

Public service is dead – long live public service!

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Our [debate](#) on Impartiality and the future of public service broadcasting proved that we are going through revolutionary times. The BBC's Economics Editor [Evan Davis](#) found himself agreeing 'intellectually' with [Richard D North](#), the author of a book called 'Scrap The BBC'. And the Online pioneer [Emily Bell](#) of *The Guardian* confessed that she has changed her mind and now thinks that the Internet does need regulating.

The event was in partnership with the BBC College of Journalism and their editor Kevin Marsh has [blogged](#) – very impartially – about it [here](#).

I thought that it was a fascinating debate for the way that it revealed how fast the media landscape is shifting. Nobody defended the status quo and everyone seemed to accept the possibility, at least, that public service values could survive the demise of the BBC.

Richard D North is an elitist free market ideologue who believes that the UK newspaper market is the ideal. A diverse range of robustly held views give us choice and competition. The reader can sort out the bias for themselves. He believes that the BBC is inhibited by its authoritative obsession with 'balance', when in fact it is simply another point of view (liberal, metropolitan, middle class). And because the BBC's journalists are forced to be 'impartial' they end up being negative about everything. He said:

They sneer at everyone in authority because they are not allowed to offer an opinion of their own. Because they are not allowed to support anything they are chippy and aggressive about everything.

Evan Davis said that intellectually he was very attracted to Richard's views. He admitted that BBC journalism is biased, for instance in always reporting business profits as somehow immoral. Davis said that he is sceptical about the future for impartiality but that instinctively he still wants public service broadcasters to offer it as an alternative to deliberately partial journalism. "I try to be fair" said Davis, "*The Daily Mail* doesn't."

Emily Bell of *The Guardian* is convinced that the Internet offers a 'natural' force for impartiality because of the diversity and interactivity it supplies. People who produce stupid or false journalism find themselves driven out of the market place for ideas by the public. Ultimately, she said, you could have an editor-less newspaper and desk-less newsrooms. "Unlimited bandwidth means the end of impartiality".

So what does that mean for the BBC? Richard D North would replace it with a broadcasting version of the National Trust provided by voluntary donations from the middle-classes. But as Damian Tambini of the LSE pointed out, not everyone can afford the cream teas and entrance fees of the National Trust and the BBC as it is now does at least provide free access.

Evan Davis said that he thought public service journalism is not doomed – yet. But he feared that we are all accelerating the rate at which it will disappear. He said that although the market will provide some sort of public service journalism, it will not be as much as we would want.

Which all raised one idea from me. Why is it that we accept that public services such as the NHS or Education should get more and more money from the taxpayer? Why do we accept that those services like Health or Transport which correct market failure and which produce social goods should get increased resources as the national economy grows? And yet we are not prepared to invest in public service journalism? All the calculations seem to be made on the assumption that people are getting more stupid and need less quality information or debate. To me the

opposite seems to be true. We are all getting richer, better educated and we all enjoy and need more reliable and effective journalism. I am not arguing for more money to the BBC. But I am arguing for more resources to go on a much greater variety of public service journalism in the future. Much of that will contribute to Emily Bell's vision of editor-less and desk-less journalism. It is up to the BBC if it is to be part of that new world.

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