Back to the Future: The Uses of Television in the Digital Age

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The background to our thinking was the realisation that broadcasting will have profound and far-reaching effects; the working assumption must be that television in particular will be a potent factor in influencing the values and the moral standards of our society … [Hence] there should be presented, for listeners and viewers to choose from, the widest possible range of subject matter, treating as much as possible of the whole scope and variety of human awareness and experience. To do so, the broadcasters must not only reflect society; they must pick out and focus attention on that which is significant–the best, because it is the best; the worst, so that we shall know it for what it is; the new and the challenging, because individual listeners and viewers should not be denied the opportunity of responding to them, and of judging them … For the future, the objective remains–as always–to realise the purposes of broadcasting.[1]

I

'A Future for Public Service Television' inquiry was launched in October 2015, in part to coincide with the government's troublesome white paper on the future of the BBC, but mainly 'to consider the nature, purpose and role of public service television' in an age 'characterised by technological transformations, shifts in audience consumption habits, and changes in cultural and political attitudes'.[2] However, unlike the recent spate of literature that foretells public service television's pending death by a thousand internet clicks, the inquiry was tasked with identifying ways in which contemporary developments might facilitate more representative and innovative television services, thereby enhancing the public interest. Taking its cue from the Pilkington Report on Broadcasting, about which more later, the commission thus set out 'to examine how best to secure quality content that informs and inspires, entertains and educates, connects and challenges audiences in the 21st century'.[3] In so doing, whilst recognising that socio-political conditions and media technologies have significantly changed in the last fifty years, the inquiry wanted nevertheless to reflect on 'the nature of good broadcasting in a democracy', just as Pilkington had done in the early 1960s.

Staffed by a highly-experienced secretariat based at Goldsmiths, University of London, and ably supported by several distinguished committee members and external partners[4], the inquiry was overseen by the critically acclaimed film producer and Labour peer, Lord Puttnam. A former advertising executive who helped revive the British film industry in the 1980s (with such productions as *Chariots of Fire*, *The Killing Fields*, *The Mission*), Puttnam has long been an influential voice in broadcasting. One of his most significant interventions was around the pre-legislative passage of the 2003 Communications Act when, as chair of the cross-party scrutiny

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[1] Report of the Committee on Broadcasting, Cmnd. 1753 (London: HMSO, 1962), §1055, §1059.

[2] http://www.gold.ac.uk/news/future-of-tv-report/

[3] http://futureoftv.org.uk/about/

[4] The secretariat was led by Des Freedman and James Curran, both professors in Goldsmiths' Media and Communications Department. Committee members included Jackie Ashley, Christopher Beauman, Georgina Born, Andrew Chitty, Dame Liz Forgan, Robin Foster, Patrick Loughrey, Jane Martinson, Baroness Onora O'Neill, Pat Younge, among others. Partners comprised the British Academy, the Hansard Society, the Guardian, BAFTA and Vice.

committee, he recommended that the recently created regulatory body for radio, television and telecommunications, better known as OfCom, prioritise the long-term 'democratic, social and cultural interests of citizens' (Puttnam 2002: §24-26), particularly in relation to broadcast content.

> Given the power of the media to shape, inform and even to undermine democratic debate, we were convinced we needed a regulatory regime that was fit for the very specific purpose of protecting citizens' interests, over and above simply delivering a marketplace that might or might not ultimately benefit consumers (Puttnam 2010).

Puttnam also questioned the Bill's conspicuous foregrounding of deregulatory liberalisation apropos existing media ownership controls, viz. measures to end legislative barriers to single ownership of ITV and Channel 5, joint ownership of Channel 5 and a major national newspaper group, and a parallel commitment to lifting restrictions on non-European Economic Area ownership of British commercial television licences (Puttnam 2002: §218-226 & §239-49). It was suggested that such actions might result in UK television being overwhelmed by US-owned media conglomerates and American programmes, which would have detrimental consequences for British production and cultural diversity. Additionally, Puttnam and other peers were concerned that the government's proposals could allow a media baron to acquire Channel 5 and to exercise an unacceptable degree of influence over the UK's media. The scrutiny committee thus recommended that, 'the utmost regard ought to be given to issues of plurality … in reaching decisions on media mergers', and that plurality be defined as:

> The public interest in – (i) the maintenance of a range of broadcast media owners and voices sufficient to satisfy a variety of tastes and interests; (ii) the promotion and maintenance of a plurality of TV, radio and other broadcast media owners, each of whom demonstrates a commitment to the impartial presentation of news and factual broadcast programming; and (iii) the promotion and maintenance, in all media including newspapers, of a balanced and accurate presentation of news, the free expression of opinion and a clear differentiation between the two (Puttnam 2002: §224).

As a result, and after much political wrangling in the House of Lords, the 2003 Communications Act did incorporate some of Puttnam's suggestions.[5] Much to the annoyance of the then Labour government, the Conservative frontbench, commercial lobbyists and OfCom's newly appointed executive board (all of whom favoured light-touch regulation), it was agreed that large media mergers would be subject to several public interest considerations, albeit at the discretion of the relevant Secretary of State (Communications Act 2003: §375). Puttnam also persuaded the government to amend OfCom's general duties so as to advance 'the interests of citizens in relation to communications matters' (ibid.: §3,1). The establishment of the OfCom Content Board to champion matters concerning quotas for regional and original EU/UK production, accuracy and impartiality, fairness and privacy, further strengthened the regulator's public service remit.

Despite OfCom subsequently conflating the two duties into a single phrase, that of the 'citizen-consumer' (a modification that was widely interpreted as subordinating civic objectives to the

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[5] The deregulatory impulse is most apparent in Clause 5 of the draft Bill, entitled 'Duties to secure light touch regulation'; for a fuller analysis, see Puttnam (2002 & 2006); Harvey (2006); Livingstone et al (2007).

market), the new plurality test was invoked following BSkyB's 2006 acquisition of a 17.9 per cent stake in ITV. And it was Puttnam (2006) who, writing in a personal capacity in the *New Statesman*, spearheaded the challenge to BSkyB's newly acquired 'material influence' at ITV and 'any further extension of Murdoch's tentacles'. He even raised the disquieting possibility that the ITV purchase was 'merely Murdoch's first card in a longer game, one in which he will end up controlling Channel 5', which represented 'a threat to British democracy' insofar as Murdoch's concentration of media ownership 'would be without precedent'. Declaring 'enough is enough', Puttnam went onto criticise the 'conspiracy of silence' among UK politicians, their failure to ask 'serious questions about the future of media plurality in Britain', and their 'fear of alienating the most powerful media owner in the country' in case they 'court electoral disaster'.

> If they really are serious about regaining the respect, let alone the trust, of the electorate, it is time they stopped shaping their electoral strategies in response to the leader columns of any of our national newspapers, and started demonstrating a belief that the votes of millions at the ballot box count for more than the self-interest of a handful of manipulative media barons (Puttnam 2006).

He was similarly emphatic in the wake of News Corporation's 2010 bid to acquire one hundred per cent ownership of BSkyB. Speaking in the House of Lords, Puttnam warned that the UK was 'on the edge of a very slippery slope – one that could find us falling further and further under the influence of a single, US-based owner, with a highly questionable interest in the benefits of a diverse and flourishing plural media here in the United Kingdom'. And he was again critical of the political elites' desperate eagerness to curry favour with News Corporation, not least Gordon Brown's refusal to disclose several Prime Ministerial meetings with Murdoch. Indeed, Puttnam argued that the UK was the only 'developed country' to allow 'one individual such control … of the TV and newspaper markets', a situation which, 'if unchecked, offers a genuine threat to plural, consensus-based democracy in this country'. Puttnam concluded by reminding his fellow peers that the UK was doing itself no favours by appearing to be 'a banana republic'.

As deputy chairman of Channel 4 (2006-2012), Puttnam was a staunch defender of the station's public service remit when it was threatened with privatisation. On the other hand, ever fair-minded, he was openly critical of the channel failures. Speaking about the Celebrity Big Brother race row involving Shilpa Shetty and Jade Goody, although Puttnam praised the channel's zeal for making 'challenging and controversial' programmes, he also argued that Channel 4 had an obligation to create programmes that were 'responsible and respected'. In fact, his criticisms of the controversy were more severe than OfCom's, even going as far to say that he was 'not proud' of Big Brother and hoped Channel 4 would replace the 'reality show' with a flagship programme which might help rejuvenate the broadcaster's original 'sense of purpose'.

It plays to the very worst of people's behaviour, rather than the very best, which is a fairly dismal view of human nature. It started being a riveting slice of life which you could genuinely call reality television, but at some point along the way, it has drifted from reality television into a form of human exploitation. What you're doing really is exploiting people's human weaknesses and then laughing at them, and that's not great for any of us (Nikkhah 2009).

Yet more recently, Puttnam (2015) has observed that both Channel 4 and the BBC 'continue to face huge challenges from some political zealots – noticeably, but not exclusively, from those on the right'. The rebuke was prompted by continuing speculation about the privatisation of Channel 4 and the publication of the inimical 2015 Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee report on the *Future of the BBC*, which questioned the BBC's market impact, the licence fee's long-term future (Clementi 2016), and the principle of universality.[6] He was further annoyed by Chancellor George Osborne's subsequent cowing of the BBC to cover the £750m cost of providing free television licences for over-75s, claiming the deal was a 'dereliction of process' (Jackson 2015). And the appointment of John Whittingdale as Culture Secretary in May of the same year, and the ensuing BBC charter renewal negotiations, caused Puttnam to repeatedly criticise the DCMS for *inter alia* 'the wrong kind of state intervention', creating a deliberately 'hostile environment', and plotting 'a significantly diminished corporation'.[7] Such was Puttnam's anger, he even threatened to help organise 'the biggest march that has ever occurred in London – to show the government we won't tolerate this kind of interference'.[8]

II

Which brings us to the independent Puttnam inquiry. After eight months of holding discussions with leading industry representatives, organising several public events across the UK, and receiving written submissions from a wide variety of experts,[9] the inquiry launched its report at the British Academy on 29 June 2016.[10] In a brief foreword to the report, Puttnam observes that, although public service broadcasting 'is a noble 20th century concept', 'the issue surely facing us is whether we can find the nobility to nurture and protect it' given 'the hyper-commercial, market dominated media environment of the 21st century' (Puttnam 2016: 4-5). Writing in the wake of Joe Cox's murder and the day before the EU referendum, Puttnam is especially concerned about the mainstream media's seeming inability to mitigate the upturn in so-called 'fake news' and 'post-truth' apropos the concomitant rise in illiberal, right-wing populism. Specifically, Puttnam accuses the tabloid newspapers of exercising a 'distorting effect' with its 'mendacious axe-grinding',[11] prompting him to conclude that 'a well-resourced and fully independent public service television system that is free of political coercion offers our most reliable means of rebuilding public trust and accountability'.

Elsewhere, in an interview with openDemocracy, conducted shortly after the EU referendum, Puttnam reiterates his concerns about the breakdown in trust between the professional media,

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[6] https://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmcumeds/315/315.pdf;
https://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/sep/24/government-considering-channel-4-privatisation-document-slip-up-reveals
[7] http://www.davidputtnam.com/viewNews/n/puttnam-protect-bbc/
[8] http://www.davidputtnam.com/viewNews/n/puttnam-fight-bbc-independence/
[9] http://futureoftv.org.uk/submissions-received/
[10] The report and the executive summary are available as PDF downloads: http://futureoftv.org.uk/report/
[11] Recent research would suggest that the UK press was disproportionately Eurosceptic in the run up to, during and after the referendum (for example, Barnett 2016; Corbett 2016; Levy *et al* 2016; Seaton 2016).

political elites and civil society.[12] Only this time, he singles out the recent fashion for 'trashing' expert authority as having a major influence on the British public's majority decision to leave the EU. And he is particularly disappointed over what he perceives to be the BBCs failure to 'take positions based on known expertise' and to challenge some of the Leave.EU and Vote Leave campaigns' spurious truths, not least their 'Monty Pythonesque' portrayal of Europe (cf. Seaton 2016). Puttnam also suggests that OfCom could have done a better job by providing UK broadcasters with a clearer set of guidelines regarding impartiality and objectivity, thus fulfilling its statutory responsibility to the public as citizens. In short, he argues that the broadcast media's complacent reticence played no small part in allowing the Brexiteers to exploit the public's 'fear and ignorance', hence the urgency of the Puttnam inquiry and its recommendation that politicians reevaluate the relationship between the media and democracy.

There is certainly a rich tradition of scholarly research and political commentary to suggest that a socially responsible media help strengthen the democratic process by holding power elites accountable for their actions and facilitating positive dialogue between competing socio-political interests. And there is a similarly extensive literature that demonstrates the media's gatekeeping role and systemic bias, which can both prime and harden social attitudes that are reactionary and intolerant of difference. However, Puttnam is mistaken to blame the culture of misinformation surrounding the EU referendum and the resulting Brexit vote on the usual suspects, be it a censorious press, a timorous BBC, the ill-equipped masses, or maverick politicians rubbishing expert knowledge. For a start, we now know that both Brexit campaign groups paid substantial sums of money to several digital marketing firms who specialise in online targeted political advertising using psychographic profiling methods based on voters' social media data. And there are growing concerns about possible foreign interference in the Brexit campaign following revelations that Google, Facebook and Twitter were susceptible to Russian-funded 'dark ads' (Barnett 2017a; Bastos & Mercea 2017). The upshot is that the Electoral Commission and the Information Commissioner's Office have launched simultaneous investigations into whether the surreptitious use of metadata had an improper effect on the outcome of the EU referendum.

Puttnam also pays insufficient attention to wider social relations and processes that have undoubtedly contributed to the current rise in populist movements and Eurosceptic discourse. While much initial analysis of the Brexit vote focused on generational differences, English nationalism and xenophobic press coverage (Barnett 2017b; Bhambra 2017; Seaton 2016; cf. Flemmen & Savage 2017), a proliferating body of research points to educational achievement and the so-called 'left-behind' as important contributing factors (Calhoun 2016; Corbett 2016; Evans & Tilley 2017; Goodwin and Heath 2016; Hobolt 2016; McKenzie 2017; Zhang 2018). Yet more critical accounts focus on the broader economic failings of the EU, financial capitalism and liberal democracy in general, as possible explanations for the recent legitimation crisis (Ali 2016; Bickerton 2016; Elliot 2016; Jones 2017). Indeed, some commentators go as far as to claim that

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liberal left academics and journalists are partly to blame for today's populist zeitgeist insofar as many of them cynically abandoned Britain's postindustrial working-class in the belief that neoliberal internationalism, identity politics and 'Cool Britannia' were the only game in town (Cohen 2017; Streeck 2017), which served to further widen the ideological rift between the cosmopolitan elite and ordinary people.

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III

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None of this is to say that television, much less the ethos of PSB, no longer matters. As recently noted by Damian Tambini (2016), although the 'populist revolutions of 2016 were caused by inequality and a corresponding sense of anger and worthlessness … understanding the precarious state of the media does help us understand the "post-fact" populist form they have taken'. Furthermore, both the Puttnam report and supporting market research clearly demonstrate that, despite the rise of the internet and the proliferation of digital platforms, television viewing remains a common source of infotainment and is characterised by meaningful continuities. For example, people (aged 4 and above) still watched 220 minutes of television programmes per day in 2014, 85 per cent of which were live broadcasts and via a television set; Britain's main five public service broadcasters and their secondary channels accounted for nearly 72 per cent of all television viewing and 85 per cent of investment in original programming; BBC One remains the most-watched channel with a 21.7 per cent share of the overall audience and ITV continues to be the UK's most watched commercial channel; finally, while young people are most likely to move away from linear television to online short-form audiovisual content (for example, vlogging platforms such as YouTube, PewDiePie and Zoella), current data on children's media usage would suggest that the vast majority of 4-15 years old still watch live broadcasts using a television set (Livingstone & Local 2016; Puttnam 2016: 8, 39-44 & 137).

On the other hand, the report is in no doubt that 'television is changing – and changing fast' (Puttnam 2016: 8). In the past thirty years, UK television has become a highly integrated, internationalised, multichannel market comprised of public service broadcasters (all BBC channels, Channel 3 licensees, Channel 4 Corporation, S4C, Channel 5), commercial cable and satellite companies (including Sky UK, Viacom, Virgin Media), on-demand internet providers (Netflix, Amazon Prime Instant Video), and a rapidly growing independent production sector (for example, HIT Entertainment, RDF Media Group, Hat Trick Productions). Of the non-public service broadcasters, the report considers Sky to be the 'only true broadcasting powerhouse to arrive on the scene as a result of the multichannel revolution' (Puttnam 2016: 39). Its combined viewing share for 2014 was 8.2 per cent, which generated a staggering £7.8 billion in revenues. Of the newer subscription services to have made a significant impact on the UK's television ecology, the report highlights the two US companies Netflix and Amazon Prime Video as major players that have 'significant ambitions in content production as well as distribution' (Puttnam 2016: 43). Both have helped to enlarge on-demand viewing over the past few years and, as of 2015, had 6.4 million subscribers between them.

Whilst recognising that the likes of Sky, Netflix and Amazon have increased demand for original, high-quality television series (*Breaking Bad, House of Cards, Orange Is The New Black, The Americans, Black Sails, The Fall, Mad Men, Hand of God, Vikings, Bosch*, among others), the report emphasises several concerns about their business models and possible consequences for public service television. First of all, much of Sky's success has been down to its aggressive acquisition of sports rights, which has greatly reduced the availability of sport on free-to-air television, once a cornerstone of British broadcasting (Puttnam 2016: 39-40). And Rupert Murdoch's £11.7bn proposed deal to take full control of Sky is just the latest of his innumerable attempts to emasculate the UK's regulatory provisions for public service broadcasting and media plurality (see McKnight 2013). A further worry is that, notwithstanding several recent examples of US/UK co-productions (for example, *The Night Manager, War and Peace, The Crown*), most on-demand platforms are dominated by US-originated content, mainly because of the dependence on US investment to fund high-budget drama, recently estimated to cost anywhere between $5-$10 million an episode. Not only does this have wide-ranging consequences for UK televisual exports and home-grown talent, it also detracts from public service television's obligation to reflect a range of British lived experiences (Puttnam 2016: 44-5, 92, 134-6). Lastly, even with lucrative global sales and streaming licensing deals, there is a growing anxiety that spiraling production costs for scripted television series are unsustainable (Ryan & Littleton 2017; Sweney 2017), which could create a subprime market situation and an eventual crash.

IV

The spectre of Americanisation and excessive commercialism is examined throughout the Puttnam report, particularly in relation to ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5's public service remits. Of these, the report considers the commercially-funded, publicly-owned Channel 4 the most significant, not least because of its unmistakable commitment to stylistic and content innovation, risk-taking and diversity (Puttnam 2016: 67-77). It is certainly true that the early years of Channel 4 introduced a refreshing viewing alternative to the sometimes more cautious and paternalistic fare offered by the BBC-ITV duopoly. Unafraid to experiment, the new channel embraced the pluralism of the 1980s and frequently commissioned programmes and films that represented changing, more progressive attitudes to race, gender, sexuality, religion and nationality (Brown 2007; Harvey 2000). Additionally, as a publisher-broadcaster, Channel 4 continues to be a major commissioner for original UK independent television production and filmmaking. According to a recent OfCom survey (2015b: 24-25), it spent £377 million on new programs in 2014, more than any other public service broadcaster spent on independent producers. However, the report also notes that, even though it introduced an Indie Growth Fund in 2014 to provide seed funding for small and medium-sized production companies, Channel 4 has veered towards working with fewer, larger production companies over the last twenty years (Puttnam 2016: 70-73). On that, Puttnam laments the consolidation of the independent sector, the growing tendency for the

largest companies to end up as subsidiaries of major US media groups and their expanding focus on international sales, rather than developing programmes for UK audiences.[13]

Though predictable, the report is justifiably critical of ITV and Channel 5's commitment to public service television. In fact, analysis and suggestions concerning Channel 5 amount to just two pages of text (which, coincidentally, was the same length of the channel's submission to the inquiry). Perhaps this is to be expected given Channel 5's uninspiring history and negligible audience figures, not helped by Richard Desmond's £103m acquisition of the channel in 2010 and his subsequent modeling of the channel on his Express Newspapers group. Similarly, US-owned Viacom's £450m purchase of Channel 5 in 2014 has done little to enhance its popularity and reputation as a public service broadcaster. On the contrary, speaking at the Edinburgh Television Festival, Channel 4's then chief executive, David Abraham (2014), predicted that '2014 could go down as the peak year of the Gold Rush of British television', whereby 'our free-to-air channels have become the must-have accessories … amongst US media companies eager to stay ahead of each other by internationalising their revenues, priming their distribution pipes and shielding their tax exposure. Still, Puttnam (2016: 89) would prefer Channel 5 to remain a public service broadcaster and to continue benefiting from guaranteed prominence on the electronic programme guide; in return, the channel's voluntary commitment to young people's programming should be made a formal requirement, with explicit obligations to UK-originated children's content.

The transformation of ITV over the past twenty-odd years is an entirely different matter, and the report painstakingly maps the channel's rise and fall (Puttnam 2016: 79-88). Launched in 1955 as a commercial network of regional television channels, ITV became a household name because of its groundbreaking programming and nurturing of new talent. However, the ethos of ITV was fundamentally altered following the 1990 Broadcasting Act, which signaled a cumulative shift away from public service obligations towards neoliberal deregulation. The 2003 Communications Act more or less ended the genre-based quotas required of ITV franchise holders, prompting a significant reduction in ITV's spending on current affairs, news, arts and regional programming (Puttnam 2016: 81-82). Perhaps the main calamity was OfCom's easing of the regulatory obstacles to cross-media ownership and the consolidation of ITV into a single public limited company, which resulted in BSkyB's 2006 acquisition of a 17.9 per cent stake in ITV. And while the Competition Commission subsequently ordered BSkyB to reduce its shareholding to less than 7.5 per cent, the latest state of play is that Liberty Global (which owns Virgin Media) has gradually acquired a 9.9 per cent stake in ITV over the last few years, fueling speculation that the US cable conglomerate is planning a takeover bid. The report concludes its criticisms of ITV by astutely noting that there is no mention of 'public service' or news and current affairs in its 2015 annual report, which focuses instead on the financial success of its drama and entertainment genres.

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[13] See also, https://www.theguardian.com/media/2014/oct/27/the-great-british-tv-sell-off-who-owns-the-uks-favourite-shows

Tellingly, the same report announced record annual profits of £843 million (up from £108 million in 2009) and proposed a special £400 million dividend for its shareholders.

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It is precisely for the above reasons that the Puttnam inquiry was clear from the outset that 'public service provision is not a sole responsibility of the BBC, but a concern linked to a much broader television ecology'. Having said this, it is unsurprising that the future and purpose of the BBC looms large in the report (Puttnam 2016: 50-65), not least because the inquiry coincided with the BBC's charter renewal, which took effect on 1 January 2017 and will run until 31 December 2027. Indeed, the report frames its discussion of the BBC using the same four headings found in the government's two consultation documents (DCMS 2015, 2016a): mission, scale and scope, funding, governance and regulation. But before turning to the report's analysis of the various debates about whether the BBC is *inter alia* too large, too imperialist, too wasteful, too popular, too highbrow, too cautious, or too urbanite, it may be useful to cast a fleeting glance at the BBC's past and present achievements.

The occasional lapse notwithstanding, the BBC has played a leading role over the years by providing a touchstone against which principles of objectivity, diversity and quality have been fashioned into regulatory mechanisms and codes of professional conduct. For a start, the BBC has a long history of, to quote Huw Wheldon (former Managing Director, BBC TV), making 'good programmes popular and popular programmes good': *Z- Cars, Hancock's Half Hour, Civilisation, Morecombe & Wise, Doctor Who, Play for Today, Arena, Fawlty Towers, Gardeners' World, Life on Earth, EastEnders, Panorama, Wolf Hall,* even *The Great British Bake Off,* are just a few examples of BBC television series that were ground-breaking or good of their kind. Additionally, the BBC has weathered a number of political storms, and though it has sometimes accommodated reasons of state (recent cases include the 1984/85 miners' strike, the Zircon affair, the Balen report, the Gaza DEC appeal, MI5 vetting, and promoting the careers of useful idiots), equally, the BBC has a strong record of refusing to kowtow to government wishes (as was the case with the Suez crisis, the Falklands conflict, the Libyan bombing, *Real Lives,* the Sinn Féin broadcast ban, and the war on Iraq), thereby asserting its public service commitment to impartiality and editorial autonomy. And in spite of a real-term decrease in its annual budget over the last three charter periods, the BBC continues to cast its bread upon the waters, as seen in the diversification of its portfolio (BBC Three, BBC Four, CBBC, CBeebies, 6 Music, the Asian Network), the pioneering of new digital services (such as News Online and the iPlayer), and the ongoing investment in genres (the arts, formal education, children's television, documentaries, regional news, religion and science) that commercial broadcasters have started to overlook.

And yet, the Puttnam report clearly demonstrates that the BBC is facing considerable pressure from a hostile Tory government, powerful commercial interests, and a narrow-minded press. The publication of the *Future of the BBC* report by the Culture, Media and Sport Committee (CMSC) in February 2015, and its demands for the abolishment of the BBC Trust and a long-term alternative

to the licence fee, was an early indication of the present government's intention to raise tough questions. Probably the most damaging criticism, insofar as it attacks what is widely considered to be the BBC's cornerstone (Puttnam 2016: 29-30, 53-55), was the government's suggestion that the idea of universality has resulted in the Corporation 'chasing ratings rather than delivering distinctive, quality programming that other providers would not'; in other words, listeners and viewers would be better served if the BBC was to concentrate on 'particular or underserved audiences'. Certainly, the BBC is not without blame for aggressive scheduling and crony corporatism,[14] and it could not do more than it already does to represent a wider range of socio-cultural relations and processes. On the other hand, to single it out for lacking distinctiveness is misleading. For a start, of the 192,564 responses to the government's consultation, more than four-fifths of respondents thought that the BBC is serving its audiences 'well or very well', and three quarters indicated that the BBC's content is 'sufficiently high quality and distinctive from that of other broadcasters' (DCMS 2016b). Puttnam also notes, drawing on the research of Peter Goddard (2017), that 'distinctiveness' is a highly subjective notion that is not easily defined, much less measured as a quantitative benchmark.

Moreover, whereas the Annan Report recommended minority programming in the genuine interests of pluralism, present-day talk of 'increased differentiation' is best understood as euphemistic doublespeak aimed at emasculating the BBC's universal appeal in the belief that it has a negative impact on the commercial television sector (Puttnam 2017: 55-56). A striking case in point is a DCMS commissioned report that offers an econometric assessment of the BBC's market impact and distinctiveness (Oliver and Ohlbaum 2016; see also, DCMS 2016b). Not for nothing does the consultancy advocate a shrinking of BBC One's primetime entertainment: as well as reducing the channel's audience share, such a policy could benefit ad-funded rivals by £33m to £60m per year by the end of the next ten-year charter period. However, it is important to remember that most of the BBC's rivals are part of diversified media conglomerates and *already* benefit from multifunctional synergies, such as cross-media promotion and repurposing. And industry metrics would suggest that audio-visual markets are in perfectly good order: for example, total net UK advertising revenue (for multi and PSB channels) increased from £3.7bn in 2013 to £3.8bn in 2014; likewise, online television income rocketed from £95m in 2009 to £793m in 2014, a growth of 38 per cent year-on-year. Meanwhile, Enders Analysis estimate that BBC's share of TV revenue was likely to shrink from 22 per cent in 2010 to just 12 per cent in 2026 (Puttnam 2016: 54). Add to this the latest real-term cuts to the value of the licence fee and it seems almost self-evident that the BBC is not the monopolistic behemoth that its critics make it out to be.[15]

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[14] The BBC's acquisition of the format for *The Voice* at a cost of £20 million is cited as a prime example of such behaviour and is summarily criticised for impinging on TV genres and formats that could be served equally well by its commercial competitors, particularly during peak viewing hours.

[15] Besides, to solicit criticisms from the BBC's commercial rivals is not unlike the pot calling the kettle black. Indeed, it is very telling that much of the current government's thinking about broadcasting pays scant attention to wider trends and market failures in the UK audiovisual sector. To do so would expose its claims to objectivity and, ultimately, the Tories fervor for economic liberalism.

VI

Of course, the future of public service television ought not be decided by the findings of market research and public surveys alone. And whilst the Puttnam report has a decidedly political economy bent, it also advances what are essentially cultural arguments about 'the contribution that television can make to public life' (Puttnam 2016: 10). In so doing, the report takes inspiration from the Pilkington Report on Broadcasting (HMSO 1962), of which the late Richard Hoggart was a key author. Indeed, the report acknowledges an indebtedness to Hoggart's thinking, not least his criticisms of a new 'candy-floss world' and his summing up of Pilkington 'as a study in social philosophy' about 'the nature of good broadcasting in a democracy' (Puttnam 2016: 10 & 13; cf Hoggart 1992: 62). The report even quotes Hoggart at his most Leavisite in anticipation that some of its own proposals will likely be criticised for being 'elitist' or 'do-gooding', just as Pilkington recommendations were: 'We could not enforce our judgements scientifically; we could only say at the end ... "This is so, is it not?" Our readers could say "yes"; or "no"' (ibid). It is certainly true that, whilst recognising that *ex cathedra* opinions can be misleading, Hoggart had little time for social research that 'outlines a great many useful is's' but refuses to 'give a single ought' (Hoggart 1972: 189; see also, Bailey 2011: 138-45; Milland 2005; Petley 2016). Happily, the Puttnam inquiry received several submissions that proposed both 'is's' and 'oughts', and the final report contains no fewer than thirty compelling recommendations.

Insofar as both Pilkington and Puttnam are singularly preoccupied with how best to revitalise the idea of public service television and are not afraid of engaging in a spirited exchange of ideas, they have much in common. Apart from their combative dismissal of commercial populism and its championing of 'giving the public what it wants', perhaps the most interesting articulation between the two reports is their recognition and encouragement of unorthodox and minority viewpoints, as oppose to the more autocratic 'giving the public what they ought to have'.[16] For example, here is Pilkington's concluding remark on 'The Purposes of Broadcasting' (1962: 19-20):

> … television must pay particular attention to those parts of the range of worthwhile experience which lie beyond the most common; to those parts which some have explored here and there but few everywhere … For it is at these points that the challenges to existing assumptions and beliefs are made, where the claims to new knowledge and new awareness are stated. If our society is to respond to the challenges and judge the claims, they must be put before it. All broadcasting, and television especially, must be ready and anxious to experiment, to show the new and unusual, to give a hearing to dissent. Here, broadcasting must be most willing to make mistakes; for if it does not, it will make no discoveries.

Echoing Raymond Williams' (1967: 33) oft-cited definition of communication as 'the sharing of human experience', the Puttnam report also identifies a pressing need 'to find mechanisms that link television producers and distributors to their audiences and allow them to speak to issues of common concern, that recognise the needs of distinct communities and that involve the public as active subjects', that is, 'to expand the terms of debate beyond those of policymakers who are

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[16] See Petley's submission …

often more interested in stability and consensus' (Puttnam 2016: 153-54). Elsewhere, the project lead for the Puttnam inquiry and one of the report's key authors, Des Freedman (2016), notes that 'dissensus, not consensus, is the new normal and that we better get used to the absence of agreement. And perhaps that is one of the failings of our most popular broadcasters: that they have for too long gravitated towards a perceived 'centre ground' when this 'centre ground' was coming unstuck; that, instead of promoting a multitude of voices and formats and taking risks, they have too often clung to the familiar and acceptable'. Again, though commenting on the present-day, Freedman's analysis is remarkably like Richard Hoggart's (1972: 184) reflections on the reception of Pilkington in the 1960s and the difficulties of democratic debate more generally:

> The report suggested that broadcasters should from time to time gamble on our willingness to try something different – or they will come to assume that today's average levels of taste are immutable, facts of nature. By assuming this, they will tend to reinforce those levels, to make them 'set' rather than support growth and difference. Dissent, the freedom to differ, had to be built into broadcasting systems because, left alone, they tend to accept the status quo, to overlook small growing points in favour of established or popular big battalions.

It is with the above in mind that Puttnam time and again returns to matters concerning diversity (2016: 31, 103-13, 157-58, 169). At its most basic, the report suggests that all television channels could do more to maintain a heterogeneous provision of programming, including at risk genres, that appeal to both mass and minority audiences (Puttnam 2016: 129-43). In the case of ITV, Puttnam recommends it restore its 'regional heritage'. Not only will this strengthen ITV's pull, it could also help mitigate the decline in regional journalism and the resulting 'democratic deficit', whereby local voices are experiencing a significant decline in regional representation (ibid: 86). Similarly, the report urges the BBC to rethink its nation and regions strategy. Whilst there is much evidence that the BBC has responded positively to demands for greater 'out of London' investment, the report argues that its governance and commissioning structures are still too heavily centralised inside Broadcasting House. Hence the recommendation that BBC funding needs to 'better reflect devolutionary pressures and budgets for spending in the devolved nations' (ibid: 158). Such changes might also address the often-reported complaint that many of the BBC programmes are disproportionately aimed at the South of England middle classes (ibid: 115-27). To take but one example: though a critical friend, film and television producer Tony Garnett (2016) has repeatedly criticised the BBC (or what he sardonically refers to as the Central London Broadcasting Corporation) for being too metropolitan and failing to adequately represent Britain's 'other regions, with their own culture, political stance and achievements' (see also Milne 2015). And when people from the provinces do appear on the screen, Garnett angrily notes that their life stories are often 'presented as though they were foreign news', 'patronised by posh southerners who occasionally venture north, like visiting anthropologists, to investigate the habits of the quaint natives'. And he is especially scathing about the BBCs dereliction of its public service remit to make a full range of programmes, such as bespoke single plays or miniseries that genuinely document the lived experiences of working people, 'showing them in all their dignity,

from their point of view'. In short, BBC television could do far more to 'reach out to everyone and engage in a truly national conversation'.

Then again, debates about diversity ought not be confined to geographical communities. Equally important are communities of interest. Indeed, where Pilkington and Putnam differ is in the latter's attention to broader diversity issues concerning women, disabled people, LGBTi and BAME audiences (104-113). Of these, the report focuses mainly on the notable levels of dissatisfaction among ethnic minority groups with how they are represented on television. For example, according to a 2015 diversity report commissioned by OfCom, a staggering 51% of black respondents felt that UK television portrayed black people negatively or not at all (ibid: 105). The report also notes that questions of underrepresentation and racial stereotyping are inextricably intertwined with the lack of diverse employment in television. Industry research clearly demonstrates that, though well intentioned, hitherto employment targets and additional money for talent development have failed to bring about any lasting systematic change (ibid: 109-13). Hence the report recommends several possible solutions, such as amending the 2010 Equality Act so that 'television commissioning and editorial policy would be covered by public service equality duties', and the ring-fencing of funds for BAME productions (ibid: 157). Such measures would almost certainly help to create better organisational structures for ensuring a more diverse workforce and content aimed at supporting both multicultural and intracultural pluralism.

VII

Many of the above-mentioned suggestions concerning public service television, and the future of mass communications more generally, are well-worn. Apart from the examples of Pilkington and Hoggart, it was Raymond Williams (1967) who suggested, as far back as the 1960s, that new kinds of broadcasting institutions are needed if the public are ever to 'have control of their own means of expression' - ones that are premised upon good public debate and genuine methods of representation that draw upon the opinions of a variety of publics, not just those of media proprietors, practitioners, middle-class reformers, organised interest groups, and government bodies, even though these agencies form an integral and inescapable part of our media culture. Not unlike Jürgen Habermas, Williams believed that the media ought to function as a truly autonomous public sphere in which people can exchange ideas and opinions openly and on equal terms, giving rise to communicative rationality and a collective sense of purpose. The vision is of a cultural democracy in which public service broadcasting is extended beyond even paternal broadcasters like the BBC. Likewise, John Keane (1991) and John Thompson (1995) have argued for more expansive, non-reductionist models of public service broadcasting, ones that are premised upon more complex notions of public service (and a pluralist civil society) in which social movements and community-based citizens' groups can make use of more diffused and localised media networks. James Curran's (2005) advocacy of 'a core public service broadcasting system, encircled by a private, social market, professional and civic media sectors', that is a public service culture based upon a multiplicity of both competing and common interests, is an even more concrete illustration of how the ecology of British television could be further

democratised. And there are numerous other scholars, media professionals and campaign groups that have made similarly valuable contributions over the years.

Even so, the Puttnam report is to be commended for its comprehensive and lucid defence of television's social purpose in the context of the medium's rapidly changing production, distribution and consumption practices. Its thoughtful analysis, careful attention to detail and cogent recommendations leave the reader in no doubt that the viewing public have a right to access the fullest means of information and creative expression so that we might learn to better value our common humanity *and* our best selves. The report also reminds us that renewing the purposes and institutional structures of UK public service television in the early 21st century will, as has been the case in the past, depend on whether the government of the day has the conviction to implement a raft of broadcasting polices that guarantee additional funding; require existing broadcasters and new providers of televisual content to carry a full range of programmes (despite increasing commercial pressures and audience fragmentation); that give rise to new regulatory processes that articulate global, national and local debates. Above all, Puttnam invites us to have faith that British democracy can overcome the latest erosion of public trust in our democratic institutions. This is particularly important considering the current political climate where, even with the ongoing economic crisis, the governmental usage of financial markets and private corporations would seem to be the preferred technique for regulating socio-cultural relations and corporate life. At the time of writing, things could hardly be worse. We can but hope that to everything there is a season, that the tide will turn again, and that a new age of revived philistine instrumentality will be held off. But we cannot wait passively for that to happen. Though it faces a cacophony of oppositional voices and difficulties, the Putnam report represents a meaningful opportunity to promote that desirable outcome.

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