

## THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTING

by Sir David Attenborough

**Drawing on his long history in television production, Sir David Attenborough considers the lessons from the past that can point the way to the future of Public Service Broadcasting. Do niche channels really offer a future for PSB and can commercial broadcasters be trusted with a slice of the licence fee?**

This lecture is about the future of public service broadcasting or, to give it today's fashionable acronym, PSB. I am saved the need to define PSB because OFCOM, in the person of its Chief Executive, Ed Richards, has defined it for us. He says it is broadcasting that aims to do four things: to increase our understanding of the world; to stimulate knowledge and learning; to reflect the cultural identity of the United Kingdom; and to ensure diversity and alternative viewpoints.

You *could* argue that good situation comedies - like *Porridge* - increase our understanding of the world; that gardening programmes stimulate knowledge and learning; that *East Enders* and *Coronation Street* reflect a UK cultural identity; and that even reality television such as *I'm a Celebrity Get Me Out of Here* ensures diversity and alternative viewpoints.

But I am pretty sure that programmes like those are not what OFCOM means by PSB. There must be something missing in that definition and I suspect we all know what it is. When we talk about PSB these days, we are referring to programmes that, for one reason or another, only attract small audiences.

I have been unable to discover who first used the phrase Public Service Broadcasting or when they did so. But those of us who were working for BBC Television back in its early days in 1952 would certainly have said that it was a fair description of what we thought we were doing. But we didn't use the phrase very much - because we didn't need to *define* our kind of television. BBC television was the only kind of television there was in this country. We were a monopoly.

All television in those days came from two small studios up in North London in Alexandra Palace. It was all in black and white of course and produced very coarse-grained pictures - 405 lines instead of the later 625 lines. It was also all live because there was no form of recording - at least none that produced pictures of a transmittable quality. The cameras we had - not just the design but the very pieces of metal - were the very first cameras in the world to have produced a publicly broadcast television service.

And very quaint they were. They were filled not with tiny transistors but large glowing glass valves and they were each the size of a very large suitcase. They were alarmingly unreliable and constantly broke down, even during transmission. You could start directing your programme with four cameras and end it desperately improvising with two - or even one. The main camera was able to move around because it was mounted on bicycle wheels and had a second man to push it. The others were supported on awkward pedestals with castors and had to be shoved around by the cameraman himself. And then there was one that was virtually

immobile, called the Iron Man. Each had only a single lens with no zoom, so to get a decent close-up of a speaker, the camera had to be within two or three feet of him or her. Of course, you could put on a special close-up attachment, but that took 10 minutes and you couldn't really do it during transmission - though occasionally we did try.

With such equipment and from those two small studios came an extraordinary output of great ambition and variety. There were, of course, quizzes and music recitals, interviews and discussion programmes. Remarkably there was also, every week, a play – usually a special production of one that had been written originally for the commercial theatre. The production had its premiere, usually on a Sunday, and then – because there was no way of recording it – it was given a second live performance, all over again later in the week.

There were also formats that have now disappeared entirely. Short stories, read by an actor sitting in an armchair; variety shows, for at that time the music halls were still flourishing and from them we could import jugglers, ventriloquists, comics and dancing girls. Distinguished scientists came to give illustrated lectures on physics and chemistry. And, in addition to our studios, we also had outside broadcast units that covered sport and public events and took people on visits to historic buildings.

Perhaps most extraordinary of all, to a modern viewer, was the fact that there was no regular pattern to the schedules – no stripping of a programme across the week. One thing you could be pretty sure of, that this Tuesday's programme line-up would seldom bear much resemblance to that shown on the previous Tuesday. And starting times, as listed in the Radio Times, were not much to go by, since total breakdowns were not uncommon and viewers might have to be treated to 10 minutes or so of a kitten playing with a ball of wool, a windmill slowly revolving its sails or hands moulding clay on a potter's wheel.

We also had very little film. Technically, telecine – the apparatus for showing film – was still fairly primitive and produced rather low quality grainy pictures. Only 35mm film, the gauge used by the cinema, was tolerable. 16mm was not. But 35mm film was very expensive and our bosses in Broadcasting House took the view that we had been given our electronic toys to play with in our studios so we should not demand cash for film as well. Television, in their view, was electronic and live.

We felt we had a very direct link with our audience. Not every household had a television set, of course. For the nation as a whole, it was still a novelty. But travelling back home through north London at night, after having directed a programme, we could spot a blue electronic glow in the windows of some of the houses and we would know for sure that the people in those rooms had been looking at the very programme that we had directed earlier that evening; and what is more, that they had bought a special television licence, in addition to their sound licence, in order to do so. The next morning, as you travelled back to the studios by tube or waited for a bus, everybody was discussing the same programme that they had been watching the previous evening because there were no others – and sometimes it was yours.

Incidentally, it is interesting to reflect, when there is talk these days as to whether it is proper for the BBC to use licence money to subsidise new broadcasting developments, that then most of our money came *not* from television licences, of which there were comparatively few, but from the sound radio licence.

We took ourselves and our responsibilities very seriously. We thought our schedules ought to be very varied and cover as wide a range of interests as possible. It was obvious that some programmes would be more popular than others, but we thought that potential popularity should not be the only reason for scheduling a programme.

We thought too that we could play a key role in modern democracy by enabling a stockbroker in Surrey to understand what a fisherman in the north of Scotland might be feeling – and vice versa. We would be able to broaden horizons, introducing people to subjects that they might have never encountered and bringing them new pleasures and delights. That was because audience research had discovered that, once a family sat down to watch television, they tended to stay there, viewing whatever appeared on the screen, until shutdown. Indeed, it was not unknown for our production secretary, as we were directing a programme in the control room, to be handed a message to say that viewers were ringing in to say they found our programme rather boring and asking how long it was going to go on.

We certainly knew that, on special occasions, we could bring the whole nation together – and the most spectacular demonstration of that occurred in the spring of 1952. 56% of the population of this country, a hitherto unheard of audience of 20 million people, came together and watched – one might almost say, participated in – the Coronation. And that was particularly extraordinary, when you know that there were then only just over two million licence payers. People had not only gathered in groups around the sets in their homes, but were watching in pubs and cinemas as well.

Then, in 1955, a new kind of television arrived, one that operated from a very different base. It was financed not by a licence fee but by advertising. It was called of course, Independent Television. Sir Hugh Greene, who became Director General of the BBC soon after that, refused to call it any such thing. He maintained that the name was no more than a public relations euphemism. “Independent of what?” he would ask. “It’s *commercial* television.” And that was the way he always referred to it.

Independent Television was, needless to say, a huge and immediate success. Big audiences were its aim and it soon learned how to attract them. The nation deserted the BBC – public service television – in droves. We no longer had a captive audience. The lesson was a very salutary one. We would have to be more cautious if we were to continue in our role as Public Service Broadcasters. So some of the more esoteric programmes disappeared from our schedules. We became a little less lofty. And the schedulers also became a little more artful. They developed a technique that became known as ‘hammocking’.

Audience research had, by this stage, identified one of the most potent instruments that you can use for building an audience – the ‘inheritance factor’. They had discovered that during peak hours at least half the audience for any one programme

was inherited from a previous programme. So one way to gather a large audience for a programme was not only to transmit it during peak hours but to place it immediately after an established favourite. Obvious enough. And then, in order to help the network rebuild its audience, the scheduler would place another popular favourite immediately after it. Thus the programme was ‘hammocked’ – propped up from both ends.

The technique, of course, was not without its cost – a cost that was paid mostly by the third programme in the sequence, for the inheritance factor itself ensured that the last programme got a smaller audience than it might otherwise have done. But it worked. The BBC continued to make and transmit a range of programming that was sufficiently wide for it to claim that it was still doing all four of those things that OFCOM now suggests should be the aims of PSB.

ITV for its part was criticised in some quarters, though not particularly from its shareholders I might say, for neglecting some kinds of programming that were less popular – programmes that dealt seriously with the arts and sciences, and politics and documentaries. Sensitive to such criticisms, ITV did schedule such programmes to a certain degree, even though by doing so they inevitably reduced their revenues from advertising, at least in the short term. So a balance of power was established between the two television systems in which neither was overwhelmingly dominant. And that was important. The BBC believed, I’m sure correctly, that if they lost ground and came to be viewed by only a tiny minority of the audience, they would ultimately lose any claim to a licence fee; and ITV, I suspect, felt that if they only broadcast programmes with a mass appeal, they would lose touch with a section of the public that their advertisers thought valuable.

The broadcasters also had to deal with another requirement. In addition to broadcasting to the nation as a whole, they had to supply different parts of the United Kingdom with special programmes of specifically regional interest. The BBC during the development of radio had already established centres outside London, in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland as well as in several regions in England. ITV, for its part, had been originally set up – and very deliberately so – not as a single united network but as separate regional companies. There was a concern that television was altogether too London-orientated, a concern that I think does not greatly trouble ITV today – though I suspect OFCOM may still hold it.

Regional broadcasters, of course, not only want to be heard locally, reporting on local affairs. They also wish to contribute to the national dialogue. Both activities, however, have their problems. Local programming, since it can only have, by definition, a very small audience, is per capita very expensive. The cost of a half hour in which a region opts out from the national network to communicate with its local audience in fact costs the BBC eight times that amount since nationwide, as eight regions would be doing so at the same time. As for those who contribute to the national network, success there often leads them to see their future in the centre of things, that is to say, the capital. So they tend to move to London, thus draining the region of its broadcasting talent.

The BBC dealt with a region’s national aspirations by encouraging each of its centres, outside London, to develop its own speciality. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland had considerable success by drawing on local talents and settings and producing

dramas and feature programmes that were of interest not just locally but nationally. But what about the English regions – the north, the west country, the Midlands, East Anglia? What could they contribute? The Midland Region, centred in Birmingham, decided to concentrate on industrial programmes. The North, believe it or not, thought it would like to make *its* speciality Old Time Music Hall. But the most interesting response was that made by the West Region, based in Bristol. It decided to specialise in Natural History.

I mention this, not only because it was of interest to me personally, but because it generated a type of production unit that is of considerable importance if we are concerned about quality of programmes – the specialist department. Natural history was not then, back in the 1950s, an obviously popular subject. Films about African big game had always had a following. But true natural history – dealing in depth with the lives of birds and butterflies, introducing people to wild-life worldwide, keeping an increasingly urban population in touch with what was happening in their own countryside – such subjects were much less popular. There were no such programming in the United States, for example, and I think it not unfair to claim that the Natural History Unit that was created in Bristol pioneered such output. And these natural history programmes were properly cherished. ‘Hammocking’ was used to help them build their audience. And build them it did.

From a single intermittent pioneering strand, called ‘Look’, the output has grown spectacularly. It has developed different styles to suit different audiences and age-groups. And now the Unit produces 100 programmes a year on television and a similar number on radio. It built up a staff of expert cameramen, directors, recordists and editors particularly skilled in this specialised craft. It has accumulated an unrivalled archive that is continually enlarged and updated. So Bristol today is respected not only nationally but internationally as the world centre for this kind of programming. It is a prime example of what public service broadcasting can achieve.

And it has been imitated worldwide. ITV in this country set up its own Unit. Similar ones were established in Australia and New Zealand. These other Units were created by organisations which depended not on licence money but advertising. And they did very well as long as natural history programmes were fashionable. But fashions change and all these units, sadly, are now disbanded. The Bristol Unit has suffered along with the rest of the BBC from recent staff cuts. Yet it remains confident in the belief that the BBC will maintain it, in spite of the vagaries of fashion, because the Corporation believes that such programmes deserve a place in the schedules of any broadcaster with pretensions of providing a Public Service.

In due course, similar specialist Units were also established in London, in order to produce programmes on archaeology and history, on the arts, on music and on science. They too, at one time, had their successes. But they have not survived as well as the Unit in Bristol. The statutory requirement that a certain percentage of programmes must come from independent producers has reduced in-house production and the Units necessarily shrank proportionately in size. As they dwindled, so the critical mass of their production expertise has diminished. The continuity of their archives has been broken, they have lost the close touch they once had worldwide with their subjects and they are no longer regarded internationally as the centres of innovation and expertise that they once were.

In 1964, the pattern of British television changed again. Advances in broadcasting technology made it possible to introduce a third network. A committee, set up by the Government, decided that it should be given to the BBC and used to broaden the choice of programmes that could be viewed at any one time – for then it was still not possible for people to record programmes in their homes and watch them when they wished to do. They could only view them when network schedulers decided that they should. BBC-2 came into existence.

It brought wonderful creative freedom. Now we could produce programmes that hitherto had failed to find a place on the senior network (which was renamed BBC-1), partly because of its need to maintain parity of audience with ITV. And with the new network came a second way of building audiences – ‘cross-trailing’. The two networks worked together to create what we called ‘common junctions’, points in the schedule when programmes on both networks came to an end and new ones started. The continuity announcer on one network was then able to suggest that viewers might like to switch across and sample a programme on the other. Like hammocking, cross-trailing had its costs. Producers and performers were not necessarily delighted to hear an announcer, immediately before their programme was aired, suggest to viewers that they might like to switch away from it and try something else.

It was now that we became painfully aware of something that, in fact, we had known perfectly well since quite early in the days of the ITV/BBC duopoly. People quickly develop a channel loyalty which is remarkably strong. When you come to think of it, that is not really surprising. The recognition of the inheritance factor should have given us fair warning. The fact remains, however, that even today, getting on for half a century after the birth of BBC-2, twice the number of people will watch a programme if it is placed on BBC-1 than if it is shown on BBC-2.

Nonetheless, by hammocking and cross-trailing, BBC-1 and BBC-2 between them managed to build audiences for such subjects as history and archaeology, for serious music and science, for biography, art history and politics. Sometimes, of course, a particular genre of programming failed to lift audiences to levels that justified its continuation. But then it would have been a scandal if that didn’t occasionally happen. The freedom to try and to fail is one of the privileges that a licence fee gives you and sometimes you must risk failure in the interest of extending the range of programming.

Now we are in the middle of another broadcasting revolution, brought about by developing technology – digitalisation and the sudden proliferation of channels. This must surely change everything. Now at last there is all the space anyone could possibly need to broadcast every kind of subject that public service could expect. Each genre can have its own channel where, protected from other claimants, it can flourish. Niche broadcasting has arrived.

There are now niche channels devoted to the arts, to natural history, to children's programmes, to biography, to science fiction, even to the weather. The big popular successes – sport and feature films – of course do very well, as they do elsewhere. But the less popular genres, the ones that public service programming is concerned with, do very much less well – *dramatically* less well. A typical natural history

programme on one of these niche channels will be lucky to get one percent of the audience it will attract if it is placed on BBC-1. Arts programmes, when shown on a channel devoted exclusively to them, fare even worse

Why have these new digital channels not done better? Well, primarily because the notion entertained by some of us that great numbers of people, tired after a hard day's work, come home and flip through 50-odd programme channels to decide what to view is, in fact, largely illusory. The overwhelming majority of people have their own favourite mainstream networks and they look to them first to engage their interest. But there are other reasons. Some channels, of course, can only be viewed by making an additional subscription – and sometimes a very hefty one. The unvaried nature of their output makes them difficult to watch uninterrupted for long periods at a stretch. And those potent weapons, hammocking and cross-trailing, are both denied to them. So in practice niche broadcasting is hardly relevant when discussing the provision of PSB – because of that last initial in the acronym. The B, I needn't remind you, stands for *broad*-casting, not *narrow*-casting.

There is, of course, another way of financing programmes with those four aims specified by OFCOM. Revenue could be found – and a slice of the licence fee, some suggest, is the way to get it – to subsidise individual programme strands placed on commercial channels. But think of the fate of one such programme, struggling for its position there. Other income-earning programmes do not want it placed anywhere near them. The inheritance factor will ensure that it will damage them. So, unless there are regulations to stop it, PSB programmes will inevitably be pushed out of peak hours and into out-of-the-way corners of the commercial schedule when fewer people will want to watch them. So the odds are stacked against them increasing their audience. They become the schedule's pariahs, retained under sufferance, tucked away, unloved, where they do least harm to the network's income. Furthermore, there will not be enough of any particular kind of programme for any independent broadcaster to establish a whole unit where the expertise required for that genre can be generated and cultivated.

PSB, to me, is not about selecting individual programme strands here or there, financing them from some outside source and then foisting them upon commercial networks. Public Service Broadcasting, watched by a healthy number of viewers, with programmes financed in proportion to their intrinsic needs and not the size of the audience, can only effectively operate as a *network* – a network whose aim is to cater for the broadest possible range of interests, popular as well as less popular, a network that measures its success not only by its audience size but by the range of its schedule.

Is that what the BBC does? I would like to think so, since I have worked for it and it alone throughout my broadcasting career. But I have to say that there are moments when I wonder – moments when its two senior networks, first set up as a partnership, schedule simultaneously programmes of identical character, thereby contradicting the very reason that the BBC was given a second network. Then there are times when both BBC-1 and BBC-2, intoxicated by the sudden popularity of a programme genre, allow that genre to proliferate and run rampant through the schedules. The result is that other kinds of programmes are not placed, simply because of a lack of space. Do we really require so many gardening programmes, make-over programmes or celebrity chefs? Is it not a scandal in this day and age, that there seems to be no place

for continuing series of programmes about science or serious music or thoughtful in-depth interviews with people other than politicians?

The BBC is still strong. Of course, audiences for established networks, the BBC's included, have all diminished. How could they *not* have done so when so many new channels have appeared? The viewers of these new networks, no matter how few, had to come from somewhere. But the great proportion of people, it turns out, are still primarily loyal to one or two networks. Viewers can only be properly provided with the variety of high quality programming that they deserve by a network, or better, a small group of two or three networks, that are planned and scheduled together to create high-quality programmes of the greatest possible variety.

I have spoken, I know, more about the history of public service broadcasting than of its future. But you cannot plan the journey ahead unless you know where you are. And you cannot properly understand where you are, unless you know where you have come from. Broadcasting technology has changed at an extraordinary speed during my lifetime and will doubtless change more, but human nature does not alter very much and human behaviour does not necessarily keep pace with our inventions.

Today, there are increasing numbers of technical advances that allow viewers to repeat programmes at their leisure and view them when the mood takes them. They can trawl through archives of material that have been gathered and created in the past with public money. There will be many more ways whereby institutions of all kinds, museums, scientific societies, political parties and great industrial corporations, can communicate with particular sections of the public. They all have their place.

But *broadcasting* is something else. It is that miraculous advance, still not a century old, that allows a whole society, a whole nation, to see itself and to talk to itself. It enables people, no matter who they are and where they are, to share insights and illuminations, to become aware of problems and collectively consider solutions. It is one of the wonders of our age.

It should not be editorially controlled by governments. Nor should it be used exclusively for commercial purposes. It should be a place where all kinds of people, with all kinds of interests and insights, can share them with society as a whole. That, I maintain, cannot be achieved with a few individual programmes, dotted here and there on networks whose aims and basic functions have some other ambition. It can only be done by a coherent network, one that measures its success not only by the size of the audience it manages to gain for an individual programme but – very importantly – by the width of the spectrum of interests it manages to represent. A network, in short, that is dedicated primarily to the service of the public.