ARTS COUNCIL OF THE AIR: SWITCHING ATTENTION FROM THE SERVICE TO THE PROGRAMME

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One of the indices of the health or otherwise of Public Service Broadcasting is the varying need to define what it is: for several decades, due to its strength and importance in public life, there was little demand for precise elaboration of the meaning of the set of values and assumptions on which it was built. Today, in many countries there is a clamour, often aggressively articulated, for definitions that can be operationalised in actual programme-making routines, and then, in some cases, co-opted by private broadcasters into rationales for widening the patronage spread of the public purse.

Traditionally, Public Service Broadcasting existed within a set of organisational conditions that developed between the two world wars, shaping first radio then television. Of fundamental importance was a trust in and certainty about the source and level of funding, which privileged the notion that money was there to make programmes, thus elevating the role of the producer-as-creator, rather than the notion centred in commercial broadcasting, that programmes should exist to make money, thus elevating the role of the producer as inspired forecaster of what programming the market would pay for. Public Service Broadcasting was about citizens in the nation, not consumers in the marketplace. The undergirding political philosophy focused on the importance of public culture as the condition in which informed and involved citizenship would flourish, and the role of public communication systems, untrammelled by commercial or political interference, in ensuring the health of the cultural life of a society. Actual histories of specific Public Service Broadcasting systems reveal, of course, that day-to-day reality did not always synchronise with the ideal: funding was limited by politicians' long-stand-

ing reluctance to raise the licence fee, Governments had an endemic urge to regard broadcasting as an arm of State policy implementation, and the desire to make society a "better" place often rested on a paternalistic attitude to audience wants and needs. But, whatever about failures in practice, Public Service Broadcasting was firmly rooted, as a belief system and a set of institutional practices, in the optimistic, humanistic Enlightenment idea that the world can be made a humane place for all, and that the collective (the nation, the region) is important in order to allow the individual to flourish. Public good and public service converged in broadcasting.

At its best, Public Service Broadcasting offers geographically universal access to a wide range of programmes that meets general taste and interest as well as minority interests, whether those are regional, linguistic, generational or confessional. It contributes to a sense of national and regional identity, reflecting and sustaining a shared culture within a national territory and stresses competition for good programming rather than for audience numbers. As a common reference point for all members of the public, it sustains a forum for democratic debate and gives public access to events of national significance, as when broadcasting creates the cultural space in real time for national celebration or national mourning. The ethos of Public Service Broadcasting emphasises making a space for innovation and extensive original production, which is of wide public interest as well as attentive to the need of minorities.

The Public Sphere

Over the last decade, as the idea of Public Service Broadcasting has come under attack from a corporatist ethic of consumer sovereignty, its roots have remained firmly embedded in the Enlightenment ideal of the body politic, fulfilling its duty to make strategic interventions in order to sustain the general well-being of society. This linkage was given a more explicit theoretical sustenance through the academic discourse that increasingly centred on the Habermasian notion of the "public sphere" (Habermas 1989), which situates modes of public communication at the heart of the democratic process. Habermas argued that a democratic public sphere came into being in Western Europe during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as a free space of public discussion among citizens. Through horizontal communication patterns fostered in literary and political clubs, tea and coffee houses and readers' clubs for the discussion of newspapers, journals and books, more and more citizens were drawn into participation in public affairs. Public opinion began to emerge in this discursive space, situated between the private sphere of everyday life and the public power of the State. The burgeoning output of the printing presses intensified public discussion, on which a new phenomenon, public opinion, began to thrive.

Habermas's view of the evolution of the "public sphere" has been subjected to vigorous criticism for under-emphasising the relationship between the class structure and the public sphere and for ignoring the exclusion of women from the expanding public sphere in the nineteenth century (Reading 1995; Fraser 1993). Others have criticised Habermas for undervaluing the development of a plebeian public sphere, built upon different institutional forms, in opposition to the bourgeois public sphere, for idealising the bourgeois public sphere as always sustained by freely discoursing intellectuals in search of public enlightenment, rather than by booty capitalists in search of a quick profit, and for exaggerating the manipulative powers of the controllers of the cultural industries and neglecting the possibilities of public service models of State