



**Speech to BBC Trust & Power Conference 19th June
The Future Case for PSB - Universality in the Face of Fragmentation
Dr David Levy, Director Reuters Institute**

1. Introduction

I was asked to talk about the case for PSB in the future. I believe the policy rationale for PSB in ten years' time will be stronger than ever. But the reality of delivering on the PSB mission will become much harder as the world changes.

In short, the universality on which the PSB project depends is ever more challenged by different forms of audience fragmentation. And if PSBs are going to make a convincing case in ten years' time they need to think through the different dimensions and implications of those forces of fragmentation and indeed polarisation.

As I discuss this I will draw on media consumption data from our recently published 2018 Digital News Report, looking across 37 countries and based on a poll of 74k respondents, to help us reflect on some of the future challenges facing PSB. I will offer my views before opening up points for discussion with our distinguished panel.

But first we need to recognise a dilemma. Many of the things that make life more convenient for all of us every day test the traditional case for and functions of PSB. That is true today and I think will continue to be the case in 10 years' time.

Why?

- The most obvious point is that PSB was born as a function of the scale, cost and influence of Mass Media, in a world where there was scarcity of broadcast distribution and providers. And yet now we live in a world of vastly increased choice
- And PSB derives from the age of the mass market – of large scale production of standardised goods – to meet the needs of everyone – but now customisation and individualised consumption seems to have replaced the standardised approach
- And then there was the belief – that faced with those two phenomena – Mass media – and the mass market – broadcasting was too important to be left to the market alone.

Other arguments were advanced in the first phase of digital:

- That in a world of globalising content there was a need for organisations that created content about their own societies
- That PSB created a shared understanding that was vital to shared knowledge and social cohesion
- That the continuing power of the media meant that impartial PSBs were vital to protecting media pluralism and avoiding undue influence of any one media proprietor
- That market failures would continue with digital since content with huge citizen but limited commercial value would still be underprovided free at the point of use.

I have advanced many of these points. And I believe they are even more relevant today faced with current concerns about misinformation and an abundance of unsourced, and often untrusted content

But they assume that as long as PSB intervention was sufficiently large and well-funded and its services were made universally available then the impact (which provided the rationale for the policy intervention in the first place) would automatically follow.

And yet in my view (leaving aside perennial issues of political independence) the biggest challenges to the case for PSB in the next decade stem from the way a fragmenting world undermines the universality on which PSB depends.

2. Three challenges to PSB Universality

I will reflect here on three different challenges to that universality

- The first is the problem of universal availability – of delivering PSB to everyone in a world of proliferating choice, competition and reduced PSB control over routes to the user
- The second is where universal impact is much harder to achieve in a world of increasingly individualised and fragmented consumption
- The third and in my view most difficult is how political and social polarisation makes it much harder to build universal legitimacy and Trust for PSB institutions.

In the next 15 minutes or so I will illustrate why these are problematic and offer some thoughts on responses that might be considered to creating a sustainable case for PSB in ten years' time. I don't have all the answers but hope I succeed in prompting discussion

a. Universal availability

It is stating the obvious to say that PSBs face much more competition now than ever before. This goes way beyond the advent of more choice in radio and multichannel TV, to the multiplicity of sources there are now both for news and indeed entertainment online, whether from old print or broadcast players to the arrival of digital born players and new over the top providers like Amazon & Netflix who compete with PSBs for attention and content. All this is good for consumers but makes life much harder for PSBs

Of course, future focused PSBs need to be online wherever they are allowed to do. But the environment is much tougher than in broadcast.

This chart from our 2018 Digital News Report compares the weekly reach of selected PSBs for NEWS in broadcast and online. Most have reasonable reach in broadcast but online they all do less well and in the case of the PSBs on the right of the chart dramatically so. The PSBs on the left do better – and the BBC does best of all - but its online reach for news is much lower than in broadcast because there is so much more choice available online, especially in English.

In addition, the way people find news online makes the situation even more complex for PSBs. In our 2018 survey we find that just 32% of them said their preferred way of finding a news brand was by going direct to the news site. Nearly two thirds – 65% - come in through a side door, mostly via search or social media. That is a tough world for PSBs which used to control their distribution through broadcast channels. Now everyone is really dependent on what Facebook do to their algorithm or how prominently you appear in Google search.

Worse, once people have found your content they may not even know who produced it. Through research we did last year just in the UK we found that brand attribution in these distributed environments is a real problem. 24 hours after people had viewed a story, fewer than half could remember the news brand that produced it if they came via search (37%) or Social (47%) compared to over 80% who went direct to the website. And remember that three quarters of the under 35s come via the side door.

So the practical problems of delivering content that is universally available becomes much more complex.

But PSBs can address this. If they have the will and the political support and resources and make the necessary internal changes – they can move online and provide valued services in much more convenient ways. They must ensure that when they depend on third parties for distribution they engage better with their users and stand out from the crowd in branding, attribution and distinctiveness. We know that some organisations do better than others in achieving this. But it is struggle well worth pursuing.

b. Universal Impact

Achieving universal impact is much harder and a one size fits all approach will no longer work.

We all know that generations differ hugely in their media consumption

Here we can see how different generations start their journey for news online. As you can see across all 37 countries in our Digital News Report older people are much more likely to go direct to a news website, with younger people more likely to come in via another route.

Looking beyond online news to preferred platforms for news when Ofcom asked people in the UK ‘which of the following do you use for news nowadays’ 69% of the population as a whole chose TV as against 48% the internet, and 33% radio. But when comparing the over 65s with the 16-24s there were dramatic differences. Only 18% of over 65s chose the internet as against 89% who chose TV. With the 16-24s the picture was reversed – with 63% choosing the internet as against 49% tv – and I’m afraid only 20% of them chose radio for news.

PSB impact is affected by fewer people using their services but in addition some people just avoid their key service, news, altogether. In our 2017 Digital News Report we found that 29% of respondents worldwide said they regularly avoid the news. Half of them said they did so because it has a negative impact on their mood.

The result of this fragmentation by age, class and just levels of interest in news means that PSBs need to think harder about how to reach all audiences, but also that they are very far away in the online world of being guaranteed impact for their efforts.

This chart from our 2018 Digital News shows how few people relied exclusively on their public broadcaster as a source of online news, just 1 to 2% in most countries even in ones like Finland or the Czech Republic where language might be expected to provide some degree of protection from competition. Given the huge amount of news that is available online in English it is surprising that 14% of our UK sample said they only used the BBC as a source of online news, but clearly that is a long way away from the kind of impact and loyalty that some PSBs became accustomed to in the broadcast environment.

So we can see that achieving universal impact in increasingly fragmented societies – is much harder than the 1st challenge of achieving universal availability.

Many PSBs have traditionally segmented their services – with some aimed at meeting mass audiences combined with others designed to meet the needs of other tastes and groups. That needs to go much further but the old idea of doing more targeted linear channels is not appropriate. It’s expensive and ill adapted to a world of consumption on demand.

In radio, podcasts are meeting the needs of young people in ways that linear radio now does less well. This chart is slightly unfair because I’m comparing weekly radio news usage with

monthly podcast figures but even so the demographic differences are stark. As you can see here around half of under 35s across all our 37 countries are using news related podcasts monthly. Less than 20% of the same group are listening to radio news programmes. And what podcasts are people using? This word-cloud gives the answer for the UK – lots of different BBC programmes but also US productions like This American life and Freakonomics are mentioned particularly by young. So, this is one way for PSBs to extend choice and convenience but of course it also opens up new competition for their listeners.

But the podcast and on demand model only offers part of the solution for PSBs. They extend the life and reach of existing PSB content but they don't of themselves increase the range of content for more diverse audiences.

And there is a more fundamental question of how serving the needs of increasingly fragmented audiences sits with the case for the PSB role as a force for social cohesion?

c. Universal Legitimacy and Trust

My third challenge is where problems for universal availability and impact are compounded by increasing political and social polarisation which in turn affects universal legitimacy and trust. This is the hardest challenge.

Given the BBC/Czech Radio collaboration on this conference I should start by saying that when we asked in our Digital News Report about Trust at the brand level in the UK the BBC is the most trusted brand by those who have heard of it and all those who use it. There is a similarly impressive picture for the main Czech PSB TV and radio channels.

However, both broadcasters exist in environments where there is relatively low trust in the media. When we asked in each of our countries, whether people agreed that you could trust the news most of the time, there is a massive difference between countries like Finland where over 60% say yes and Greece and Korea where only around a quarter agree.

As you can see the UK, US and Czech Republic are at the lower end of the scale in trust in the news media as a whole.

Trust in the media is often affected by wider political polarisation and currently the US is the most polarised media environment of the countries we have studied. This chart from the Digital news report shows how trust in the media has played out there over the past three years, from the campaign year 2016, to Trump's inauguration and then the first year of his Presidency. Over time – as debate has raged between the President and the Press, trust in the media has crashed on the right, and correspondingly grown on the left.

This kind of polarisation can, over time, affect PSB legitimacy and trust. You can see that most dramatically here in the US case where trust in NPR by people who self-identified on the right (in orange) is less than half that of people on the left (in blue).

Most European PSBs score quite well on trust even if they skew slightly to the left. Spain and Hungary are the outliers with people on the right there more likely to trust their PSBs. At

the time we did our polling both Spain and Hungary had right of centre governments and in each case, we assume people saw the PSBs as under some government influence.

However, when the US based Pew Research Centre looked at trust in the media in general in Western Europe –they saw populist attitudes as a stronger driver of low trust than the traditional left-right divide. Pew defined populist attitudes as people who agreed with two statements. ‘Most elected officials don’t care what people like me think’. And ‘Ordinary people would do a better job solving the country’s problems than elected officials.’ As you can see here people with populist views in Spain, France the UK and Italy are particularly likely to distrust the news media – indeed only around a quarter of them do.

This poses major questions for PSBs as to whether they see themselves as closer to their audiences i.e. to ‘ordinary people’ or to the people they need to make their political case to, namely ‘elected officials’?

The point here is that polarisation isn’t only about political choices but goes much wider than that to major divides in people’s lived experiences and indeed in their sense of identity between broadcasters and the people that PSBs are meant to serve.

The Channel 4 presenter Jon Snow talked very powerfully about this in reflecting at last year’s McTaggart lecture at the Edinburgh TV festival on how he was greeted when he went to cover the Grenfell fire which took place just a year ago a few miles from here when angry residents asked him ‘Where were you? Why didn’t you come here before?’

He reflected in his lecture

“Why didn’t we enable the residents of Grenfell Tower – and indeed the other hundreds of towers like it around Britain – to find pathways to talk to us and for us to expose their story?

“In that moment I felt both disconnected and frustrated. I felt on the wrong side of the terrible divide that exists in present-day society and in which we are all in this hall major players. We can accuse the political classes for their failures, and we do. But we are guilty of them ourselves.

“We are too far removed from those who lived their lives in Grenfell and who, across the country, now live on amid the combustible cladding, the lack of sprinklers, the absence of centralised fire alarms and more, revealed by the Grenfell Tower fire.”

“Grenfell speaks to us about our own lack of diversity, and capacity to reach into the swaths of western society with whom we have no connection.”

3. PSBs and Conceptualising Trust in a fragmenting world

So beyond the questions of universality, impact and fragmentation and its relation to trust this takes me to the broader question of how PSBs themselves should think about Trust in this more complex world and how they connect with their users. There’s no shortage of ideas of things that PSBs can do to restore trust whether in terms of sourcing, engagement

with your audience or transparency over funding and the make-up and perspectives of your staff. All these things matter

But I want tackle a more fundamental question if you like of how we conceptualise trust in deciding what PSB should be doing in this changed world and how this impacts on the case for its continuance.

I see several different approaches to PSB Trust. The first is the idea of Trust born from being authoritative. This is the traditional approach to trust.

The second is one that focuses more on authenticity, which is sometimes in competition with the authority.

And the third is based more on affinity – which I think is what Jon Snow was talking to in his comments about Grenfell Tower trying harder to connect with the concerns and experience of our users.

Let's look at these in a bit more detail

Authority is generally trust born of distance....Trust in expertise and assurance. The kind we expect from surgeons and pilots. We don't expect to like them in order to trust them. Indeed, in some ways it is precisely their remoteness that means we trust them. But PSB is different since it is about creating and communicating and engaging with the audience not just about things that they should know, but also things they care about.

Authenticity to my mind gets closer to this mode where trust is born from a conversation and generates a different kind of trust, one that is linked to the idea that in a world full of spin and politicians who are too clever by half – trusted communication is done by people who have first-hand knowledge of what they are talking about as well as expertise. They tell it like it is, give us the unvarnished truth, from their own experience. This is a far less distant kind of trust.

The third form of trust based on affinity is much harder to achieve. This is born of the idea that the PSB understands what matters to me. They seem to value me and care about what I think. And indeed, they might even be like me! This is not without its problems, especially given the fragmentation and polarization that I've described, but it is also something that most PSBs are very far from at present. Not even to engage with this aspect creates the all too common risk that when PSBs are reporting on things in ordinary people's lives, they seem remote, distant, patronizing and uncomprehending of what they are witnessing. And when they focus on major political events the audience struggles to see the relevance to their lives and sees the PSB as part of a remote elite.

4. Conclusion

Let me move to conclude to address the problems I've identified of how to defend PSB in ten years' time. As I've said I think the intellectual case for PSB will still be strong in a decade's time but there are some problems causes by the multiple challenges to the universality on which that case has rested historically together with the knock on impact on trust.

- Universal availability – through proliferating platforms and distribution systems -is harder than in the past but can be attempted given sufficient focus, funding and internal reform
- Universal impact is harder but raises questions about the trade-offs between serving the differing needs of a more diverse audience and the old political arguments for PSB as a source of shared experience in a fragmenting world. For the moment keeping the two in balance seems achievable, but for how much longer?
- Building Institutional legitimacy and Trust in PSB in the face of political polarisation and growing suspicion of many institutions is much harder.

Reduced trust in elites makes it harder for PSBs to perform their traditional balancing act of winning authorisation for their activities by negotiating their future with decision makers whilst at the same time winning legitimacy with the public through universal use.

This is about something more fundamental than the old dilemma of combining PSB political accountability and editorial independence from political power. It involves moving beyond forms of trust that are based on distance to ones based on dialogue and engagement with users. That is hard for most PSBs and it's even harder to do whilst holding firm to political impartiality within a polarising environment.

The old PSB defence to criticism that "if both sides are criticising us we must be getting it right" always rang rather hollow. The risk in the future is of PSB being criticised as another out of touch institution – a more damaging social charge than the political one of a failure of impartiality. All PSBs need to reflect how not to be seen as part of a remote elite if they are to maintain trust and legitimacy in ten years' time, when the universality on which they have rested so much of their case in the past will be under ever greater challenge.

Thank you for your attention. I look forward to the discussion