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March, 2006

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Can the BBC Compete to Deliver “More Than Just What Consumers Want”?¹

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This article comments on how the British Broadcasting Corporation sought to create interest in, provide information of, and encourage public debate on, the issues of the 2005 British General Election in its terrestrial television programs. I argue that delivering high quality news programs is a key democratic purpose and seek to highlight that election programs are a key component of a sophisticated package of guarantees for a safe, intelligent, and meaningful participation within the democratic process. Such guarantees are, however, threatened by the conditions of a multichannel/multimedia environment. My aim is to provide some initial reflections on, and generate further discussion concerning, how the BBC could provide better election programs. In doing so, I hope to highlight the importance of its election campaign provision within a multichannel multimedia environment.

Introduction: Britain’s Public Service Broadcasting System in Transition

Before 2005, both public and private television broadcasters in Britain were required to follow strict guidelines for quality program production and for the impartial treatment of political issues and industrial controversies. The guidelines for public broadcasters were laid out in the 1996 British Broadcasting Corporation’s License and those for private broadcasters in the 1991 Independent Television Commission’s (ITC’s) Program Code. Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) became the label used to designate the institutional aims that would be advanced by the regulations and public bodies set up to enforce them. One of the institutional aims was the fair usage of, and access to, a collectively funded facility or service. This aim is captured in the phrase “PSB is to be all things for all people” (ITC 2000) and in the requirements of universality of access and of special provisions for minorities. Another important institutional aim was “good quality

programming,” which is implied in the Reithian maxim to “inform, entertain and educate” and in the exhortation for producers to take “creative risks” and “challenge viewers” (ITC 2000).²

Those aims were relevant to the general justification of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and to the public service regulations on private broadcasters. They were also used as a justification for the license fee, which, in 2004, was at the time around \$190 per household annually, that every television set owner would have to pay to finance the operation of both the BBC and the Independent Television Commission. That justification can be summarized as follows: a public service broadcasting system exists to fulfill two functions that a primarily market-driven broadcasting system would fail to perform. Those functions were (1) to cater for the preferences of minorities and (2) to foster a taste or preference for “good quality programming” in the audiences.³

The institutional aim of fair broadcasting operated at two levels. At an economic level, it sought to ensure its license fee payers a fair return for their contributions through programs responding to their specific preferences. At a political level, it sought to ensure the fair depiction of minorities and to promote their political recognition. In the context of a multicultural society, the failure to ensure minorities a fair return for their contributions by way of programs responding to their specific preferences could also suggest that their views or lifestyles are deemed unworthy of recognition in relevant public domains.⁴ PSB’s commitment to fair broadcasting was therefore very much in line with American egalitarian political theories, which require democratic political institutions to ensure respect for, and widespread acknowledgment of, the equal moral worth of all citizens.

For instance, Charles R. Beitz (1989) objected to procedural roles that are assigned in a way that “conveys the social acceptance of a belief in the inferiority or lesser merit of one group [of citizens] as distinct from others” (110). The same objection could be levelled against the media if it conveys the same belief of minority groups by either excluding them from the programming schedule or depicting them in an unfair way. Conversely, it is possible to require from the media’s programming what Beitz required from democratic procedural roles: that they “should convey a communal acknowledgment of equal individual worth” (110). In direct connection with the media’s failure

to account for the diversity of social interests and viewpoints, Owen M. Fiss argued that the state should intervene so that “voices and viewpoints that would otherwise be silenced or muffled” are heard in relevant public domains (Fiss 1987, 788). Although political fairness theorists like John Rawls do not address the issue of inclusion and fair depiction of minorities in media programming, Rawls argued for ensuring the expression of minority viewpoints in the press by means of a scheme of public subsidies (Rawls 1973, 226). What appears to follow from all this is that if much of what happens in the public sphere in the way of exclusion and denial of equal moral and political status of minorities happens in the media, then the scope of PSB’s regulations before 2005 was clearly political and directly relevant to a sustainable democratic practice.

At the political level, the PSB provision included guarantees for informed participation in the political process. These entailed strict regulations for the coverage of political issues and controversies, especially during elections. For example, the BBC producers’ guidelines stressed that reporting “should be dispassionate wide-ranging and well-informed” and that it should give “due weight” to the “main differing views” (BBC 1996b, pt 1, sec. 2.2). Those guidelines stated that reporters can “express a professional, journalistic judgment but not a personal opinion” (sec. 2.2). Specific guidelines for the campaign coverage state clearly that “special care must be taken that in reporting this activity we are not being used to influence the campaign in favor of one party at the expense of others” (BBC 1996a, chap. 34). Another specific guideline goes as far as recommending that “great care” is taken “to insure that BBC staff, presenters or free-lancers do not bring the impartiality of the BBC into question in pursuit of their own political careers” (chap. 34).

Private broadcasters were subject to similar requirements. “Reporting—according to the ITC’s Program Code—should be dispassionate and news judgements based on the need to give viewers an even-handed account of events” (ITC 2002, sec. 3). That code also required the clear distinction of opinion from fact and that reporters give due weight to differing views in “reporting . . . matters of industrial and political controversy” (sec. 3). These requirements address a different kind of market failure. Those increasing the viewers’ risk of being misled by candidates, party press officials, advocacy group

speakers, broadcasters, journalists, and, as BBC producer guidelines point out (BBC 1996, chap. 34), even by free-lancers. Of course, this risk could not be avoided beyond the outlets of the PSB system, which included all terrestrial television news programs and the few news programs and news channels available in cable/digital services. British tabloids have been left free to inform the public as they wish and excel at opinionated political commentary and uncritical partisanship. Nevertheless, all citizens could always turn to the PSB system for accurate and wide-ranging reporting and for well-informed political commentary.⁵

With the multiplication of cable/digital channels and Internet information outlets in the last four years, the audiences of PSB channels' news programs have not just diminished as viewers have a wider range of choice for both news and entertainment programs. In the face of these pressures, PSB channels, especially privately owned ones, are also more susceptible to dumbing-down the content of their news programs and even opting out altogether from PSB regulations. Furthermore, Britain is currently preparing itself to enter a digital-only environment. This means that the PSB system will have to compete with a host of private television networks. Under such a scenario, there seems to be scant justification for charging a license fee, as the PSB system will merely be just one among many other providers.

Ultimately, questions arise within the digital environment as to the relevance of the sophisticated political guarantees and protections offered by the PSB system. In the past, when most viewers were locked up in the few channels available in terrestrial television, those political guarantees and protections were purportedly universal in their reach. In a digital environment it is unlikely to be so, as audiences tend to disperse throughout the multiplicity of channels. All that television networks can aspire to is a portion of the audience. Regrettably, that is all the PSB system, or whatever is left of it, is likely to get. A main contention of this article is that the BBC should take over the institutional aims that, in the past, were entrusted to all terrestrial television channels. Indeed, it should continue to improve its political news provision in spite of the likely reduction of the audiences for BBC channels in a multichannel/multimedia environment. The grounds of my argument are that while the new environment makes it difficult for the BBC to reach out to a larger audience, there is nothing in that

environment that renders unnecessary the protection of citizens from being misled, misrepresented or under-informed. Moreover, insofar as a multichannel/multimedia environment does not correct the market failures that continue to harm democratic citizenship, there is a key role for the BBC to perform. That role is to keep a portion of the country's political information safe from the rhetoric and obfuscation that the multichannel/multimedia environment could well incite.

Hard Times for Election News Programs

After three successive elections of declining audiences for election news programs, perhaps we should acknowledge that election news is not exactly a growth industry in Britain. Maybe this would not be so disappointing if there were evidence that the dwindling audiences for terrestrial news programs were being complemented by proportional audience increases in digital/cable news programs. This does not, however, appear to be the case. Political apathy is not the only culprit to blame for audience decline in PSB news programs. Even those who have strong interests in political affairs and/or more sophisticated information requirements are switching away from PSB (Cozens 2005; Gibson 2005a) toward the myriad of other channels and resources now available that satisfy their specialized needs.

The slow transition into a multichannel/multimedia environment has entailed for all PSB providers in Britain the loss of their captive audience, an audience that was previously confined to the limited spectrum. Although one part of the audience remains "stuck" with terrestrial television because of financial constraints, another is already spoiled for choice with the many distractions offered in the multichannel/multimedia environment—among them the primal joy of "just channel-flipping." In the absence of a captive audience, PSB providers compete for the attention of an already reduced audience for every genre. This major change means that PSB is no longer performing as the provider of "all things to all people," for there are now many other outlets catering to the tastes and interests of audiences and more are to come in the future. Nevertheless, there are still compelling reasons for retaining the collective funding of PSB as the stiff competition of the multichannel/multimedia environment will make it very unlikely that privately-owned outlets will take creative risks, challenge viewers, and

especially cater to the needs of an informed citizenry. In fact, stiff competition for audiences has already made it more costly for PSB to do those things (Plunkett 2005; Tryhorn 2005). It seems, however, that in this new environment PSB will only be fully justifiable if it does what others fail to do, to the extent that is needed. Also it seems that this is why so much is already expected from PSB in general and from the BBC in particular.

The *Review of the BBC's Royal Charter* (RBRC) proposal (2005) expects the BBC to offer "high quality programmes that set a benchmark for its commercial rivals" (4). It also states that "[i]ts programmes should set standards, especially in the news, for other broadcasters to aspire" (8). The remainder of this article makes an initial foray into the implications of such expectations with particular reference to election programs. I contend that while attempting to deliver high quality news programs is a key democratic purpose, advancing such a purpose under the conditions of a multichannel/multimedia environment will almost certainly not lead to significant increases in audience shares. Quite the reverse. This is not, however, a good reason to abandon commitments to deliver high-quality election programs. If quality is the benchmark, it appears to be more pertinent to ask at the end of every election campaign whether the benchmark was met, not whether audience shares increased. If we wish to avoid being complacent with whatever election-program providers achieve, we should go beyond the due impartiality requirements and seek to work out coherent criteria to distinguish high quality from average and poor quality in election programs.

Renewed thinking on how to assess and achieve quality seems necessary not only if the goal of setting standards "for other broadcasters to aspire" is to be taken seriously, but also if license fee contributions in the digital age are to be fully justified. To advance this view I examine the rationale of a multichannel/multimedia environment in the next section of this article to make the case for privileging quality over audience shares when assessing the performance of PSB providers. I then assess briefly some features of the 2005 BBC election campaign provision and confront those features with a notion of quality that takes democratic needs into account. In the final section I offer some tentative criteria for enhancing the quality of election news programs that could help to provide the basis for future discussion over how to develop

quality performance criteria. Those criteria are consistent with the conviction that the PSB system plays a key role in protecting basic conditions for political equality, effective participation and collective self-rule that individual rights simply fail to protect. In this way, improving the quality of election programs leads to widening the scope of the protection a PSB system gives to citizens and to the self-governing community as a whole.

Structures of a Multichannel/Multimedia Environment

A multichannel/multimedia environment implies that providers of any service can only aspire to find their niche in the market in very much the same way that consumers find their own communities of interest within an unlimited spectrum and a wide range of media (Norris 2000, 31). All the technological revolution seems to be offering PSB election news provision, therefore, is a plurality of potential niches rather than slices to cater to the needs of citizens at different levels of interest within an infinite constellation of specialized information and allegedly distinct entertainment outlets. Strikingly, while the broadcasting industry began as one of the most highly protected sectors of the British economy, few other sectors are now exposed to such cutthroat open competition. It has become very much like the Internet, which was literally conceived as a low-entry-requirements industry. These features of the multichannel/multimedia environment give rise to two relevant points in connection with the ideal of catering to the “citizen needs” of consumers.

The first point is that the platform for an unlimited range of choices is explicitly built for consumers at different levels to choose according to their tastes and preferences among a variety of suppliers at different levels. This rationale stands in stark contrast to the widely shared view that as “television has immense influence . . . broadcasters should have a special responsibility to deliver more than just what consumers want” (Office of Communications 2005).⁶ However in the new environment, what matters most is that there is a wide range of choices. The particular merits of the choices themselves are far less important. Under such conditions there is no more room for offering *more* than “what the consumers want” than there is for offering *less*. Consumers, in other

words, are just as likely to switch over if they are receiving more than what they want as they are if they are receiving less. The new environment, to recall a phrase from the beginning of Rousseau's *Social Contract*, is thus designed to suit the citizens' preferences *as they are* and not *as they might be*. Consumers are offered more or less than "just what they want" only under conditions of total captivity of the audience: that is, under a limited spectrum. This condition of captivity is totally removed only if all the members of the audience can have access to a variety of suppliers. At present, some members of the audience only have access to terrestrial television. Likewise, after the analogue switch-off, some members will have access to PSB digital channels only. To the degree that this is so, a portion of the audience will be captive. However, it will be a small audience in comparison to the size of the captive audience under a limited-spectrum-only environment.

The main implication here is that, to the extent that in a multichannel/multimedia environment only a portion of the audience depends exclusively on the provision of PSB channels, only that portion is susceptible to receiving more than just what it wants. These are the ones who, to return to Rousseau, could be "forced to be free," while those who can pay their way out are (allegedly) "set free." Currently, those with access to other providers are already able to choose "just what they want," and to the extent that they do, the size of PSB providers' audience shares is already smaller.

The second point concerning the ideal of catering to the "citizen needs" of consumers is that quality services in this environment are assumed to be a scarce commodity that comes at a high price. This is either paid by consumers in the form of subscriptions, or by high-end product or service sponsors. Quality providers compete for discerning consumers who are also scarce. Clearly, quality information can serve an individual or a million. If a provider has a million users of its information, it is possible to reduce the cost of access to it. Individual access, or the publicity that enables free access to it, is expensive precisely because not many demand it. In the new environment, the difficulty facing any quality service that is entirely free (as it is paid for via advertisements) is that the fact that it is free will not necessarily increase its users. That is because consumers who are not too sensitive to quality are amply catered for elsewhere.

An implication of this is that election news providers are likely to encounter a key constraint faced by any quality service provider in the multichannel/multimedia environment. That is, quality can be made available to many, but is only likely to be used by those for whom quality is “just what they want.” From this perspective, if the quality of a PSB election news provision increased significantly but the size of its audience shares did not, it would seem short-sighted to judge its performance solely on the basis of the latter. It would be as inappropriate as judging the merits of *The Guardian Unlimited* website exclusively on the basis of the number of its registered users. Still the BBC often comes under fire for “fail[ing] to pull in the viewers” (Cozens 2005; Gibson 2005b) or for failing to reconnect the audience with politics (Bell 2005), regardless of the quality of its election-related broadcasts. If, in a multichannel/multimedia environment all that is expected from a quality service is that it meets verifiable quality requirements, as in the cases of, for example, *The Economist*, *The Financial Times*, and *The Guardian Unlimited*, then the BBC’s performance should be judged on the same grounds.

Two further implications of a multichannel/multimedia environment for PSB election news providers charged with the task of delivering high-quality news programs are worth stressing at this point. First, the greater the number of consumers able to afford access to other providers is, the smaller the reach of a PSB election news provision will be. In consequence, the number of consumers exposed to an election news provision that delivers “more than just what consumers want” will be similarly smaller. Second, because PSB providers will compete on the quality track against other providers, a PSB election news provision can attract some consumers able to afford access to other providers *only if* a quality news service is precisely what they are looking for. One general point that seems to emerge from all this is that promoting the delivery of high-quality news programs in multichannel/multimedia environment will almost certainly not result in increases in audience shares (Day 2005a and 2005b). The very aim of that environment is to cater for wants, not transform them. Even if an election news provider succeeded in setting standards for other providers, this would be likely to have a limited effect because only those providers equally committed to delivering quality services to consumers would be likely to adopt quality standards.

In this section I have identified some central limitations a high-quality election news provision faces in a multichannel/multimedia environment. I have also suggested that quality service providers in that environment survive because they satisfy the quality expectations of their consumers and not because they serve large numbers of consumers. If this is the case, then perhaps the quality of PSB election provision should be the primary justification for ensuring its operation in the digital age. Moreover, if quality is understood as the key ground to justify the continuation of PSB in the digital age, then thinking of the concrete dimensions of “quality” appears to be a necessary part of such a justification. I hope to provide some initial ideas toward this project in the following appraisal of the main features of the 2005 BBC Election Campaign Provision.

The 2005 BBC Election Campaign Provision

It seems to me that a good place to start such a project concerns devoting a little thought to how some of the elements of “quality” election broadcasts might be usefully categorized. The *RBRC* expects the BBC to ensure democratic value. This means “that it supports civic life and national debate by providing trusted and impartial news” (*RBRC* 2005, 26). One of the roles the BBC itself expects to perform is “to help equip the public with the knowledge and capability necessary to act as informed citizens” (31). These institutional aims suggest that the assessment of the quality of the BBC provision is closely connected not only to its congruence with democratic needs such as the provision of reliable and impartial information and enabling an informed citizenry (Marks 2005), but also to the satisfaction of these democratic needs. Bearing this in mind, I have sketched three broad categories that seem useful in assessing the quality of election-related broadcasts according to purposes that capture some important needs of a democratic community. While the potential list is certainly not restricted to these areas, the categories I focus on here are: engaging the citizenry; enabling informed choice; and promoting interest in the election campaign. Below I take a brief look at what these purposes entail, identify the components of the 2005 BBC election provision that fall within them and indicate the extent to which they were successful

in satisfying the democratic needs to which they pertain. It should be noted that some components fall within in more than one purpose.

Engaging the Audience

This purpose seeks to include the claims, qualms, and discontent of ordinary citizens in its election provision. In this way, the audience not only hears what politicians said concerning their proposals, but also what ordinary citizens say concerning those proposals. The importance of offering an opportunity to hear the voice of the citizenry can serve as a springboard for the reflection of the audience on party policies and positions. Programs that contributed to this purpose in the 2005 campaign included *Question Time*, particularly its “Special Edition with Party Leaders” (see Deans 2005a; Timms 2005b,) *The Election Roadshow*, and the BBC’s official *Election Bus*. Nearly all news programs served the purpose of engaging the audience by including *vox pop* segments in which citizens expressed their opinions concerning the election campaign. *The Politics Show* and *BBC Breakfast News* regularly carried email and text comments from viewers. Radio 4’s *PM* program carried listeners’ letters.

Enabling Informed Choice

Components connected to this purpose are primarily news programs. The fair coverage of parties’ views and the agenda balancing of issues enable citizens to listen to the “unmediated” views of candidates, acquire knowledge on a wide range of issues, and assess the proposals parties put forward to deal with them. The BBC’s economics editor, Evan Davies, provided masterful summaries of the manifestos when they were released. In-depth programs like *Panorama* and the political commentary and interviews with experts and politicians in programs such as *Newsnight* and the *Politics Show* also contributed to informed choice to the extent that they brought to bear wider sets of considerations on particular party positions and proposals. The availability of a “compare policies section” on the BBC Election web site enabled the acquisition of a systematic and more precise knowledge of party proposals on a wide range of issues. Last but not least, any political junkie ex-patriot could watch the main news bulletin editions throughout the campaign through broadband Internet.

Promoting Interest in the Election Campaign

A bus (the official BBC *Election Bus*), a narrow boat (*The Politics Show*), a helicopter (*Newsnight*), and a motorcycle sidecar (*BBC Breakfast*) were used as markers of the importance of the election campaign and of the presence and commitment of the BBC to serve the electorate. This is perhaps how the BBC sought to respond to the Electoral Commission's call to the media after the 2001 election campaign "to engage voters and increase turn out" (The Electoral Commission 2001, 59). However, while the narrow boat, the helicopter, and the sidecar were useful for *attracting* the audience's attention initially, it was unlikely that the reporters assigned to them could keep this attention. Although such innovations are creative, they have had the adverse effect of unnecessarily exposing the BBC to criticisms over their use of gimmick-techniques which frankly beg reporters to devote large portions of their stories to lampoons (see Deans 2005b; 2005c; Timms 2005a).⁷ Not only, then, do the gimmicks fail to contain enough substance to maintain attention throughout the campaign, they also contributed toward shifting the focus away from the election story in other news reports.

It is for reasons such as these that it is worth rethinking the means chosen to advance the purpose of promoting interest in the election campaign. While we may be prepared to accept that a purpose is worth advancing in order to satisfy democratic needs, we nevertheless cannot make that decision without assessing the effectiveness of the means by which such a purpose is to be advanced. It is likely that a democratic community would be willing to advance the purpose of promoting interest in the election campaign. However it is also likely that a democratic community would require that this purpose be advanced through means that ensure something of a fair opportunity to develop such an interest. Admittedly, it may be very difficult to identify the actual means within an election campaign provision that *could* provide this fair opportunity. However it is not difficult to see that fair opportunity has less to do with the means used to create interest in products or services than some program producers appear to believe. Thinking of how election programs and activities can be made to cohere with democratic needs is, therefore, one important standpoint for defining quality.

Tentative Criteria for Quality Enhancement of Election News Programs

The Audience as Worthy of Democratic Treatment

Treating individuals as citizens not only entails acknowledging the condition of equality of each and every citizen, but also acknowledging the conditions they need to achieve effective participation and to rule collectively (Mena 2005a; Mena-Aleman 2002). Impartiality requirements go a long way in ensuring democratic treatment as they seek to prevent the exercise of undue influence; to protect the reliability of information on public issues; to ensure the recognition and fair depiction of vulnerable groups; to cover all relevant positions on controversial issues; and to provide relevant information on the candidates' policy proposals and the issues at stake in every election. All these protect citizens individually and collectively in aspects that are beyond a scheme of individual rights.

In the arena of political communications, rights do not protect individuals from being misled, misrepresented, or underinformed. Individual rights also fail to protect the quality of public life and of collective decisions. While many considerations are taken into account in defining the requirements of impartiality; apart from those that facilitate citizenship and democratic rule, it appears that much of what is cherished of the PSB system is also conducive to democracy. Perhaps more would be cherished if additional thought were given to the service owed to citizens and the democratic community as a whole. In an effort to extend the election campaign provision of a PSB system, it could be argued that apathetic citizens are owed a fair opportunity to develop an interest in the political process. Such an opportunity could entail a considerate attempt to engage the apathetic in the election campaign provision on the basis of a debate that gives an apathetic person the opportunity to express his dissent and to listen to what other citizens say of the merits of participation. Promoting interest in the election campaign in this way would fully respect the apathetic person's condition of equality. It is precisely because of this condition that such persons are given the attention owed them during the election in place of being asked to give their attention to the election. Promoting interest in the campaign in the way I am suggesting would also allow a key problem of democratic performance to be addressed and discussed during the campaign.

Why would this kind of initiative improve the quality of an election campaign provision? My claim here is that it can do so because it allows the provision to keep its focus, confront a critical issue, and foster a debate that is likely to draw the attention of others who are apathetic to the election.

Democratic Creativity

It is a BBC tradition to produce new ideas and a wide variety of activities at every election, many of which are highly relevant to the needs of citizens (Blumler and Gurevitch 1995, 123). However, some innovations can respond more to global media changes (Blumler and Gurevitch 2001) than to the needs of citizens. Democratic creativity involves thinking continuously of how to enhance the quality of the election campaign provision. That provision is forever susceptible to several limitations: patterns in news-program making inherited from the past, patterns of party politics that scarcely lend themselves to coherent and thoughtful reporting and global media trends that mirror the needs of individuals in a multichannel/multimedia environment. There are also challenges that continue to await a comprehensive response such as how to supply political information effectively to the less educated segments of the audience to make them less susceptible to tabloid manipulation. This kind of challenge is only likely to be met successfully in a gradual way and in the long term. The question it poses is how to reach out for the less educated with the effectiveness of the tabloids, but subject to impartiality requirements. In the face of this challenge there is no room for complacency. There are some citizens who are not being treated with the due respect that follows from consideration of their equal status. A variety of collaborative efforts (such as task forces or research groups) need to be organized and responsibility needs to be shared with other civil society associations and even through a competitive commissioning system as the *RBRC* has proposed.

Democratic Responsibility

I have stressed in this article that impartiality requirements offer an enabling and protective scheme that needs to be constantly supplemented with more refined interpretations of what a PSB system owes to both individual citizens and the democratic community as a whole. Democratic responsibility emphasizes that the *citizenry* is

responsible for sustaining a PSB system that guarantees basic conditions for ensuring political equality, effective participation, and collective self-rule. In parallel, PSB providers are responsible for enhancing the quality of the election programs. This responsibility should be understood to hold even under the conditions of a multichannel/multimedia environment where some citizens are able to afford other providers and where PSB providers will have smaller audience shares than they have at present. This responsibility emerges as a result of the centrality of the service a PSB system contributes to both individual citizens and the democratic community as a whole. Maintaining that centrality depends on how much providers work on improving its quality. The quality of the service of a PSB system is defined by the extent of the protection it gives to citizens and to the self-governing community as a whole, from the risks of democratic process and the inequalities of the social structure.

Final Remarks

Andrew Marr (2004) argues convincingly that if viewers “have been enjoying an Aussie soap, and are looking forward to light entertainment, or a thriller, they are not likely to want unadulterated, wall-to-wall politics and business in the middle of that. Therefore it is wrong,” he warns us, “to think of a TV news program as being essentially like a moving, talking version of a newspaper” (290). Furthermore, he suggests that TV news should reflect to some extent the entertainment mood that prevails in the programs around it. It is clear that the BBC election provision should adapt to such restrictions and that more skilful efforts, in the sense of avoiding putting off audiences, need to be made the closer the country moves into the digital age. However, what I sought to highlight here is that election programs are a key component of a sophisticated package of guarantees for a safe, intelligent, and meaningful participation within the democratic process. A package of guarantees, that I should stress, many democratic governments around the world fail to provide their citizens with. If we take this fully into account, any effort to avoid putting off audiences can be justified as long as it leads to protecting more citizens from the risks of being misled, misrepresented, or under-informed, and as long

as it enables the community at large, to have a fairly stable and legitimate electoral process.

It seems that thinking of the value of election programs for citizenship and democracy leads to view entertainment merely as a valid means but never as an end in itself. It also seems that thinking of the value of election programs for citizenship and democracy does not necessarily confine producers or broadcasters to conventional forms of entertainment, as interesting, true-to-life, or puzzling topics or stories can also become popular forms of entertainment. What has set the BBC apart from other world media organizations has been precisely its commitment to explore—and its proven capacity to find—unconventionally entertaining ways to convey knowledge. If holding the BBC line has meant not selling knowledge short for the sake of sheer entertainment then it is possible to expect election programs that creatively ensure democratic value. I realize all these are tough things to pull off but, to a certain extent, making the BBC election provision more congruent with democratic needs not only offers a stronger justification for license fee contributions in the future, it also ensures that a portion of the country's political information is kept safe from the rhetoric and obfuscation that a multichannel/multimedia environment could well incite.

Notes

¹This research note is based on an earlier paper delivered at the *Elections, Public Opinion and Parties 2005 Annual Conference*: '1C: The BBC.' 10 September. Wivenhoe, Essex, U.K.

²In official documents of Broadcasting Authorities these last two institutional aims are the constitutive elements of the general definition of PSB. "The broad aim of PSB is to be all things for all people at least some of the time with a strong emphasis on extending public knowledge, tastes and interests" (ITC 2000).

³"The economic rationale for PSB lies in the concepts of market failure or crowding-out. It is argued that, where there is only a small number of universal channels the market—left to its own devices—would not

deliver certain types of programs valued by minorities of viewers which have some cultural and societal benefit generally” (ITC 2000).

⁴ A paradigm case of market failure that worked as a form of exclusion of minorities from media output was the 1957 NBC decision to reschedule *The Nat “King” Cole Show* from a primetime slot to an early evening slot. NBC took this decision when it became apparent, after sustaining the program by itself for more than a year, that no company would be ready to offer single national sponsorship in spite of the fact that the show had good audience ratings. Nat King Cole refused to reschedule the show. Further to the rescheduling he expressed in an interview: “I found myself standing there with the bat on my shoulder. The men who dictate what Americans see and hear didn’t want to play ball” (Museum of Broadcast Communications 2005).

⁵ For detailed accounts of the difference PSB regulations make to electoral news reporting in Britain in comparison to electoral news reporting in other countries where broadcasting is mostly privately run, see for a comparison between Britain and Mexico, Mena (2005b); and between Britain and the United States, Blumler & Gurevitch (2001).

⁶ OFCOM, Foreword to the February 8, 2005 Consultation Paper. The sentence reads: “At present, the public think television has immense influence, and therefore television broadcasters should have a special responsibility to deliver more than just what consumers want.”

⁷ The dynamic upgrade of *Newsnight* to *Newsflight*, for example, attempted to add a high-speed, high-tech spin to campaign trail reporting “accompanied by a continuous soundtrack of whirring helicopter blades,” in the hope that “Crick’s chopper adventure will produce memorable TV moments” (Deans 2005b).

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