

Appendix 1

Voice of the Listener and Viewer: seminar on the arts, broadband and broadcasting, 15 October 2008

In October 2008, the Voice of the Listener and Viewer in association with Arts Council England convened a half-day seminar to discuss the future of the arts within the digital environment. This was attended by senior representatives from the arts sector, new media, independent production and broadcasting sectors and included representatives from Tate, BBC, Channel 4, Five and BT. The seminar was conducted under 'Chatham House rules'. The themes have, therefore, been extracted from the debate and quotations included within this document, without the contributors being identified.

The main objective of the day was to produce practical suggestions relating to how the arts and the broadcasting sector could work better together to bring out the best of the arts content and to realise the full value of the public service broadcasting and content now available

'...is there a way we can help to bring together this wonderful range of expertise, both programme makers and those who distribute it to a wider public, and take it forward for the common good? Including, in these difficult financial times, trying to maximize some of the economic benefit that resides in this wonderfully valuable resource.'

Key areas for discussion included supporting innovation, plurality and partnerships. The important role that 'free to air' broadcasters play in relation to arts programming in terms of reach, serendipity and as a form of endorsement and validation of the arts to stimulate public engagement was a key theme, as was the new broadband opportunities for greater public involvement and engagement through new public service content.

Delegates considered a research presentation showing that, with the exception of the portfolio of BBC channels, the other public service broadcasters had reduced their arts programming over the past five years, and as a consequence, viewing of arts programmes had at best remained flat or, for the commercial channels, had declined. Broadcast channels still managed to achieve considerable reach for the arts programmes that were transmitted and a recent range of hybrid arts programmes had shown that they could still attract significant audiences.

In the multi-channel world, digital arts channels continue to represent only a tiny fraction of the total number of channels available with limited reach and did not presently offer a solution to a decline in arts content on the commercially funded public service broadcastings. Meanwhile, participation in the arts has been increasing, with over 80 million visits a year to museums and galleries and more people following arts and related courses at colleges and university. Broadband penetration has reached 58% in the UK and is predicted to rise to 82% by 2013, with the BBC's iPlayer enjoying twenty million download requests each month. Arts institutions are also beginning to

distribute their own content. Might there be opportunities here to complement the broadcast offering?

'We need broadcasters with funding. We then need strategies that include arts as part of what they have to do. We then need budgets and funding that give enough opportunity to create the kind of programmes you talk about.'

It was broadly agreed that the focus of debate should be on developing institutional relationships for public value:

'The answers are probably in this room...the two biggest players are going to be the BBC and the Arts Council and the way forward is to find a way to get arts into the core script, and that's where we need to go...we need to be the future not the past.'

Sharing resources was seen as important in the way forward, in order to leverage maximum public value, both within the publicly funded broadcasters and the publicly funded arts organisations:

'If we think of the public looking at what we do, and our publicly funded bodies, then we just have to think about the best ways that we can work together for the maximum benefit to the public.'

'...the opportunity and the excitement lies in the kind of thing we will talk about in terms of partnerships, broadband and on demand....I think there are opportunities of the sort we have never seen before in this sector.'

But obstacles to partnership working between arts organisations and broadcasters were identified:

'Rights, generosity of spirit, institutional structures...I think there are some quite practical questions we could ask about what are the blockages, what's stopping it from the arts side as well as from the broadcasting side. As a result, I don't think that mainstream broadcasting reflects nearly effectively enough what's going on in the British arts.'

But bringing us back to the present and the continuing importance of arts programming within the broadcasters' schedules:

'We are still in a hybrid situation, where the mainstream broadcasters still have an incredible audience reach and an incredible audience impact, and those of us who are in the public service space – whether that's at the BBC, Channel 4 or in an arts organisation, we have an obligation to make the most of the opportunities that already exist. Yes, we do need to develop...but I don't want us to lose sight of the power of the existing brands while there is still a debate to be had about what should be at the heart of public service'

Delegates debated the strengths and potential of the public service broadcasting system and whether some of these elements might be retained in the future:

'Public service broadcasting is exactly what it says, it is meant to be a public service and if we look at how it is starting to fracture, across all the different platforms that there are, I think there is a real danger that you actually lose the public service element, because you lose the coalescing, the meeting of minds, around certain key events.'

'I am worried about what happens to the serendipitous moment when you alight on something you hadn't expected to see, so in terms of thinking about the public service role, I think we need to think about how we ensure that people come to new experiences or things that maybe they wouldn't choose to look at, but happened across quite accidentally.'

There was broad agreement that this shouldn't be an 'either/or' debate between public service broadcasting and new forms of digital content and that delegates should be open to hybrid models and the new opportunities these could offer:

'It's about how best to engage with audiences in different ways and we see that television has great reach and impact and that's really important; we should continue to do that where it's appropriate and then in terms of digital platforms there is huge opportunity with regards to content: digital archives from galleries engage with people in different ways.'

'We mustn't close down the possibility of taking advantage of these opportunities in the future and again that link between a live collective experience with the new technology – that is what we should be allowing the possibility of.'

'Where an idea emanates from and where it is first produced is quite important, because it can tip the balance in favour of it being made. Where it is shown thereafter, doesn't matter hugely as within the public service realm we can be quite generous about rights. I think the issue is about communities: we don't actually talk about building a community of interest around the subject of dance, for example, or photography, or film and that seems to be where there is real value. Out of those really big communities will emerge the ideas for film and the television programmes that the community become involved with and respond to thereafter, so you create a legacy rather than just a one-off programme, which tends to be the focus of broadcasting.'

The dissenting voices suggested, however, that the arts content of traditional television and radio should form only a small part of this discussion. They argued that arts organisations are beginning to find terrestrial broadcasting less appealing and are increasingly interested in creating and distributing their own material by themselves. However, support to make this transition would be needed:

'What is important to realising this is two-fold. First – partnership which we've already talked about; in training, in resources, how do you create content and distribute it well? Second – search, because it is an issue for both

broadcasters and arts organisations regarding the content. How will people in the future find content of public value when search is paid for?’

‘There are so many organisations that want to do it themselves, have their own constituency, want to be able to work with their own audience, to be able to use that material as a way of keeping control of that audience, to be able to use it as additional revenue and feel that they can reach the same size of audience by whatever means – be it by subscription or other forms. In this hybrid world, it may be that it’s a combination of terrestrial broadcasting and a partnership whereby you work out a period where material is available for a particular time and the different commercial models. But we should not assume that every single organisation wants to be able to broadcast on television.’

In a country where 40% of people do not have home access to broadband and against a historical backdrop in which the invention of television technology had not subsumed radio, an argument was made not just for the retention, but for the development of, arts content within television and radio:

‘There are lots of things going on, but television will always matter, just like radio still matters, fifty years on from the invention of television. So of course new media is exciting and new stuff will happen. One point, however, is the coverage of new arts. Where is the coverage? Where is the archive for tomorrow? Where is the filming of what’s really exciting?’

There was talk of the ‘long tail’ possibilities available to broadcasters and arts organisations alike through the exploitation of existing archive material if the blockages around rights, and a generosity of spirit around exploitation, could be resolved.

A question from left-field: should our broadcasting legislation lay down quotas for arts content, similarly to listed events within the sports arena? Should this form part of a new public service settlement in order both to protect and to enrich the cultural life of the nation?

Another possibly left-field thought emerging from anxieties around partnership working with broadcasters and the difficulty of finding a successful model:

'I think there is a model of partnership that public service broadcasters have understood and absorbed very well, and that is with indies. There is no reason as far as I can see why every arts organisation that is a limited company couldn't be an independent production company, and that would change the way in which the arts sector works with broadcasters...It would make a very profound difference to the nature of the relationship and it would get us away from the perceived unevenness of the relationship between the arts sector and the broadcasting sector.'

As part of the discussion around partnership working, the debate was re-focused to address the issue of how the arts organisations were expected (and required) to invest their resources: is it solely about bringing in audiences to the 'live' experience, or is it about trying to expand and develop audience reach through distribution via broadcast or digital platforms? The way organisations were funded would not generally allow them to meet both of these objectives, and currently, for most, it was a matter of choosing one direction or the other, or 'squeezing' some digital content out through education departments or sponsored or specially funded projects.

'If the funding is perceived as subsidizing bums on seats, which it largely is on the performing arts side of things, it is extremely difficult to be on the fringe and broadcast on 'the edge'. And yet if you take a broad definition of public value, 30,000 streams in conjunction with Radio 3 of Sally Potter's Carmen is more bums than were on the seats of the Coliseum. So until both sides of the equation start to provide incentive, I think it continues to be difficult.'

And in terms of trying to maximize the value of public investment in the arts and new possibilities within public service broadcasting:

'The link between a live collective experience with the technology is what we should be allowing the possibility of.'

As key players in the creative economy, the role of the independent production sector in offering different partnership models and ways of developing talent was explored:

'As an indie, we are working with a regional dance company that have come to us because they need some skills that they couldn't access through a broadcaster. That has led to collaboration, not just a partnership, but a real collaboration. This is of benefit to an indie as well as the arts organisation.'

'The challenge is really looking at the whole notion of ideas and innovation and where they are coming from...most of the innovation will actually come from the margins so when you look at the innovation that will come about through digital technology and the distribution opportunities and so forth, the challenge is how do we invest in those organisations in time for that to exist? Where will the talent of tomorrow come from? I think the opportunity exists to grow a variety of network partnerships, not just for the organisations, but for the audiences as well. That will cost money, but it also takes time. If we don't think carefully about how we connect all these things together, then we will lose out.'

'The best bits of arts television are when arts institutions allow really good craftsmen to get hold of the stuff, when there is a really good conversation going on throughout about how you are playing with this stuff - quite often television people come up with rather crude formats and then when you apply them to the stuff it turns into something rather poor. But if you spend time and you work together, if it works right you come up with something good.'

Delegates explored what form any alternatives to the current public service broadcasting system might take:

'What we are talking about is the creation of public service content. The traditional broadcasters who are fighting over the licence fee at the moment would like to have the monopoly of that money because their organisations have always had the money and they want to keep it. If there is not a proper framework of multi-partnership with the arts at all levels, not just in terms of broadcast programmes, that's fine, give the money to the arts and they will take the money and make the public service content, as that's what they can now do. So it is partnership on a much bigger scale or, thank you very much, we'll have the money as a contested fund.'

This raised the question of 'plurality', how it is defined, and the implications of that definition:

'Is it about plurality of offer within broadcasters or is it about plurality of offer within the broadcasting space? What is the right proxy to give you plurality? Partnership with broadcasters is part of it but another argument is going beyond the hybrid situation. The opportunities of how we get the new type of plurality within broadcasting without upsetting the delicate balance of ecology will be interesting and challenging to broadcasters and arts organisations.'

'Plurality is in this room, in this discussion. It's very exciting, it's very wide, and it's across Britain. And we are just talking arts here, we could be talking anything but we are talking about the arts...Ofcom's very narrow use of the word plurality must be challenged.... It's about the conversation that we are having today.'

'I think it is right for people on the Arts Council and others to say there are other people who could really use some of this money to do some other things. I think it's great the public service broadcasting review is prompting the BBC in particular to pursue the partnership agenda; let's hope that doesn't disappear once the public service broadcasting review is out of the way. To me it's much more about convergence between different sectors like the arts and media broadcasting; an issue for DCMS and government to think about the future policy environment...Why not get organisations like yourselves to say, we can do fantastic things in this place, please don't confine this to the BBC/Channel 4.'

Discussion developed on the issue of public value; should Voice of the Listener and Viewer and Arts Council England start to make the 'benefits' argument, outlining the real public value that was present within the sector and how best to leverage it? What would the new public service content economy look like and what would be the elements and partnerships within it? What would the business model look like? These were key questions to be considered by those who were creating content and working alongside the broadcast institutions.

Training was seen as one of the key elements to the success of broadcast arts distribution, on whichever platforms, and delegates identified a skills shortage in this area:

'We need a coherent strategy around training, because the arts organisations need people with certain skills to create really good content: understanding of the media; understanding of the subject; genuine understanding of the audiences alongside editorial skills. But those skills can be taught and brought through, particularly through some of the internship programmes that are running – there's some really exciting people coming in with different opinions and different backgrounds. This should be on the agenda, this whole idea about training to benefit the arts.'

Delegates explored the question of search, or discoverability, in the online environment, around which there was considerable anxiety. Did the majority of arts organisations have sufficient scale and brand identity to allow users to find their public service content:

'Search...is an issue for both broadcasters and arts organisations regarding the content. How will people in the future find content of public value when search is paid for?'

'Search is about setting up a coastguard service; discovery is about everybody having flares, so it isn't about a publicly funded search engine, it's about the public finding things that are of public value...The web is not waiting to be distributing television, like television people think - it's a medium in its own right, focused on individual users and interactions. That's the space that the arts has the opportunity to walk into, because the arts sector is very good at understanding that relationship between the individual and art. Broadcasting isn't; it's a feature of a broadcaster not to care about every individual member of its audience. It's about discovery, not just search.'

'...And the smaller arts organisations, how are they going to find their space? How are they going to be seen? An arts channel?'

In terms of future possibilities and relationships for broadcasters:

'The implications of the boundary-free world of the internet brings us into a very different world where we need to go on a journey to become a full archive provider, but that is not something we can remotely dream of doing as a solitary project because as soon as you think about it, you begin to think about all the connections and partnerships that get triggered by it, because the internet likes connecting things. This is not a replacement for broadcasting, it's bringing the power of all this connectivity to broadcasting...Rights are often used as an excuse for not doing things in this area; they are difficult, due to pride, identity, what has been invested in time, effort and money, but there is such potential here.'

In a world increasingly populated by younger, 'digital natives' who are used to getting content for free on the internet, discussion turned the future funding models for the production of content, whether on broadcast or digital platforms:

'Let's keep in proportion the amount of money that any of these rights are actually going to make in a digital space. No arts organisation is getting rich anytime soon; what you have to do it to manage the costs against the revenues really tightly...what money paid for these things in the first place, and why? This raises some interesting questions about public value. What is the public service/commercial divide?'

'If the public service broadcastings and the arts organisations that we fund are not capable of keeping that market for new ideas liquid, then we will be faced by a culture crunch.'

'The BBC is a net of connections. The archiving that they are doing is one of the most exciting things to be happening at the BBC because it will become part of something bigger than television, bigger than the BBC, and the arts will be in there. The only danger is who is going to pay for this and what effect will the 'culture crunch' have? It's all very well musicians giving away their DVDs in the newspapers, but that is not a business model for the industry.'

The BBC was broadly seen to have a key role in the future of the arts on a range of different platforms, not just their own: should they be required to set targets in relation to arts content and partnerships?

'How much is the BBC going to put into this each year; what are the outcomes likely to be and can the BBC measure itself against those targets? Will there be a secondment of staff to help arts organisations create content where they haven't got the resources initially themselves?'

Channel 4 was seen to have an important role, too, as an innovator, with a lot of powerful and consistent work within the arts, which delegates expected to see continue at the same level or to increase, in line with Channel 4's Next on 4 commitments and the Channel's current push for additional funding:

'They have also invented the idea of working in partnership with arts institutions and I think the BBC haven't quite caught up and that is something that really would not have happened a few years ago. I think we need to praise Channel 4 for what it has done.'

And what about the smaller arts organisations, who didn't have brand identity or know-how to help drive users?

'This is a problem that comes under the broad arch of where resources go in terms of encouraging and helping people to create and then distribute the content; whether that's through the BBC or other means.'

'We are talking about public content and it seems to me that what we are looking for is a new public space in which to display and make that content more accessible, whether it comes from individuals or small organisations or large ones like the British Museum or Tate.'

How to bring about this public content within a public space will continue to be debated over the months to come alongside the critical question of the funding models. What is clear, however, is that significant movement is already underway: arts organisations are beginning to explore how to take ownership and control of their own content; new collaborative ventures are being formed between some arts organisations and independents to create new, innovative, digital content and arts organisations are beginning to have greater expectations of their publicly funded public service broadcasting

partners. Our focus must be on trying to find ways to leverage maximum value for the public from both our publicly funded broadcasters and our publicly funded arts organisations, and ensuring that Britain continues to be at the forefront of the creative and digital opportunities offered by the coming together of arts, cultural organisations, independent producers and broadcasters.

‘If we can gradually build up a different set of relationships here and trust, then the UK can lead the world in showing how this is done. We have the best set of institutions to do that.’