

Dear OFCOM

I recently attended the Media Guardian Changing Broadcast Summit 2008 at the Mayfair Hotel, at which Jonathan Thompson of OFCOM was present. I was troubled by some of the arguments being advanced by Sky TV at that event and therefore have decided to write to you in connection with the current PSB Review.

Several Sky representatives, throughout a very useful day, took the opportunity to express their opinion about the various options tabled for discussion by OFCOM on the future of PSB Funding. I found this surprising and disappointing. Sky TV invests virtually nothing in PSB in this country and little or nothing in the UK production sector. Where Sky have programme funds to deploy, they spend them with Hollywood Studios, (to purchase feature film rights), or with the governing bodies of various sports, (to purchase sporting rights). Virtually none of these very considerable sums are spent on UK home-grown production. They never make brave or awkward programmes, outside their very narrow, (though excellent), Sky News, never make challenging drama that asks challenging questions of those in positions of power in our country. They never make programmes with which their proprietor would be uncomfortable. They do nothing to nurture our independent production sector – in fact nothing at all, though they are blessed with considerable resources, that could be called PSB in the traditional sense. I found it hard then, and on reflection find it hard still, to listen to them expressing opinions on the future of a system they do nothing to encourage or enhance. Far from promoting PSB, their option preferences nakedly favour the narrow commercial interests of Sky TV itself – an organisation which has chosen to position itself in direct competition with PSB in the UK.

In contrast, at the “Future Funding” Session attended by Jonathan Thompson, next to the Sky rep sat a representative of C4. The difference between these two stations and their strategies could not be more marked. Where Sky tells us that their subscription based revenue will be insulated from the economic downturn, C4 is being hit hard by the slump and is cutting budgets and shedding jobs.

Where Sky does no PSB to speak of outside news, C4 has ring-fenced its commitment to expensive, challenging PSB drama this year and next. Where Sky does nothing to nurture the indie sector, C4 effectively created that sector and now offers terms of business that allow indies to keep their international rights and flourish commercially. Like any public service broadcaster worth the name, C4 looks beyond its own narrow commercial interests to discharge its obligations to the wider audience as set down in its remit. I should declare an interest here.

I have been the direct beneficiary of this approach. C4 have backed ‘The Government Inspector’ and ‘Britz’ in recent years. As well as winning Baftas for best drama in their respective categories, these dramas were, (whatever else one might think of them), clearly not the kinds of drama that would ever be contemplated outside a PSB arena. They are hugely expensive, (having a lengthy research phase before a costly film production process), earn the broadcaster no brownie points with the government and rarely attract sizeable audiences. They are simply seen by the broadcaster as part of its PSB obligation – delivered at a considerable cost to itself. Can anyone imagine Sky TV putting sums of this magnitude into shows like ‘Britz’? Obviously not.

C4 has been quite open about the funding gap which threatens its commitment to PSB as the effective subsidy it receives via its analogue spectrum leaks away.

This problem is being exacerbated by the semi-collapse in advertising revenue facing the channel and all other equivalently funded broadcasters. I know the OFCOM PSB consultation process is open until 4th December. On behalf of our beleaguered production sector, and in particular on behalf of those who focus on the PSB output for which Britain is rightly renowned, could I beg you to move to a

conclusion swiftly? It is desperately important that we maintain our commitment to high quality, original content outside the BBC - a commitment that is directly threatened by the financial difficulties now faced by C4. I would urge you to maintain a publicly owned C4 and to opt for new OFCOM model 2, which offers the best hope – as far as I can see – for a C4 in a financial position to discharge its PSB obligations. Above all, I would urge you to give them a swift answer, so desperately needed in these very troubled times.

Best wishes and many thanks

Peter Kosminsky
Writer/Director