

The Cost of Democracy: Regulation, Self-Regulation and the Public Interest

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Introduction

- *“It is hard to avoid the conclusion that our remarkable, convulsive revolution in the technologies of communication has debased our standards of journalism and eroded our capacity for civil discourse. We are wallowing in information – but we are starved for understanding”* – Max Frankel, New York Times
- In the US, patronage of television news slipped from 60% to 31% in past five years; newspaper circulation in decline – number of newspapers available dropping nearly 1% a year in past two decades
- The role of broadcasting in serving democracy
- The challenges for public service broadcasting
- Issues to consider

Broadcasting: A Cultural and Democratic Force

- Broadcasting is a living cultural force; it must reflect our reality
- Cable, commercialism and convergence combine to produce a new content universe – content is now available like water from a tap
- Potentially enriching but a danger that could be subverted for commerce and amusement
- European countries have long taken the view that broadcasting should be regulated in a way that the written press is not
- Over the years, the BBC has had to struggle to stick to its role as the reporter of events rather than the promoter of the views of the government

Emerging Public Policy Issues

- Issues which need to be addressed by politicians, regulators, broadcasters and society
 - new technology creating a pressure towards a media industry that contains fewer competitors
 - public monopolies being replaced by private monopolies
 - spectrum scarcity
 - single gateways to various means of distribution
 - research into children's programming, for example, shows amount of available viewing increased by factor of eight, but genuine choice has narrowed
- Broadcasting has a democratic and cultural importance – in this brave new world, who or what will stand up for the citizen and consumer interest in quality and the public good?

Limitations of the Market

- Market alone does not meet all the benefits of conventional broadcasting systems
- Nature of the funding source also has an impact on the service that is provided
- Diversity and range are restricted as services necessarily concentrate on 'market drivers'
- Some consequences of the market at work in British broadcasting
 - number of available channels increased significantly to over 400, but viewers and available viewing time remained constant. Viewing split into smaller fragments
 - terrestrial channels still dominate but overall share around 60%
 - every slot a battleground in which even BBC competes for ratings to demonstrate its right to licence fee
 - programmes become product which must maximise revenue and reduce costs
- Should broadcasting be treated as any other utility or industry?

The role of Public Broadcasting

- How to maintain a strong indigenous, national creative base, able to compete effectively in the new universe?
 - build on existing services and ensure survival of properly defined and mandated public service broadcasting
 - provide a universal high quality service with distinct value in every area of programming (especially news and factual)
 - go beyond what the market alone might provide, recognise plurality of need
- Ensure that not a means of avoiding competition, but enabling it on equal terms
- Diversity, range and ambition in every genre should be part of the national broadcaster's unique contribution
- Public broadcaster should put greater emphasis on audience reach than on audience share – BBC achieves a weekly reach of over 90%, even if on any given day share may be only 40%

A Future Framework

- Issues to consider for a future broadcasting framework
 - how to ensure programming of quality, diversity and cultural specificity is guaranteed for adults and children
 - how to ensure minimum standards of respect for human dignity
 - how to ensure consumer protection
 - how to ensure broadcasters develop their own self-regulatory culture
- A need for regulation
 - within which citizens and consumers can place their trust
 - able to ensure framework of public policy but remain independent of government
- Ofcom, the new UK regulatory body, has power to ensure cultural and regional diversity, appropriate programme standards, and hold broadcasters to account.
- Public service broadcasting is based in the belief that there is still such a thing as society, in which citizens count as much as consumers.