Thinking faith
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The BBC and Public Space

Mark Thompson

The BBC Director-General, Mark Thompson, has discussed the concept of public space and the way in which the BBC continues to cultivate its role within that space, in a lecture hosted by the Las Casas Institute at Blackfriars Hall, University of Oxford. Read the text exclusively on *Thinking Faith*.

I'm going to talk about what I want to call the battle for public space.


Photo: BBC

It's a battle which is often presented as if it were just an argument about the scale and scope and future direction of the BBC, or of public service broadcasting as a whole. And indeed, as you'll hear, the BBC often finds itself in the middle of the action.

But to me, it also touches on much wider issues as well: about the way our democracy works; about how the public can get trustworthy, impartial information and take part in free and meaningful debate about the great issues of the day; about the broader cultural and educational space, its breadth, its approachability; perhaps even about the kind of society we want – closed or open, certain or questioning, self-referential or engaged in an encounter with other perspectives, other cultures.

I want to begin with the ideological debate.

The case for the prosecution

A good place to start that is the case for the prosecution, which has probably never been expressed more trenchantly and eloquently than it was by James Murdoch in his MacTaggart lecture at the Edinburgh Television Festival this August.

With all its faults, British television – not just from the BBC, but ITV, Channel 4, Five, Sky and others – probably remains the most admired in the world. In his lecture, James described it as 'the Addams family of world media'. (I don't know, by the way, whether that makes me Gomez or Uncle Fester.)

What James objects to in the UK broadcasting system is the level of regulation and the level of public intervention. Ofcom, the media regulator, came in for some heavy criticism.

But James reserved most of his strongest remarks for the BBC: for its dominance; for its market impact; for its malign and, to use his word, Orwellian influence on the whole of UK media.

The debate about the boundaries of what the BBC should do, about how best to unlock the immense potential of the BBC to create positive public value, through its news, its documentaries and arts output, its children's programmes, without excessive adverse market impact: that debate is a legitimate and important one with which the BBC should be and is engaging.

But James Murdoch's speech goes a good deal further than that and questions whether any form of public intervention in media is ever justified. I want to quote the end of his speech. He's talking here about how best to ensure independence in journalism. Having rejected models like the licence fee-funded BBC, he says:

> On the contrary, independence is characterised by the absence of the apparatus of supervision and dependency. Independence of faction, industrial or

> political. Independence of subsidy, gift and patronage... There is an inescapable conclusion that we must reach if we are to have a better society. The only reliable, durable, and perpetual guarantor of independence is profit.

Note the ambition in James's words. He, correctly in my view, believes that the stakes are very high. Independent journalism can lead not just to better-informed readers, but to a better society.

And his proposition is a simple one: that only an unregulated free market can guarantee editorial independence, choice and quality. Media properties are either commercial and therefore truly free, or they are State-sponsored, State-controlled and therefore not just paternalistic, but authoritarian. You have to choose, and in James's view, in so many ways – with the BBC, Channel 4, Ofcom, the rest of the public service broadcasters (PSBs) – Britain has made the wrong choice.

Now it's true that a free market in media can be a powerful stimulus for quality, diversity and freedom of speech. The energy and extraordinary range of the British press is testament to that. But James's argument is not that a free market approach to media is *one* way of guaranteeing independence, and in particular journalistic independence, but that it is the *only* way.

The idea of public space

The most important thing I want to say to James Murdoch is that in this country we have a different tradition, a tradition that denies that the only two ways of delivering media or culture are either through the untrammelled market or through state control.

Not just the BBC and the other PSBs, but universities, our museums and galleries, many of our orchestras, the RSC, the National Theatre, our great national parks, more broadly our educational and health systems: in fact so much of our collective cultural and social life exists not in James's bi-polar universe of market and state, but in a third space. Public space.

Public space is not-for-profit space, not by accident but by design. It exists not to make money but to serve the public and it is accountable to them, not just as customers in James Murdoch's formulation, but as citizens.

Wherever it can be – and certainly in the case of the BBC – public space is free at the point of use. And the more people who use it the better.

In the case of the BBC, there's another important characteristic. There's no demand curve and no exclusion. You can't buy a better service from the BBC no matter how wealthy you are. And you can't stop people who are less well off than you enjoying just as good a service as you do.

Public space is shared space. That's why we will never erect a pay zone around our news. That's why we will fight tooth and nail to preserve our broad public remit – from *Strictly Come Dancing* to the Poetry Season.

And public space is independent space.

How can that be, James Murdoch asks, when you're State-sponsored and State-controlled? In James's universe, you'd never be able to slip a cigarette paper between the BBC and the Government of the day. Every night there would be glowing and obsequious reports about the Prime Minister's diary for the day. The Hutton crisis could never have happened; no scandal, no crisis, no inquiry, no resignations. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan would have been covered on the BBC with deference and without debate.

Now clearly there are still countries in the world where state broadcasters behave exactly like that. But, for anyone with eyes to see, Britain is not one of them.

The public believes in the editorial independence of the BBC and they trust us. James called his speech 'The Absence of Trust', the argument being that we have a system that doesn't trust the public to make free choices as consumers and which therefore is a system which the public themselves cannot have any trust in.

So much of the current discourse is based on the assumption that support for the BBC, the licence fee and for other forms of public service broadcasting, is in decline.

It isn't. Public support is strong and getting stronger.

At a time when the future of so much of the rest of media is so uncertain, the idea of the BBC still works. That thought itself is infuriating to many of the participants in the debate, but it's true. It works in terms of investment in production, in training, in talent. It works in innovation. But above all, it works for the public.

And, like the remarkable renaissance in so much of this country's cultural life – in music, theatre, dance, the crowds that flock to museums and galleries across the UK – it points to the fact that the idea of public space is not a piece of paternalistic nostalgia. It's about our present and our future.

Disputed ground

But what public space should consist of and where its boundaries should be set – these are lively and disputed questions, not least because they often involve trade-offs.

Take religious broadcasting. Probably a majority of people would accept that religion has a place in the public square. Certainly the BBC remains committed to a significant volume of religious output across radio, TV and the web. From the *Morning Service* on Radio 4 to Diarmaid MacCulloch's *A History of Christianity*, playing currently on BBC4, there's a central commitment to Christianity, but a determination to find space for the UK's other major faiths as well.

But in what proportion? And what is the BBC's responsibility for non-believers and specifically for those – humanists, for instance – who have sophisticated belief-systems which they believe guide their lives and the moral choices that they make, but who reject the supernatural and spiritual claims of religion?

They appear frequently across our output, especially on programmes of ethical discussion like *The Moral Maze*, but should they also appear sometimes on *Thought for The Day*, alongside the Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Jewish and other religious speakers who currently occupy the chair? Their case is simply that it's unreasonable to exclude one class of belief-systems from an important slot, the whole point of which is to bring a range of different perspectives and patterns of belief to bear on the major events and talking points of the day.

Now, while we accept that that argument has considerable weight and that it is right that we should find ways to reflect humanism, atheism and other non-religious belief systems on the airwaves, we have always in the past taken the view that the point of *Thought for the Day* is specifically to be a religious perspective on the world and that therefore only religious speakers should appear. *Thought for the Day*, in other words, helps reinforce a place for religion in that part of public space represented by the BBC, but we do that, I accept, at least in this case at the price of excluding the representatives of serious non-religious belief-systems.

But, as we speak, *Thought for the Day*, is the subject of an active debate and discussion with the BBC Trust.

In fact, trade-offs and difficult judgment-calls seem unavoidable if you have to define public space in practical immediate terms, by commissioning and broadcasting programmes and web pages.

What about the decision of whether or not to show an appeal on behalf of the Disasters Emergency Committee about the humanitarian crisis in Gaza? Many people thought we should have done. Instead we followed a longstanding principle that we do not broadcast charity appeals in circumstances which could suggest that the BBC feels deferential sympathy for one side or the other in an ongoing war. We would not, for instance, have felt able to broadcast an appeal, had one been requested a few months later, for the conflict in Sri Lanka.

But whether you think we were right or wrong, I hope you can see that here too there are important interests to balance. The humanitarian need, of course: one that we ourselves helped to highlight to the world through our news output. Providing opportunities for the public to find out about and then to respond to human need is itself an important mission for the BBC and an important part of public space.

Most years BBC charity appeals and events encourage the British public to donate around £100 million to good causes. But in this case, against that we had to

weigh our primary duty, which is to independence and to impartiality. In the event, we decided that the danger that the public might doubt our impartiality was sufficiently great that we should not broadcast.

Impartiality is probably the biggest single benefit that the BBC brings to the national debate. We don't tell the public what to think or who to vote for. Instead we try to give them the information with which to make up their own minds and to stage fair debates in which the whole range of political, social and cultural opinions can be heard.

But it isn't easy. Impartiality is at once the most important, but also the most disputed of all the BBC's duties. To illustrate that fact, I thought I'd look in slightly more detail at one recent case study – our decision to invite Nick Griffin, the leader of the British National Party onto *Question Time*.

Question Time epitomises the kind of debate I've been talking about. Politicians from the UK's biggest parties appear most frequently, but from time to time representatives of parties with many fewer supporters – from the Scottish Socialists and Respect to the Green Party – also take their seats on the stage, as do a whole range of non-politicians with something to say. *Question Time* is the most prominent programme of its kind on British television, and we carefully study the support gained in elections by each of the parties, large and small, before deciding who to invite and how frequently they should appear.

It is a straightforward matter of fact that, with some 6% of the vote and the election of two MEPs in this spring's European elections, and with some success in local elections as well, the BNP has demonstrated a level of support that would normally lead to an occasional invitation to join the panel on *Question Time*. It is for that reason, not for some misguided desire to be controversial, not to get bigger ratings, but for that reason alone, that the invitation was extended.

For the BBC to say to the BNP (or indeed to any political party), 'Yes, you've met the objective criteria for appearing on *Question Time*, but we have decided that in your case it would be more appropriate if you didn't, but instead appeared on *Newsnight* or *Panorama*,' would be for us to deny them parity with other parties, presumably on the basis of our own, or somebody else's, qualitative political judgment about the BNP.

That isn't impartiality: it is its opposite. It would be contrary to our obligations under the BBC's charter; and contrary, I believe, to the British public's expectations of us. And it would be wrong.

Does that mean that we believe the BNP should not be challenged? Of course not. They should be challenged as tenaciously and as searchingly as any other political party, and I believe they are when they appear on the BBC. From news coverage to hard-hitting, and indeed award-winning, investigative journalism, we have probed both the BNP's stated policies and some of the views of the party's leaders and supporters that are expressed only behind closed doors.

But *Question Time* is the public's chance to challenge the politicians. That is why it is so important that they should sometimes be able to hear and interrogate politicians from the relative fringes as well as from the mainstream.

The case against inviting the BNP to appear on *Question Time* is, I believe, a case for censorship: the case, in other words, that in the opinion of those who make the programme, the BNP's policies are so abhorrent and so liable to sow hatred and division that they should be excluded from this form of public discourse altogether.

Democratic societies sometimes do decide that some parties and organisations are beyond the pale. As a result, they proscribe them and/or ban them from the airwaves. The UK government took exactly this step with specific parties and organisations in Northern Ireland in the 1980s.

Many would argue that proscription and censorship can be counter-productive, and that it is usually better to engage and challenge extreme views than to try to eliminate them through suppression. My point is simply that the drastic steps of proscription and censorship can only be taken by Government and parliament. Though we argued against it, the BBC abided by the Northern Ireland broadcasting ban in the 1980s, and, if the BNP were proscribed, the BBC would abide by that decision too, and the BNP would not appear on *Question Time*.

But that hasn't happened, and until such time as it does it is unreasonable and inconsistent to take the position that a party like the BNP is acceptable enough for the public to vote for, but not acceptable enough to appear on democratic platforms such as *Question Time*. If there is a case for censorship, it should be debated and decided in parliament.

Public space then is not just a place reserved for works of art or political parties of which we ourselves approve. What makes it public is not just the fact that anyone can wander into it as a spectator or observer, but that pretty much anyone can offer their intellectual or cultural wares there too. There are limits of course, but within those limits, in my view the BBC's presumption should be in favour of inclusion rather than exclusion.

The BBC's own public status and its guaranteed funding makes such a stance possible. It's one that many private media organisations might quite reasonably shy away from. Looking at the crowd of demonstrators and police outside Television Centre a few weeks ago, most private bosses might well conclude that they simply don't need the grief. They don't have a duty to represent the full range of political views and they're unlikely to feel it makes good commercial sense. Here too I think it's hard to argue that profit is a strong, let alone the only guarantor of independence and diversity in journalism.

The BBC and the future of public space

The BBC has persisted and, despite many bumps over the years, has retained public confidence precisely because it has never been allowed to stagnate.

That's why the last thing we should do now is to sit on our laurels. Nor should we remove ourselves from the rest of the media sector. The public will be best served not by a strong BBC sitting in isolation but by a strong, varied media sector which includes a strong BBC.

In the last three years, digital take-up and the public's use of digital services has exceeded almost everyone's expectations. But the effect of that, and of the downturn, on many incumbent media businesses has been devastating.

Inevitably, that has meant a steady increase in the number of those who worry about the BBC's scope and market impact. Convergence has become an everyday reality and businesses who once regarded themselves as being in a quite different market from the BBC – newspapers, for instance – now believe themselves to be direct competitors.

Now you've heard me argue that James Murdoch's diagnosis of the ills of British media misses the point.

That does not mean that every question about how the BBC fits alongside the rest of British media is illegitimate or a partisan attack on public service broadcasting. We have to accept that to many in commercial media we seem relatively bigger and stronger than ever. Therefore, it is inevitable that questions about the BBC and our services come to the fore.

The British public tell us that they continue to want a strong, confident BBC which delivers real value to every household in the country. But in a period where not just the licence fee but the wider public finances and the revenues available to commercial media, are constrained, and after years of squeezing efficiencies out of the system, we will have to make choices.

But I can tell you that I expect to see on the BBC a further shift in emphasis in favour of investment in high quality, original British content in those areas which are least likely to be provided by the market: the best journalism in the world, we hope, available to the public here and around the world free at the point of use; a long-term commitment to outstanding content for children; a bolder strategy for programmes which build knowledge about the arts and sciences; a determination to open up the BBC's archive and make it as widely available as possible.

To give just one example: early next year we launch a new programme on Radio 4 called *The History of the World in 100 Objects*. The programme is itself a partnership between the BBC and the British Museum and is presented by the British Museum's director, Neil MacGregor. Each episode uses a single artefact from the museum to illuminate one chapter in the world's history and culture. But the programme won't just live on Radio 4: there's a companion TV programme

for children on CBBC, additional output across the BBC's national, regional and local services, a massive and permanent web presence and literally scores of partnerships with museums and galleries in every part of the UK.

In its way, *The History of the World in 100 Objects* is an attempt to join up one part of public space and it points to a new and rather different vision of what the BBC could become – less of a citadel with its own institutional priorities and interests and more of a catalyst for collaboration and change.

Given the scale of the challenges, there's an air of pessimism about much of British media at the moment. And given the ferocity of some of the attacks on us over the past few years, some understandable nervousness among the BBC's supporters about the future of the Corporation itself.

But I want to end by saying that I believe that the fundamental contract between the British public and the BBC remains strong. The case for a major public intervention in broadcasting and the web is probably stronger today than at any point in our history. Although there are those who dispute that and the whole idea that there is any third way, any path between the market and the state, they are in the minority. And the opportunity for the BBC and for others not just to defend the concept of public space, but to transform it and to use the new technologies and new media to populate it with amazing new ideas – the opportunity to forge a new relationship with the public within that space – that opportunity is greater now that it has ever been before.

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