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Time to challenge the priests of public broadcasting

HENRY ERGAS THE AUSTRALIAN FEBRUARY 03, 2014 12:00AM

MALCOLM Turnbull is right to check whether the ABC and the SBS provide taxpayers with value for money. But to ensure good use of the community's resources, it is not enough to ask whether the public service broadcasters are doing what they do properly; one must also ask whether they are doing the right things.

After all, public service broadcasting has evolved enormously since its origins in the 1920s, while the environment in which it operates has changed even more. However, its role and purpose have not been subject to careful, focused inquiry. Other than a Productivity Commission review of broadcasting, which did not examine the functions and financing of the public service broadcasters, we lack any equivalent to Britain's landmark Annan (1974) and Peacock (1985) reports on the British Broadcasting Corporation.

Without a coherent framework for defining the public service broadcasters' duties, governments have found it impossible to assess their performance, undermining efforts at imposing accountability. And like a fly thrashing at a window pane in a vain attempt to get through it, governments' frustration has then been made all the more acute by the broadcasters' self-righteousness and their entrenched inability to distinguish independence from conceit.

Yet is difficult to imagine a greater contrast than that between today's realities and the world in which our public service broadcasting was born. Much like the BBC, and its counterparts in Canada and New Zealand, the ABC was formed, and its mission framed, from two beliefs that became predominant following the trauma of World War I.

The first was the conviction that in an age in which the fate of nations rested on a turbulent, potentially dangerous, "mass opinion", it was crucial to shape public understanding. Cogently expressed by John Reith, effectively the BBC's founding father, in his 1924 manifesto *Broadcasting Over Britain*, this unabashed paternalism was not aimed at imposing high culture on the great unwashed; instead, it sought to provide "all men an atmosphere ... where they may use ideas" while being "nourished and not bound by them".

The second was a faith in the capacity of experts to undertake that function. As Reith put it, "few know what they want, and very few what they need"; but those few should be running the show. Guided by a sense of "service", they would be the designers, producers and providers, harnessing the miracle of wireless for the broader good.

These twin notions, of a "public" that was as much to be transformed as it was to be informed, and of a professional elite that would do so, defined public service broadcasting's theology, with the great public broadcasters being its cathedrals. And while those cathedrals' priesthoods might struggle to live up to their high-minded creed, many elements of Reith's vision proved their value.

By 1977, however, the Annan committee was right to conclude that the Reithian model was increasingly incapable of accommodating "the variety of expression of what is good". And as the Peacock review of the BBC stressed a decade later, the assumptions on which that model rested were of rapidly diminishing relevance.

To begin with, the Reithian mental map was of a society dominated by an enduring vertical division between rich and poor, educated and ignorant. But today's segmentations are more variegated, transient and horizontal, reflecting ongoing choices at least as much as birth.

No less significantly, Reith and his followers believed that only a public service could produce quality material. The possibility that private providers could be even more innovative would have seemed fanciful; and so would the possibility that anyone but a public service might examine the issues of the day with the rational scepticism, openness of mind and empathy of spirit that are the hallmarks of intelligent conversation. As for the risks of public broadcasting's high priesthood degenerating into a self-serving sect, they would never have crossed Reith's mind.

A yawning gap has therefore emerged between the theory on which public service broadcasting is founded and its practice. The Peacock commission reacted by recommending that the publicly funded functions be more clearly limited to areas where markets were unlikely to operate effectively; and that at least 40 per cent of outlays on public service programming be sourced outside the BBC itself.

The internet's spectacular development means there is even more merit in that approach today than there was 30 years ago. Yes, some types of programming would not be adequately provided by market forces alone; but as new sources of content proliferate, it is absurd to think only the public service broadcasters can and should fill the gap. Rather, public service broadcasting must be distinguished from the public service broadcasters. And that is why the Australia Network tender was critical: it was a first, however small, step towards contestability. Little wonder the ABC reacted so violently; and little wonder Julia Gillard and Stephen Conroy, then at the height of their reign of error, prevented it going ahead.

But that shouldn't stop the Abbott government from embracing market testing, while still providing the public service broadcasters with the funding needed to keep core capabilities intact. No doubt, considerable complexities would be involved. But gradually extending contestability, administered by an independent board, is more likely to flush out the cost and efficiency data Turnbull seeks than even the best-designed administrative review. And every bit as important, contestability would allow taxpayers to draw on a talent pool far wider than the ABC and SBS alone.

Reith's vision of public service broadcasting as part of society's "civilising process" deserves a future. Ultimately, however, that future must lie not in ignoring private creativity but in channelling it to public purpose. Good on Turnbull for closely examining the public broadcasters' costs; but that should just be the beginning of reform, not its end.