“The Value of Memory”

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The Value of Memory

It’s a great honour to be here at the Prix Italia, which is a fine and proud institution. In fact, it’s an institution made up of a great many other fine and proud institutions, such as my own, the BBC. And the BBC, as I’ll argue later, is an institution whose role in sustaining and advancing democracy through massively increasing access to our collective memory is just beginning.

My name’s Tony Ageh and I am Controller of Archive Development at the BBC and my task is to ensure that the greatest value possible is realised for the greatest number of people as possible through making the BBC’s archives as accessible as possible. This is a big task – because it’s a big archive!

I am particularly proud to be speaking here during the celebrations of the 150 years since the Risorgimento because my mother was Italian and when she found out that I’d landed a job at the BBC, she told me with great seriousness that, in her opinion, broadcasting had played as important a role in the unification of Italy as Giuseppe Garibaldi.

Now she may have been romanticising or at the very least exaggerating but then... she was, after all, Italian!

My theme this morning will be the continuing role of broadcasters, and the BBC in particular, in democratising access to knowledge, both in the humanities and the sciences through memory – and, thus, reflecting my mother’s assertion, the role of a broadcaster in helping to shape and reflect a nation’s sense of itself over time.

I’ll talk about the specific role of memory and archives in this regard when I describe the BBC’s plans for a Digital Public Space a little later.

Now we all know about the way the Internet has destabilised our operating models, fragmented our audiences, forced us to cope with a terrifying speed of change... and so on. At the BBC we’re grappling with all of these things and more. And I’m certain we’ll still be grappling with them in 10, 20 and 50 years time, because I’m convinced we’re only at the start of a long and probably endless process of change.

But I want to focus today on just one of the many changes that confronts us: the way the Internet is turning us all – or at least, WILL turn us all - into memory institutions. In fact, Michael Hart, founder of Project Guttenberg, who sadly passed away last week had a similar insight as far back as the 1970s – and doubtless we all owe him a considerable debt of gratitude for his pioneering and selfless work.

So... What is a memory institution? Well, the obvious examples are libraries, art galleries, museums, monuments and archives.
The Value of Memory

Broadcasters, traditionally, have not thought of themselves as memory institutions.

We have archives – of course we do – but we don’t do anything much with them. Because – for now, at least, – we’re more preoccupied with today – with the programmes we’re about to broadcast. That’s our obvious priority. We absolutely must continue to provide a first class service of fresh programming to our audiences.

I think it’s worth me saying here and now that when I say “broadcasters”, what I really mean in this context, of course, is “public service broadcasters.” Organisations whose principal objective is to serve the broad public interest rather than shareholders. Organisations that play a vital part in maintaining and strengthening democracy. Organisations that, in this digital age, are so much more than just “broadcasters”.

Because, and it’s crucial to stress this at the outset, the term “broadcaster” hardly does justice to the role that public service organisations such as the BBC play today. The term “broadcaster” conjures up images of viewers sitting in front of a screen in their living room, passively consuming whatever a channel controller has decided they should watch that evening.
In reality, we all know that we’ve moved a long, long way from this being the sole and only function of a “broadcaster” – even though, of course, the output of individual channels remains core to the BBC and every other broadcaster represented in this room.

The BBC still starts from its fundamental guarantee to serve the needs of the “licence fee payer” – a term, which according to our Charter, includes not only those who actually pay but “any other person in the UK who watches, listens to or uses any BBC service, or may do so or wish to do so in the future.” So the term “licence-fee payers” really means “everybody”.
I see our guarantee to the licence fee payer as being underpinned by seven core principles. These seven principles are:

To develop and maintain a world class electronic publication network that is free from all commercial and political influence
Universality of access to the network for all, regardless of ability or disability
A dynamic and innovative workforce that lives by the BBC ethos – independence, impartiality, honesty, audience focused, creative, respectful (of each other and of diversity), collaborative.
The highest quality editorial output, balancing local, national and international perspectives
Unwavering concern for and protection of contributor’s rights - both moral and commercial - as well as care for the privacy of the individual
Careful use of public money and the management of BBC properties and assets to ensure the licence fee payer gets maximum value. Accountability first and foremost, without fear or favour, to every licence fee payer, whoever and wherever they may be.

It is these fundamental principles which separate the BBC from its commercial competitors – competitors who nevertheless have a vital role to play in ensuring the diversity of the media landscape. Those of you here today who work for public service organisations will, I’m sure, have a set of similar public principles which underpin the distinctiveness of your own companies.

It is by following those principles that the BBC has helped deliver access to, and enhance knowledge about, the arts, the humanities and sciences, over many decades.

Think of the power and impact of material as diverse as Jacob Bronowski’s The Ascent of Man, the BBC Proms – described by Jiri Belohlavek as “the world’s largest and most democratic music festival”, The Open University, Horizon, Arena and countless others and you begin to understand the value that the BBC has delivered to licence fee payers by broadening access to human creativity and scientific endeavour.

But think not only of the programmes themselves but also of the all the material that surrounds them – the stills, the production histories, the credits – and everything else that we describe under the rubric of that very ugly term “metadata.”

If you think about the TV programmes alone, despite the few notorious omissions and deletions, we still have over 400-thousand, complete programmes. The very best or most important ones, in fact. And that’s a lot of viewing. There’s nobody in this room who could live long enough to watch them all – unless you went without sleep... and did nothing but watch television for the rest of your life.

But the programmes are only the start...

In our Written Archive Centre at Caversham, just one of our 27 archive centres across the UK, we have over 7 and a half miles of shelving. It’s full of amazing documents and papers – including Winston Churchill’s speeches, The Beatles’ contracts and historic original scripts from the World Service, to name but a few.

Elsewhere, we’ve got more than six million stills and photographs – almost all, by the way, under BBC copyright. We have four and a half million items of sheet music. And over 100 thousand hours of sport footage, much of which has only ever been broadcast once and some
of it, never at all. And as well as one of the world’s largest record collections, we’ve also got the world’s smallest playable record.

Think of all that, and the fact that it all still exists in the BBC’s archives and then you begin to understand not only the richness of what the BBC created but that, together, it represents a unique and priceless portrayal of the 20th century, as it was seen and heard at the time. It all still endures and is all still there with the potential to be rediscovered and reused by existing and future generations. It is this potential that is transforming all broadcasters, just like the BBC, into Memory Institutions.

And despite all the problems we will encounter along the way, we’re committed to opening these up to the public, who, after all, paid for them in the first place.

What does that mean? Well, one of the things we’ve realised after working on this for a year or so is that “opening up the archive” means much more than just letting people watch their favourite old programmes on demand. We will do that, of course, but we believe there is vastly more public value to be gained by a different approach. I want to illustrate this by telling you about a recent research project – undertaken by Simon Popple, of the Institute of Communications Studies at The University of Leeds and one that is all the more poignant after the recent, terrible events at the mine in The Swansea Valley in Wales, – our thoughts and prayers are with those families at this, the saddest of times.

[SILENT PAUSE]

For almost a year, from March 1984 to March 1985, miners in Britain’s nationalised coal industry went on strike. They were protesting against plans to close 20 coal mines – which would result in the loss of 20,000 jobs. The two main protagonists were the miners’ leader, Arthur Scargill, and the then Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher.

The strike was long, bitter and often violent. Ten people died in strike-related events and many more were injured. In the end, the miners went back to work without having achieved their aims. Most of the coal mines were eventually closed. The social and political consequences of the strike were far-reaching and it remains controversial to this day.

The BBC, of course, provided extensive coverage of the strike in its news bulletins and programmes. That coverage was itself sometimes controversial and attracted criticism from various sides in the dispute.
The Value of Memory

For our research project, we decided to re-examine the coverage, working with groups directly involved in, or affected by, the strike.

The groups included former miners, retired police officers, women’s groups, local history groups and political activists. We gave them all access to the coverage from 1984 and 1985 and recorded their discussions and observations in focus groups around the UK, copies of which have in turn been added to the archives as part of the journal of record.

The idea was to test people’s perspectives and memories, to find out how well the BBC had done in representing the issues at the time, and to learn as much as we could about how to engage with the public through the archive.

One of the most interesting things to emerge was that the police and the miners – who were widely seen at the time as being on “opposite sides” of the dispute - were equally suspicious about joining in the project. Both groups felt that all the broadcasters, not just the BBC, had let them down during the strike, by failing to cover their side of the story properly – this project gave the BBC an opportunity to regain the confidence it had lost in some quarters.

Another thing to emerge was the way the archive material matched – or did not match – the memories of those involved in the strike. In some cases it brought back really powerful emotions and people said their memories were deepened by seeing the footage. In other cases people found their memories were at odds with what they saw from the archive.

Our participants frequently stressed the importance of the material as a way of educating future generations. But many felt that extra material was needed to give it more context and provide a broader picture. One said: “The footage needs to be balanced by personal input – by witness accounts – by the voice of people and the opinions of people who were involved”.

A theme that kept cropping up in our focus groups was the importance of the archive material in capturing heritage and cultural tradition. In particular, many people spoke of difficulties in engaging children in what they saw as an important historical legacy. Some felt it was the BBC’s duty to help stimulate engagement.

One miner said: “History belongs to us all and if the items exist then everyone should have access to them. After all, we paid for it.”
One entirely unexpected thing that emerged from the project was the potential of archive material to help bring about reconciliation. Hostility and mistrust were certainly still present, but many participants said that after looking through the materials; they had a better understanding of the perspectives of others. A former miner said:
“You’ve got to forgive and you’ve got to forget.”
And a retired police officer said:
“My abiding memory of the strike really is respect for the mining community”.

We’re going to do some more work in this area in a follow-on project.

The miners’ project is a prime example of how the Internet makes it possible for anybody to become a historian. I suppose, in the past, anyone who was sufficiently interested could have written to us and asked for access to our archive, for research purposes. But having access to the material from any Internet-connected computer makes research possible for everyone. It democratises the process and therefore has a great capacity to make history more accurate – as long as we, the broadcasters, are willing not just to expose our materials but also to engage with the users.

The feedback we’ve been getting throughout this project has resulted in all of us having a much more rounded and nuanced understanding of the Miners’ Strike than we had previously.

The information and knowledge that was contained in our footage was very important – but it has been enriched and given extra context by our engagement with the people directly involved in the strike at the time. Until we engaged with them, it was just a few cans of film on a shelf in a storeroom. Now, it’s a living resource.

This, I think, is the real power contained within the archive. It’s not just about letting people see programmes they remember fondly. It’s about opening up our memory bank, letting people share it and improve it and, as a result, you begin to understand, in fact, the “value of memory” as represented by a public service organisation such as the BBC.

If you then harness a commitment to the “value of memory” to the development of digital technologies, you have the potential to develop something truly extraordinary.

Because the emergence of those digital technologies has enabled us to engage with the licence fee payer in entirely new ways, in which they are active participants, increasingly using our services and assets on their own terms, at a time and in a manner of their own choosing –
commenting, challenging, criticising, reusing and sharing as they wish within a framework which we may set and guarantee access to, but over which our control is limited.

This capacity for the public to exert much greater control over the way in which they access and use the media... made possible by the BBC... poses a fundamental challenge to any vested interests that seek to control or manipulate agendas – political, social, cultural or otherwise.

The democratising power of digital networks is, of course, increasingly apparent – whether that be via social media, weblogs, or crowd-sourced analyses of political data, for example.

The erosion of control over information by media corporations, at least in mature democracies, is an unassailable fact. It’s a trend that will only accelerate and which is slowly but surely resulting in an erosion of the power *of* media companies and their ability to exert significant influence over the terms of democratic debate.

Of course, at the same time, there are real and legitimate anxieties about control over personal information and closed systems which are exercised by some of the technology companies which are driving the digital revolution. Never have ever-changing “Terms and Conditions” (T&Cs) been the source of so much angst.

And in regimes where the ballot box does not exist, or where it is manipulated by the state, the dominant media continue to dictate the terms of debate – even if social media, to a limited extent, are able to bypass them.

But the reality is surely that, in a democracy at least, the blossoming of a world of digital plenty means that NO companies or organisations will ever wield the same kind of mix of market and political power that could be accrued in a world of analogue scarcity, and which did accrue to some media interests.

All of these developments represent a huge opportunity for the BBC. By opening up as much as possible of our archives to the widest and most diverse range of audiences possible – all underpinned by our fundamental commitment to the public interest – we help to empower people with the services and tools they need to make sense of the world around them.

Indeed, I would argue that all of us who are public service broadcasters have, both as “memory institutions”, and more broadly, a fundamental obligation to help strengthen democracy in a globalised, digital era. We have, of course, an obligation to those citizens to whom we are accountable. But we also have an obligation
to act in the way that citizens in less, or non, democratic parts of the world would expect us to.

Honouring this obligation will involve making the vast wealth of information we hold as open, accessible and transparent as possible. Now, more than ever, all of us involved in both safeguarding and making available our past must stand up for the principles and values we believe in.

So in this digital era there is both an opportunity and a duty for the BBC to develop the most accessible and affordable environment for UK Licence Fee Payers to access and contribute to media, from across the entire public sector, arts, humanities and heritage industries with the same degree of safety and certainty that it has guaranteed since its formation, and thereby enabling access to an incredible wealth of material from across the entire public sector, and from the arts, the humanities and the sciences – among many other sources.

In our high-level strategy document Putting Quality First, we laid out our ambition to act as architect of a digital public space; supporting partners and setting parameters. We said that we committed to focusing on “high-quality content within clearer limits, keeping open a digital public space for all”.

The BBC’s own archive strategy goes some way to delivering this vision – in terms of making available some of the enduring value of the BBC’s huge vaults of memory. Under the strategy, we will deliver a limited, curated body of permanently available material to the audience by 2013, with the objective of making everything available (video and audio, documents and images, catalogues and data) either commercially or via the public service in the longer term.

This is known informally as the Digital Public Space initiative: and, in a nutshell, is the BBC working closely with public institutions and other partners to create an open, online environment in which publicly-owned cultural media and related materials would be held, found, used, shared and amplified.

The BBC Archive Development team has been building partnerships with archives, libraries, museums and other holders of public goods. Such collaboration brings us all immediate benefits in terms of efficiency and interoperability based on common standards, but it also makes sense from an editorial perspective, one that carries great weight within the BBC and makes my job, and that of my colleagues, a lot easier.

For instance, the BBC has, since the late 1930s accumulated a huge amount of material about World War 2 – but, for obvious reasons, not much about World War I. By linking with the British Library, the
Imperial War Museum, the British Film Institute and the National Archives, we can all offer a more comprehensive and useful collection of material, so that together we all present a much more rounded picture of that period in history.

Of course, this ability to create and make available a digital public space critically depends on our ability to preserve material in ways that ensure it can be accessed by future generations.

In particular, I’d like to underline the fundamental importance of the current generation doing everything we possibly can to preserve the stories of our recent history that are held on very fragile tape and film.

The danger is that the next generation won’t start to think about the potential value of it until it’s too late and then they’ll blame us for not using our initiative and preserving it for them.

So, in conclusion, what does all this mean for the “value of memory” in the future, and for those institutions such as the BBC which help to both conserve and make available that memory?

I would single out three key things.

Firstly, it means that public service organisations, working in partnership have the ability to create something from their archives which is still underpinned by the principles which have always defined the public service mission but which, in terms of the material made available, is more inclusive than ever before – and, critically, places an unprecedented amount of power in the hands of the public.

And those partnerships which I mention need to stretch across national borders and embrace anyone in this room who shares our commitment to public service and enhancing access to the collective memory.

Secondly, the combination of a robust commitment to universal, fair and affordable access with rigorous strategies for the preservation of material should mean that the digital space we are creating is more permanent than anything we’ve yet devised.

Thirdly, this public space will operate with an authority, a credibility and an accountability which some may seek to challenge – particularly those vested interests who cannot handle the truth and who fear torches being shone into corners hitherto shrouded in darkness.

The BBC has been built on the principles which I set out at the beginning. But until now it has been all but impossible to always deliver all of these - certainly at the same time.
The Value of Memory

It is almost twenty years since mass adoption of the worldwide web began. We are at a turning point. The web is increasingly social - it’s about the connections we make, not the places other people tell us to go.

This is a world in which narrow political and commercial self-interest will find it increasingly hard to prevail against a public which has the collaborative tools to shape and share the flow of information and knowledge.

The public, all of us, have the capacity to help reinvent public service organisations in a way that enables us to use the powers of technology to further the development of democracy, social justice and learning.

It’s my personal belief that the BBC is now the best-placed organisation on earth to challenge and reform the role that media plays and the ways that people all over the world are free to access and interact with it. The Digital Public Space is in the vanguard of this vision.

In this vision, the “value of memory” becomes the value of using memory to better understand the present and, thereby, to better prepare for the future.

And in so doing, to create the conditions for a more enlightened future which is shaped not by the self-serving power of a few, but by the generous wisdom of the many.

Thank you very much – e un grandissimo onore parlare a questo congresso. Grazie mille.