

Chapter 3

Universal – but not necessarily useful

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Abstract

This chapter scrutinises the universal service aspect of public service broadcasting historically. It argues that it was always limited to two quite narrow principles: geographical universality and universality of appeal. Both principles were, from the beginning, vague or ambiguous in definition and operated with caveats and exceptions. Even in the rough and ready fashion in which they did operate, both principles have become increasingly irrelevant in practice. Therefore, the universal service mission is an anachronistic starting point for addressing the very real challenges and opportunities that advocates of public service media must address today.

Keywords: public service broadcasting, communication history, universal service, BBC, geographical universality, universality of appeal

Introduction

The aim of this collection, and the conference from which it stemmed, is to examine challenges and opportunities in achieving the universal service mission for public service media (PSM) in the era of media abundance. Underlying this aim is, I presume, the assumption that the universal service mission has always been an important pillar of public service broadcasting (PSB) and therefore advocates of PSM today must address how to maintain that pillar. This chapter takes issue with this assumption, arguing,

- a) the universal service aspect of PSB was always limited to two quite narrow principles;
- b) both of these principles were, from the beginning, vague or ambiguous in definition and operated with all sorts of caveats and exceptions;
- c) but even in the rough and ready fashion in which they did operate, both of these principles have become increasingly irrelevant in practice;

- d) therefore, the universal service mission is an anachronistic starting point for addressing the very real challenges and opportunities that advocates of PSM must address today.

Public service and universalism

Tight definitions of what the “public service” in public service broadcasting meant have been notoriously difficult to come by. Writing in the mid-1980s, the British Committee on the Financing of the British Broadcasting Corporation (more commonly known as the Peacock Committee, after the name of its chairman), bemoaned, “but what is public service broadcasting? We found that there was no simple dictionary definition. This is not surprising, since previous committees have found it difficult to define this concept” (Peacock Committee, 1986: 6).

As their report went on to make clear, the Committee was going to define (or at least operationalise) “public service broadcasting” in a considerably narrower sense than had been traditionally held to be the case. For the Committee, “public service broadcasting” was to be effectively the residuum that might be collectively desired after commercial provision had satisfied the sum of individual consumer wants (Goodwin, 2016; Peacock Committee, 1986). The Peacock Committee was, nevertheless, right about its predecessors (Annan Committee, 1977; Pilkington Committee, 1962).

The Broadcasting Research Unit (BRU) provided the Peacock Committee with one apparently precise exposition of public service broadcasting, whose eight principles embodied the PSB idea. The Peacock Committee (1986) summarised this in their report, although they ended up effectively disagreeing with them. The BRU definition was produced with the awareness that the political climate surrounding the appointment of the Peacock Committee extolled market mechanisms in broadcasting now that spectrum scarcity was or was about to be overcome by cable and satellite. The BRU argued in the pamphlet expanding its points the burden of its eight principles:

The purposes served by the main provisions of public service broadcasting in Britain go far beyond the policing of shortage, serve far more important, democratic aims, and that, though the structure we have is not perfect nor perfectly operated, in general it has served us extremely well. (BRU, 1986: i)

However, while many outlets or delivery systems were brought into existence, the BRU continued, these aims of PSB could not be ensured simply by market mechanisms, and they needed to be kept.

The BRU described its work as defining “those main elements of public service broadcasting as it has evolved in Britain which, it is argued, should be retained” (BRU 1986: i). Its method was to invite a number of people “from

various backgrounds, but all known to be interested in the idea of public service broadcasting, to set down briefly what they think are its essential elements” (BRU, 1986: ii; the people participating in the exercise are listed on p. iii). The eight elements distilled by the BRU were those “most commonly proposed by the writers” (BRU, 1986: ii).

One might quibble about the methodology, and one might debate whether the BRU definition was a normative exercise or an inspired (but little evidenced) sketch of the traditions and then current state of British analogue terrestrial television and radio broadcasting in the mid-1980s. The BRU itself concluded that its analysis “has something of the character of an ideal type” (1986: 23). But whatever the quibbles, few appear to have quarrelled with that second descriptive side of it (even if, like Peacock, they wanted to change the normative side). Michael Tracey (who, as director of the BRU at the time, may well have had some hand in the original) later generalised the eight-point definition beyond the UK in his 1998 book *The Decline and Fall of Public Service Broadcasting* (Tracey, 1998).

So, in the BRU document and in Tracey we have the two concrete “universal service missions” of PSB precisely formulated in a way in which no-one else had seemingly been able to do. True, they were initially formulated about the UK and later reformulated by a British academic (although one who, by that stage, was based in an American university). Would any public service broadcaster or supporter of PSB in the 1980s or 1990s have rushed to dispute them? Although it may well turn out other parts of the BRU definition are more useful as a guide to current policies, for our immediate purposes the two most important of the BRU’s eight principles are the first two:

1. Universality (geographic) – broadcast programmes should be available to the whole population.
2. Universality (of appeal) – broadcast programmes should cater for all interests and tastes.

We will discuss each in turn.

Geographical universality

As far as television and radio were concerned, the principle of geographical universality (or as Tracey calls it, universality of availability) meant that the reception of broadcast services was to be provided for everyone within a certain universe (generally the nation – but more on this later) regardless of the cost of doing so. To the best of my knowledge, in the UK this was never written in either legislation or in the Charter of the BBC – it was accepted as a given. The Committee on Broadcasting 1960, chaired by Harry Pilkington, observed:

The concept of the comprehensive service applies not only to programme content, but also to the geographical range or coverage of the transmissions. It has never been accepted that services of broadcasting should be available only to those for whom they can be provided easily or economically. Both the BBC and the ITA regarded it as their duty, as public corporations, to see that their existing services are as nearly as possible available to everybody in the whole of the country. (Pilkington Committee, 1962: 9)

ITA was the Independent Television Authority – the public corporation then broadcasting and overseeing commercial television in the UK. A decade and a half later, the Committee on the Future of Broadcasting, chaired by Lord Annan, reiterated the message:

The Pilkington Committee [...] noted that in Britain the broadcasters considered it to be their duty to make available the same services to all parts of the country, so far as was possible, and not merely to the urban areas where services can be provided cheaply. (Annan Committee, 1977: 9)

This was something that Lord Annan took as read for broadcasting as a public service – and remember that in the UK in 1977 *all* broadcasting, both BBC and ITV, was legally a public service. Public service broadcasters (PSBs) didn't stop at a few transmitters in large urban areas, each of which could cover millions of people, they built transmitters to reach even thousands in remote rural areas – something which a purely commercial broadcaster would not have found financially worthwhile.

For anyone who wants to trace the roots of this principle back to the beginnings of PSB, the evidence is provided in the book *Broadcast over Britain* that John Reith, the BBC's first director general wrote in 1924 when the BBC was still the British Broadcast *Company* and supported by the radio equipment manufacturers (it became the British Broadcast *Corporation* at the beginning of 1927):

The country was to be served by broadcasting, and eight stations were originally considered sufficient, and this was all that the Company had undertaken to provide. These stations were soon in working order, but naturally large tracts of the country were left with facilities only available to those who were in a position to buy comparatively powerful, and therefore expensive, apparatus. The company early announced its willingness to extend its operations so as to make that which was broadcast receivable in the greatest possible number of homes. Here is a very important principle, and involves a radical departure from the original scheme, and on this account it was not altogether appreciated by certain sections of the trade, their manufacturing and selling programmes having already been planned on the old basis, involving high-powered apparatus. (Reith, 1924: 61–62)

Geographical universality is a concept with other important applications in communications – above all in postal services and telephone networks. Each application is worth briefly examining for the light they shed on geographical universality as it applied to PSB.

The reforms undertaken in the British postal service by Rowland Hill from 1839 most famously resulted in the first postage stamps (the Penny Black in 1841). But more important for our purposes was the introduction in 1840 of a uniform penny postal service whereby a letter could be sent from anywhere to anywhere in the UK for the same low price (as against previous arrangements which involved charges relating to distance). This was the principle of geographical universality (although no one then called it that) at work eighty years before the birth of broadcasting (Robinson, 1953).

The first use of the actual term universal service in the context of communication is generally attributed to Theodore Vail – President of American Telephone and Telegraph (AT&T) from 1885–1889 and again from 1907–1919 – in the context of AT&T negotiations with the US Federal Government to secure a publicly regulated private monopoly. Vail probably meant something different (universal interconnectivity – preferably to AT&T, if one were to be cynical) from what the phrase later came to mean. It took on its more modern meaning in 1934 with the establishment of the FCC (Federal Communications Commission). Horwitz (1989: 132) observed:

In return [for effectively granting AT&T a monopoly in long distance PG], regulation was able to “extract” from telephone companies the public interest obligation of service to all – “universal service”. Universal service meant that telephone service must be made available to and generally affordable by everyone.

The term became part of the debate on the re-regulation of former state and new telecom services in the last decades of the twentieth century. It is in that context that Nicholas Garnham (1997: 199) offered a slightly sceptical explanation:

There is now widespread agreement on a definition of universal service in telecom which in the words of OFTEL [the then UK telecom regulator] in the UK, is the provision of “affordable access to basic voice telephony or its equivalent for all those reasonably requesting it, regardless of where they live”. The problem for the regulator is that neither affordability nor reasonableness are terms that can be defined with scientific precision. They remain a matter for subjective judgement by the regulator. The EC Draft Interconnection Directive defines universal service more narrowly as “the provision of service throughout a specified geographical area, including – where required – geographical averaged prices for the provision of that service,” but introduces the additional concept of common tariffs.

As Garnham continues, the term could also be extended more widely to other services considered socially desirable, such as public payphones.

So, the concept of geographical universality has a serious pedigree in other forms of communication. But that pedigree also illustrates a number of problems with the concept which have relevance to the principle of geographical universality as applied to broadcasting. Four, in particular, are worth noting.

First, although universal service in broadcasting has been generally interpreted as meaning *free* service, that is certainly not the case in either post or telephony. Both were charged for, although in the case of the early postal service in Britain conscious efforts (the universal *penny* post) were made to bring the basic cost of a letter within the budget of a worker, and in the US (unlike much of the rest of the world) *local* (but not long-distance) calls were free.

Second, although the service might be *provided* universally, *ability* to afford the equipment to take advantage of that service was far from universal. So, in the US and most other high-income countries (not to mention low-income ones), a large proportion of the population did not have a domestic phone until the 1970s. Similarly, in the early decades of radio and television, a large proportion of the population did not have a radio or a television set; these were expensive items for many working-class people. Interestingly, it was only authoritarian regimes (e.g., the Nazis) which subsidised them – presumably with a propaganda purpose in mind.

Third, universal service was only provided where “reasonable”, and what was considered reasonable was distinctly subjective (or financially or politically determined). What was clear was at the extremes: If you lived at the end of a peninsula or on an island in a sparsely populated rural area, you would not get a landline or perhaps a daily postal delivery, and if you happened to live behind a mountain you would probably not get an adequate terrestrial broadcasting service. In Britain, during much of the period of public service dominance, terrestrial signals were sufficiently bad in some areas for hundreds of thousands of people to enable a lucrative commercial cable industry based on retransmission of good signals (and a cheaper receiver). Furthermore, no one suggested that it was unreasonable for some parts of the (generally national) “universe” to wait for new services during roll out – something which might take decades.

Fourth, the “universe” of universal service was always assumed to be the nation. If you were sending a letter outside the UK in the nineteenth century it cost more, and similarly if you were phoning outside the US in the twentieth (in that case much, much more). Similarly in broadcasting, the BBC’s universal service was one provided in the UK. Outside their own country, PSBs might broadcast for “soft-power” reasons (funded by their government) or to earn extra money for their domestic operations, but no one suggested the geographical universe of geographical universal service extended beyond national borders.

Universality of appeal

This second universality principle was limited to broadcasting and has no clear parallels in previous communication technologies. That is, quite simply, because it is about content. Broadcasters provided content; postal and telephone services did not – for these media, each user provided her or his own content. What has later been termed universality of appeal was present from the start as part of the argument for broadcasting as a public service, again made most notably by John Reith. Reith’s approach is neatly summed up by Andrew Crisell (2006: 19):

[The BBC’s] output was intended to be *universal* both in consisting of a comprehensive diet of information, education and entertainment created to the highest possible standard, and in being targeted at everybody in the nation who wished to listen, irrespective of their status or location. It would take the form not of branded or streamed output but of *mixed programming* – a miscellany of genres in which every listener could find his or her particular interests. [...] The company also aimed to introduce an element of serendipity and thus *expand* the interests of the individual listener.

It should be noted that this goal of producing “something for everyone” was not a goal of providing something that everyone actually wanted. Rather it should be understood alongside Reith’s famous pronouncement that “few know what they want, and very few know what they need. [...] In any case it is better to over-estimate the mentality of the public than to under-estimate it” (Reith, 1924: 34).

A more prosaic early articulation of this public service universality of appeal principle, and a clear indicator of some of the problems inherent in it, was provided by the BBC’s (and Reith’s) first organiser of programmes C. A. Lewis (1924: 48):

What, then, is the general policy by which our programme organisation is run? Broadly speaking, I think it is to keep on the upper side of public taste, and to cater for the majority 75% of the time, the remainder being definitely set apart for certain important minorities.

Many of the problems of what universality of appeal actually amounts to shine out from Lewis’s pioneering remarks. This was catering for “the majority” most of the time (not quite the same as everyone!), and not always what the majority wanted, but what was good for it. Lewis (1924: 48–50) amplified:

What is meant by the “upper side” of public taste? Well we strive, as far as possible, to avoid certain things, desirable or undesirable according to the point of view, which are readily or more fully obtained elsewhere. Such things, for instance, as sensational murder details, or unsavoury divorce cases [...].

Of course, we could probably increase the number of our subscribers in a few weeks by changing our policy on these things, but it would leave us open to attack from many quarters.

So, the notoriously Reithian viewpoint of giving the listeners what was good for them rather than what they wanted seems from the outset to have been inseparable from universal appeal. As for the “certain important minorities”, who were they? What made them “important”? And why 25 per cent? All this smacks of course not only of an easily personalised “Reithianism”, but of the more general elite assumptions of the interwar period. By the 1970s, in Britain and elsewhere, these were being questioned even in elite circles – for instance in the UK by the Annan Committee in 1977.

But what we should also note is that these “universalist” injunctions are about running a single broadcast channel – and much of them applied whether that channel was public service or not. Broadcasting, both radio and television, developed as a mass, popular medium with a limited number of channels. Whether funded by advertising or public funds, whether state owned, heavily regulated, or unregulated, radio and television broadcasters appealed to the mass (to the “majority of the population” with provision for “significant minorities”). Whether public service or commercial, broadcasting for most of the twentieth century was most certainly *not* a niche medium. Public service or commercial, the characteristic form of radio in its early days, and even more of television, was the generalist channel with a carefully planned schedule covering a mix of genres. That became particularly clear after the arrival of commercial competition to previously public service television monopolies, where PSBs often simply mimicked their generalist commercial rivals (Achille & Mieke, 1994).

When more than one channel was available to PSB, then the universality of appeal approach became increasingly stretched. This can be seen even when PSB still had a monopoly. During the World War II, the BBC (which until the mid-1970s had a monopoly of radio broadcasting in the UK) shifted from providing one (high-minded but “universal”) radio network by supplementing it with a second, more “popular” network called the Forces Programme (Crisell, 2002: 59). After the war, the multi-channel approach was consolidated in a division in BBC radio between three radio networks: the (middlebrow) Home Service; the Light Programme (repurposing the more popular approach of the Forces Programme); and the (distinctly highbrow) Third Programme. Andrew Crisell (2002: 67) observes:

This tripartite system was an attempt to respond to popular tastes and provide the listener with an element of choice without sacrificing the old Reithian seriousness of purpose [...]. Like its predecessors it would provide “something for everyone” – but across the *entirety* of its networks rather than within any one of them.

But that had consequences, as Crisell (2002: 68) explained:

The failure to cater for the full range of interests within any single network meant that the second and perhaps more important of Reith's original aims – to provide “everything for someone” – was being dropped [...]. Henceforth, thanks to stratified programming the listener would be exposed to no more surprises.

It should also be added that if “something for everyone” really was being provided by the new tripartite arrangement, it was being done by dividing the population into three “intellectual” categories: highbrow (the Third Programme), middlebrow (the Home Service) and populist (the Light Programme). Leave aside the tenuous nature of this sort of division, there were plenty of other ways of slicing the “universal audience” into three.

In television, PSBs faced this sort of dilemma immediately when they gained more than one television channel, which happened in analogue terrestrial television from the sixties onwards. From their first acquisition of an extra television channel, one response of PSBs was to keep their main channel more “popular” – often competing directly with the leading commercial rival – while the extra channel (or channels) was more “highbrow” (Achille & Miege, 1994). So, just as with the division of BBC's radio output in the 1940s, although it might be claimed that the channels in totality provided “something for everyone”, as we have just seen in Crisell's observation about BBC radio, from then on in public service television too there would be no more surprises. And that developed even more with the arrival of still more channels, particularly as a result of the advent of digital terrestrial broadcasting from the 1990s onwards. Now, “something for everyone” was being provided across a range of channels catering not merely for the low-, middle-, and highbrow, but for arts enthusiasts, young (our youngish) people, children, news junkies, and so forth.

By describing these developments, I do not want to in any way disparage any of the many new channel initiatives taken by PSBs over the last 60 (and even more in the last 20) years – although some may indeed have turned out to be misjudged. What I want to stress is that over this long period, decisions have been made (and have had to be made) which had nothing to do with observing some sort of principle of universality of appeal. These decisions were by public broadcasters about broadcast distribution. They predated the primacy of Internet distribution.

The end of the two universality principles

What I have discussed suggests that the only two universality principles which had a real bearing on PSB had some very serious issues – both logical and prac-

tical – from the start. But each stood up, in a rough and ready way, so long as PSB was confined to a limited number of channels broadcast terrestrially. That time is long past. So, what does that mean for these two universality principles today as implications for PSM?

If we take as read that PSM is already, and will increasingly be, distributed over the Internet, then there is nothing left of the principle of geographical universality. Any content which any PSM organisation (either an established legacy PSB or a newcomer) cares to put on the web can in principle be received by anyone anywhere. Of course, one might argue that some areas have less adequate broadband or mobile reception than others, that to access different types of content adequately requires expenditure on reception equipment that is beyond the budget or expertise of many of the population, or that the new devices or forms of reception for which the PSM content is being aimed are, as yet, of limited take up. But, as we have seen, all these arguments applied to geographical universal service from the earliest days of broadcasting, and before and alongside that, in telephony.

The one difference from the present is that for much of their history, PSBs were responsible for their own distribution infrastructure, but today PSM are not. Perhaps they should be, or to me more obviously, perhaps that infrastructure should be a general public responsibility and publicly provided. And perhaps the income inequalities which lead to some people not being able to afford the devices (and expertise) necessary to participate fully in the digital world should be eliminated. I would completely agree – but that takes us into a quite different (although in my view centrally important) argument about the relationship between PSM and public provision and social structure in general.

Regarding the second principle of universality – universality of appeal – as we have seen from the very start this presented serious problems of both (elitist) assumption and operationalisation – or at least in justifying that operationalisation by reference to any principle. In practice, it meant a mixed-genre channel with a rather subjectively judged “something for everyone”. And that was not that different from what commercial radio – or even more, what commercial television – did with their single channels. What distinguished PSBs was not primarily their universality of appeal (commercial ones were pretty good at that, and they weren’t niche broadcasters) but PSB’s extra and quality news and current affairs, challenging drama, stimulating children’s programmes, and so forth (although we should not necessarily romanticise what they did on these scores, both under the pressure of conservative establishments and commercial competition).

In that light, are either of the only historically established two universal service missions likely to provide meaningful guidance to PSM practice today?

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