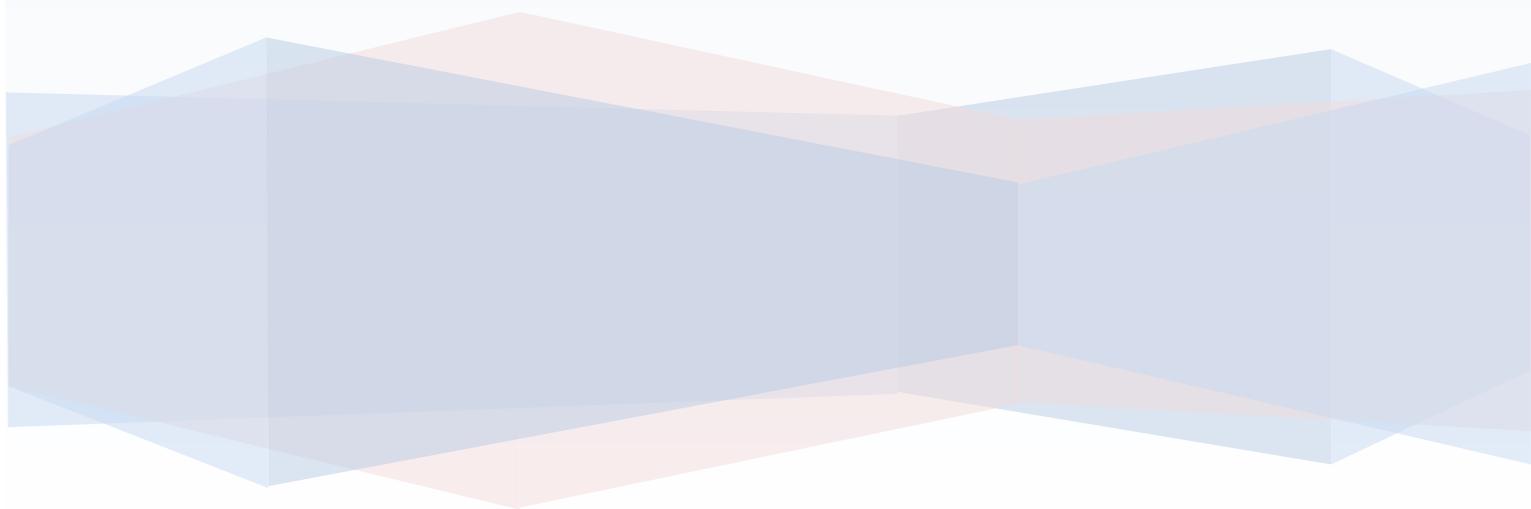


The Future of Public Service Broadcasting

Some thoughts

Stephen Fry



Before I can even think to presume to dare to begin to expatiate on what sort of an organism I think the British Broadcasting Corporation should be, where I think the BBC should be going, how I think it and other British networks should be funded, what sort of programmes it should make, develop and screen and what range of pastries should be made available in its cafés and how much to the last penny it should pay its talent, before any of that, I ought I think in justice to run around the games field a couple of times puffing out a kind of “The BBC and Me” mini-biography, for like many of my age, weight and shoe size, the BBC is deeply stitched into my being and it is important for me as well as for you, to understand just how much. Only then can we judge the sense, value or otherwise of my thoughts.

It all began with sitting under my mother’s chair aged two as she (teaching history at the time) marked essays. It was then that the *Archers* theme tune first penetrated my brain, never to leave. The voices of Franklin Engelman going *Down Your Way*, the women of the *Petticoat Line*, the panellists of *Twenty Questions*, *Many A Slip*, *My Word* and *My Music*, all these solid middle class Radio 4 (or rather Home Service at first) personalities populated my world. As I visited other people’s houses and, aged seven by now, took my own solid state transistor radio off to boarding school with me, I was made aware of *The Light Programme*, now Radio 2, and Sparky’s Magic Piano, Puff the Magic Dragon and Nelly the Elephant, I also began a lifelong devotion to radio comedy as *Round The Horne*, *The Clitheroe Kid*, *I’m Sorry I’ll Read That Again*, *Just A Minute*, *The Men from The Ministry* and *Week Ending* all made themselves known to me.

This was a world in which the BBC had a cosy and almost complete monopoly of radio. There were things called pirate radio ships, about which Richard Curtis has just written a feature film I believe, and these gave rise to Radio 1 and a whole generation of disc jockeys, but this was pop music, something that frightened and upset me then and frightens and upsets me now. That’s not generational, I’m from an entirely pop-literate, pop-loving generation, it is personal. For me comedy was all I wanted, whether in the surreal world of *Goon Show* reruns, the insinuating filth of Kenneths Williams and Horne, or in the grown up wit of Frank Muir and Dennis Norden. Many of the names that meant so much to me are now all but forgotten by the general public: Steve Race, Ian Wallace, Anthony Quinton, John Ebdon, James Cameron, Kenneth Robinson. And in the past few years a cruel swathe has been cut through the once lush grass of great radio personalities: Alastair Cooke, Linda Smith, John Peel, David Hatch, Ned Sherrin, Alan Coren and finally, I was only yesterday at the funeral of

the great Humphrey Lyttleton. Maybe this cruel swathe will be used as an excuse radically to reinvent radio. Radio 4 in particular is radically reinvented every five years or so, fortunately with no result whatever. Radical reinvention is not something that comes naturally to the British institutional mind. Indeed if you have an institutional mind, a change of stationery is seismic and upsetting enough to qualify as root and branch restructuring. Thus, altering the time slot of *Woman's Hour*, allowing *Gardeners' Question Time* to be independently produced and other such cosmic storms have constituted the radical and fundamental changes to Radio 4 that have allowed it slowly to evolve over the decades, matching and paralleling its core audience and providing a service so incomparable in its variety and quality as to be an actual reason for some to live in Britain. But it is 'only' radio: necessary to its survival has been the fact that the Associated Press, media tycoons and the political classes don't care that much about it. Thus it has thrived. Thriven. Throven. Bethrived. I have to turn now to TV.

I may have grown up just as the Golden Age of Radio had passed, but the Golden Age of Television, that grew with me. When I was seven my parents moved house. Well, we all moved house as a family, I don't mean my parents left me behind, though who would blame them if they had? We owned, in those days, a television that disguised itself as a mahogany drinks cabinet, in the way they did – and they were never called just televisions, by the way, they were television *sets*. This one's screen was, of course, black and white, it boasted one channel, the BBC (what we'd now call BBC1) and had a knurled volume knob in dark brown Bakelite. The set smelled the way dust always did when it was cooked on Mullard valves as they warmed up. It slid about on castors and had doors that closed with a satisfactory snick as a ball bearing rolled into its slots to secure it. The week before we moved, the BBC started a new drama, starring William Hartnell. An old man, whose name appeared to be Grandfather or the Doctor, had a police phone box of the kind we saw in the street all the time in those days. It turned out to be a magical and unimaginably wonderful time machine. My brother and I watched this drama in complete amazement. The first ever episode of *Doctor Who*. I had never been so excited in all my life. A whole week to wait to watch the next instalment. Never have seven days crawled so slowly by, for all that they involved a complicated house move from Buckinghamshire to Norfolk. A week later, in that new house, my brother and I turned on the good old television set in its new sitting room, ready to watch Episode 2. The TV had been damaged in transit and was never to work again. We missed that episode and nothing that has transpired in my life since has ever, or could ever, make up

for that terrible, terrible disappointment. There is an empty space inside me that can never be filled. It is amazing neither of us were turned into psychopathic serial killers from that moment.

The years passed and brought with them for children *Blue Peter*, every Oliver Postgate from *Noggin the Nog* to *Ivor the Engine* by the way of *The Clangers* and *Bagpuss*. *Mr Benn*, *Play School*, *Play Away*, *Rent-a-Ghost*, *Grange Hill* and the *Multi Coloured Swap Shop*. How lucky our generation was. How spoiled. ITV played its part, of course it did, with *Magpie* and *How* and much else. This was a period of revolutionary drama from directors and writers such as Alan Clarke, David Mercer, Kenneth Loach, Mike Leigh, Alan Plater, Michael Apted, Stephen Frears, Dennis Potter. Play of the Month, Play of the Week, Play for Today. *Cathy Come Home*, *Edna The Inebriate Woman*, *Pennies From Heaven*, *I Claudius*, *Tinker Tailor*. Popular drama from *Z Cars* to *Colditz*. And comedy: Peter Cook and Dudley Moore, Monty Python, *Up Pompeii*, *The Goodies*, *Dad's Army*, Dick Emery, Morecambe and Wise, *The Likely Lads*, *The Two Ronnies*, *Porridge*, Reggie Perrin, *Fawlty Towers*. ... ITV gave us *Rising Damp*, and those definite article ITC adventures from Monty Berman and Dennis Spooner: *The Avengers*, *The Champions*, *The Adventurer*, *The Baron*, *Man in a Suitcase*, *The Prisoner*, *The Persuaders*, *The Protectors* and of course *The Sweeney* and *The Professionals*. And during this time BBC 2 had arrived and with it *Civilisation*, *The Ascent of Man* and the full realisation of its first controller, David Attenborough, as the world's natural historian.

A succession of progressive, imaginative, tolerant, liberal in the loosest sense, and amiably hands-off TV executives from those legendary BBC Chairmen, Hugh Carleton-Greene and Lord Hill, downwards had created, or presided over, a cultural revolution of astounding depth, variety, imagination and dynamism. And then, just as I was leaving prison, starting simultaneously my period on probation and at University, the way you do, the wind changed and Margaret Thatcher, the new Mary Poppins, descended into Downing Street, with new medicines for us to take, but very few spoonfuls of sugar to help them go down. I am not going to blame her or make political points. The wind had changed and she blew in with it and would one day be blown away by another change. But here she was and fundamental questions were asked, genuinely radical unthinkable thoughts were thought in an age of privatisation and anti-dirigiste, anti-statist conservatism.

The first few years of that long administration in fact changed nothing. Her government was busy with a terrible recession and the Falklands war,

fighting miners, that kind of thing. During exactly this time, I left University and began on what, for want of a better word, I shall call my career.

Comedy was my point of entry into television. Comedy had been my rock and roll as a child and now I was allowed to do it for a living. There is an argument that comedy is a greater public service than any other genre of art or culture: it heals divisions, it is a balm for hurt minds, it binds social wounds, exposes real truths about how life is really led. Comedy connects. The history of BBC comedy in particular is almost a register of character types, a social history of the country. Hancock, Steptoe, Mainwaring, Alf Garnett, Basil Fawlty, Baldrick, Victor Meldrew, Alan Partridge, Ali G, David Brent, the matchlessly great General Melchett – it is much harder to list character types from serious drama who have so penetrated the consciousness of the nation and so closely defined the aspirations and failures of successive generations. A public service broadcasting without comedy is in danger of being regarded as no more than a dumping ground for worthiness. Seriousness is no more a guarantee of truth, insight, authenticity or probity than humour is a guarantee of superficiality and stupidity. Angels can fly because they take themselves lightly.

Meanwhile, back to history, for a moment. What was happening to broadcasting during the time I was cutting my comedy teeth? In drama, the word “play” had been all but banned. It was Film Four and Screen Two. The multi camera studio drama, such as *I Claudius*, had become a thing of the past, the way led by *Brideshead* and other single camera filmed pieces. ‘Yoof’ TV made an appearance thanks to Planet 24 and Janet Street-Porter and the Peacock Report appeared.

The Peacock Report, referred to by broadcast professionals in that way they have, as Peacock, came less than ten years after the Annan Report, which the great Noel, Lord Annan had submitted to parliament in 1977. Annan had been the first to detect a caterpillar in the perfect garden salad of the BBC’s golden age. He thought television as run by ITV and the BBC needed a shake up, it lacked a kind of diversity, plurality and edge, all happily unfamiliar words in those days. For the first time the founding Reithian tenets of authoritative patriarchal broadcasting were challenged: the *de haut en bas* principle in which the educated producer, presenter, writer knew what was good for the country and for the audience was under fire. The first and most direct result was Channel 4 three or four years later, specifically charged to speak for minorities and sections of society who did not want to be spoon-fed by the supercilious educated classes. The arts and documentaries, drama and comedy were still presented but in a kind of punked up style, all attitude and in-yer-face. TV went from Oxbridge to

concrete, missing out red brick altogether. But the words ‘radical’ and ‘reform’ meant something quite different to a new and ideologically fired government and so in 1986 a new report emerged: Peacock.

Here was a report that really delivered a blow to the BBC’s solar plexus. Peacock began to foresee the possibility of digital diversity on an unimagined scale, it also put forward the ideas of a consumer-led, market driven broadcasting world, one in which the very principles of a licence fee funded public service broadcasting system would naturally be seen as obsolete. This suited the tenor of the times: deregulation, privatisation and a rigorous dismantling of the frontiers of the state – it was happening in the city and in industry and the utilities, why not broadcasting? The BBC, long seen as harbouring tendencies and personnel that were socialistic at best, Marxist at worst, was suddenly no longer a secure and unassailable acropolis. It was no secret that Norman Tebbit and some of the more fundamentalist free-marketeers and red-baiters of the administration would have been very happy indeed to dismantle the entire structure of the BBC. Peacock prevaricated and the charter appeared safe, but at a great price. Nothing would ever be the same again, the old certainties were dead and the harsh realities of capitalism arrived at Wood Lane and Portland Place. Whole departments were razed and working practices abolished, and something called an internal market was put in place. Radio Times was outsourced, the permanent make-up staff went, engineers, editors and set-designers were suddenly out of a job. Twenty-five percent of the BBC’s output was commanded to be produced from outside sources and a whole new independent sector was born. Companies like Hat Trick and Talk Back achieved almost instant success. Peter Bazalgette, who had been a typical BBC producer, starting life as a *That’s Life* researcher, then making *Food and Drink* and other such innocent programmes, started on the path that would lead him to Endemol and unimagined reach and riches. Men and women who had spent their whole lives dreaming up formats and broadcasting ideas as part of their job, suddenly had those ideas outside BBC premises, in their own time, because producers could now become entrepreneurs. There was money to be made and such a thing as loyalty to this new BBC was now a preposterous idea. The smell of Hugh Wheldon’s pipe smoke and tweed was finally expelled from every office, every corridor and every meeting room in the BBC. But at least the charter was safe, the licence fee was safe and the radio stations and the World Service and the general face and form of the BBC were safe and familiar. There was still *Blue Peter* and the Cup Final and *Only Fools and Horses*. The spinning globe and the logo were outsourced to Lambie Nairn, but the Beeb was still alive. David Attenborough and Bristol continued to make outstanding

natural history programmes, the BAFTAs and Emmys continued to roll in for the innovative new drama and comedy.

And now ... well, we know what has happened since. Satellite, digital TV, Freeview and now Freesat, the Internet and mobile telephony, BBC iPlayer for the iPhone, Mac and PC, a plethora of outlets so vast, complicated and fast-moving that audience numbers for traditional TV have plummeted. 3 million is now considered a good rating for a BBC 1 drama. Meanwhile of course ITV has morphed into a new kind of entity, more answerable to shareholders than ever before and Channel 4, always an uneasy hybrid of public duty ideals and free market commercialism, is finding it hard not to descend to freak show documentaries: *The Man With a Nose Growing Out of His Bottom*, *The Girl With Fourteen Nipples* and that kind of embarrassment for all concerned. So much so that C4's very existence and right to continue is being questioned.

And we have a BBC that broadcasts through four major adult channels and a number of children's channels, it has a news channel, a parliamentary channel and an HD channel. It also has a news channel in the form of its news.bbc.co.uk website, one of the most popular in the world. It has the iPlayer on its site too, streaming content to UK users only. But hell, there's ways round that. Streaming? Hardly: anything that can be played on your computer can be stored on it and shared. A digital copy is a perfect copy. Once on the net it's out there and will be bit torrented and Limewired and Gnutella-ed and otherwise P2P distributed. The BBC is making a lot of enemies giving away free programmes to an internet that everyone else is trying to "monetise"; at the moment it's relying on the fact that you have to be slightly dorky to record from the iPlayer, but believe me that will change. It will soon be the work of a moment for my mother to get an iPlayer programme off her computer and onto her iPod, iPhone, or whatever device she chooses. In its digital doings, from interactivity through to HD and online resources, the BBC has been pretty much in the forefront of development, but also in the forefront of annoying those without its advantages.

Meanwhile I have continued to enjoy a happy career as actor, performer, broadcaster, documentary maker and now, with an independent production company of my own, producer, so it is clear that I have had nothing to complain about: the old system was easy for my benighted Oxbridge self and the new system has worked for me too. I may be white and middle class, but hey, I'm gay and Jewish, so all kinds of minority compliance boxes are ticked by my very presence, aren't they? Well, do gay and Jewish count as minorities in this business? Do you remember that

scene in Mel Brooks's *To Be Or Not To Be?* He and his wife Anne Bancroft play, if you remember, a theatrical couple in Poland at the outbreak of the war. As the Nazis move in, more members of his company get taken away. One day his wife's rather camp dresser, Sasha, disappears. Brooks's character really loses it. He slams his palm into his fist. 'Enough is enough. First the Jews, then the gypsies, now the faggots. Don't they realise that without Jews, gypsies and faggots there's no such thing as show business?'

The point is I have of course a kind of vested interest in the status quo. Or if not the status quo, it might easily be seen that any view I have about broadcasting is that of an insider. A member of the Oxbridge *cosa nostra*, the gay *cosy nostra* and indeed the kosher *nostra*. An insider moreover, who even if he had never stepped into broadcasting would, by virtue of that upbringing I told you about, be destined always to have in his heart a huge place for public service broadcasting as exemplified by the BBC.

Many of us are likely, whatever our professions, to have an attachment to the kind of broadcasting we grew up with, a fierce pride in the staggering history of quality and innovation that has characterized British television and radio for fifty years. A pride, a sentimental loyalty that causes us to raise our well modulated, well educated voices loudly against any perceived barbarians at the gates. At a price, we saw off the Tebbit and print media attacks on our ramparts, a price that included many of us becoming extremely rich – damn you capitalism! – and now there is another attack imminent, at least a new report is beating its wings above us and stirring the air once more. And so once more we have to think not of how things have gone on, and how they are going on, but how they will go on. The future beckons. What will happen? As Neils Bohr, the great Danish physicist once said, "Prediction is very difficult, especially about the future."

This new report is not from a grand panjandrum like my lords Annan or Peacock, but rather – *o tempora o mores* – it is an OfCom Review of Public Sector Broadcasting. A new kind of cat has been put among the pigeons. There is nothing ideologically gross for us to moan at, nothing personal, philistine or crassly commercial to deprecate with elegant disdain, but a simple honest proposal. If we still want the broadcasting landscape in this country to be dominated by grand mountains and valleys of quality programming that can inform, entertain, educate and enlarge the horizons of the British viewer then perhaps we should accept a new 'model' for the financing and husbanding of such a landscape. Let the income from the licence fee now be shared amongst the BBC and its rivals. Let it be sliced, as the jargon has it.

Wow. A beguiling thought. Neat. And how appealing to our political masters. The Blairite/Brownite benisons of public/private interbreeding can be allowed to combine with the wholly reasonable recognition that in this fierce new world of rich-spectrum, multiple-bandwidth broadcasting, resources must be shared – all must be allowed to wet their beaks.

I stated earlier that Peacock ‘prevaricated’ in not creating a wholly commercial landscape; it might be truer to say that the BBC won part of the argument back then because it was successfully proposed, by Andrew Graham and Gavyn Davies, *inter alia*, that broadcasting is a special case, that the rules of the market place don’t apply. As in the armed forces, coastal defence, policing and other fields, capitalism red in tooth and claw cannot be unleashed here. If we stopped husbanding the Yorkshire Moors or the Lake District the result would be weeds, scrub or desertification, not more efficient productive landscapes from Germany or South Korea providing consumer choice and real competition. If innovative, cutting-edge, new and risky programming is not subsidised, the weeds will blow in too. This was the argument and it prevailed. But. But it was ultimately an argument that applied to a spectrum poor, low bandwidth broadcasting world. Gavyn Davies and others were able to argue that there would be no real diversity and choice in a free market dismantling of the licence fee because it was not foreseen how staggeringly multifarious the technical possibilities of programme rediffusion, distribution, ownership and rights management would be twenty or so years later. Private competition meanwhile continued to hammer home its counter-message. ‘Actually the market does work, it only doesn’t work when it’s unfairly dominated by subsidised monoliths like the BBC. Take away their distorting effect on the market and all will be well. Choice and diversity will reign.’ I remember Hugh and I wrote a sketch in which I played a waiter who recognised a diner in my restaurant as a Tory broadcasting minister. I clapped him on the shoulder and told him how much I admired his policies of choice, consumer choice, freedom of choice. I then was horrified to notice that he had only a silver knife and fork for cutlery at his table. ‘No, no, they’re fine,’ said the puzzled politician. But my character the waiter raced off and soon returned with an enormous bin liner which I emptied over his table. It contained thousands and thousands of those white plastic coffee-stirrers. ‘There you are,’ I screamed dementedly at him, virtually rubbing his face in the heap of white plastic, ‘now you’ve got choice. Look at all that choice. They may all be shit, but look at the choice!’ The sketch ends with me trying to strangle him. Heavy handed satire perhaps, but that was how it looked to me we were in danger of going: thirty or forty channels but all filled with

drek. Peacock had been made to see the danger of that too and the BBC's unique funding model was safe – for the time being at least.

Meanwhile the free market is great, it has proved just how greedy for money even the most socialistic TV programme maker is – just watch them scabble for the millions as their production companies are floated.

And as for broadcasting, well after a mad diversion of believing that it was all about distribution, every media boss now repeats the mantra Content is King.

'We repent,' they seem to be saying, 'being a media boss is no longer about owning as many stations, networks, nodes, outlets and ports as possible – it's about production, about making things. I see that now.'

'Hurray,' shout the programme makers, 'finally you've understood. So, give us the money then.'

'What money?' say the media executives, 'there is no money. We spent it all buying up companies and their back catalogues. We needed content in a hurry, because – in case you weren't aware ... content is king, you know.'

'Doh. Hang on ... but what about new content?'

'Good lord no. Are you mad? Far too expensive.'

The arguments for keeping the funding structures in place might be considered compelling: despite everything, the BBC is still doing what it has always been charged to do. It actually makes programmes. It pioneers comedy and popular entertainment, it reveals some of our cultural heritage to us in the form of costume drama, documentary, history and science programming; it informs, educates and entertains, it tells us about the human heart and the cosmos, the wide globe and the narrow street, it responds to new technologies and still manages to retain some sense of being the nation's fireplace.

If it were to be forced to turn commercial, who would benefit? How would consumer choice and quality be maintained? What systems overseas provide tempting paradigms to imitate? None. Let's stay the way we are.

All of which *is* arguable when looking at the BBC alone. But OfCom has wider responsibilities of course, as does government. They must balance public provision with private competition across the whole of an industry of converging technologies and diverging missions. They look at the plight of ITV struggling with its miserable ever-widening Mr Micawber gap between expenditure and income and specifically at Channel 4 with its ambivalent position as a commercial operator with an often countervailing non-commercial remit. How ironic. Channel 4 is the perfect example of the

glories of private and public and yet far from freeing it up, it's been hamstrung by its unique constitution. How can we ensure a healthy, post digital switchover future for such networks? Where will the funding come from?

And what about other private companies who want to invest in the fabulous opportunities offered by online broadcasting: how can they compete with the BBC and its unfair subsidy? The days of claiming that the market cannot work are over, and it's time to look at broadcasting in a new way. Thanks to TiVo, Apple TV, Sky Plus, Elgato and other forms of personal video recorder, televisions are now audio visual retail outlets that know about and respond to the consumer. Real market choice is here, there is no national fireplace, the individual with his remote, connected as he or she is, has no stake in station loyalty, no interest in network branding: show them the list of content, in categories including action, adult, arts, children's, documentaries, drama, films: in sub-categories and nested sub-sub-categories, special interest according to age, religion, ethnicity and sexuality – who says the market place can't tick the boxes for plurality, diversity and inclusivity?

Control is – or soon will be – the consumer's: there is no need for a front end branded One Two Three Four, whether BBC or ITV. No need for anything but content. And if you want content to be anything more, any scintilla of a *soupeçon* of a hint more than what market forces demand, if you sincerely want content to be occasionally uplifting, ennobling, educative, innovative, top down, nourishing and of bountiful, beautiful benefit to Britain and its citizenry, then yes, absolutely, the only source of financing for that is the licence fee.

So long as the playing field is level, the market will take care of the set top boxes, the distribution systems, the digital pipelines to the audio-visual retail outlet that is the consumer's television, while the licence fee can – if it must and likes the idea – pay for content that can't pay for itself in the normal cut and thrust of the marketplace. And if Channel 4 wants to (or must because of its remit) make *that* kind of public service programme as well as *Hollyoaks* and *The Girl Whose Breasts Talk German*, then the licence fee should cover that as well. The days of the BBC as a national institution, hosting and front-ending publicly funded content are over. The mighty oak must have some of its branches lopped off to allow light on the smaller trees around it. Public Service Broadcasting is now merely the management of licence fee monies: we don't need a BBC for that, or rather the BBC we need is a slimmed down BBC. It doesn't need to try to be all things to all

people, it can concentrate on public service and leave the commercial populist programming to the private sector.

Wow! Radical. And tempting. Perhaps. Perhaps tempting. Not to me, I have to say, but then I am not Britain or an average Britain. This image of the consumer's home as a kind of electronic bookshop, as outlined by media business guru Barry Cox, where we move from passive viewer to active consumer may seem beguiling to some, but actually we already know that model. We know it from hotel rooms and aircraft entertainment systems.

It's technically doable, especially when cleverly finagled with PVRs, but is it broadcasting, is it, actually, what anyone *wants*? Well actually, it exactly isn't broadcasting, it's narrow-casting. But is it wanted? I don't know, I can't speak for Britain, I can't second guess polls, though I can imagine how easily they will return the results wanted by either side, according to the way the questions are framed. "Do you want to see the BBC dismantled so that you have to choose and pay for all your programmes like a hotel room film menu?" NO. "Do you want to stop paying the licence fee and being forced to watch poncey documentaries and have access to thousands of films and saucy programmes at the click of a button?" YES. GIGO, as they used to say in the early days of computing: garbage in, garbage out.

But that is nothing, nothing to the real problem. Content. Production. Programme making. TV programmes suffer from the embarrassing necessity of having to be written and made. Unlike Yorkie Bars or tennis balls or mobile phones you can't just gear up the machinery and stamp them out in perpetuity. Every damned new programme has to be developed, nurtured, and tried out. Relationships have to be forged with writers, performers, presenters and directors, failures have to be accommodated and accepted. How this is achieved in a brave new world of post switchover root and branch restructuring, I don't know.

Even the most immoderately free market media analyst or commentator I have heard or read would concede that there is a need for good impartial news coverage; that a nation deserves access to programmes that reveal truths about themselves and the world. But mostly they would argue too that if that is what the BBC is to provide, it can be slimmed down, the corporation can lose the need to make its *Doctor Who* and *Strictly Come Dancing*, its populist forays can be taken care of by ITV, whose audience share would concomitantly rise, narrowing its dreaded gap, while money would be freed from retrenching the BBC's ambitions in the digital world, in film-making, in popular TV, in sporting occasions, money that could create better PSB programming and allow Channel 4 access to money that would spare us more *The Boy Whose Testicles Play The Harpsichord*.

Or perhaps a PSB system can be implemented on the American model of public subscription, or on the New Zealand and Singaporean models, based on a kind of central funding body. Neither of these can really be deemed especially successful, but again they free up money which can be thrown at as much public service broadcasting as anyone wants, and let real commercial players get on with making real commercial stuff.

But what would that BBC then be? Who would watch it? How could an audience be brought to a channel that showed nothing but worthy programming, no matter how excellently produced? Isn't the whole point of the BBC as a major channel, a real player in TV production across the spectrum of genres and demographics, isn't the whole point of that BBC its ability to draw audiences into PSB programming by virtue of their loyalty and trust in a brand that provides entertainment, pure and simple? Isn't the slide scheduling from BBC4 to 2 or BBC3 to 1 an example of that, just as it can be from BBC2 to 1? I have been involved in programmes that have made that journey. *Who Do You Think You Are?* started on 2 and went to 1, like *Have I Got New For You* and a documentary I made recently on Gutenberg started on 4 and then screened on 2, getting I am told very good figures indeed, and staying in the top 3 on the iPlayer top ten for a week. It would not have been possible to get that audience, for what I am persuaded (well I would be) was an important and almost copybook example of PSB programming, without the cross channel trailing and station loyalty that the present all-encompassing nature of the BBC allows. In a sense the nature of the BBC as it is, 'gives permission' to all kinds of people to watch programmes they otherwise might not.

What is the alternative, a ghettoised, balkanised electronic bookshop of the home, no stations, no network, just a narrowcast provider spitting out content on channels that fulfil some ghastly and wholly insulting demographic profile: soccer mum, trailer trash, teenager, gay, black music lover, Essex girl, sports fan, bored housewife, all watching programmes made specifically for them with ads targeting them. Is that what we mean by inclusivity? Is that what we mean by plurality? God help us, I do hope not.

And anyway, can it not be understood that what we call 'entertainment pure and simple' is neither. It seems hardly necessary for me to rehearse the argument in comedy: Gervais and Merchant, Lucas and Walliams, Mitchell and Webb, Catherine Tate, the Gavin and Stacey team, and before them Ali G, Steve Coogan, you name them, they all developed their arts over time, they all made minority failures, they all needed to be brought on. No one but the BBC could have made *Blackadder*, especially after the expense

and relative failure of the first series. Does it count as entertainment or as public service broadcasting? Do we have to make a distinction? That's the point surely. With all respect to OfCom and Barry Cox, and all the media analysts and broadcasting journalists who insist on one, do we really have to make a distinction?

I have to be personal again. I wanted to make a pair of films about bipolar disorder, did I have to believe that I was making a public service series? Could I not believe as I did, that I was making two television programmes that I hoped as many people as possible might watch, just as I would hope if I was making a drama or a comedy? Yes, those couple of films on manic depression may well have fulfilled a public service, one that could be uniquely followed up via the BBC's resources on radio, on websites and on help-lines, but the gratifying large audience that tuned in, did they do so *because* it was public service broadcasting? How insulting to everyone concerned is that?

By asking me to contribute my thoughts, the BBC hoped, I suspect, but in no way insisted, that I would fight their corner against cuts, against the slicing of the licence fee: at the very least they expected I might make a case for the public service aspects of comedy, and for its importance and for the need for it to be nurtured and fostered. I am happy to do that, not out of eternal loyalty and belief in an institution that has, as much as any school or college, made me who I am, but because I genuinely cannot see that the nation would benefit from a diminution of any part of the BBC's great whole. It should be as closely scrutinised as possible of course, value for money, due humility and all that, but to reduce its economies of scale, its artistic, social and national reach for misbegotten reasons of ideology or thrift would be a tragedy. We got here by an unusual route that stretches back to Reith. We have evolved extraordinarily, like our parliament and other institutions, such is the British way. Yes, we could cut it all down and remake ourselves in the image of Italy or Austria or some other notional modern state. We could sharpen the axe, we could cut away apparently dead wood, we could reinvent the wheel, we could succumb to the natural desires of commercial media companies. Although I have an axe to grind on this, you should understand that it is personal not professional. Actually, if licence fee slicing and other radical plans do go ahead, I do not believe it would affect my career as performer, presenter or producer; in fact I would probably profit more from the change. It is simply that I don't want to live in a country that emasculates the BBC. Yes, I want to see Channel 4 secure, but I don't believe that the only way to save it is to reduce the BBC. We can afford what we decide we can afford.

You know when you visit another country and you see that it spends more money on flowers for its roundabouts than we do, and you think ... coo, why don't we do that? How pretty. How pleasing. What a difference it makes. To spend money for the public good in a way that enriches, gives pleasure, improves the quality of life, that is something. That is a real achievement. It's only flowers in a roundabout, but how wonderful. Well, we have the equivalent of flowers in the roundabout times a million: the BBC enriches the country in ways we will only discover when it has gone and it is too late to build it up again. We actually can afford the BBC, because we can't afford not to.