and provides case studies of the changes in audience interactions at two radio programmes. The authors, having worked previously as producers of the programmes offer an insider analysis in their study. Griffin had produced *Feedback*, BBC’s pre-recorded audience feedback radio show, while Wincott had worked as a producer/presenter at BBCe!, the Corporation’s World Service programme for audiences in Egypt. Using additional data from interviews and analysing programme content, they take a closer look at power relations between audiences and production personnel in broadcast radio. Findings reveal that a level of inertia in professional production mechanisms remains, blocking a true real-time participatory and interactive relationship with the audience. These constraints include professional journalistic standards of PSB, work patterns, technological limitations and prevailing socio-cultural habits. Traditional PSB benchmarking and expectations of content and production play a key role in these restraints, which present a curious contradiction. Unpredictability and occasional non-conformist features of the public voice make them difficult to be integrated in both PSB and PSM cultures.

Part II of the volume, *New Forms of Public Service Media?*, opens with an analysis by Janet Jones discussing case studies of new, non-conventional news cycle patterns experimented with in the local news scene in the UK and the US. These endeavours seek to revitalize news production at local level, partly as a response to the sharp decline of local print press in both countries during the last decade. They aim to facilitate “a new organisation of cultural production” and cultivate “a range of discourses and representations”. The chapter provides an analysis of the “newsshare” project between the BBC and community radio in the Bristol area in the UK, and compares it to a similar co-production and content

sharing scheme in the US, J-Lab. Jones' assessment of these two projects highlights a certain structural mismatch between the legacy media organisation work structure and that of the more fluid independent field. For example, in the British "newsshare" case, the BBC could only work with established community radio stations but not with bloggers or other independent actors. The structural imbalances also lead to unequal flows in co-production and content sharing, both in the UK and the US case studies, where independent story makers have increasingly become story sources. Jones concludes, however, that despite the difficulties, both sides are "structurally" interested in cooperation, and the projects illustrate that "there were undeniable benefits to opening the door even a little".

Ferenc Hammer's contribution seeks to map an emerging media terrain; that of community media forms fulfilling public service functions. The analysis is based on three case studies from Hungary, a country where governments have continued to interfere with traditional PSBs. The three case studies are the Green Spider Foundation (Zöld Pók Alapítvány), a community organisation with a background in media activism and grassroots production, EPER Radio, a university-based community station, and Tilos Radio, a renowned independent community station. Hammer argues that all three of these community media projects can be conceptualised as public service media, and that, in a more generic sense, public service media is increasingly difficult to define either on the basis of content features, or their importance in public affairs, or the ways they are being financed or regulated. Arguing so, with the notions of distributed public service media and platform-neutral content curation, he marshals an understanding of public service content and services facilitated and produced via space-times of community media. The chapter offers a reassessment of community media in the digital age, contending that they are emerging as new PSM forms, going beyond the traditional understanding of a geographically and socially restricted media activity. Hammer concludes that public service content should be the central concept in restructuring the public service terrain, given that in the new ecology all interested parties, corporate or public, political or private, could contribute with such content.

The next chapter by Hsiao-Wen Lee presents an analysis of another new PSM initiative, that of a citizen journalism project in Taiwan. The traditional PSB sectors in Taiwan and Hungary, as well as many other parts of the world, have similarities, which seem to influence the development of their PSM in the digital age. The parallels include political intervention by governments and recurring financial problems of PSBs. The chapter provides an analysis of People Post (PeoPo), launched in 2007

by Taiwan's main public service corporation; an open digital platform for participation and user input. PeoPo incorporates user stories through a process of registration, monitoring and discussion. It not only hosts and encourages grassroots contributions, but also seeks to enhance user-generated content through training courses, mentoring and channelling the best contributions to be broadcasted on mainstream media. Since its inception, the site's over six thousand citizen content makers have produced nearly eighty thousand stories. The chapter also analyses specific cases of citizen contributors highlighting different stylistic and journalistic strategies. In summarising her findings, Lee argues that despite the apparent success of the organisation, structural features of PeoPo jeopardise the feasibility of the user input system. In particular, the fact that even regular contributors do this unpaid regardless of how their content is used, makes the long-term sustainability of quality content unlikely. This is especially the case, notes Lee, for covering events that evolve over a period of time and require resources. A further issue with the initiative is that user generated content mainly contains "an abundance of trivial local news" and contributes little to the coverage of hard news of national importance. Thus, Lee concludes, citizen journalism for the most part plays an auxiliary role in the national news beat unearthing human interest stories and supplying voices of localities and individualities.

The closing chapter by Ágnes Gulyás explores new forms of public service media for local publics focusing on a case study area in the Southeast of England. She argues that local communities are an interesting case study in the discussion about PSM, partly because they were neglected in the analogue era, and partly because the opportunities offered by Web 2.0 are especially great here, as there is already an existing community for whom new technologies could bring increased interactivity and enhanced involvement of citizenry. The chapter analyses both legacy and new media provisions for the local communities in the case study area. Similarly to Hammer, Gulyás notes the difficulties with defining public service media in the digital era, as public service content are provided by a variety of organisations and groups. The case study shows that a number of new PSM initiatives have been launched by other types of public bodies, such as local councils and universities. This raises questions about motivations, independence and financial sustainability of these new initiatives. The analysis also shows that how people communicate in their localities and what information they receive are changing but the developments are geographically patchy, stratified and dependent on the characteristics of the local community. Gulyás concludes that supportive systems and policies are needed for a comprehensive and universal public

service media for local publics. This is especially important as traditional local media are in decline and the emerging new provisions do not reflect some key public service media values, particularly geographic universality, inclusive appeal and catering for all interest and tastes.

As the volume's contributions suggest, public service media provisions are going through dramatic transformations as a result of technological developments, policy changes, market pressures and shifting audience behaviour. The studies point out that a significant part of this transformation is connected to the enhanced and novel roles of audience initiative to use and generate content. The volume as a whole, however, suggests that the scale and significance of a new public service media is still contested, as evidence is often sporadic and contradictory. Fundamental questions still abound: Is the public ready to fulfil roles associated with it in the new participatory culture? Can public service media companies and professionals radically shift their production and professional practices? What are the key principles of public service media in the digital age? Nevertheless, the present volume, assessing recent developments and case studies, offers a cautious and reserved optimism regarding the future of public service media.

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PART I

LEGACY PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTERS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

CHAPTER ONE

THE CHALLENGE OF PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTING IN A WEB 2.0 ERA: BROADCAST PRODUCTION CULTURE'S VIEW OF INTERACTIVE AUDIENCES

JAMES BENNETT

Introduction

“At the start [of the *Creative Future* multiplatform strategy] television people were really psyched because they got 100,000 emails [for their show]. They came in going: ‘We got 100,000 emails!!’; ‘That’s great’, [I said], ‘how many did you answer?’; ‘err, 2’.” (Interview 10, BBC Senior Multiplatform Executive, 26/11/2010).¹

This chapter examines the extent to which UK public service broadcasters (PSBs) have been able to make the transition from public service broadcasting (PSB) to public service media (PSM) institutions, offering social, interactive and user-led experiences of their content and services. Whilst there has been a strong rhetoric of transformation for a digital, web 2.0 mediascape, significant barriers in production cultures remain that are likely to impede such change. Drawing on a larger AHRC² funded project comprised of over 100 interviews with industry figures from the UK’s PSBs and independent production sector (Bennett et. al 2012), this chapter adopts a production culture perspective (Mayer, Banks and Caldwell 2008) to examine the BBC’s and Channel 4’s approaches to engaging, harnessing, and ultimately demonstrating their relevance to, the newly empowered interactive audiences of the digital television era. Semi-structured interviews were conducted across the UK’s two main PSB institutions, the BBC and Channel 4, and the independent television and digital media sector that supplies much of their content. Interviewees ranged from “above-the-line” workers, such as managing directors, commissioners, senior executives, executive producers and policy makers, to those

working “below-the-line”: junior producers, developers, directors, various freelancers, researchers and runners. Such an approach enables the official strategies, public discourses and utterances of senior personnel to be tested against the experiences of those working at various levels within the PSB organisations and across the sector. As the epigraph to this chapter suggests, taking such an approach reveals a considerable distance between strategy, rhetoric and reality in PSBs’ engagement with the newly interactive audience.

The shift from television as a broadcast medium to a digital one has entailed a profound challenge for the world’s PSBs. The story is, by now, a familiar one characterised by a range of binaries used by free market evangelists and neoliberal governments around the globe to attack the basis of PSB: broadcast television was characterised by spectrum scarcity, digital television is typified by platform abundance; broadcast television was characterised by limited viewer choice and a concern with the (passive) citizen, in digital television the (interactive) consumer is king; broadcast television captured mass audience attention in the living room, whilst the digital viewer roams free across platforms forming niche, empowered communities.

In order to demonstrate their continuing relevance to the digital experience of television, PSBs have therefore had to master a new range of programming strategies, production practices and discursive presentations of their institutional selves. No longer the fusty old, didactic institutions of the broadcast era, PSBs have attempted to transform themselves into interactive, social, multiplatform organisations that offer users their content “anywhere, anytime”. For example, in 2008 Anthony Rose, then head of iPlayer, promised the new service would revolutionise the BBC as a “broadcast 2.0” organisation for the digital future³. Rose’s hyperbole, speaking during the five year *Creative Future* editorial strategy led by former Director General Mark Thompson, exemplified the Corporation’s attitude to re-imagining itself from a PSB into a 360° multiplatform, interactive PSM institution (Strange 2011). As a strategy, *Creative Future* promised the wholesale transformation of the BBC into a 360° organisation that was no longer tethered to broadcast television production imperatives: including the replacement of the “television” production department with the platform agnostic “Vision” department. Such a shift would place social, interactive and user choices at the heart of the audience’s experiences of BBC content through iPlayer and 360° multiplatform experiences (Bennett and Strange 2014). Against this impulse and pressure to transform, however, such changes must be located within a production culture that views not only broadcast as default, but

also sees the audience through a broadcasting lens. Thus whilst PSBs may have formed “new”, “digital”, “interactive”, “multiplatform”, “online” or “future” media divisions over the past decade, such entities must necessarily engage with the content produced by, for, and through a *broadcast* production culture. For the PSBs, television remains the core business: for example, Channel 4 spends 37 times more on television output than its online offerings each year (see Bennett et al 2012). The tension between these cultures, impulses and views of the audience marks a crucial battle in the transformation from PSB to PSM.

Rhetorically the official disclosures of PSBs’ “new” media divisions have tended to emphasise the importance of dialogue and interaction with their audiences. Similarly to commercial organisations who survey and profile the habits, preferences and movements of their users in a bid to tailor content and direct user-flows (Andrejevic 2002; Caldwell 2003), PSBs now invest heavily in audience research that monitors the activities of their audiences well beyond overnight ratings and tracks their movements across Twitter, Facebook and other social media platforms. At the BBC, Holly Goodier (Head of Audiences Future Media) argued that 2012 marked the point where “Participation is now the rule rather than the exception: 77% of the UK online population is now active in some way”.⁴ These interactive experiences, according to Goodier, are increasingly “ordinary” and “easy”, such as sharing photos, commenting or tweeting: PSBs must, according to such audience research, be alert to these activities and incorporate them in their offerings. In late 2012, Ralph Rivera (BBC Director of Future Media) charted the increase of these interactive experiences as part of the fifteenth anniversary of the BBC’s online presence in a blog entry about the phenomenal growth in use of the BBC’s online services. From just 3.9 million UK adults per week in September 2002 to 22.7 million in September 2012, the exponential growth in website traffic had placed the BBC’s digital offerings “at the heart of BBC broadcasting and have fundamentally changed ... how our audiences share, interact, engage and get immersed in BBC content”.⁵

Similarly, at Channel 4 (C4), Richard Davidson-Houston (Head of Online) used their 2011 Winter Briefing to industry suppliers to talk about changing audience behaviour. According to Davidson-Houston, the growth of web 2.0 and social television experiences means “audience ‘participation’ has taken on whole new meanings”, resulting in the public service broadcaster drawing up eight audience personas to illustrate C4’s approach to interactive audiences.⁶ These personas run the gamut of engagement with digital culture – from the multitasking “Generation Web” 18-25 year olds, and 20-30 year old “Gadget wideboys” to the less

digitally literate “analoggers” in the 45-60 age-range.⁷ Beyond merely profiling and monitoring these digital media proficiencies, however, PSBs have been keen to emphasise that the shift to digital television, according to C4’s Louise Brown (Multiplatform commissioning lead) “allow us to create more personalised, relevant experiences of content and enter into meaningful dialogues with our audiences”.⁸ Collectively, therefore, the public discourses of PSBs have been one of digital transformation and embracing the newly empowered users – encouraging and engaging with participation.

Ultimately, however, such pronouncements must be read against what Caldwell describes as the imperative to “spin and narrative [that] define and couch any industrial disclosure” (2008, 2).⁹ Placed in the context of the prevailing production cultures within the PSBs, such accounts of institutional change and audience engagement are less convincing. Returning to the epigraph at the start of this chapter, this story from a Senior Multiplatform Executive at the BBC indicates the difficulty of engaging an established broadcast production culture with an interactive audience. There simply was no inclination to respond to all these emails, let alone production capacity to do so. As he went on to argue:

“[the problem is that online] is a conversation and [broadcast] is one to many. But when the many start writing back to you, we’re just not ready ... when you’re getting 10 million people and even just 1% of that comes back to you ... it causes absolute havoc. And then everyone has a slightly disappointing experience” (IV10).

A key reason for these disappointing experiences is the divergent view of, and relationship with, the audience held by those in PSBs’ digital and broadcast divisions. This chapter focuses on two interconnected issues around these different perspectives of the audience: firstly, audience size; and then production cultures and processes. This is not a story of absolute failure of strategy, nor of one “old” broadcasting culture failing to “get” the new digital technologies, cultures and platforms. Indeed, in addressing the “2.0” of the title and Rose’s hyperbole above, what follows suggests that these failures are an important part of the transformation from PSB to PSM. Nevertheless, this chapter demonstrates the difficulties in making this transition. Arguably the different modes of working between television broadcasting and digital that inform their view of, and relationship to, those “people formerly known as the audience” (Rosen 2006) lie at the heart of such problematics. Thus, whilst Jay Rosen’s polemical “former audience” category cites then BBC Director General Mark Thompson’s view of the “active audience” as evidence that “big

media” are “getting the idea”, it is not, however, clear that all producers are willing to recognise or accommodate the “new balance of power” that a “broadcast 2.0”, digital television landscape may require.

Audience Size: Too Big to Handle, Too Small to Hold

Fundamentally, one of the major problems for PSBs in a multiplatform age is audience size: it is at once too big and too small. In this section I deal with each part of this paradoxical statement in turn, before turning to how this affects the relationship between production cultures.

The example in the epigraph to this chapter usefully suggests how the interactive audience of digital television can be too big. Here the audience is too large for the production team to deal with: “it causes havoc”. Arguably, PSB institutions are hamstrung in their ability to interact meaningfully with audiences from the outset because of their pre-existing, broadcast era popularity. Clay Shirky usefully explains how the interactive potential of digital media platforms, such as blogs or social media, can be adversely impacted by fame or popularity. When a blogger, or in this case institution, attracts a large number of followers “the growing audience will ultimately defeat” the possibility of interaction, because the institution has “to start choosing who to respond to and who to ignore, and over time, ignore becomes the default choice” (Shirky 2008, 93). Thus, whilst the BBC may have celebrated fifteen years of its online presence at the end of 2012, one need only take a cursory glance at its Internet blog to find a plethora of disgruntled users who feel their comments on the site go unheeded. In the squeeze on production budgets and the pressure on workers to interact with users beyond their working hours (discussed below), PSBs will always struggle to find ways to respond and engage in the dialogue with audiences they loudly and polemically claim in public utterances. Indeed, this struggle will arguably remain a necessary consequence of their remits for universalism.

The problem of overwhelming audience size, however, extends beyond the difficulty of listening or creating meaningful interactions with large-scale audiences inherited from the broadcast era. Equally, technical infrastructures, and the disjuncture in approach to users from digital and broadcast production cultures, have created several problems for PSBs in engaging with large audiences beyond the broadcast experience. In the move towards multiplatform PSM experiences, many PSBs have integrated “calls to action” within the linear television broadcast experiences that ask the viewer to go to an associated website and take part in a connected activity. For example, for the BAFTA and

International Digital Emmy award-winning *Virtual Revolution* (2010) the BBC created a range of associated interactive experiences. This included adopting what they described as a truly web 2.0 approach to the production, including using the “wisdom of the crowds” in researching the series’ history of the Internet and even naming the series. The team took an “open source” approach to production material by releasing rushes and interviews from the production prior to the series’ broadcast for users to view, mash-up and share.¹⁰

Whilst these pre-broadcast experiences worked effectively with the smaller, more niche audiences interested in following and contributing to the production of a TV series about the Internet, the large scale interactive offering released to accompany the first programme’s TX date was less successful. This took the form of a web-behaviour test that would tell users what kind of “web animal” they were: from the “slow moving, leisurely” web bear to the “speedy surfer” web ostrich. The broadcast television series’ call to action invited audiences to go online and take part in the test via digital on screen graphics and a voiceover announcement before and after the programme. However, audiences arrived in such numbers to take the test that the site “bloody falls over” (IV10). In an apology on Twitter to frustrated audience-come-users, executive producers described the BBC’s “web animal” as “most closely resembling a fail whale”. As another senior television producer reflected on the impetuses to create interactive multiplatform experiences under the *Creative Future* strategy, such problems were indicative of a pressure to “march people up the hill, both about the speed at which all of this stuff was required and the technical ability to deliver it, before we were ready” (IV45, 01/06/2011). As she went on to suggest, it was not just that a broadcasting organisation was not used to interaction, it was that the digital division – Future Media and Technology (FM&T) as it then was – was not ready for participation on such a large scale.

The paradoxical nature of such online audiences being perhaps too big is revealed by another example, this time from C4, again from 2010. *Seven Days* was promoted by the broadcaster as the “new *Big Brother*”, with enhanced levels of interactivity that would allow audiences to chat with participants from the show via Twitter and the site’s own “Chatnav” feature. Whilst the series failed to live up to the hype, attracting just one million viewers on launch night, *Seven Days* was cited as a multiplatform success by interviewees across the industry and the UK trade press. Paradoxically this was because the amount of users it attracted to the associated online offerings was so big as to crash the C4 servers. Trade magazine *New Media Age* reported approvingly of the “overwhelming

response” to the show, whilst its TV counterpart, *Broadcast*, described it as “unprecedented” demand.¹¹

Similarly, high online audience numbers might be used to obscure other failures. As one former senior multiplatform executive at Channel 4 reflected,

In the past, we had all kind of rationalised metrics post-project. We’ve had a look at what we can measure then tried to tell the story afterwards ... just picking the biggest number and saying it was a success” (IV16, 14/12/2010).

One such example was C4’s multiplatform education commission 1066 in 2009: an online strategy game aimed to encourage teenage boys to study history. Six months after its commission, the broadcaster boasted of 6.5million game plays providing “a clear indication of the potential interest in games involving documentary themes”.¹² Over three years later, the game appears phenomenally successful with interviewees at the broadcaster and independent producer detailing over 30 million game plays worldwide (IV7, 05/11/2010). However, this tendency to simply “pick the biggest number” obscures the fact that few of these game plays were from the target audience of British teenage boys. Indeed, the digital agency responsible for the game revealed the majority of plays came from China (IV51, 8/8/2011). Whilst such a volume of game plays may drive up the popularity and visibility of the game to the target audience (the game remains the number one search result for “1066” via Google), the public service value of such large audiences remains open to question.

The question of metrics and how to measure and value online audiences remains a vexing question for broadcasters, PSBs and otherwise. Prior to the turn to web 2.0, the PSBs tended to use page-impressions as a key metric for measuring the success of a given online initiative. These often looked large but, again, were hiding underlining issues. Thus in the move from page impressions to appreciation scores, the BBC found that in many instances it was not that audiences “absolutely loved” the web offering. Rather, high page impressions often meant “it might just be very difficult to get to where you want to get to ... and one of the things I think disguised that was some of them were getting a lot of page impressions” (IV63, 29/09/11). The difficulty broadcast organisations have experienced in quantifying, and understanding, the value of the online audience is perhaps best encapsulated by the fact Channel 4 announced two distinct policies and criteria for measuring online audiences within six-months (see Bennett, et. al., 2012, 35). The lack of clarity and shared metrics for online, points to the second paradox

of online audience sizes: that when they are small enough to interact with meaningfully, they are too small to count.

Broadcasting has a long established system of counting audiences, determining their demographic profile, and measuring success (Lotz, 2007). Whilst the fragmentation of audiences across multiple channels and platforms, alongside the advent of new technologies that provide new levels of (often unwelcome) scrutiny, has called the established BARB and Neilson systems in the UK and US into question, overnight ratings figures remain a measure that most television producers are comfortable with. In contrast, as one MD of a digital company argued:

“everyone’s kind of reluctant to say [what the numbers are for online] because what if you don’t like what you get to know. But if it’s a TV show. [Metrics are clear]. I mean I know that a TV show has to get like ... two million [or] you’re fired. [With multiplatform it’s more] “You know, let’s see what we can get” (IV49, 25/07/2011).

Approached from a broadcast production culture, the audience is often reduced to numbers: it is not the interactions but the metrics that matter, evidencing longer engagement with particular programme brands. But if we are to evaluate such interactions in terms of public service value, we need to make different judgements. For example, where PSBs have been successful in creating formats that emphasise social media interaction – *Million Pound Drop*, *The Voice*, *Strictly Come Dancing* – there is limited public service value here beyond demonstrating relevance to large audiences. Even where multiplatform experiences offer more strongly orientated public service values in terms of citizenship engagement, such as *Embarrassing Bodies*, we must be cautious in celebrating its success. Thus whilst it is important that over eight million unique users have visited the related website and that the programme and its personalities’ twitter accounts have a cumulated following of over 500,000 people, it is the quality of interactions that remains important. Here there is perhaps less public service value in the size of the following on Twitter, where many tweets are puerile, voyeuristic or both, than there is in the smaller statistics around the site: such as the 200,000 people who “have taken the Autism-Spectrum Quotient test developed in collaboration with the Cambridge Autism Centre [enabling] a scale and depth of research on autism otherwise unimaginable” (Bennett, et. al. 2012, 19). More fundamentally, we must therefore ask whether the use of social networks to produce a broadcast 2.0 style of engagement with audiences adds public service value: in certain instances, it will enhance a programme, but in others it will lead to a dispersed attention that treats TV as wallpaper,

failing to enhance the value of either the online community or broadcast proposition.

Overall, however, the emphasis on numbers tends to devalue the role multiplatform can play in PSB. As one multiplatform executive surmised: “overnights [ratings] are all anyone ever cares about in PSB” (IV10). Across the UK industry, online figures for multiplatform projects were often only a 10th of the size of the broadcast audience. As one multiplatform producer reflected, “you can always add an extra ‘0’ or two on the end of the audience figures for TV compared to multiplatform,” (IV3) leading to a corresponding budgetary and production interest in multiplatform. As the same producer put it, this made multiplatform producers feel like second-class citizens. This relationship between television and digital media production cultures is the second issue that must be negotiated in developing a new relationship with the interactive audience for PSB 2.0.

Cultural Differences: Shouting and Listening

On the 3rd of May 2012, BBC sports journalist Liam McLeod tweeted that new BBC guidelines meant staff could no longer respond to tweets or retweets. Media commentators and workers on Twitter quickly rushed to question this supposed new policy, which surely seemed at odds with the platform’s culture and the status of the BBC as a *public* service broadcaster. Later that day, senior BBC figures stepped in to clarify that the guidelines were unchanged, and indeed promoted interaction and retweets by BBC staff and journalists. McLeod’s tweet was put down to mistaking local advice about particular stories, in this instance reporting about Glasgow Rangers football club’s tax avoidance case, for new guidelines. However, this short example illustrates not that an individual member of staff failed in communicating and applying BBC policy, but rather a cultural misunderstanding of new digital media platforms by broadcast production cultures. As the MediaUK website opined, “a cursory look at [McLeod’s] timeline appears to show that he doesn’t quite understand Twitter isn’t a shouty broadcast medium anyway”.¹³

As Jackie Harrison’s study of newsroom production cultures at the BBC concluded, broadcast journalists often viewed UGC submitted to the BBC as trivial or unsuitable, having minimal impact on most news reporting (2010). Similarly, across a public service *broadcasting* institution there are long established production cultures that do not easily or simply accommodate the new demands of the interactive audience. Moreover, because of the audience size and metrics issues discussed

above, most money and “key decisions [remain] TV driven” (IV8), with multiplatform or interactive thinking “bolted on” to broadcast programme ideas. Coupled with production processes that privilege the schedule and need for channel controllers to plan ahead, the production cultures of PSB organisations can be understood in terms of a “TX [transmission] culture”. This culture emphasises linear production processes “working up to a final deadline whereby – via the linear process of pre-production, shooting, editing and post-production – significant changes to a program [sic] could be made practically to the point of transmission” (Bennett and Strange 2014). Moreover, as discussed below, this TX culture also means production teams are disbanded at, or before, the point of transmission. Such a culture can stand not only in stark contrast to the visions set out in official strategy or “above-the-line” rhetoric of senior executives, but also the more iterative modes of production and cultures apparent in digital media (discussed below). Thus, whilst then BBC Director General Mark Thompson claimed in an interview that the BBC is evolving to “get certain kinds of content to the public, increasingly content with which they can interact and have a dialogue with us and each other about” (Interview, 17/02/201), the ability of production teams to listen and respond is often curtailed.

The distinct production cultures of broadcast and digital media posed a particular problem for the BBC’s transformation to a multiplatform organisation due to the institutional re-organisation enshrined in *Creative Future* (2006). This editorial strategy at once disbanded “television” as a separate production silo at the same time as re-inscribing other production culture barriers. Instead of television, radio and new media divisions, *Creative Future* removed platform-specific production departments, replacing these with three content production departments – Vision, Audio and Music, and Journalism. Outside of these teams, the new “Future Media & Technology” division would service the needs of these content producers. I have explored elsewhere the difficulties this particular separation of technologists and content producers entailed, with particular respect to the dominant role iPlayer has come to play in the BBC’s digital strategy (Bennett and Strange 2013). Here I want to focus on the way this restructure also required long established broadcast production cultures to work with their digital counterparts within the Vision department under the guise of multiplatform production. In this regard, multiplatform producers were effectively embedded within television production teams to help create and implement new 360° interactive experiences for audiences. However, as many producers told us, the distinct production cultures of broadcast and digital media often hamstringing the initiatives to

create dialogue and meaningful engagement with audiences. As a senior multiplatform executive reflected of his TV counterparts:

“They are happy to have a conversation as long as [the audience] sit down, shut up and listen. ... the BBC finds it difficult to get its head around [the fact that new platforms are participative]. It has a very broadcaster, parent child [view of the relationship] A PSB more than any other should listen hardest, empower your audience to be part of something” (IV29, 24/02/11).

He went on to discuss the 2007 BBC phone-in scandal around children’s television programme *Blue Peter*, which saw the Corporation rig an audience poll to name the show’s new pet cat: unhappy with the viewer’s choice of “Cookie”, the production team arbitrarily named the cat “Socks” instead. He suggested this evidenced “a contempt for the audience. They didn’t like what the audience came up with. It’s a public vote but it isn’t. The BBC views its audience as recipients” (ibid). As another producer argued, such examples were evidence of the lack of risk that broadcasters were willing to take in recognising the power and control of the “people formerly known as the audience”:

“You know, the risk, they’re a big organisation they have to be risk averse, we all get that. You know, but, it’s different with online. With TV you can lock it down and it’s down but online it’s a living thing. And there are different levels of risk that you have to be comfortable with” (IV49).

This reluctance to lose control or take risks has led PSBs to be nervous around funding campaigning multiplatform projects, which allow sustained engagement with the audience over important public and political issues (IV31, 3/3/2011). This meant that multiplatform projects produced internally at the BBC often lacked such initiatives. Similarly, at C4 (who rely solely on independent suppliers), independent production companies had to fund such social media campaigns themselves, often with a brand playing a role in the funding and shaping of the message as a result.

It would, however, be erroneous to position broadcast production cultures as intractable or out of step with their far more savvy digital counterparts. Equally important in the difficulty PSBs face in the transition to establishing new relationships with interactive audiences has been the production cultures of digital media. Here many digital producers involved in multiplatform tend to see audiences as an extension of their tech-savvy selves: the absence of the over 45s as at all digitally literate, let alone alive, in C4 profiles discussed in the introduction to this chapter is but one

example of this slight narcissism. Elsewhere, prior to the merger of television and multiplatform teams in 2011 at Channel 4, multiplatform commissioners would often treat quite marginal audience behaviours as mainstream. For example, one former Channel 4 multiplatform commissioner evangelised the successes of second screen projects like *Million Pound Drop*, which he claimed would have been a “research and development project ten years ago, and it’s a live peak time show for Channel 4 in 2010” (IV16). Such hyperbole, however, ignores the fact that the audience conversion rate for online activities associated with *Million Pound Drop* remained at around 10% - a record achieved almost a decade earlier with 2001’s *Big Brother*. Moreover, the industry’s overall obsession with second screen tablet experiences seems incongruent with eleven percentage penetration rates (Ofcom 2012), particularly given the PSBs’ universalist remits. The relatively small numbers for online audiences therefore tend to reinforce schisms and differences between broadcast and digital production cultures. As a result, it can remain difficult to win over television production cultures into investing in dialogue with interactive audiences. As one multiplatform producer put it, his television counterparts were able to stick their fingers in their ears and say “lalalalal, it’s not going to happen” (IV10), whilst his fellow digital producers viewed them as digital refuseniks or “dinosaurs” (IV54, 17/08/2011).

These divisions were further reinforced by differences in production processes between television and digital media. In contrast to television’s linear production model, digital tends to work with iterative production models – developing, user testing, releasing software, getting feedback, re-versioning and re-releasing: there is a constant interaction with the user group of any digital business as part of the production process. This slower, more dialogic, relationship with the audience or user-base for digital media was difficult for broadcast production cultures to understand:

“The other thing the BBC can’t quite get its head around is how networks online work. It treats them as kind of “six-parters”. So it wants it to be ready the minute it goes up; doesn’t understand Beta, doesn’t understand why the entire audience isn’t there at the start ... and then walks away from it at the end (IV29)”.

As this producer indicates, the problems are manifold – not only is there insufficient time and attention paid to user-testing in order to create robust systems that might avoid the “fail whale” scenario of *Virtual Revolution*, but there is no capacity in broadcast production cultures for on-going interaction with online audiences. The broadcast TX culture effectively means that when any show that is not live goes on air, the