

Values of Public Service Broadcasting – as delivered

Nicholas Nugent for OSCE 11th November 2014

When I first started working with the Public Broadcaster here in Georgia, and later with Ictimai in Azerbaijan, I was often asked ‘What is a public broadcaster and why do we need one?’ I became used to giving the rather unhelpful answer that it is a membership requirement of the Council of Europe. Or, a little more helpfully, that it is an important adjunct or support of democratic governance, connecting the people to the government through media.

After hearing yesterday’s presentations I realised how far on the debate has moved on. Now it seems not so much a case of ‘What is a PSB?’ but ‘How can we successfully create one?’ ‘How to we build one with all the essential values?’ David Lewis and Boris Bergant went a long way towards answering that yesterday.

So let me jump in at the deep end. We talked about making our PSB accountable to its constituency, the people, through parliament – which is both necessary and important. But if a PSB means anything in a democratic society surely its most important role is to hold those who rule us accountable to the people who elected them.

To an extent that is a role of all media, but a PSB ‘owned and funded’ by the people is best placed to fulfil that responsibility. No wonder it’s so difficult to create a PSB from scratch, as in Azerbaijan, or to transform a state broadcaster into a non-state body, as in Armenia and Georgia, because if it’s good at its job the people may choose to elect different political leaders the next time. In other words, there is some vested interest in politicians not wanting media to work well. They may be persuaded by the Council of Europe and others that there is no place for state broadcasting in a democracy. But it’s a taller order for them to grasp that this new model of media, the PSB, intends to hold them accountable to the people for the way they govern, or how well they perform in parliament.

Of course they want the media including PSB to work for them, to address their electorate, for example, and to gain their support. But are less happy at the thought that the media hold them accountable for their actions, including their mistakes. As someone said yesterday it’s a two way flow. It is through the media that the people know whether politicians are performing well or not.

I am being both idealistic and provocative. I come from a country that has long had a fairly free media (with some periods of exception, notably to do with Northern Ireland), has never had a state broadcaster, and which more or less invented the concept of public service broadcasting. Its senior PBS, the BBC, was born in the 1920s as a radio broadcaster, taking on television after the Second World War and internet services before the turn of the 21st century. It has been involved in and often led all broadcasting technological developments, including in recent years DTT, DAB radio, catch-up services (iPlayer) and HD television. Yet it is not, and never has been, a government body.

Importantly the BBC has developed a model both of funding and governance that supports its independence from both government and business. In Britain those owning a television set pay approx. rather less than €200 a year) – per household *not* per house or per TV set – as licence fee in return as what you might call compensation for carrying no advertising for its UK audiences. That works out at about half a euro a day compared with a daily newspaper which may cost between 2 and 3 euros. (Overseas BBC television operates as a commercial subsidiary with advertisements but listeners and viewers in Britain see no ads.)

More than 20 million households with TVs allows for a significant annual income. We have an effective system of governance that acts as a buffer between government or political pressures and the BBC. Plus, as I indicated the model has evolved over 92 years. So GPB - 10 years next month if I'm not mistaken - seems like an infant.

The BBC is not perfect and is continuing to evolve. I will be surprised if the licence fee funding system I described survives more than 10 or 15 years from now. However it does do a fairly decent job, not least in holding elected officials accountable to the public that elected them. How do we get from the fairly successful model, to what you aspire to, a well-functioning PSB? It won't happen overnight, but I believe the most important ingredient – alongside dedicated and continuously trained staff – are the broadcaster's set of values.

The BBC succeeds because, on the whole its audience trusts it. (SLIDE) Trust is the most important quality for a broadcaster, especially a publicly funded one. Believe me, if the BBC did not deliver large audiences, the lobby to end the licence fee would become unstoppable. It is just as important for a PSB to have sizeable audiences to justify its income. The BBC is not immune from criticism; indeed, it is acutely sensitive to the opinion of the public that pays for it.

At the risk of confusing you, to some extent all terrestrial broadcasters in the UK are public service broadcasters since the law requires that they are neither owned by, nor do they back, any political party or religious organisation – so the number one value of objectivity is enshrined by law.

By the way, we face parliamentary elections in six months. The process of planning and scheduling what we call the 'prime ministerial debates' on television – such as deciding which party leaders should take part, and what to do if any leader declines – is mainly in the hands of the broadcasters, which may surprise you. Yes, at election time especially, the broadcasters not the politicians are in charge by ensuring the process works both smoothly and fairly.

GPB, which I know fairly well, already has plenty going for it. It has a strong basis in the 2004 Law on Broadcasting; a good funding formula with a set percentage of GDP; Zviad Koridse told us of current attempts to depoliticise, or at least to balance, the board more successfully than was the case in the past. (If I'm not mistaken you cannot become a board member if you, your husband or wife, belong to a political party.) And it has an excellent code of conduct, adapted from that of the BBC. In the past I'm not sure it's been enforced, or that all staff members know of its existence. However, I have hopes that it may be more consistently applied now that its originator has been

appointed to the board. One area I would criticise is that GPB does not listen nearly enough to its audience, the public, for if it did its ratings would be higher.

Which bring me back to Values, which are most important in the area of news, but should be followed even in entertainment programmes. Winning the audience's trust is a 'must' if a PSB is to succeed. Trust comes through a broadcaster's commitment to core values – sometimes called a code of ethics or of conduct or, at the BBC, Editorial Guidelines (SHOW BOOK).

The values of Public Service Broadcasters are the values of good journalism and broadcasting: it is just that our funders, the public, expect us to be especially good at applying them. This would be my list, though there are other topics that could be added:

Number one has to be accuracy: we are nothing if we are not accurate.

Objectivity: the obligation not to take sides (in any programme).

Balance: the commitment to report both or all sides (without supporting any of them).

Fairness to contributors and viewers and listeners– listening to complaints for example, and making corrections where due.

Diversity: remember that you serve all the people, not only the majority. Diversity in age as well.

Children: protection of young people, not exposing them to public scrutiny for example, and not depicting sex or violence when children are viewing.

Privacy and intrusion more generally, for example at times of bereavement.

Taste and decency: what to show or report: never set out to shock.

Conflict of interest: you cannot be a politician and an objective journalist at the same time.

Bribery: favourable coverage is not up for sale.

Elections: following rules of balance and objectivity with stopwatch precision!

Nicholas Nugent, who worked for more than 20 years with the British Broadcasting Corporation, has assisted many public service broadcasters including GPB in Georgia and Ictimai in Azerbaijan.