

A recipe for a right-wing assault on public service media?

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This article by Dr Bart Cammaerts, of the LSE Media and Communications Department.

While the announcement of the BBC to mothball the BBC Food site seems at first to be a somewhat trivial decision, it proved to be highly controversial and in the mean time the BBC backtracked in the face of public consternation. In fact, this announcement was, however, symptomatic of a neoliberal agenda that is fundamentally anti-public service and it is part of a longstanding and ongoing war of position between publicly-funded and commercial media.

In recent times, the BBC has been pushed and cajoled by its political masters to retract rather than to gracefully expand and this has all to do with political and above all ideological choices. As a much cherished and highly successful public service, the BBC is a thorn in the eyes of those who champion a leaner state and who advocate the primacy of market forces in all walks of life, including media content production. It is also a sticky thorn in the sides of commercial media, who consider the BBC as their prime competitor and distorting the market and capitalist logic in media production.



Recipe Collections



Not that the BBC is not commercial or does not pay its celebrity stars a revolting fortune (which might be legitimate to curtail), but (part of) its funding comes from citizens, who are in effect also its shareholders and audience wrapped into one. This, the commercial sector, argues constitutes a breach of fair competition law. Commercial media owners have been trying to sue public broadcasters for decades via Europe and competition law. Up until now, however, publicly funded broadcasters remain justified under the exception rule regarding state aid in terms of services of general economic interest, but for how long?

The public service ethos has a very different logic and justification from the commercial one; it argues that cultural production and democratic culture is ill-served in a context which is solely guided by a capitalist logic. Such a context inevitably leads to a few oligopolies controlling the production of media content and the meaning making process in a democracy. Hence, the need for media organisations that adhere to other criteria than commercial one.

Of course, throughout the years public service broadcasters across Europe have also mastered the art of producing excellent mainstream entertainment formats, which are enjoyed by a large majority of its 'shareholders'.

All these tensions culminate in a political and economic battle to clip the wings of public broadcasters, a set of actions that is geared towards actively avoiding them being too successful, either through reducing funding or by passing regulation that protects commercial actors or limits public service broadcasters in their actions.

It is, however, not that public service broadcasters should be abolished according to its detractors, but they should concentrate exclusively on that which the market does not provide, filling the holes in the commercial cheese rather than competing with commercial services. As James Murdoch claimed a few years ago:

“Rather than concentrating on areas where the market is not delivering, the BBC seeks to compete head-on for audiences with commercial providers.”

Part of the curtailment and containment agenda is the growing expectation that public service broadcasters focus their attention on their core-business, namely broadcasting – i.e. they should not be offering non-broadcasting related content online as that competes with the commercial newspapers or commercial services.

These tensions are not exclusive to the UK; in other European countries similar struggles between the public service model and the commercial model of media production are taking place and unsurprisingly they often situate themselves on what public service broadcasters can do and may offer online. In my view, as a democratic society with serious political legitimacy issues and as intellectuals we should argue for a radical expansion of our public service media landscape rather than force them to remain stuck in a 20th Century broadcasting era.

What we should actually be striving towards is indeed an expansion of public service media beyond radio and television, fully embracing the internet as the platform of the future, and producing a wide range of quality media content, including popular content and crucially print.

This expansion of public service media should not be limited to the BBC, but we need more and more diverse public media organisations that are also active on very local levels and across different media formats and genres; print, broadcasting and the internet.

From this perspective the swift and controversial decision to remove the cooking recipes from the website should be seen as being part of a broader ideological struggle to reduce the significance of public service media rather than increase its importance. However, a brief analysis of the state of the UK media landscape and a concern with the democratic deficit would reveal the need for the latter rather than the former.

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