

THE BBC QUESTION

Michael Chanan

When Screen Forum was born out of a couple of open meetings in London in late 1991, one of the strongest-felt priorities for attention was the future of the BBC. The first fruit of this concern, a one-day conference at Riverside nearly a year later (preceding by three weeks the delayed publication of the Government's Green Paper on the future of the BBC) happily succeeded in bringing BBC employees and independent programme makers into dialogue together.

The growth of the independent sector is one of the main differences from the last time the renewal of the BBC Charter came up in 1981. But the ground has shifted in other ways too, for over the same period the ideology of the market place has colonised the language of public debate. As Stuart Hall put it at Riverside, even in his institution of the Open University the language in which public issues are discussed has undergone a complete shift. Probably no-one had changed their political allegiances, he said, but everyone speaks differently: 'we have been internally reconstructed'.

Market-place language, and its incompatibility with the liberal language of old patrician values, was one of the reasons for the emergence of a crisis of leadership at the BBC, which is not resolved by the departure of Michael Checkland, the accountant who was appointed Director General in 1987. The crisis was first publicly aired in two major speeches last summer by Michael Grade and David Attenborough. Attenborough attacked the idea going about that the BBC ought to withdraw from the full spectrum of programme-making and concentrate on the 'higher ground' (the so-called 'Himalaya option'). This, he said, would rob the BBC of the widespread popular support which has made the licence fee acceptable. Grade accused the BBC of dangerous political appeasement likely to threaten the survival of the Corporation. Now that John Birt has taken over after eighteen months waiting in the wings, and is able to speak his mind, nothing is any clearer. 'An outward-looking audience-centred perspective' is the boss-eyed formula Mr Birt now offers.

Most people at Riverside agreed when Hall argued that the loss of nerve at the corporate centre of the BBC is a failure to perceive how, as the old public service broadcasting model disintegrates, it can be adapted. A new model is essential, because the cultural conditions have changed. Channel Four, a television publishing house instead of a programme factory, offered a model of what public broadcasting might mean in contemporary conditions. (Of course he could also have mentioned Carlton.) But here the conference saw two positions emerge. For whilst everyone agreed that to keep the space of public broadcasting open and free of commercialism was vital, some speakers felt the main object was just to defend the BBC and secure the licence fee, and this was the best that could be achieved.

However, Hall (who someone later proposed as an eminently suitable BBC Governor) was arguing something more: it was not a question of defending the

institution as it is but the space which it ought to occupy. While the old rationale of public service broadcasting formulated by Reith is now unworkable and needs to be rethought, the essence of the matter is still the same: public service broadcasting is educative: it brings society into dialogue with itself; we need this. Today, as Isaac Julien and Parminder Vir pointed out, this requires among other things an end to the ghettoisation of multiculturalism. But even if the new definition leaves out all the old paternalist ideological wrapping, no new model of public service broadcasting will be possible, Hall averred, unless the licence fee can be guaranteed.

All this was extremely useful in mapping out the terrain, but still indicates only part of the changes in the last couple of decades. Brian Winston told us about what he called 'the significant absence in the debate': the US experience, which proved that more channels does not mean a bigger audience, or increased revenues, or more programme choice. The market is not elastic and while it's good for diversity of brands, it is hopeless at diversity of product. Thus the defence of the BBC is vital in order to sustain the quality and range of television.

Roger Bolton, from the franchise-loser Thames, argued that the conference should not produce a list of specific demands, but call for a Public Inquiry. But what would be its terms of reference? And what language would it speak? The linguistic perversions produced by market-place speech tend to disguise the real nature of the market. The term 'independent', for example, has become almost meaningless. Ironically, it was Channel 4 which first made it so. Back in the sixties and seventies, people who worked on their own account selling their skills and services on the market, were called freelancers. When Channel Four started up, Jeremy Isaacs and his team encouraged the expansion of this sector by enticing many top BBC contract programme-makers to take the plunge and 'go independent'. Freelancers now became what the advertising industry calls independent 'creatives'. But the underlying relationship is the same: freelancers are sub-contractors, selling their specialised creative skills. Sub-contracting remains the game, but the sub-contracting units have got larger. The result is that 'independent' now means any programme maker, whether large or small, who doesn't have their own transmitter.

Some speakers approved the BBC's recent attempts to come to terms with this market-place of programme-makers. But the mechanism devised for this purpose, which Checkland's representative at Riverside, David Docherty, Head of the TV Planning and Strategy Unit, himself called the 'dreadful dragon' of Producer Choice, came in for a great deal of criticism. Brian Winston called it 'spurious entrepreneurialism', misconceived because it didn't operate with real market prices but invented ones. Ken Trodd, Philip Donnellan and others attacked it as 'an obscene and offensive misnomer', since producers once had a lot more real editorial choice than now. Besides, in devising Producer Choice, no-one asked the producers what kind of choices they really wanted.

Trodd put the issue succinctly. The new policy was misconceived because the BBC 'is not in any way a business - in the same way that a cat is not a rabbit.' Several other speakers drew the lesson that the Corporation should not be making deals with commercial operators or trying to set up commercial tentacles, and Tony Lennon from BECTU criticised Docherty for 'defending the BBC's econometrics'. For the Right, he said, the problem with the BBC is not its alleged

inefficiency but that it exists at all, that part of the market is outside the scope of profiteering.

The BBC presence at the Riverside indicated how much the Screen Forum initiative was needed - and the possibility, in the new situation, of forging alliances. But that left other significant absences in the discussion. For one thing, the Riverside audience spanned several generations, but when the question of training was mentioned no-one spoke for the thousands of students now following courses in film and video production at more than 25 higher education institutions: the source of an increasing proportion of new entrants to the labour market (especially with the contraction of in-house training in the commercial sector).

There is little mention of training in the Green Paper, delayed first by David Mellor's resignation and then by the Government's autumn trouble, and finally published at the end of November. Nor in the BBC's own exercise in futurology, blandly entitled 'Extending Choice', which appeared, as officially promised, a couple of days later. The Green Paper talks of 'slimming down' the BBC by hiving off other 'support' services, including its transmitters, and there is also mention of a proposal to hive off a portion of the licence fee to help fund public service programming on other terrestrial broadcasting stations - an idea floated by both Michael Grade and Melvyn Bragg. You can see the logic behind this: it would help claw back the disaster for public servicing programming on commercial television caused by the franchise carve-up, though the Heritage Secretary currently on duty, Peter Brooke, is reported not to favour this option.

The Green Paper declares that the Government believes in keeping the BBC as the major public service broadcaster that it is, but places in question the need for such an institution to sustain its own infrastructure. This is not surprising: a Government which privatises everything, even water, probably never uses the word. The BBC itself has a rather different picture of the way the world works. Small mercy. The model put forward for public service broadcasting in 'Extending Choice' is the Japanese. In all other cases, says the document, public service broadcasting has failed to maintain its centrality in the face of market diversification. But NHK, through a combination of terrestrial and satellite channels, a mixed funding base and a clear programming mandate, remains 'at the heart of Japanese broadcasting'. The Tokyo option, then.

But what of the European experience of public service broadcasting? The French, for whom television stations are political footballs which get kicked around every few years, own goals included? Or the Italian, where chaos reigns and dozens of local television stations have been broadcasting illegally since last August? Or Germany? or Holland? And what of official EC policy? None are given, by Green Paper or the BBC document, more than a passing glance.

What all the scenarios leave out is any promise of democratisation of the airwaves, like the potential of low-cost video (for which the Japanese, of course, are also largely responsible). Yet the BBC itself has already demonstrated this potential: for example in the Video Diaries produced by the Community Programmes Unit, in which professional broadcasters provide support for amateurs to produce their own programmes. Why can't this kind of participation

be extended beyond the ghettos of 'access' television and 'caught in action' entertainment shows?

The question is the same that Brecht asked about radio in the 1920s. Here is a medium, he said, capable of much more than reporting the news and distributing programmes to a mass audience, but also of allowing the listener to speak as well as hear, of organising debates, for instance, between industry and consumers about the standardisation of daily commodities, or discussions about rising prices, or disputes in local government. 'If you should think this is utopian, then I would ask you to consider why it is utopian.'

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