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# On public service broadcasting: against the tide

Helena Sheehan

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The defence of public service broadcasting has become so unfashionable in recent years. Despite an international climate bearing down upon its economic base from without and an erosion of its ethos from within, I seem to be among an ever dwindling number who want to defend it.

My first experience of the European tradition of public service broadcasting came after two decades of listening to radio and watching television exclusively within the American tradition of commercial broadcasting. I therefore have tended to see it in greater relief than those who grew up taking it for granted. For two decades now I have marvelled at the sort of radio and television it made possible and I have been distressed at the strength of the forces moving against it.

The pressures building up against public service broadcasting have been tied to the pressures building up against the public service generally. It has been part of the global push to privatization, bringing the dismantlement of the public sector, with its concomitant eighties mood of glorification of entrepreneurial spirit, of individualist acquisitiveness, of cynicism in relation to higher ideals and social movements.

Crucial to the whole scenario have been the new communications technologies, coming with breathless hard sell, promising a new leisure society, a new interactive capacity, a whole new era of democratic participation and consumer sovereignty, promises which remain largely unfulfilled a decade later. Whatever about the exciting technological possibilities, and I am an enthusiastic user of the new communications technologies, the much heralded communications revolution has been assimilated to the political economy of the increasingly internationalized market economy.

In Thatcherite Britain, the Hunt Report in 1982, the White Paper in 1983 and the Peacock Report in 1986 all came down firmly on the side of the de-regulation of broadcasting, breaking with the Reithian tradition in British broadcasting. The push was on for a new level of commercial penetration, with a minimum of restriction on the free play of market forces, assuming that commercial competition was the surest guide to quality. The monetarist case came packaged as widening the viewer's choice, as promoting diversity and initiative, as taking power from stuffy government bureaucrats and transferring it to the consumer.

Underneath all the freedom of choice rhetoric, however, is the reality that freedom for the pike is death to the minnow. It is freedom of choice for those holding the balance of power, for those at the commanding heights of struggle for control of the world's telecommunications systems. Paradoxically, real freedom of choice requires public regulation, albeit a new more flexible and more open form of public regulation, as opposed to the old elitist Reithian model.

The apparent equality of the marketplace masks the deepest inequalities. The patterns of dominance in the electronic representation of the world are tied to the patterns of dominance in everything else. Not everyone has the same opportunity to tell their own story any more than everyone has the same opportunity to buy and sell on the open market. The fear is that all indigenous cultural expression, indeed all higher forms of intellectual, moral and aesthetic consciousness, would be swamped by the culture of Dallas, Eurodisney and Coca Cola.

At the same time as there has been a trend toward increasing concentration of ownership and control of the commanding heights of world communications, there has simultaneously been a countervailing trend toward fragmentation of production, transmission and reception on other levels, with both of these trends making inroads against the middle level of nationally based institutions heretofore in control of communications. National broadcasting institutions, such as BBC and RTE, have been caught in the middle between forces of increasing centralization at one level and forces of increasing decentralization on the other.

Ireland in its own way has been caught up in the struggle between the forces supporting public service broadcasting and those advocating the supremacy of the free market, even if the debate has often been confused and the struggle for power has taken on farcical forms. Through most of the eighties, pirate radio stations operated illegally. When the government closed them down in the mid 1980s, they immediately resumed broadcasting and the government did nothing. Public reaction was fairly successfully manipulated by the pirates and the whole debate was posed as being between public and private broadcasting, with public broadcasting being characterized as synonymous with censorship, bureaucracy, centralization and stodgy programming, as if commercial broadcasting automatically brought freedom of expression, community participation, decentralization and vibrant programming. By the end of the decade, the situation in radio was regularized, with mixed results, some small successes and some gigantic failures.

Successive governments have made a mess of the whole thing, especially in television. They have persistently enacted measures to undermine RTE to provide 'a level playing pitch', from repeated refusals of requests to raise the licence fee and to provide an effective method of collection to the existing (and rumoured soon to be rescinded) cap on advertising. At the same time, there has been a dramatic collapse of alternatives with the demise of TV3 and Century. No one is happy with the present situation. Perhaps the smaller independent producers, caught in the middle between more powerful public institutions and commercial interests, have suffered most.

My own view of what needs to be done is to enact new legislation eliminating the obstructions to RTE and radically opening up the whole scene to independent producers. While I believe that RTE has served Irish society well, I do believe that its monopoly of television broadcasting must be ended. To have only one structure for commissioning television projects is no longer satisfactory. Too many good projects have been rejected with nowhere else to go. There needs to be an alternative to RTE in-house production and even to RTE commissioning of independent production. I believe that Network 2 should be given over to an alternative public authority and run as Channel 4 in the sense of commissioning production to independent producers, rather than as an alternative in-house service, whether as it is now or as a commercial alternative.

Although public service broadcasting needs to be transformed, I believe that it must be preserved. It would be a tragedy to behold the end of this form of broadcasting, which treats its audience primarily as citizens with needs and interests and not as consumers of advertisers' products. It is time to move on, but carrying with us the best of what we have evolved so far.