

## FROM SERVICE TO COMMONS

### Re-inventing a space for public communication

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#### **Servicing Democracy**

The media help us to make sense of the world. By addressing us as citizens, rather than mere consumers or free-floating egos, media make the link between communication and community. At its best, public broadcasting has contributed to a national conversation about who we are, how we live and what we want from the future. It has helped to define a public arena in which we can be more than passing strangers.

The mediation of solidarity is threatened from two directions. Firstly, media technologies have changed radically and the language of terrestrial, national broadcasting is not always meaningful in thinking about how we want to communicate in the twenty-first century. Secondly, the discourse of citizenship is all too frequently infected by a mood of gloom, based upon a belief that there are now fewer issues than ever before that can be discussed by everyone with a view to fostering the common good. The fragmentation of the media audience, which has been an outcome of multi-channel choice, is regarded as a metaphor for the tribal disintegration of the public.

Policy for public communication in the twenty-first century needs to reflect these changes in both the technologies of communication and the sense in which the public is conceived. As a public body established in the early twentieth-century, the BBC has always seen itself as a service, mediating the national culture for a receiving audience. But what happens when audiences speak and make things happen as well as consuming cultural output? What happens when *the* national culture is a contested zone? What happens if service is not enough?

Raymond Williams, in *Culture and Society*, contrasted the liberal, Victorian idea of service with the democratic idea of solidarity. Service, he argued, entails an uncritical relationship to social order. The function of the servant, whether as senior government policy-maker or butler, is not to question the rules of the game. (1) In a deferential culture service makes sense – in fact, it reinforces sense. Culture as service is, not unlike a church service, linear and led: there is a beginning and end, a front and back row, a right and wrong tune to the liturgy. Like the dominating servility of Jeeves to his master, Bertie Wooster, the service-provider offers what is needed rather than what is wanted. In the patrician terms of John Reith's evidence to the Crawford Committee in 1925, 'He who prides himself on giving what he thinks the public wants is often creating a fictitious demand for lower standards which he himself will then satisfy.' (2)

So, broadcasting as a service fitted well the age of media scarcity, when choice meant *Take Your Pick* or *Double Your Money*. We are not wrong to feel nostalgia for a time when important things could be said to everyone and talked about the next day with anyone. Public broadcasting served as protection against anomie and disintegration

and came as close to a simulation of community as industrialised, mass society would reach. The BBC modernised the popular apprehension of national culture and helped to lift the populace from subject-spectators to animated participants in their own culture. This has been an inherently democratising project.

Then there is market-based, commercial broadcasting. If public service is often oblivious to the wider relationships in which it is implicated, the commercial media never forgets their connecting strings. As the mediation of British democratic culture has become more privatised, with the growth of deregulation and channel fragmentation, a range of characteristics have emerged which threaten to seem unexceptional and inevitable. Firstly, news and public-interest coverage is expected to compete with other areas of output on the basis of ratings and capacity to attract lucrative sponsorship. Secondly, the coverage of politics is abridged and under-researched, a victim of populist scheduling rationales and the relentless 24/7 news cycle. Thirdly, professional journalists find themselves locked in to a systemic embrace with political message and event managers, so that the contestation of news becomes ever more a battle between rival public relations manipulators. Fourthly, the role of citizens within this thin political sphere diminishes to the point of being little more than cheering – and increasingly booing – onlookers. Finally, the audience, whose attention sustains the case for news and public-interest programming, switch off in droves, preferring to engage in the real interactivity of *Big Brother* or *Restoration* than the indignities of inauthentic public affairs. For commercial broadcasters, the response to audience withdrawal is simple: give the customers less of what they will not watch. Coverage of politics is marginalised and left to the junkies who will stay up all night to watch a by-election.

A public broadcasting service cannot retreat from public information. Service implies duty. But it should not blind itself to the reality that, for millions of its viewers and listeners, political coverage no longer matters. Richard Sambrook, in a speech to the Royal Television Society, observed that

News viewing – across all channels – is now down 25% for the under-45s. There's a generation growing older which just doesn't sit down and watch news as their parents did. I see that as a time bomb. A demographic wave sweeping up through all of our audiences. If we don't do something, in ten years it'll be the under-55s and then the under-65s who don't watch. (3)

If, as Sambrook suggests, and political scientists such as Seyd and Whitely confirm, disengagement from politics is a cohort effect, then democracy is in trouble and the public servant of democratic culture must simply learn to support it in new ways. (4)

### **Disconnection and its Discontents**

The problem with contemporary political culture is often described in terms of disconnection. It is as if the public has somehow become unplugged from the socket of traditional power; as if the wiring of political legitimation has precariously loosened. The technological metaphors of connection and disconnection are not accidental. In a political culture that is so thoroughly mediated, pessimists blame the media for turning people off politics (again, a metaphor from radio technology); optimists hope that new, online media will tune them in again; and politicians call for political 'reconnection', as if seeking to rekindle a once robust attachment. There is an

inescapable risk of banal determinism in linking communication technology with political engagement without addressing the surrounding problems of obsolescence and irrelevance in many of the practices and cultural norms of contemporary politics.

Few would now disagree that we are facing a veritable crisis of public participation. This is manifested in collapsing voter turnout, the demise of mass-membership political parties and a collapse in trust for political institutions or efficacy on the part of citizens. In a candid recognition of the problem, though not the solution, the Leader of the House of Commons, Peter Hain, has noted that

The public, and particularly young people, now have less faith than ever in parliamentary democracy. We (politicians and media) who constitute the 'political class' conduct politics in a way that turns off our voters, readers, listeners and viewers. They want intelligent coverage and debate, not 24-hour news spin.

People now place a greater emphasis on independence and individualism. They are less deferential and less willing to accept the opinions of 'experts.' They want information, accountability and influence.

In such an era, trust and respect no longer flow from status. It must be earned. And so the task for Parliament is to connect. Too many people believe that government is something that is done to them. Westminster must stop giving the impression of being a private club and instead give the public a greater sense of ownership. (5)

Citizen disengagement should not be confused with apathy - as if few people were concerned about, interested in, or had relevant views about how politics affects their lives. A major source of public frustration is citizens' inability to see how their voices count. A UK national survey of young people who have recently become eligible to vote found that 84% considered that they had no influence on political affairs and 63% believed that they had no say in what the government does. (6)

It is within this context of public disengagement and inefficacy that the democratic potential of the internet, as an interactive communication technology, has been assessed. The internet could be a new medium for horizontal communications and interactions and thereby for new relations between citizens. Its transformative potential lies in two fields. Firstly, there is the conventionally political field of citizenship and activism, where the internet could enable new modes of communication between members of social and political movements and parties. Secondly, there is the perhaps more fundamental political field of friendship and association - that is, those social relations beyond kinship that are, according to some traditions of political theory the fundamental political relations and the basis for government founded on politics. The internet could afford citizens a new technology, and a new set of channels, for

- holding governments to account - for asking questions of representatives, ministers and parties, for protesting and talking back about governmental and administrative failure, for policy evaluations and reports.
- high quality consultation on policy options - improving policy design and legitimacy.

- displacing or supplementing older communication media – face-to-face communication, telecommunication, broadcasting, press and print.
- political mobilisation - to be used by parties to democratic politics to recruit supporters, members and activists.
- transactions between governments and citizens - claiming benefits, paying taxes and fines, buying licences and so on.
- strengthening representation by creating more direct channels of engagement, consultation and discursive interaction between representatives and represented.

The potential of the new media to invigorate democracy is high. But that potential could be lost, submerged or marginalised if not deliberately harnessed for civic purposes. Nothing is guaranteed about the realisation of that potential. Technology, after all, is democratically neutral; its development depends on how it is used. And left to their own devices, the new media could replay the disappointing scenarios that have shaped the fates of earlier 'new media' (radio, television, cable TV), in which for a time high civic hopes were also invested.

The UK Government, like others across Europe, North America and Australasia, has initiated a vast e-government programme, intended to transform the delivery of services to the public and scope for government-citizen transactions. The public is unenthusiastic by e-government and it is still the case that rates of use for government web sites are low. Between 86 and 93 per cent of UK citizens have never accessed any online government services, according to a range of recent usage studies. (7)

Governments will never generate an interest in the democratic potential of the internet by confining their use to the rationalisation of bureaucratic transactions.

The UK Government has taken some tentative steps in the direction of conceiving a policy for the internet as a democratic channel. The title of its policy consultation paper, *In the Service of Democracy*, is revealing. (Interestingly, exactly the same title was chosen for Swedish Government and Dutch parliamentary reports on the same subject.) The danger of such initiatives is that they are framed in terms of a service discourse: democracy as a gift to a receiving subject. 'Here, let us allow you to tell us what you think – here, let us give you a chance to vote online.' Handed-down democracy generates consumer-democrats.

The Government's attempt to create a showpiece online space for public dialogue, the *Citizenspace* area within the *UK Online* government portal, was not a success. Between its formation in June 2001 and January 2002 it attracted 35,000 registered users who posted over 40,000 messages. Contributions from the public were not moderated or summarised and, above all, were entirely disconnected from the policy-making process. *Citizenspace* became a forum for empty ranting rather than meaningful consultation, made additionally frustrating by the notice appearing at the top of the discussion forums declaring that a summary of the comments would be passed on to the Prime Minister. In fact, a substantial number of all the messages within *Citizenspace* were addressed not to matters of current affairs, but to allegations that messages had been censored, deleted and unanswered. The Government had reinvented the worst aspects of soapbox oratory and, by placing it online, imagined that it had somehow contributed to modernised empowerment.

Beyond government, the internet has been used in more imaginative ways to consult with hard to reach stakeholders, share experiential narratives, promote political satire, organise collective actions and link dispersed groups. By and large, experiments in online democracy have flourished in serene independence from government. Perhaps that is inevitably the way with democracy: it is always ultimately subversive to government and should never be conceived as a top-down service or offering. The BBC has always been at its best when it has been autonomous. What sort of communicative autonomy is appropriate for the media ecology of the twenty-first century?

### **The new context for public communication**

Since 1927, when the BBC became a corporation, both the media and the public have changed radically. There are now more media: more channels, more platforms, more efficient use of the spectrum. There is now a more diverse public: more pluralistic, reflexive and mobile. These are seismic historical changes, a recognition of which is fundamental for any serious reassessment of the role of public communication. Then there are three other shifts which are more discrete, but as important for thinking through a reconfigured system of public communication. Firstly, the shift from transmission to interaction. Secondly, the diminished significance of media places and the new dynamics of media spaces. And thirdly, a transition from democratic representation based upon the intractability of distance to more direct notions of representation based upon (often disembodied) participation and deliberation. The combination of these three trends suggests a case for the reshaping of public communication.

### *From transmission to interaction*

Brecht famously observed that

The radio would be the finest possible communication apparatus in public life, a vast network of pipes. That is to say, it would be if it knew how to receive as well as to transmit, how to let the listener speak as well as hear, how to bring him into a relationship instead of isolating him. On this principle the radio should step out of the supply business and organize its listeners as suppliers. Any attempt by the radio to give a truly public character to public occasions is a step in the right direction. (8)

Broadcasting has evolved as a dominative form of communication: its tendency has been to transmit without receiving, to speak without being spoken back at. In the late twentieth-century broadcasters began to incorporate technologies of feedback into their 'one-way conversations.' The phone-in show is exemplary of this 'step in the right direction', from a Brechtian perspective. But the phone-in caller, like the studio audience member or *Big Brother* housemate, is always only a guest, an invited participant in the broadcasters' agenda, bound to play by the broadcasters' rules. (9)

The public performs a surrogate presence in broadcast media.

A defining feature of digital media is their inherent feedback path which blurs traditional distinctions between message senders and receivers. No successful online communication strategy works on the assumption that message transmission is an

exclusive domain. The rhetoric of 'Here I am. You only have to look at me and listen to me to complete the communicative transaction' no longer works.

The huge success of reality TV - which is still dismissed by snobs for whom it is seen as a step too far towards reflecting and respecting the ordinary - has depended upon the technical opportunity for audiences to control distant events on the basis of their own judgements. Whether it is the authenticity of a contestant on *Big Brother* or the talent of a performer on *Fame Academy* or the cultural value of an historic building on *Restoration*, interactivity has provided an experience of democratic control for which people are prepared to pay. (Imagine if they had to pay to vote in a general election!) Some of the current reality formats may well prove to be ephemeral, but interactivity will become a permanent fixture, alongside colour pictures and teletext. (10)

Interactivity is the flip side of the 'look, but don't touch' deference of the 1950s. It heralds a media landscape in which touchability is the norm. Political touchability means that politicians can no longer just reach out, but must be reachable; policy-makers must no longer simply access the 'hard to reach', but must address the fact that the political elite are the hardest to reach of all.

### ***From place to space***

Media occupy places and put us in our place. The BBC, for example, is symbolically as well as physically in and of Britain. When we are in France and listen to *Any Questions* or *The Shipping Forecast*, although the disembodied voices we hear are with us, we know that they originate in and belong to a place that is called Britain, the Britishness of which is noth defined and reflected by the BBC. With its symbolic

appeal to we-ness and its nuanced sense that the rest of the world is somewhere out there, the BBC represents place and holds its audience in place. If print helped us to imagine community, broadcasting helps us to feel it.

As global communication has become a reality, national media have come to look and feel more like local media: they remain good at representing the peculiarities and specificities of culture, but less convincing in addressing the grand themes that everyone must know about. 'Everyone' no longer resides in any one country (except the USA, where even scholars persist in using Americans as a synonym for human beings), but is everywhere, globally.

The civic role of the public broadcaster within global media space must be radically re-thought. As national broadcaster, a constitutional structure of legitimate authority and necessary accountability framed the democratic agenda. In a global space of often illegitimate and unaccountable organisations and agencies, sometimes exercising far more power than national governments, who are the democratic media supposed to represent? In media spaces that anyone can enter and anyone can leave, who are the citizens and what are the rules? To be more direct about this problem, where in the global media landscape does one go to question the World Bank or the WTO or the UN Security Council? Where are the spaces for debate and deliberation about risks to our common health or security or environment? What is the global equivalent of *Any Questions*? To whom do we complain if the world wide web becomes a disturbing and confusing space?

***From distance to deliberation***

Since its inception, representative democracy has been characterised by the tyranny and the mystique of distance. The ‘tyranny of distance’ (a phrase invented by Blainey to describe the problems of mass communication in Australia) was a principally technological problem. As long as it took too long to travel from the centre of governance to far-away constituents, the represented had simply to trust those whom they *sent* to speak for them. Distance also refers to the mystique of cognitive superiority and symbolic exclusivity. At one level, we elect representatives precisely because they are not like us.

The spontaneous transparency of live media has compressed physical distance and undermined the pretensions of deferential distance. Political representatives are increasingly expected to be one of us. The simulation of vulnerable ordinariness has become a political skill far more valued than the cultivation of demagogic distinction. In this sense, the media have helped to democratise representation.

For classical Schumpeterian political theorists, the only basis for representation could be aggregation. So, the media became obsessed by numbers. Opinion polls. Swings. Majorities. Parliamentary votes. The public were conceived as a vast provider of psephological data. As the world became more complex, democratic values less uncritical, citizens less deferential and mass disengagement more conspicuous, a turn from counting to accounting democracy took place. We have come to realise that people have voices as well as votes and that the health of democracy can be measured in accordance with how well voices are heard.

Experiments in public deliberation, ranging from citizens' juries to deliberative polls to consensus conferences all pointed to the strong suggestion that public preferences were less fixed than political realists had believed. When exposed to information, diverse narratives and public reason people can and do change their minds. As importantly, once introduced to a culture of debate, people's sense of efficacy increases and they feel motivated to participate more.

The interactivity of digital media makes two-way accountability unprecedentedly possible. The rise of two-way digital communication erodes the role of the representative-ventriloquist and suggests a new dimension of accountability in which citizens give their own accounts, in their own words. An account-giving notion of accountability involves much more than transparency: it calls for views, policies and actions to be explained, contextualised and related to social experience. To be democratic, public accountability must transcend the traditional rituals of consultation with 'the usual suspects' and find ways of actively collecting accounts, even from those who might think they have no accounts to give.

### **A Civic Commons**

What, then, should be the role of a public broadcaster in the twenty-first century? Such a role should embrace two principles. Firstly, the unique requirement to provide universal access to content that is in the public interest. This ranges from news bulletins and weather forecasts, that are of universal significance, to minority public interests that would not otherwise be catered for by commercial media. Secondly, a recognition of the new context for public communication: that such communication can no longer be conceived in terms of broadcast transmission, but must embrace the

broadest opportunities of interactive communication; that public communication must relate to the reality of global networks and cannot be confined to territorially-bounded audiences; and that there is a normative democratic function for public communicators, not simply to report the workings of democratic institutions, but to inspire and facilitate public participation in its own governance. These principles have several policy ramifications, but the concluding objective of this chapter is to make the case for one practical proposal for sharpening the purpose and relevance of public communication in the twenty-first century.

There is a need now to give new and extra meaning to public service communications. Just as in the 1920s, Europeans realised that public service broadcasting organisations were essential if the new medium of radio was to serve public purposes at all well, so today an area of the internet should be given over to a quite new-style public service framework, designed to enable and organise consultation and deliberation between citizens and political institutions over issues of public policy. Jay Blumler and I have argued that there is a need for a publicly-funded, independently-managed online ‘civic commons.’ The body running this communications initiative for the age of interactivity would

be charged to elicit, gather and coordinate citizens’ deliberations upon and reactions to problems faced and proposals issued by public bodies (ranging from local authorities to parliaments and government departments), which would then be expected to react formally to whatever emerges from the public discussions. The resulting ‘electronic commons’ would be neither a talking shop in splendid isolation nor a replacement of representative by direct democracy. It would be instead an open-ended, institutionally-backed extension of people’s opportunities to make contributions to public policy on those matters that specially concern them. (11)

The creation of an online civic commons addresses both the crisis of public participation and the exploitation of the democratic potential of the new media. From a citizens' perspective, it would address the frustrating disconnection between public action and political consequence. Zygmunt Bauman, in *In Search of Politics*, laments 'the blatant inconsequentiality' of anything that takes place in contemporary public spaces:

Assuming for a moment that the extraordinary happened and private/public space was filled with citizens wishing to debate their values and discuss the laws which are there to guide them – where is the agency powerful enough to carry through their resolutions? The most powerful powers float or flow, and the most decisive decisions are taken in a space remote from the *agora* or even from the politically institutionalised public space; for the political institutions of the day, they are truly out of bounds and out of control. (12)

For, not only are members of the public disconnected from institutions of representation and governance, but these institutions are cut off from the spaces of the public, adrift in a sea that is only calm because there is nobody else in it.

So, a space for civic participation must be constitutionally connected. The civic commons should be run by an independent agency, funded by government, but accountable to the public. This agency would be charged with promoting, publicising, regulating, moderating, summarising, and evaluating the broadest and most inclusive range of online deliberation via various new media platforms, including the web, e-mail, newsgroups, and digital TV.

Politicians are constantly asking for public debates. ‘The time has come for a much broader *public debate* about how we effectively regulate modern communications and strike the balance between the privacy of the individual and the need to ensure our laws and society are upheld.’ (David Blunkett) ‘We would welcome a *public debate* [on funding of political parties] and members of the cabinet should be free to take part in that debate without necessarily first reaching a collective line and then seeking to impose that collective line on the party, parliament and public.’ (Robin Cook) ‘The Government wants a genuinely open and balanced discussion on GM. There is clearly a wide range of views on this issue and *we want to ensure all voices are heard.*’ (Margaret Beckett) These calls are uttered as if the mechanisms for such a process have only to be switched on for public voices to be heard. In reality, public debate is more likely to comprise a series of interviews on *Today* and *Newsnight* and some exclusive exchanges between civil servants and the usual suspects. The public is largely ignored in such great debates.

There could well be a key role here for the BBC. It has been granted a very broad remit to innovate online and has developed a successful web presence. Between 16 and 20 million unique users access BBCi each month and over 1 million messages are sent to BBCi message boards each month. The BBC has not, however articulated a clear notion of a public service remit for its online presence, with the consequence that grassroots initiatives are often squeezed out. The BBC has faced widespread criticism for providing various online services, including search, education and entertainment. It could seek to defend its position in economic terms, but, as Andrew Graham has argued, the case for public broadcasting need not rely solely on arguments about market failure; there are equally powerful arguments for public communication based upon the economically intangible interests of citizenship,

community and democracy. (13) These so-called externalities are not easily measurable or quantifiable, but the qualitative effects of their absence or atrophy are soon perceived by all of us.

A central normative concept of contemporary social thought is that of the public sphere, defined by Dahlgren as ‘the institutional space where political will formation takes place, via the unfettered flow of relevant information and ideas.’ (14) Too often talk of the public sphere falls prey to romanticism (we had it, but we lost it) and fatalism (there’s no hope for the public or its spaces.) A policy for public communication in the twenty-first century cannot ignore the public sphere for at least three reasons. Firstly, because there is an irresistible democratic case for doing whatever is possible to make the arena of policy formation and decision-making as socially and culturally inclusive as possible. Secondly, to redress the dangers of group segmentation and attitudinal polarisation which seem to be unavoidable effects of the fragmentation of the media audience and the ghettoisation of single-issue and narrow-communal politics. Thirdly, because in an increasingly complex world the experiential and expert inputs of those outside the formal policy circle are necessary in order to make sensible decisions.

The BBC might respond that, important though such attention to the public sphere might be, it is not its job to provide it. Then whose job is it? Government is manifestly unable to create such a communication space – and attempts to promote governmentally-sponsored deliberation would not be trusted by citizens. The BBC is trusted, knows more than most about how to help the public to articulate its views and is in need of a role in the age of interactivity which befits its sense of high social

purpose. As an agent for civilised public debate and authentic connection between people and their representatives, the BBC could surprise its critics by having an even more important role in the twenty-first century than it had in the twentieth.

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