

Consultation: A new approach to public service content in the digital media age.

Response to the Ofcom Discussion paper: “A new approach to public service content in the digital media age. The potential role of the Public Service Publisher”.

Professor Richard Collins¹. 19 March 2007.

1. I welcome Ofcom’s consideration of establishment of a Public Service Publisher (PSP) and support strongly the principle of establishing a PSP. I will refer particularly to the future of news – rightly identified as an important issue in the Discussion Paper.

Pluralism.

2. There is growing concern, both in the UK and the European Union, about media concentration and diminished media pluralism and diversity. The European Parliament’s insertion of a new Article 23c into the draft Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD) in late 2006 is a striking recent case in point.

3. Article 23c (though narrowly referring only to conventional broadcasters) charges Member States to:

promote measures, in order that broadcasters under their jurisdiction as a whole reflect the necessary pluralism of the relevant values and options within their society.

4. A PSP could do much to support and foster new providers information (including news) and also accelerate the development of interactive “Web 2.0” based facilitation of deliberation by UK (and overseas) citizens. Tim O’Reilly, sometimes credited with first using the term “Web 2.0”, refers to “Web 2.0” services as “applications that harness network effects to get better the more people use them”. In both respects the PSP could contribute effectively to fulfilment of Ofcom’s remit to “to further the interests of citizens in relation to communications matters” (Communications Act 2003 Part 1: 3(1) a).

UK providers and Web 2.0.

5. Already, there has been a significant growth of online providers of news and information services in the UK of which some (www.OpenDemocracy.net²; is a striking example) have made very effective use of user generated content and online deliberation to enhance the range and accuracy of the information provided and to foster user involvement and understanding. Other relevant cases in point (these are cited for indicative purposes and not as either a representative sample of services or as “recommended” services) include:

- The Independent Media Centre UK (Indymedia) at www.indymedia.org.uk
- Interworld Radio (IWR) at www.interworldradio.net
- 18 Doughty Street at www.18doughtystreet.com
- “The First Post” at <http://www.thefirstpost.co.uk/>

¹ Professor of Media Studies, Sociology, The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA. UK. R.E.Collins@open.ac.uk

² I have no connection to OpenDemocracy other than as an infrequent and unpaid contributor.

Sites such as these testify to the potential of online services (whether, on one hand, television or radio like or, on the other, multimedia and/or text based) to extend the range, diversity and pluralism of news and information services.

6. Some such sites (again www.OpenDemocracy.net is a case in point) successfully use “Web 2.0” interaction and user generated content to enlarge and enhance the public sphere and to foster citizen participation and deliberation. The potential of interactive deliberation is particularly important because “Web 2.0” sites may, potentially, profit from their intrinsically dialogic character to enhance public trust and their own trustworthiness. Here I refer to the arguments of Professor Onora O’Neill who has proposed that face-to-face exchanges enable participants to “assess what we are told by backtracking and asking questions, by cross-checking and testing our understanding and our interlocutors” (O’Neill 2002: 186) whereas the intrinsically “one way” character of conventional broadcasting (and printed media) must rely on other means (in which O’Neill generally finds them notably deficient) to establish trustworthiness. The potential of “Web 2.0” interactive sites to command trust is, of course, easily exaggerated. Sources may lie or mislead in any medium and there is ample testimony to the abuse of trust in online, including “Web 2.0”, services as there is in offline services. Nonetheless the high regard in which some online services, such as www.OpenDemocracy.net, are held derives from self-balancing and inclusive potentiality of “Web 2.0” services as well as the conventional journalistic procedures of fact checking, sub-editing and so on which they practice.

7. Accordingly, I support the proposal in the Discussion Paper for the PSP to make a wider digital media intervention rather than confine its remit to conventional one way broadcasting services and institutions. The constructive role which public finance can potentially play in this domain is (yet again!) exemplified by OpenDemocracy which owes its origins to support from charitable foundations (notably in the USA). Public support from the PSP would enable high quality established providers to consolidate and extend their, often fragile, positions and foster and facilitate new entrants. Public funding should primarily (though not necessarily exclusively) be directed, as the Discussion Paper considers it may, to organisations which are both share aware and non-commercial. The nature of news and facilitation and fostering of participative deliberation suggests that the PSP should not simply be a commissioner of programmes (or of series and genres) but also a supporter of institutions over the middle term.

Funding and the role of the PSP.

8. How should the recipients of funding be selected? **First**, they should extend range and diversity and enhance pluralism – this suggests a bias in favour of new entrants (including bodies such as those mentioned above which are not part of established large scale public or private media enterprises), **second** they should jump a quality hurdle (although this should not be over prissily defined – much has been done to enhance public understanding and extend the public sphere by “irresponsible” media), **third** they should adhere to what O’Neill calls appropriate “conventions and standards” (O’Neill 2002 186-7³) eg

³ See O’Neill, O (2002) *Autonomy and Trust in Bioethics*. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press.

- Declaration of “relevant interests and conflicts of interest”
- Declaration of “relations with lobbyists, political parties, companies and campaigning organisations”
- Publication of “credentials of reporters writing on technical topics” and warning if reporters “lacking the relevant competence” are assigned to a particular topic
- Declaration of “full financial information about payments made to obtain material relevant to ‘stories’”
- Publication of corrections “of equal length and prominence, perhaps written by third parties”
- Penalties for “recirculating ‘stories’ shown to be libellous or invented (O’Neill 2002: 190).

9. Other relevant “conventions and standards” may be found in the 1977 Royal Commission on the Press’ programme of editorial rights, in compendia of journalistic ethics (such as that at <http://www.uta.fi/ethicnet/>) and in established codes and good practices already embedded in some UK newspapers and broadcasters.

10. Fourth, funding may be linked to the ability of recipients to show that their services are valued by users – this might be done by demonstrating a body of members/supporters, an ability to raise funding from a plurality of donors and/or by consistently manifested peer approval (eg by a body of citations and references by other information providers).

Closing comments.

11. There is much else worthy of comment in the rich and stimulating Discussion Paper (and in Ofcom’s *Hypothetical tender document for a Public Service Publisher* and *Review of public service television broadcasting* where the idea of the PSP was put forward). I make only two closing comments.

12. First, the successful roll out of broadband provides a platform for universal access at affordable prices to news and information services such as those considered above – the factors limiting access are increasingly likely to be ones of user skills and competencies which can appropriately be addressed through media literacy initiatives.

13. Second, the portfolio of possible stimulating new services foreshadowed by Andrew Chitty do not sufficiently acknowledge the potential for public bodies, such as museums, libraries and universities to digitise, curate and provide access to works and interpretative narratives: there is an opportunity to build on established competencies and experience (and foster pluralism) eg of the kind demonstrated by major UK public institutions (eg the LSE, the British Library, the V&A) who participated in the promising, but premature, Fathom initiative (www.fathom.com) and by the Scottish Executive and its partners in Scran (www.scran.ac.uk). Bodies such as these should be both eligible for PSP funding and the PSP’s remit should be such as to facilitate their entry (or re-entry) to online content provision.