

DO INSTITUTIONS MATTER FOR PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTING?

Philip Schlesinger

**Professor & Director,
Stirling Media Research Institute,
University of Stirling, Scotland FK9 4LA.
e-mail: p.r.schlesinger@stir.ac.uk**

Introduction

Is Television Special? has opened up the debate on how public service broadcasting is to be delivered in the future. Ofcom has sought to define PSB in terms of the fulfilment of specific *social purposes* and the *necessary characteristics* of television programmes. PSB is conceived as having both a consumer and a citizenship rationale. In many respects, despite their recodified terminology, the arguments still map on to the classic Reithian triad of educating, informing and entertaining. Although the definition of PSB is analytical, it is still heavily dependent on the prior institutional history of PSB and it is also coloured by contemporary preoccupations. The report addresses a new context in which the digitisation of television is linked to the development of a knowledge society, which is expressly part of the UK government's competitiveness agenda. Explicit social objectives such as achieving solidarity through strengthening cultural identity and seeking the promotion of tolerance and inclusion are also being articulated in the current rethinking of PSB's purposes. So too is the development of a 'media literate' public.

In a significant break with previous regulatory doctrine, programme genres are said to be increasingly irrelevant for a definition of PSB because of successes in new forms of programming. Genres that enjoy less public support as measured by audience size (specialised arts, religious and current affairs outputs are singled out) have a question mark placed against them: such programmes are deemed not necessarily relevant for evaluating PSB in the future when that is provided by commercial broadcasters. 'Creativity' has been signalled as an important new watchword to encapsulate public purposes and popularity; it will operate as a loose criterion of PSB achievement.

Alongside this shift into sketching out a new regulatory approach, it is recognised that 'public service broadcasters' are still *institutionally* defined as the 'main terrestrial TV channels', namely the BBC's licence-fee funded channels, ITV1, Channel 4, S4C and Five. While all of these still seem set to produce PSB programming, Ofcom's agenda makes it clear that the present institutional map is going to be challenged.

The drive towards switchover from analogue to digital television and the way this will affect existing consumption patterns is one key factor. Another is the future of broadcasting finance; in particular the challenges now posed to a licence fee that exclusively supports the BBC. Current debate ranges from proposing the licence fee's complete abolition on a variety of grounds to making it more or less 'contestable' in terms of how that finance is earmarked for expenditure. And of course, there are those who advocate no change at all.

Nearly two decades after the Peacock report first floated the idea,¹ revived talk of an Arts Council of the Air is linked to ‘contestable’ funding, that is income top-sliced from the licence fee. This means that changes in programme supply are closely linked to questions about how PSB programmes would be commissioned and distributed and how their purposes and characteristics might be convincingly ascertained and evaluated. The question of scheduling is also crucial if PSB output is to achieve its wider purposes and not be relegated to low-audience slots.

The present map of television suppliers is therefore under challenge. Ofcom’s review makes it clear that today’s cartography is seen as *transitional* to the fully digital era envisaged for the end of the decade, or thereabouts. We cannot be quite sure, as the government’s goal posts on digital switch-over have now moved back a couple of years to 2012. Existing broadcasting institutions will certainly matter in delivering PSB for that transition. Different remits have been sketched out for ITV1 and Five, Channel 4 and the BBC. But the longer-term future is less certain. A key question for the regulator just beyond the medium term, therefore, is whether ‘new institutions are to be created or older ones reformed’.²

What institutions can do

In principle, institutions that are set up to deliver PSB *may* benefit from the efficiency that comes with having a common purpose. That is because institutions provide frameworks of value and models of practice and operate as systems of socialisation for those who join them. They inculcate normative frameworks (ways of doing things in accordance with given principles) and they institutionalise judgement.³ A consequence is that people know the value-system, how authoritative decisions are made in it, and how they themselves fit in.

Institutional systems have the effect of producing routine ways of doing things according to the rules of the game that they establish. In the case of broadcasting organisations, producers (in the broadest sense) know what is required of them. If the norms that they follow are informed by PSB values, this does not by any means ensure a failure-proofed performance in every case. There are inherent risks in all institutions of becoming complacent and inward looking, of believing that there is no alternative to present ways of doing things and that external criticism can be disregarded. In short, while institutional cultures can confer identities and build confidence, they can also stultify and are not necessarily virtuous.

It is also the case that the purposes that inform PSB and the means to achieve them may be interpreted in varying ways at different times, in part due to the internal logic and politics of an organisation and in part in response to external pressures. That much is clear from Georgina Born’s new anthropological study of the BBC under John Birt and Greg Dyke. To over-simplify her argument greatly, Birt’s managerialism was inimical to the producer creativity she takes as central to delivering PSB, whereas Dyke’s regime restored significant autonomy to the producers and substantially (if not entirely) repaired the damaged corporate ethos.⁴ In short, there was a struggle over the soul of an institution

and how it should discharge its obligations. Given the place of the BBC in British life, such internal struggles became a public matter and were read for their wider significance. Indeed, contemporary debate about the scope and limits of public service broadcasting during the current Charter Review is profoundly related to how the BBC has adapted its approach to the changing policy imperatives of successive governments in the past two decades.

Which institutions?

Because *Is television special?* distinguishes so firmly between PSB values and the *institutions* through which these are presently delivered, it has raised pressing questions about what kinds of institution might provide PSB programming in the future.

On the supply side, Ofcom's Phase 1 sketch of a new institutional set-up envisages a greater number of broadcasters involved in delivering PSB, although it lacks specific detail as to their composition or configuration. Are there thresholds of scope and scale that need to be reached in order to qualify as an 'institution'? Ofcom has held off from providing this until its Phase 2 review is published.⁵ On the basis of what has been published so far, 'the market' is seen as likely to produce 'significant amounts' of PSB programming. Presumably, that means independent producers operating on a raised production quota, and some existing broadcasters, with relaxed regulatory regimes, taking up a larger share of delivering the PSB output. It may also assume new entrants from cable and satellite. Whatever their make-up, it is apparently assumed that both new (and reformed) institutions will be well adapted to the task. However, while demand in the marketplace may result in the supply of content that meets PSB criteria, this outcome will still require regulatory intervention.

The big, inescapable question for Ofcom is what are the institutional arrangements most likely to conduce to the achievement of PSB purposes in the longer term? In the transitional phase to digital switchover, and perhaps beyond this, Ofcom envisages a special role for the BBC as a not-for-profit organisation that 'should always strive to reflect the broad purposes and character of PSB' and should curb other activities deemed to be extraneous. The BBC is described as 'the standard setter'. Channel 4 is also seen as making a distinctive PSB contribution in providing programmes of 'originality and innovation'. However, a liberalised PSB regime is envisaged for the main commercial terrestrial channels ITV1 and Five, which are to focus on news, original UK production and high-audience popular programming. That adds up to a transitional programme of reform.

'New' institutions, then, are likely to come from the independent sector and what next happens to liberalised terrestrial commercial broadcasters. These suppliers cannot exclude cable and satellite producers prepared to offer PSB programming in line with Ofcom's eventual criteria. Such developments raise far-reaching questions about regulation, commissioning and funding – and not least capability to meet PSB criteria. As an Ofcom internal briefing paper notes: 'The fact that PSB is not a well-defined output and that commercial entities will endeavour to mislead the regulator in order to maximise

shareholder value suggests that private provision of the service may be inefficient due to excessive monitoring costs and potentially necessary investment'.⁶

Since Ofcom's Phase 1 review was published, the PSB role envisaged there for Channel 4 has increasingly come under question as Channel 4 and Five engage in a highly publicised courtship that might result in a merger or some form of close co-operation. Recurrent rumours also keep surfacing about the Treasury's interest in privatising Channel 4. At the same time, there is a counter-current that envisages some kind of trust status for Channel 4. If the most frequently invoked model – that of the Scott Trust – is the one in mind, that would require a reinforcement of PSB purposes, not least independence from external political pressures, and in particular heavy insulation from any shareholder interest, rather than opening up to further commercialisation. The Scott Trust operates a profit-seeking principle but rather than distribute profits to shareholders it reinvests them in the wider media group. Its success has been premised on cross-subsidy and diversification.⁷ On this basis, a merger with Five would take quite some ingenuity to engineer. An alternative route, using the trust principle, and perhaps some element of 'contestable' funding, might be to re-engineer Channel 4 as a key commissioning body for PSB programming, acting as a counterweight to the BBC. There is a choice, then, between commercialisation and the effective disappearance of Channel 4 and its reinvention as a refocused PSB institution with a new set of purposes.

Such speculation about the future of Channel 4 does have a useful effect, whatever the outcome. It underlines the possibility that, by the end of Ofcom's transitional phase, the only institution fully tasked with PSB purposes will be the BBC. Although the corporation's long history has shown that it is capable of reinventing itself, it would not be to its advantage to become the quasi-monopolist of PSB. This would have a number of far-reaching consequences, none of them desirable.

First, the analytical separation between PSB and its particular institutional incarnations would be largely undermined. As the quasi-monopolist of PSB, the BBC would be largely, if not overwhelmingly, identified with it. Second, this would make the future of PSB more vulnerable by largely equating it with one institution's output and profile. Criticism of the BBC (whether justified or not) would to all intents and purposes be criticism of PSB, changing the context of public debate. The corporation's tendency to attract flak would be greater than ever, with likely implications for its ability to take risks and discharge its obligation to be independent. Third, to lose critical mass in the other major sources of PSB production now available would impair the capacity within British television to develop alternative ideas about public service and to establish significant creative clusters outside the BBC – not least in the nations and regions.⁸ The effect would be to remove a crucial source of what John Kay has called 'disciplined pluralism' from the marketplace. Kay maintains that 'Disciplined pluralism in public services requires that there be careful audit – of outcome, not of contribution to process... Performance can be compared because other people are trying to achieve the same goals.'⁹ Competition *between* organisations whose purposes are focused on public service broadcasting, within a market dominated by a commercial imperative, is a desirable counterweight to the unmediated impact of commercial imperatives on a quasi-monopoly. Largely localising

PSB inside one institution would result in a greater polarisation of the market as the gradations between types of institution harden into radical differences. In that context, commercial performance will be the prevailing common-sense measure for what is done in the name of public service. Finally, as we have noted, institutions are far from perfect. A BBC quasi-monopoly would mean that the corporation largely became its own measure in matters of performance (despite the counterweight of public debate, regulation and reformed corporate governance). This would reinforce an inward-looking culture. All of these reasons provide a compelling case for ensuring that more than one institution is centrally tasked with providing PSB.

Although the future of existing PSBs is presently open to review, and where warranted, they are subject to proper criticism for their shortcomings, there is presently considerable institutional predictability in the delivery system. Recognising this, Ofcom has speculated that ‘social purposes may be more easily achieved when the organisational aims within which commissioners and schedulers work are closely aligned with PSB purposes, rather than potentially in conflict with them.’¹⁰ As there is presently so little exploration of this viewpoint, as opposed to the advocacy of market solutions, let us consider it further here.

The best sources for a contemporary institutional analysis of broadcasting are broadly sociological or anthropological in focus.¹¹ In fact, there is little such work currently under way in the UK. What does exist is by no means innocent of the great driving forces that shape strategies and organisational systems. Broadcasting is configured by politics, law and regulation, by technological change, by the balance between market and state, and by values and beliefs contending in the national public sphere. Much current thinking in the UK, moreover, is a response to the demands of global competitiveness as well as formed by longstanding traditions and histories in the broadcasting field. Analysed from an institutional standpoint, media enterprises are commonly presented as pursuing their goals and strategies by reference to these wider contexts. The driving interest is to understand how these contextual factors shape organisational responses that impact on the core activities of broadcasting. A key issue is the creation of broadcasting cultures, that is the interconnected practices and occupational beliefs that inform the purposes of broadcasting and give those who work inside it their various rationales.

The wider value effects of institutions

The impact of institutions is not necessarily limited to what goes on within their walls. Because PSB has been so central to the development of the wider culture in the UK, it has had a widely diffused impact on how the wider public thinks about its role. Ofcom’s research has shown that – largely irrespective of viewers’ consumption patterns - there is extensive public support for some key PSB purposes (social values, quality, range and balance, diversity).¹² Moreover, the research also demonstrates clear expectations about the roles of the different channels.¹³ Arguably, this is evidence of the wider value effects of institutions. Having a publicly recognised socio-cultural map of this kind is much broader in import than each channel achieving brand recognition. It implies that the present television architecture is well understood as linked to a range of specific purposes and social values.

If the public takes such a view, it would be surprising if this outlook were not well entrenched in the television occupations. Although broadcasting's output and its suppliers have diversified greatly over the past two decades, some research suggests that there is still considerable consensus about a hierarchy of values embodied in programme genres.

In the early 1990s, Jeremy Tunstall noted the 'fog of moral values which hangs over the fiction and entertainment areas'. By contrast with US product, he wrote, 'British TV dramas are seen as truly British, as artistically superior, as dealing in non-factual forms with real issues and real concerns; British drama and comedy series are both expensive and prestigious'. Factual programming also enjoyed high prestige at the time.¹⁴

Nearly two decades after Tunstall began his research into television producers Alison Preston's work on independent television producers also found that a 'cultural hierarchy of value' still persisted in the television industry.¹⁵ The context is highly instructive because – by contrast with Tunstall's account - some of the independent television producers being studied by Preston were diversifying their output to develop portfolios of programming aimed at reducing their traditional dependency on the BBC and Channel 4. In other words, they were now moving in line with a centrifugal tendency.

Preston has argued this persisting set of values was 'in part a reflection of one of the norms of British elite culture...which prioritises status above commercial return'. Much like Tunstall, she found that 'certain genres and types of activity were intrinsically more worthwhile and interesting than others. Thus, film is at the apex, followed by TV drama and documentary, with other genres... such as entertainment, lifestyle and corporate work further down the scale.' We could reasonably expect the clientele of the main PSBs to share their values (or at least to identify publicly with them) in order to be able to sell programmes, even as they try to find new markets. Preston's research points to the continuing existence of a widely shared set of occupational values broadly in line with traditional PSB thinking that - for some producers at least – still relate only loosely to prospects of economic success. Fine words butter no parsnips, so the durability of such creative aspirations must be thrown increasingly into doubt as the going gets tougher in the independent sector. The key point for any thinking about new institutions that might next emerge is that there still appears to be a widely shared set of values relevant to PSB in the independent sector. This is important for the production of content and how supply connects with commissioning.

More sceptical that such a diffuse consensus still exists, Georgina Born argues that the value hierarchy has been destabilised across television production as a whole. Moreover, she also maintains on the basis of her research into the BBC that commercial values have significantly reshaped the corporate ethos. She holds – rightly - that the question of which programmes we should rate as offering a public service is a continuing matter of conflict.

'In the British PSB tradition, entertainment and popular drama were seen as socially and culturally necessary and, in that sense, valuable, but as having lower intrinsic cultural worth than high-cultural genres. This value hierarchy was destabilized with the postmodern turn in broadcasting from the 1960s and 1970s, when elements of

entertainment came to be credited with as much or more reflexive sophistication, aesthetic and ethical subtlety as documentary, current affairs or arts programming.¹⁶

It is precisely the continuing debate about the proper scope of PSB that has fuelled the present calls for the BBC to retrench and recover a more clearly defined mission (or in Ofcom's terms, its 'purposes'). The corporation now signals its new turn as one of 'building public value' in a number of distinctive ways.¹⁷ While this is plainly a pragmatic adjustment to current requirements, it does start to contribute debate about what might make PSB distinctive and whether we still need special kinds of organisation to deliver it, alongside the outsourcing of production.

The available research suggests that whatever the current conflicts over the scope of PSB, and how we might recognise it when we see it, historically generated institutional values do continue to extend - in some measure at least - into the occupational values of the television industry. They remain debated both inside and outside broadcasting institutions.

Beyond the institutions?

Large broadcasting institutions reproduce value systems. At the same time, they may have internal conflicts over the interpretation of purposes, goals and strategies. What happens when you move away from this kind of large-scale production of an occupational belief system because some programme making migrates to new contexts? We can address this process by looking at what we presently know about commissioning and scheduling, and training.

Commissioning and scheduling

The history of Channel 4 has been of key importance in this regard, since it marked a break with the vertically integrated broadcaster model, introducing that of the broadcaster-publisher. With a public service remit, it established a network of suppliers whose value relationship to the channel (their inscription into its purposes) was mediated through the system of commissioning editors. This provided the starting-point for subsequent relations between other broadcasters and independents. The relationship between commissioners and suppliers is cultural as well as economic. While the transaction between the broadcaster-publisher and the independent company involves financial calculations, it is premised on a cultural value system (which relates to the content and form of programming) and social relations (which are the necessary backdrop to buying and selling).

Since the 1980s, as outsourcing obligations for broadcasters have become increasingly generalised, the commissioning system has remained pivotal to the relation between independent production and the broadcasting organisations. Commissioning might be seen as a centripetal force that binds independents into the purposes of broadcasters. Of course, these purposes may vary but they do ensure that the institutional nexus of broadcasting has a core and peripheries at varying distances. This imposes a common discourse, even though it has channel, generic and other variants.

As regulatory expectations change and their impact is adjusted, we need to attend to how channels are – and will be - constructed in the multichannel environment. Commissioning is at one end of the chain from scheduling and its related channel-branding and identity-conferring strategies. In the most comprehensive study to date of the commissioning process and how it interfaces with independent production, Alison Preston has described the processes presently in play:

‘Commissioning used to be about finding good ideas, spending more money on them and then seeing where they might work in a schedule: a bottom-up process. These days are long gone. Now, at all broadcasters, the process is much more top-down. The emphasis has shifted from a product-oriented to a market-oriented approach to programming, which requires a tighter focus on competitive scheduling.

Most commissioners now work to tight briefs for particular types of programming at particular slot prices. Senior channel management set the programming requirements, with variable input from the commissioning tier. At many broadcasters, the scheduler is seen as having increased power over channel policy. Other channels have their strategy closely mapped out by marketing and channel brand considerations.’¹⁸

Other features of this environment include more centralised control, an increased tendency to refer up, and less risk-taking in order to meet the diverse demands of the multichannel environment. Some channels are particularly tight in their formatting, highly concerned about output fitting closely into the channel brand. Where commissioning involves buying in product from independents, the precise requirements are normally made clear at pre-production stage. Currently, commissioning may be seen as an increasingly tightly circumscribed activity in which commissioners – at the limit – are ‘given a shopping-list of programming requirements with little flexibility or room for manoeuvre’.¹⁹ At ITV ‘it is reportedly the Network Centre’s Director of Scheduling and Strategy who draws up the “wish-list of priorities and slots” which is then issued to each genre controller, setting out the desired slot, budget and target demographic based on advertiser needs.’ Other channels face more direct commercial pressures.²⁰ In the case of multichannels, marketing and brand considerations hold most sway. The channel’s strategy is a given.²¹

BBC commissioning ‘benefits from having future guaranteed income against which to allocate resources’, although Preston has noted a tendency now for ‘creative’ and ‘business’ concerns to coincide increasingly at the BBC. This question has been studied in great detail by Born, who argues that the BBC’s shift to a more entrepreneurial approach under Birt reshaped the nature of scheduling and that this in turn resulted in schedule-led commissioning that narrowed rather than extended diversity. According to her analysis, under Birt the BBC’s internal processes became increasingly shaped by co-production deals and by trading with the independent production sector and the two-way traffic of ideas and personnel that this engendered.²²

The commissioning process, then, is at the interface between the culture of a given broadcaster and that of the producer (whether in-house or independent). The

commissioner embodies the values and imperatives of the organisation; the supplier has to bring the right reputation to the table: a mix of track record, access to talent and a pertinent slate of proposals. We should not assume that the culture of the broadcasting institution remains unchanged by the commissioning encounter. Born's research, in fact, suggests that engaging with independent production can have far-reaching consequences for a broadcaster such as the BBC. Much depends on the extent of the market power of the particular supplier as well as that of the commissioner.

The meeting point is the trading of that elusive quality of 'creativity' which is meant to characterise the ideas that are bought and sold. The transaction usually requires the commissioner to have a relationship with a preferred supplier, and as the Research Centre's study has shown, commissioning commonly involves a relatively small number of companies. To the extent that relatively stable relations have developed over time, current commissioning arrangements build in certain orientations towards channels and their brand among producers. Whether this will continue is related to how supply conditions might develop with an increase in independent production quotas. In short, whether there is further diversification of supply or whether there is increased concentration has a bearing on the likely evolution of cultures both inside and outside the broadcasters. The more funding is dispersed in the future (which looks likely) the more this might attenuate the culture and social relations that underpin the broadcaster-indie marketplace. Commissioners and suppliers may start to lose the relevant skills and values that presently make the system work.

Training

Since British television began to diversify in the 1980s, a common value system has been sustained by the continuing to-and-fro migration between PSB institutions and the independents. As is well known, the television industry is now significantly characterised by freelance work and a short-term contract culture. And as further diversification takes place, and experience becomes more segmented, it is likely that centripetal tendencies will develop. This state of affairs is highly relevant because Ofcom's view of the market is that more independent production could supply PSB programming. At present, however, this appears to be based on an unstated (and unexamined) assumption that PSB output could in principle be forthcoming from anywhere in the marketplace because those working in the independent sector still know what it is now and will know what it is in the future. This raises questions about how and where the workforce is trained and the developing cultures of independent producers.

One of the noteworthy developments of the past two decades has been the decline of in-house broadcasting's training for production staff. As the BFI's seminal industry tracking research has shown, the growth of the freelance/independent economy means that training occupies an occasional rather than a routinely structured place in the career process. Women (as well as ethnic minorities and disabled people) tend to encounter major career disadvantages, both in terms of longevity of career and in pay. The recent and comprehensive *Workforce Survey 2003* by Skillset has sustained this view, while offering a more quantitatively comprehensive picture.²³ According to Skillset's report, there are barriers to surmount for those seeking training, whether as employees (defined

as those having one-year contracts) or as freelancers. However, one clear advantage of employee status is that twice as many employees as freelancers have had their training paid for by employers.²⁴ More than half of employees received training from their employer compared to two-fifths of freelancers. 'On-the-job training and formal courses were the most common forms of training delivery for employees, while nearly a quarter of freelancers reported structured self-tuition'.²⁵

Presently, the BBC is the only broadcaster offering high quality training across the board. Carol Sinclair, director of the Research Centre for Television and Interactivity, which organises producer training in co-operation with Channel 4 and the BBC, sees the BBC's courses as inculcating a range of values that she describes as regulatory, ethical, legal and moral.²⁶ According to her, those trained in the BBC's ways do constitute a significant part of the freelance labour force and take their values with them as they move around. If that is correct, it identifies one way in which the diffusion of a largely PSB-oriented culture takes place. Born's view is less sanguine, as she sees the BBC's creative context as having been quite vulnerable to an accountability culture under John Birt that damaged its common purpose and that turned public service into salesmanship.²⁷

Current tracking research at Stirling Media Research Institute into journalists' career paths (both in broadcasting and print) has noted the extent to which the media industries are now highly dependent on the undergraduate and postgraduate courses offered by the universities. Journalism (like media occupations generally) has become an almost exclusively graduate profession. A study by Simon Frith and Peter Meech found that 'few respondents had had any training at all (clear evidence that the majority of journalist employers do now assume that journalism training will take place in academic institutions). Of all employers, the BBC offered the most (and most highly regarded) training opportunities (although not all of its journalists appear to have had access to them).'²⁸

Regular in-house training in television has largely disappeared in the industry (apart from inside the BBC, which the Stirling University research has found was valued among its beneficiaries for the range of jobs on offer in-house). This has led to the need to intervene in the labour market through Skillset, the sector skills council for the audio-visual industries, along with other agencies in the nations and regions. According to Skillset's survey, terrestrial television (with 24,900 employees) remains the largest single TV sector employer.²⁹ Cable & satellite employs 4,900, whereas independent production occupies 13,300. Terrestrial television has the largest number of employees in the sector (with 81% on permanent or long-term contracts). In the terms we are discussing, terrestrial TV is the most highly institutionalised. While cable & satellite has a larger percentage of employees, its workforce is only some 20% of terrestrial's size. Only 53% of those working in independent television production are employees.³⁰ Two-thirds of those in independent production for the TV sector are engaged in producing or related occupations. Most involved in production have worked in related activities. And there 'is a high degree of crossover between journalism and sport, radio broadcasting and television broadcasting'.³¹

The evidence suggests that there are still strongly clustered occupational communities, overwhelmingly working in terrestrial broadcasting, which points to a routine sharing of norms and values. There are major differences, however, between being an employee and the kinds of attachment and career prospects that this brings, and encountering a given organisation on a free-lance basis.

When we look at the related evidence from the BFI's tracking study of individual careers in television production, some key tensions do emerge. One central finding is that achieving 'creativity' is an important regulative ideal for those working in television. However, this aim can be undermined by the degree of uncertainty that many workers face in a volatile and casualised employment market. 'Creativity' operates as a kind of shorthand for self-realisation through work and has at least some connection with PSB values, although it does not equate to them.

Some of the subtler social impacts of occupational change in the television industry emerge from the BFI's research, which was conducted from the mid- to late 1990s.³² The rise of independent production and the decline of staff employment are key factors in thinking about the continuing significance of institutions. In this regard, Richard Paterson remarks:

'All firms require the trust and commitment of their employees to sustain creativity and provide a competitive advantage in the search for commissions and this factor is undermined by the uncertainties inherent in a freelance labour market.'³³

Present labour market conditions do not conduce to the institutional loyalties that more stable career structures used to engender. They may – and do – expand the range of genres, types of work and networks of colleagues that individual workers encounter. On the positive side, this produces a flexible workforce and the flow of changing talent into companies may challenge outmoded ways of thinking and doing. However, in a market place in which PSB regulation is likely to weaken its grip (outside the BBC and Channel 4) whether or not work cultures have more than a contingent orientation to the purposes of public service broadcasting becomes a relevant factor. Consequent upon changes in the television labour market, the tensions have intensified between developing one's own reputation in a market in which one's 'talent' is a highly tradable commodity and working in a team.³⁴

For some, the present widespread diffusion of PSB know-how has generational limits, with those trained in the BBC and the ITV companies becoming older and thinner on the ground.³⁵ Others argue that, certainly in the case of the BBC, commissioning focuses on indies that share the corporation's values. Moreover, inasmuch as the BBC is the main in-house trainer of talent, it does continue to produce people schooled in its ways who are still finding their way into the independent sector.³⁶ In fact, the evidence remains rather anecdotal here and the issues do merit further study.

My brief survey of current research suggests that the extent to which PSB purposes can be and are mediated to employees through their production contexts and work practices

will vary considerably, depending on the organisation for which they work and the markets to which the company's output is orientated. Arguably, employment patterns have a significant impact on occupational beliefs and commitments. In her research into independent producers, Gill Ursell has commented that 'the conditions for work presently prevailing in UK television production do not encourage workers to feel commitment, loyalty or trust in the broadcast commissioners. But some measure of these attributes does develop among the work team'. The producer who negotiates directly with commissioners occupies a pivotal, binding role in independent production cultures.³⁷

Richard Paterson found that most 'respondents who had staff positions were more likely to experience aspects of the creative work environment more positively in the workplace than those working freelance and on short-term contracts'.³⁸ Stability of employment does not of itself equate to the engendering of PSB values. However, where those are central to the purposes of an organisation, arguably it does create some of the conditions that make such values self-reproducing. For instance, stable work contexts and commitment to organisational purposes can conduce to what Born calls 'rituals of unification and collective reflection': examples in the BBC are programme review boards and internal events such as the network TV review of the year 'which bind the workforce into an internal public'.³⁹

Pertinently, and in contrast to this vision, Paterson notes that:

'The working lives of most creative personnel in the television industry are now marked by uncertainty. In many respects television has become more like film in its mode of production...However, one of television's social roles is to provide accurate and well-grounded information and education for citizens, and continuities in the organization of production are arguably beneficial to the efficiency of this process.'⁴⁰

Consideration of new institutional developments and how these relate to the delivery of PSB requires us to attend to what happens to careers, how and where these are developed over time, and how they may shape the value systems of those employed in television. These concerns are at the heart of why institutions matter. Once again, as Paterson observes:

'Individuals' values and attitudes are informed by and formed within the organizational cultures of the industry but then these attitudes inform the evolution of those same firms and the evolution of new values. The television workers, reacting to imposed changes in their working environments, are reshaping the organizational cultures in companies but these are also affecting output at the creative heart of television.'⁴¹

One of the efficiencies of institutions, according to this analysis, lies in the conditions that allow the more or less stable development of systems of value and belief oriented to the broader purposes of broadcasting among those that manage and produce it. This has a wider relevance and is of key importance. Training certainly involves the acquisition of know-how in a task-oriented, instrumental sense. But that is only part of it. The *context* within which the training occurs may – in a PSB institution – acts as a powerful form of

routine socialisation into a system of belief. To the extent that this is increasingly disappearing outside the BBC, it makes the inculcation of PSB values less and less a matter that can be taken for granted. It will have to become explicit. Appropriate contexts will have to be found to deliver a cultural outlook over and beyond the transmission of technological, business and other skills, and attending to this dimension will also represent an added economic cost.

General observations

The research drawn on above allows us to make a number of points, to which some broader considerations are added.

1. Ofcom's conception of a transition to a fully digital, multichannel environment poses far-reaching questions about the present institutional framework in TV. The vision of an alternative institutional order is still vague and whatever emerges will need to be tested for its capacity to meet PSB objectives just as much as the present arrangements have been questioned in these terms. 'Letting the market decide' simply evades thinking about the importance of institutions. Applying a principle of 'contestable funding' raises questions about the institutional framework required to administer this, with implications for commissioning and scheduling as well as content.

2. There are some strong arguments for taking broadcasting institutions seriously. For instance, they constitute and sustain creative clusters. They socialise personnel and may allow some space for thinking beyond the next project. They contribute in a diffuse as well as a direct way to the establishment of a common culture both within the production community and the wider public, although this does not entail a consensus on what qualifies as PSB or on hierarchies of cultural values. There is some evidence that this common culture is under strain.

3. Critical mass in institutional terms may allow resistance to external pressures. Public funding in particular allows the scope for the pursuit of goals that are not totally subordinate to market logic. That said, institutions oriented to public service are inescapably conditioned by market imperatives as well as by public policy objectives. There are particular challenges to both the BBC and Channel 4 in navigating between these (often) divergent logics, as (given probable reduced regulatory expectations of ITV1 and Five) these are now likely to be the linchpins of public service in the future. Indeed, in the case of Channel 4, there are reasons to wonder about its future PSB role. This has major implications for the BBC, potentially pushing it towards becoming a PSB quasi-monopoly.

4. Having PSB production largely or exclusively limited to one institution would have a number of undesirable effects. PSB would tend to be identified with what that institution produces. This would undermine the attempt to develop an independent analytical conception of PSB for the purposes of regulation and accountability. Moreover, a single institution would not be subject to the pluralistic competition of other institutions operating within a broadly similar set of assumptions. This would impact on the capacity for innovation and the distribution of creative clusters throughout the UK. In practice, as

the measure of its own performance, a new PSB monopoly would tend to look inward. The gulf would grow between PSB values and those of the rest of a market overwhelmingly driven by a commercial logic. This would make the future sustainability of PSB more vulnerable because everything would hang on the fate of the BBC.

5. Whatever outcome results, we should not assume that broadcasting institutions are necessarily virtuous: they do have their own pathologies and their internal regimes and interpretations of values are subject to change. Any tendency to institutional pathology will have to be addressed periodically by internal change, external regulation and the redefinition of purposes through public debate.

6. The expansion of independently produced supply may reshape the internal culture of PSBs as well as reconfigure the wider culture of TV production. A PSB institutional culture is always shaped by the wider framework within which it operates and it can be engineered to respond to the external environment in a variety of ways, some of which might be judged to detract from PSB principles.

7. The future distribution of public funding for broadcasting may have a major effect on institutions, depending on how this process is handled. If critical mass is significant for PSB delivery in at least some parts of the market, there may well be limits to what proportion of public funding should be 'contested'. The consequences of 'top-slicing' or other forms of redistribution for the major broadcasting institutions are certainly a consideration to be borne in mind. Assuming that the licence fee survives, questions therefore need to be posed about the institutional impact of any 'contestable' element that is introduced. Much depends too on whether any new redistributive arrangement is handled inside or outside existing institutions.

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¹ Professor Alan Peacock (chairman), Report of the committee on financing the BBC, Cmnd. 9824, London: HMSO, 1986.

² Ofcom, *Ofcom review of public service television broadcasting, Phase 1 – Is television special?*, Ofcom: London, 2004, p.11.

³ Neil MacCormick, *Questioning Sovereignty*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, p.7.

⁴ Georgina Born *Uncertain Vision: Birt, Dyke and the Reinvention of the BBC*, Secker & Warburg, 2004, p.6.

⁵ Robin Foster, personal communication, 30 July 2004.

⁶ 'Delivery of Public Service Television Broadcasting through institutions', n.d., p.2.

⁷ Philip Schlesinger, *The Scott Trust*, Manchester: Guardian Media Group, 1994. The central purpose of the Trust is to keep *The Guardian* in business and over time that has involved the creation of a media group. What do trust advocates actually envisage for Channel 4?

⁸ Philip Schlesinger, 'The New Communications Agenda in Scotland', *Scottish Affairs*, No. 47, Spring 2004, pp.16-40. Concern about the impact of change on capacity and distinctiveness in Scotland is matched by similar concerns expressed in Wales and Northern Ireland.

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- ⁹ John Kay, *The Truth about Markets: Their Genius, their Limits, their Follies*, London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 2003, p.356.
- ¹⁰ Ofcom, op.cit., p.11
- ¹¹ A fuller account could not avoid an assessment of historical sources.
- ¹² Ofcom, op.cit., p.48.
- ¹³ *ibid.*, p.53.
- ¹⁴ Jeremy Tunstall, 'Television Producers' in Jeremy Tunstall (ed.) *Media Occupations and Professions*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001, p.199.
- ¹⁵ Alison Preston, *Risky Business: Inside the Indies*, Executive Summary and Full Report, Glasgow: The Research Centre for Television and Interactivity, 2002. Quote is from Executive Summary, p.11.
- ¹⁶ Georgina Born, 'Strategy, positioning and projection in digital television: Channel Four and the commercialization of public service broadcasting in the UK', *Media, Culture & Society* 25(6) 2003, p.776.
- ¹⁷ BBC, *Building public value: Renewing the BBC for a digital world*, London: BBC Media Centre, 2004.
- ¹⁸ Alison Preston, *Inside the Commissioners: The Culture and Practice of Commissioning at UK broadcasters*, Executive Summary and Full Report, Glasgow: The Research Centre, 2003. Quote is from Executive Summary, p.7.
- ¹⁹ Executive Summary, pp.8-9; quote from p.9.
- ²⁰ Full Report, p.37.
- ²¹ *ibid.*, pp.35-36.
- ²² Born, op. cit., p.148.
- ²³ Skillset, *Workforce Survey 2003*, London: Skillset, 2004
- ²⁴ Skillset, op. cit., pp.11-12.
- ²⁵ *ibid.*, p.13.
- ²⁶ Carol Sinclair, personal communication, 5 July 2004.
- ²⁷ Born, *Uncertain Vision*, op.cit., ch.6.
- ²⁸ Simon Frith and Peter Meech, 'Becoming a journalist', unpublished paper, Stirling Media Research Institute, June 2004, p.42; to be submitted to *Journalism*.
- ²⁹ Skillset, op.cit., p.19.
- ³⁰ *ibid.*, p.33.
- ³¹ *ibid.*, p.20.
- ³² Richard Paterson, 'The Television Labour Market in Britain', in Jeremy Tunstall (ed.) *Media Occupations and Professions*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001; and 'Work histories in television', *Media, Culture & Society* 23(4), 2001, pp. 495-520.
- ³³ Paterson, 'Television Labour Market', op. cit., p.205.
- ³⁴ Paterson, 'Work histories', op. cit., p.498.
- ³⁵ Georgina Born, personal communication, 9 July 2004.
- ³⁶ Carol Sinclair, personal communication, 7 July 2004.
- ³⁷ Gill Ursell, 'Television production: issues of exploitation, commodification and subjectivity in UK television labour markets', *Media, Culture & Society*, 22(6), 2000, p. 812.
- ³⁸ Paterson, 'Television labour market', p.212.
- ³⁹ Born, *Uncertain Vision*, p.96.
- ⁴⁰ Paterson, 'Work histories', pp.498-499.
- ⁴¹ *ibid.*, p.514. These critical views are endorsed by Born.