

- on the Press, Royal Commission on the Press Working Paper 3, London, HMSO, 1977). His paper was symptomatic of the misgivings that were expressed at the time.
3. See, for example, Bruce Page, *The Murdoch Archipelago* (London, Simon and Schuster, 2003).
  4. N. Hartley, P. Gudgeon and R. Crafts, *Concentration of Ownership in the Provincial Press*, Royal Commission on the Press 1974–77, Research Series 5 (London, HMSO, 1977).
  5. *Periodicals and the Alternative Press*, Royal Commission on the Press, Research Series 6 (London, HMSO, 1977).
  6. *Royal Commission on the Press 1947–9 Report*, Appendix 2, table 1 (London, HMSO, 1949); Newspaper Society database (as of January 2002).
  7. Des Freedman, 'The political economy of the "new" news environment', in Natalie Fenton (ed.), *New Media, Old News* (London, Sage, 2009).
  8. This is a central theme of Part I of this book.
  9. P. Murschitz, 'State support for the daily press in Europe: a critical appraisal', *European Journal of Communication*, 13 (3), 1998; E. Skogerbo, 'The press subsidy system in Norway', *European Journal of Communication*, 12 (1), 1997; P. Humphreys, *Mass Media and Media Policy in Western Europe* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1996).
  10. Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), *Consultation on Media Ownership Rules* (London, DCMS, 2001), p. 25.
  11. The government failed to refer Murdoch's purchase of Times Newspapers to the Monopolies Commission on the grounds that the newspaper group was in such financial difficulty that its immediate future was in doubt. This was not the case.
  12. Proposals for divestment came from, among others, Sir Geoffrey Crowther (Royal Commission on the Press, Oral Evidence, Vol. 1, p. 5, London, HMSO, 1962), and Professor Jeremy Tunstall (Royal Commission on the Press 1974–77, unpublished evidence), both from the centre left of the political spectrum.
  13. C. Frost, 'The Press Complaints Commission: a study of ten years of adjudications on press complaints', *Journalism Studies*, 5 (1), 2004, pp. 101–14.
  14. Africa is giving nothing to anyone – apart from AIDS', *Independent*, 10 July 2008.
  15. A. Delano and J. Henningham, *The News Breach: British Journalists in the 1990s* (London, London Institute, 1996).
  16. R. Worcester, 'Demographics and values: what the British public reads and what it thinks about its newspapers', in H. Stephenson and M. Bromley (eds), *Sex, Lies and Democracy* (London, Longman, 1998).
  17. Eurobarometer Survey, 2002, cited in the *Guardian*, 24 April 2002.
  18. The 1977 Commission contained a minority report, signed by two members, proposing a National Printing Corporation and a Launch Fund to assist the establishment of new publications. These recommendations were ignored.
  19. Its appointment was secured through a private member's Bill, and pressure from the National Union of Journalists.
  20. For a brief description of the context of this campaign, see Chapter 5.
  21. Sean Tunney, *Labour and the Press* (Brighton, Sussex University Press, 2007).
  22. For different interpretations of the politics of press regulation, see J. Curran, 'Press reformism 1918–98: a study of failure', in H. Tumber (ed.), *Media Power, Professionalism and Politics* (London, Routledge, 2000), and the more optimistic T. O'Malley and C. Soley, *Regulating the Press* (London, Pluto, 2000).

## Broadcasting and the theory of public service

British broadcasting was started as a public service, and this proved as creative commercially as it was innovative culturally. Indeed, until recently every stage of its development, from the emergence of the BBC, through the introduction of commercial television, to the founding of Channel 4, depended on a set of linked and radical expansions. First, at each stage a novel source of finance was discovered. In turn the growth of broadcasting was financed by the licence fee, advertising revenue, and then a tax on the profits of the commercial companies (but one devoted to making programmes). These sources of finance did not compete with each other, and were key to the possibility of political independence. Each stage produced new audiences for broadcasting – the BBC creating an image of its audience as 'participants' in the great affairs of the nation, commercial television popularizing the medium, and Channel 4 decisively registering and enhancing the interests of minority audiences. Finally, of course, at each stage new kinds of programmes and styles of addressing audiences were evolving. Until the 1980s, broadcasting in Britain was not fettered, but liberated for cultural and political expansion by the requirements of public service.

The principle of public service – which has always been fought over and continually reinterpreted – was not the paternalistic and abstract rule which critics have suggested. Nor has it been damaging to entrepreneurial initiative. Indeed, public service regulation has secured the survival of a successful broadcasting industry, one which has become more significant economically and which has become an important exporter of programmes while continuing to discuss and mould national issues. It has, of course, also never been perfect. Broadcasters have often failed to perceive the public interest and, even more frequently, have been too acquiescent to political pressure. Broadcasting has often been used by dominant political actors. Nevertheless, it has provided a flexible means of managing and developing an important utility which has been commercially successful and also served the public.

In the 1980s 'public service' became unfashionable. Yet those who derided it often had a financial interest in weakening it or, alternatively, disliked the political autonomy of broadcasting. However, public service is not a static or

dated ideal, it is one we need to redefine and develop. What were the origins of the principle and how did it come to be undermined?

Broadcasting in Britain – monopoly or duopoly – always depended on an assumption of commitment to an undivided public good. This lay beneath all official thinking on radio and television until the 1970s. In 1977 the Annan Report abandoned this assumption, and replaced it with a new principle of liberal pluralism. The ideal ceased to be the broad consensus – the middle ground upon which all men of good sense could agree. Rather, it became, for Annan and those who supported and inspired him, a free marketplace in which balance could be achieved through the competition of multiplicity of independent voices. The result has been confusion and crisis, from which no new received doctrine has yet emerged.

So, by 1982, the Hunt Report on the introduction of cable television could begin to modify the principles of balance and quality even further. These were relegated to a part of the national service in the BBC and ITV. Although both the Hunt Report and the subsequent White Paper advocated some safeguards to protect the British system from the damaging effects of foreign satellite transmissions, and to guarantee the rights of the networks to televise events of national interest, the basis of public service broadcasting was abandoned. Thus cable television, free from constraining ideals, was left to produce programmes that 'were sufficiently attractive for the public to buy'.<sup>1</sup> The 1990 Broadcasting Act suggested that contenders for broadcasting franchises should produce 'sufficient amounts of quality programmes', but not only was this undefined, it only occupied two paragraphs in the Act. By contrast, conditions governing the financial arrangements for the auction of franchises took up fifteen pages.

However, the most obvious long-term symptom of the change in the status of the concept has been a shift in terminology. The concept of public service is elaborated in all broadcasting reports before that of the Annan Committee. As early as 1923 the Sykes Report argued that broadcasting was 'of great national importance as a medium for the performance of a valuable public service'.<sup>2</sup> The next report – that of the Crawford Committee in 1926 – suggested that in view of the scale, significance and potentialities of broadcasting, the duties and status of the Corporation which it had just created 'should correspond with those of a public service, and the directorate should be appointed with the sole object of promoting the utmost utility and development of the enterprise'.<sup>3</sup>

Later reports developed the consequences of this view. 'The influence of broadcasting upon the mind and speech of the nation', commented the Ullswater Report, made it an 'urgent necessity in the national interest that the broadcasting service should at all times be conducted in the best possible manner and to the best possible advantage of the people'.<sup>4</sup> In 1950 the Beveridge Report on broadcasting characterized the ideal of public service more actively. 'Like the work of the universities', Beveridge suggested, 'the work

of broadcasting should be regarded as a public service for a social purpose'.<sup>5</sup> The Pilkington Report, which considered both the BBC and the commercial service in 1962, added to this definition: 'The concept of broadcasting has always been of a service, comprehensive in character, with the duty of a public corporation of bringing to public awareness the whole range of ... activity and expression developed in society'.<sup>6</sup> Indeed the organization of commercial television was as much a product of the ideal of public service broadcasting as the BBC's had been originally. Thus successive reports developed the idea of broadcasting as a public service – catering for all sections of the community, reaching all parts of the country regardless of cost, seeking to educate, inform and improve, and prepared to lead public opinion rather than follow it.

The Annan Report in many respects broke with this tradition for the first time. This change was noticeable, both in the evidence which was presented to the committee, and in the conclusion of the report. Even the reformers, whether of the left or right, disregarded the public service principle entirely. The BBC referred to it in only the most apologetic tone. The Annan Committee itself took a pluralist view: broadcasting should cater for the full range of groups and interests in society, rather than seek to offer moral leadership. 'For the individual life is a gamble, he is entitled to stake everything, if he desires, on one interpretation of life', it argued. 'But broadcasting organizations have to back the field, and put their money on all the leading horses which line up at the starting gate'.<sup>7</sup> In one elegant metaphor, much of the basis of public service broadcasting had been dismissed, despite the fact that Channel 4 was, in many ways, in practice an extension of it.

Indeed the Annan Report's reinterpretation of public service unintentionally left British broadcasters defenceless against the threats posed by recent technological developments. By so transforming public service it left no grounds on which to manage or control the impact of the inevitable introduction of cable, video or satellite broadcasting. Since 1977, reports and White Papers on the future of these very technologies have not even attempted to assess the impact of unregulated competition for audiences, revenues and programmes on the television system as a whole. Thus it was possible for the Hunt Report to suggest that viewers' willingness to pay for cable television simply constituted a new source of revenue. It was claimed that this would not divert resources from existing channels. (However, it was not apparently thought necessary to support this assertion by either evidence or argument.)

By contrast, there was a radical development in the 1986 Peacock Report, which reinterpreted the role of the market in broadcasting.<sup>8</sup> While advocating what Samuel Brittan, a leading monetarist journalist and theorist and member of the Peacock Committee, called 'the goal that British Broadcasting should move towards a sophisticated market system based on consumer sovereignty', the report perceived public service commitments as actually protecting consumer sovereignty. Brittan commented that 'The existence of a

tax-financed BBC and the IBA regulation of commercial television were justified by Peacock as a second best, but very successful, attempt to replicate artificially the programme structure of a true broadcasting market'. More than that, the committee took up the elaboration of the public service ideal developed in Channel 4 provision, and suggested that a mature broadcasting service would operate like the publishing industry. 'Pre-publication censorship, whether of printed material, plays, films, broadcasting or other creative activities, or expressions of opinion, has no place in a free society', the report argued, and recommended that the government 'embark forthwith on a phased programme for ending it'. Britain went on to point out not only that the report widened the scope of its enquiries far beyond its original brief of considering the introduction of advertising into the BBC (which it rejected), but also the future of broadcasting and how that could be best managed in the context of technological developments, but also that the report demonstrated the fundamental social significance of broadcasting. As Brittan commented:

Peacock exposed many of the contradictions in the Thatcherite espousal of market forces. In principle, Mrs Thatcher and her supporters are in favour of de-regulation, competition, and choice. But they are distrustful ... of plans to allow people to listen to and watch what they like, subject only to the law of the land. They espouse the market system but dislike the libertarian value judgements involved in its operation: value judgements which underlie the Peacock Report.<sup>9</sup>

The Peacock Report put public service back on the agenda just at the point when the broadcasting organizations seemed to have abandoned it.

In fact, this abandonment by the broadcasting organizations is a problem for the authority of British broadcasting has always depended on the pursuit of public service. Indeed, by relinquishing any claim to this, the broadcasting institutions have put into jeopardy a whole set of complex relationships between themselves, the state, their audiences and their programme policy. What caused this crisis? What are its consequences?

### The state and broadcasting

One cause of the collapse of the principle of public service broadcasting has been the deterioration in the relationship between the state and broadcasting institutions. In the Sykes Report, Charles Trevelyan argued that 'We consider such a potential power over public opinion and the life of the nation ought to remain with the state'. Because broadcasting was so important it was seen as 'essential that permission to transmit, and the matter to be transmitted should be subject to public authority'.

Air waves were a scarce resource which did not obey national boundaries. Consequently the state was obliged to control the right to broadcast in all

societies. In the early British broadcasting reports, however, there is a consensus that state regulation is the best guarantee of broadcasting independence and accountability. As the Crawford Report put it, only the state could license the BBC to be 'a public corporation acting as trustee for the national interest'.

In the 1920s the problem of the relationship of government with broadcasting was dealt with by making new rules and creating new machinery. It was taken for granted that the control over the administration of an organization could be kept quite separate from whatever the organization did. Hence it was possible for broadcasting to be politically accountable, and yet remain independent of any political influence. The Sykes Report noted that any detailed control of the work of the Corporation would make a government 'constantly open to suspicion that it was using an opportunity to its own advantage'. It was therefore decided that the minister responsible for the service would be able to answer questions in the House on matters of principle and finance, but he should not be held responsible for the programmes themselves. Later the problem seemed to disappear. Complaints about government intervention were rare, and the issue of excessive interference no longer seemed to exist.

In 1936 the Ullswater Report commented, 'We have no reason to suppose that, in practice, divergent views of public interest have been held by the Corporation and government departments'. Pilkington argued in 1962 that 'The practical resolution of the problem was made easier because the first priority of the department concerned with exercising the government's responsibility (the GPO) is with technical matters'. No conflict had arisen between broadcasters and governments over the definition of public interest.

However, by the 1970s this pragmatic argument was felt to be inadequate. Imperceptibly the problem had become one of defending broadcasters against the state. The relationship was increasingly characterized as one of vigilant and stealthy hostility. A cold war had been declared between them.

This was partly a consequence of the changing nature of politics in Britain. In a world of increasingly sophisticated news reporting this posed problems for both the BBC and the IBA. 'Politics' and political balance could be treated simply in two- or three-party terms in the 1950s. By the 1970s this was no longer the case. The emergence of centre parties made the work of 'striking a balance' far more difficult for broadcasters. In addition, many fields which had previously been regarded as non-controversial and administrative had moved into the political arena. But also because of a proliferation of parties, interests and pressure groups, because of a widening gap between the major parties and, most of all, because of the rise of issues — of which Northern Ireland was the most critical — for which the gentlemanly and constitutionalist assumptions of the early rule makers could not cater. The problem of providing 'balance' in dealing with treasonable activities in Ulster — when, whether and under what conditions to interview terrorists or

members of illegal organizations, how to discuss the issue at all – forced the broadcasting directorates to make new rules and, in effect, to add to the corpus of Britain's unwritten constitution.

The questions which the public asked about broadcasting, the Annan Report claimed, were becoming 'more critical, more hostile and more political'. At the same time, there was a new public mood, 'at once inflationary in the expectation of what political power could achieve, and deflationary towards those in power who failed to give effect to these expectations'.

The interests of governments had come, by the late 1970s, to be seen as inimical to those of broadcasting. The distinction between the broadcasting bureaucracies and what they produced had been challenged. Previously the quality and balance of a company's programmes were believed to be guaranteed by the good order of the administration. This view was now replaced by one of increasingly detailed suspicion. More than that, broadcasters' institutionalized caution about the power of governments had developed into a rejection of all kinds of intervention by the state.

This has had profound consequences for the legitimacy of the public service broadcasting organizations. The Annan Report argued that the authorities have a dual role: on the one hand they exist to ensure that broadcasters operate in the public interest and are responsive to public opinion, particularly as expressed in parliament. On the other hand, they exist 'also to defend broadcasters from undue pressure from whatever quarter'. But these are not complementary obligations; rather they are contradictory. The authorities are supposed both to reflect political pressure and to resist it. It used to be possible for the authorities to perform these two functions when the interests of the state and the broadcasting organization were seen as similar, if not identical. However, once their interests are opposed, the two aspects of the authorities' role are increasingly difficult to reconcile.

### Accountability and broadcasting

This situation would matter less if other mechanisms designed to relate broadcasting institutions to society seemed less perfunctory. Since 1926 they have all suffered from attrition.

Reith rapidly turned the BBC Governors, supposedly 'the trustees of the national interest', into creatures of the Director General. In both commercial television and the BBC, the Boards of Governors depend for their information upon the organizations they were designed to supervise, and they have no independent secretariat or research function. The Governors have remained relatively powerless, and do not see their job as one of representing external interests or views. Similarly, the role of the advisory committees was ingeniously reinterpreted. Reith ensured that these acted as specialists (whether in music, speech or religion) who merely offered their advice over particular policy issues to the Corporation, rather than experts in broadcasting as such.

Indeed the only independent source of power left within these supposedly governing bodies is that of the Chairman of the Board. This power derives from the Chairman's close personal association with the Director General – or the administrative head of the independent service. Yet this intimacy leads to what Heller has called 'the tendency of broadcasting authorities to identify their interests, and by implication the national interest very closely with the survival of the organization they supervise'.<sup>10</sup>

However, in the 1980s a series of political crises in which the role of broadcasting was crucial – the Falklands War, continuing trouble in Ireland, disputes about the interpretation of foreign events, and profound disagreements about the management of the economy – all exposed the potential vulnerability of the governing body and the Chairman to political influence. Indeed, the Conservative government sought to dominate the governors more directly than any previous administration, by swamping the board with its own supporters. In the 1980s, the problem was not so much the identification of the Chairman with the institution, but rather the identification of the Chairman with the government in power.

Yet the broadcasting organizations had given up so much of the ground themselves. By the 1980s the IBA was to claim that accountability was only a minority interest. The Annan Report had endorsed a system which was little more than a pious rhetoric. 'On balance', the report concluded, '... while some improvements could be made, the relations between government and parliament and the broadcasting authorities do not require much adjustment: the chain of accountability is adequate'. Annan apparently believed that accountability was a purely abstract idea – one which includes no reference to the public. But the paragraph nevertheless ends, 'We do not consider, however, that the relations between the broadcasters and the public are satisfactory'. If, as Annan suggested, broadcasting is to abandon the independence of public service, and be based, rather, on a principle of representative pluralism, then the inadequacy of the Governors, and advisory committees, becomes even more serious. By the 1990s accountability had almost been dispensed with as a value. It had, up to a point, been replaced by that of market success.

### Independent professionals or men with an interest?

The independence of broadcasting from the state has recently been seen as the most important condition of the service's accountability. This independence has in turn been reduced to the freedom of programme makers. Yet, as Beveridge once commented, 'To whom is a broadcaster responsible? If it is only to his own conscience the decision might better be described as irresponsible.'

This emphasis on broadcasters' rights is a consequence of focusing the assessment of broadcasting on individual programmes. Pilkington was the last report

to elaborate the tradition of public service, and it also argued that 'A service of broadcasting should be judged, not by the stated aims of the broadcasters, but by its achievements'. The Annan Report endorsed this approach.

Nevertheless, broadcasting and broadcasting institutions cannot be understood merely as a collection of separate programme 'texts'. As a report by one of the television unions commented, judging broadcasting organizations by their product 'was like being asked to evaluate the Milk Marketing Board by drinking milk – relevant, but not adequate'.<sup>11</sup>

Broadcasting is a process which cannot be entirely understood from its products. Few would claim that the whole nature of the industrial enterprise can be understood from the shop floor of one factory. Neither can all the pressures which condition broadcasting institutions be revealed by an examination of what Tracey has called 'the world of determination of a television programme'<sup>12</sup> – however important that study might be. The emphasis on programmes as the most important criterion for judging broadcasting reinforces the arbitrary role of professionals at the expense of more general considerations of public service.

The Annan Report claimed that 'Good broadcasting would reflect the competing demands of a society which was increasingly multi-racial and pluralist'. In turn, this variety could be secured only by giving the 'talented broadcasters' greater freedom of expression.

However, broadcasters are not necessarily influenced by a wide variety of interests. Much research has shown how little producers and directors consider their audience. The only information about viewers which seriously affects producers is knowledge of the size of the audience. This is not because audience research is incapable of providing more complex detail, but because to know more would put producers under even greater stress. 'For a sociologist', commented Burns, 'it was rather like watching the whole practice of medicine being reduced to the use of a thermometer'.<sup>13</sup> Producers value the opinion of their colleagues most, but they see very little even of them.

The public interest cannot simply rely on the quality of broadcasters, because to do so is to ignore the pressures which determine broadcasting choices. 'When one stresses the role of individuals manning the system', Garnham argues, 'one is tempted to await a Messiah who will come over – and help transform the system'.<sup>14</sup>

However, the relationship of broadcasters to their organization has also altered. Burns argued that there had been a considerable change in attitude since the 1960s. Then staff expressed a devotion to public service 'and a belief in the BBC's normative role in the cultural, moral and political life of the country'. By the 1970s this had been replaced by a commitment to professional values. Indeed, as Kumar points out, the emergence of professionalism as the dominating ideology is the product of a particular moment in the evolution of broadcasting organizations. Even the notion of 'lively broadcasting' which determines the professionals' judgements

'expresses a particular stance towards the audience, a judgement of what the audience can and cannot take, which reflects a particular conception of the purposes of broadcasting'.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed the new 'scientific management' of broadcasting organizations has greater power than earlier administrations, whose main concern had been to protect and assist programme makers who had far higher status within the organization. 'Because of the need to allocate time and resources economically', Burns argued, 'working relations became impersonally functional'. The steady march of rational managerialism had led to a withering of institutional ardour.

Indeed, professionalism is now being superseded in many broadcasting organizations by crude financial managerialism. The pursuit of profit rather than excellence is more likely to dominate decisions in the next decade. Government reforms, culminating in the 1989 Broadcasting Bill,<sup>16</sup> and the auctioning of Channels 3 and 5 to the 'highest bidders' (who in order to bid had to pass a programme quality 'threshold', but who were awarded franchises solely on their ability to raise the largest amounts of capital)<sup>17</sup> will inevitably reduce the power of programme makers. These pressures are already evident: in the past broadcasting administrators had often been programme makers first; in a survey of appointments to top posts in television the majority of posts were given to 'accountants, bankers, and financial managers'.<sup>18</sup> Consequently not only were the talented programme makers upon whom Annan, for instance, rested the future of broadcasting less committed to public service than before, but also they had become less important within broadcasting organizations.

### Independence and the theory of broadcasting

The significance of broadcasting independence is also disputed. One side suggests that the independence is functional and must be extended to guarantee accountable broadcasting. The other argues that this same independence poses a serious threat to political institutions, whose control over broadcasting should be strengthened. Working from the same assumptions about the role of the media, Anthony Smith and Colin Seymour-Ure arrived at diametrically opposed diagnoses and solutions.

According to classic liberal theory, the independence of a journalist depended on his ability to follow the uninhibited dictates of his conscience. According to Smith, this is an illusory ideal. In discussing the 1968 crisis in French broadcasting he argues that, 'The ORTF strikers had stumbled across the central dilemmas of broadcasting and were demanding in the name of freedom ... a right which no broadcaster has ever really achieved – the right to be an individual member of a Fourth Estate'. In its place Smith put forward a far more sophisticated and powerful version of the theory, in which the independence of broadcasters is not an individual right – but rather a functional necessity.

Broadcasters are not free, but are 'brokers and megaphones, impresarios and mediators', he suggested. The 'independence' of broadcasting institutions from political control was one solution to a dilemma all broadcasting systems had to solve: namely the necessity not only of regulating the right to broadcast but also of ensuring that broadcasting served the interests of all sections of society. For, Smith suggested, 'The institutions of broadcasting inaugurated a special problem of illegitimized and unselective power'. Broadcasters are obliged to negotiate political conflict and not take sides in it – precisely because of the immense and dangerous nature of their power. In stable systems, countervailing interests would always be able to enforce damaging sanctions if broadcasters became partisan.

This model implies that all political interests in society can, in practice, be reconciled. It is a logical extension of broadcasting institutions' own view of their role as arbiters that they come to see conflict and opposition as the products of failures in communication. Nevertheless, if there are real differences in interest, incompatible policies, and irreconcilable principles, then the role of the broker becomes untenable.

However, the functional independence of broadcasting institutions has many of the same policy consequences as the older liberal individualism. For, Smith argued, the way to meet recent criticisms is to give broadcasters more independence. The more perfectly broadcasters can do anything they want, the more adequate the service will be. As he is reported as commenting to the Annan Committee:

If I am free to say anything I want to say except the one thing I want to say then I am not free ... In broadcasting ... a single prohibition imposed on a national broadcasting authority or within it tends to corrode the whole output.

Colin Seymour-Ure views the 'independence' of broadcasters rather differently. The independence of the press – no longer the client of political parties – and 'now part of vast corporations who may have very direct interests in the outcomes of policy decisions' is vulnerable because it is compromised by ownership. Broadcasters, moreover, having abandoned the protection of 'public service' ideology are also susceptible to accusations of bias. Seymour-Ure argues that:

Some Labour politicians used to take comfort in the fact that although the press might be disproportionately conservative, at least broadcasting was balanced. This is no longer true. No doubt broadcasters are not willfully biased. But the simple fact of deciding their own programme content may in the extreme case lead to a projection of party politicians and leaders that might run entirely counter to the parties' own views.

He suggests that the current interpretation of broadcasting independence has seriously damaged the political system.

The ideal of broadcasting independence – unlimited by any obligation to public service – has become increasingly inadequate. It has contributed to a growing anti-government ethos. It is hostile to many forms of political partisanship. It may inhibit political change and development. It may be that, as Seymour-Ure comments, the period of mass-based party organization is ending, for one effect of television in many countries seems to be 'the erosion of intervening structures between representatives and electors'. Nevertheless, any increase in the autonomy of broadcasting institutions may have more serious political consequences than had been expected. Rather, it is the democratic processes which need support: not because broadcasters are malign but because of the inexorable pressure of broadcasting independence on the handling of politics. And the devotion of increasing amounts of political energy to managing the media – rather than managing politics.

### Choice versus public service?

Double think, according to George Orwell, is the 'power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously and accepting both of them'. Through successive régimes, *double think* has nevertheless precisely defined the attitude of politicians towards broadcasting. On the one hand there are people (government ministers, for instance) who tend to believe that the worse excesses of broadcasting, as of the trade unions, should be curbed. There are others (shadow ministers, for instance) who look to broadcasting as a means to correct political bias.

Never, however, have the contradictions been so glaring as in the recent past. The politics of the 1980s and 1990s were orchestrated in a language of freedom, choice, non-intervention, withdrawal of the state: yet they were deformed with successive governmental limitations on the public right to be informed. Where individuals have sought to challenge state manipulation of the news, the government showed neither mercy nor moderation in making an example of offenders. Indeed, the effective range of discussion and investigation is probably narrower here than in most modern democracies – including France, Sweden, West Germany and possibly even the USA. It may not be long before the former Eastern bloc leaves us behind in the matter of broadcasting freedom. Who can imagine the Home Office giving a foreign camera crew *carte blanche* to film what they liked in the Maze Prison – in the way that the Soviet authorities recently provided open access to a western team in one of the USSR's remaining political gaols?

In addition to this, during the 1980s the Conservative government blatantly used television for government propaganda – with a massive increase in public sector advertising. Between 1980 and 1989, commercial television revenues doubled in real terms, and the proportion of advertising revenue

generated by the public sector over that period quadrupled, indeed by 1989 it had become the largest single buyer of television advertising. The privatizations of public utilities were the single largest source of television advertising finance between 1990 and 1995.<sup>19</sup> If the ostensible purpose of the advertising was the sale of shares in the shortly-to-be-privatized public sector industries, it also furthered the ideology of privatization.

Throughout the period, public service broadcasting was compared unfavourably with 'the real choice offered to consumers by a more effective market'.<sup>20</sup> Successive reports, government green papers and Bills proposed to 'set free' broadcasters from the narrow constraints of control' and it was repeatedly argued that satellite, cable and a deregulated broadcasting system would offer the public a greater choice of programmes more sensitively tailored to their wants by the competitive pressures of the market. In part, of course, government policy was attempting to adapt to a new situation in which cable and satellite would deliver such a multitude of channels and services that the previous régime of regulation would become practically impossible. But more than this, policy was driven by a profound hostility to the principles of public service broadcasting.

Yet the ideology of 'choice' was absurd. Commercial broadcasting is based not on the sale of programmes to audiences, but on the sale of audiences to advertisers. Thus the introduction of more competitors will reduce advertising revenues both by spreading them between a greater number of channels and by splitting potential audiences into even smaller groups. As the main incentive will remain the attraction of the largest possible audience, the competing channels, less constrained by regulation to produce a variety of programmes, will tend to show more of the same or similar programmes.

Indeed, if one contradiction of Thatcherism was that free market rhetoric was accompanied by interventionist practice, another was that talk of the marketplace was accompanied by its virtual eradication. Technological change — with its requirement for long-term investment and large-scale capitalization — has produced a bureaucratic jungle of profit-taking conglomerates which own shares in all the media which the public consumes. The small number of corporate owners is not competitive in a sense that could conceivably be expected to produce an improved product; but their financial rivalry will undoubtedly impose pressure to produce a cheaper one. That means an almost inevitable lowering of standards, since it is cheaper to buy in internationalized soap opera than to make your own drama, and so on. The result is likely to be a lesser variety of the kind of programmes that many of us watch some of the time, and some of us watch most of the time, but which do not attract top audience ratings. We are all, on occasions, members of minorities. Thus the victims of media concentration are variety, creativity and quality, while the proliferation of broadcasting channels in the hands of a small band of operators, 'liberated' by government policy from the obligations of public service variety, is likely to make matters worse.

'Choice', without positive direction, is a myth, for all too often the market will deliver more — but only more of the same.

## Conclusion

Broadcasters have come to see the state as their enemy. Yet broadcasting institutions ultimately depend on the state for their legitimization. This authority cannot be replaced by a pluralist ideal of reflecting social and cultural variety. Indeed the adoption of this principle has left broadcasters peculiarly vulnerable to the more general attack on public service broadcasting.

Moreover, arguments with quite different aims from those of the broadcasters, but apparently related, are being used to undermine broadcasting responsibility and independence. Thus neither the emphasis on the authority of the viewers' right to choose from a greater variety of programmes, nor the elaboration of some aspects of the local and regional role of the media, let alone the distinction between a 'service' the public will pay for and a public service, are intended to strengthen the creative autonomy of broadcasters. On the contrary, they are arguments which enhance the power of commercial interests in determining the patterns of broadcasting provision.

Thus, without a commitment to public service, broadcasters are increasingly vulnerable to detailed political interference in the content of programmes. Broadcasting in Britain has in the past had a considerable degree of autonomy from other institutions: it has not in any simple sense been biased. This autonomy is now threatened, partly because the consensus about what constitutes the 'middle ground' of agreed opinion has broken down, partly because the reliance on the skill of professional broadcasters which has replaced it is unjustified, and partly because of the erosion of public service broadcasting. Broadcasting needs to find a new relationship to the state — and a new form of commitment to public service, and indeed a new definition of public service that will work in the conditions of increased competition.

## Notes

1. *Report of the Enquiry into Cable Expansion and Broadcasting Policy* (Hunt Report, 1982) [Cmnd 8697].
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4. *Report of the Broadcasting Committee* (Ullswater Report, 1936) [Cmnd 5091], VII, 617, para. 7.
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