
The debate over the definition of public broadcasting (PB) and its corollary modes of operation and production has to rank as one of the most durable traits of government-funded broadcasting. Whether it exists as an antidote to commercial interests or to dominant foreign cultural models, PB’s raison d’être seems always to be challenged because the perspectives presented on air are alleged to be limited to the best organized or media savvy interest groups. Despite the recent upsurge in the number of television, radio, and Web outlets, there is mounting concern that the mainstreaming of informational, cultural, and entertainment forms of expression is cultivating an ideological and creative deficit to which PB, instead of providing an alternative to, appears to have chosen to participate in.

Public Broadcasting and the Public Interest is one of the most recent contributions to this long-standing quandary pertaining to the type of socio-political posturing best suited for contemporary PB. The book grew out of a June 2000 conference held at the University of Maine where some 26 scholars and media professionals convened to discuss the role of PB. The 23 articles that make up this book are divided into four sections: 1) Defining the Public Media terrain, 2) Critical Dimensions, 3) Global Perspectives, and 4) Civic Space, Cyber Market, Public Trust, or Grassroots Alternatives? To various degrees, most papers focus on the dilemma of situating the “public,” or “publics,” as conceived and exhibited by public broadcasters. Predictably, in the current context of the privatization and commercialization of many media and public spaces, PB is subjected to a rigorous and at times severe analysis of its mandate and the ways in which it has chosen to fulfill it.

One might justifiably argue that the majority of the positions articulated in this book are specific to the American context, where PB’s form of public broadcasting differs significantly from what the CBC, the BBC, France Télévisions, and other Western world state-supported broadcasting services are mandated to do. Although the U.S. has a rather constricted experience of PB, the bulk of the issues raised throughout the book speaks to a growing practice among many of the world’s largest public broadcasters: the development of alliances with private media entities and the oft-criticized emergence of commercial media practices and “overtones.” Public service broadcasting has relentlessly become one particular “brand” of broadcasting that is marketed to media consumers. On this aspect, I felt the authors’ compendium to be most persuasive and its relevance to the Canadian media environment to be equally discernible. Ostensibly, CBC’s recently announced partnership with Sirius Satellite System to apply to the CRTC for a domestic satellite radio service license, or the creation of a vice-presidency responsible for merchandizing activities would fall within the purview of the critique raised against the trajectory that many public broadcasters have embarked upon. The questioning raised and the rationales exposed throughout the book constitute a perspective on media organizations, both public and private, that is too often neglected or worse, dismissed as being part of the stratagem utilized by the opponents of a liberal system. In that sense, the book represents a valid contribution to a fuller appreciation of the decisions made by governments and the choices confronting citizens in the broadcasting arena.

The intellectual legacy of PB’s fathers, such as Graham Spry and John Dewey, is very much palpable throughout the collection of papers assembled here. The precept that democracy needs a vibrant nonprofit and non-commercial sector to fully thrive is unambiguously positioned as one of the central tenets of the book. The reader is offered a suave blend of arguments advocating a renewed PB where community broadcasting, public access, and micro radio would play a more significant part. As McChesney writes, “We need a national service aimed at the entire population as well as distinct services for minor-
ities and underserved communities and youth. We have to envision public service media as a whole panoply, a whole range of broadcasting” (p. 19).

Various collaborators express the view that without access to the means of production, PB can hardly claim to be an instrument of social democracy and does in fact very little to expand public spaces. The book submits a coherent plea to open up the airwaves to all publics so they can participate in decision- and meaning-making, including full access to media production and distribution. Whether this can ever be achieved under the current organizational structure of state-financed broadcasting is a different story. At the very least, in an era of rampant deregulation, raising the level of attention to such issues and exposing the social benefits of protecting true public spaces become a responsibility that more need to espouse.

Because the book came out of a conference that took place four years ago, the chapters that deal with New Technologies cannot be legitimately faulted for painting a picture that, in some instances, has since evolved significantly. From a Canadian standpoint, the contention that the Web . . . “is not, and . . . never will be, a vehicle for telling Canadian stories and reflecting a Canadian identity” (p. 155), is highly contentious today when put against, for instance, the CBC Archives Website which contain some 5000 radio and TV clips totalling some 550 hours of Canadiana material. Over the last few years, many similar initiatives have sprung up around the world where public broadcasters have developed electronic portals with the goal of disseminating the most significant events in the country’s history. In the spirit of the book, however, one must question the nature of the narratives that are included in such projects as they certainly fail to be reflective of the full gamut of voices defining a society at any given point of its development.

As the title suggests, the book deals abundantly and efficiently with the notion of public and civic spaces. It proposes a variety of novel approaches to conceptualize and reform what PB has traditionally been. The deployment of the “information society” and the adjacent considerations given to the decline of social capital and civic space constitute the backdrop against which the future of public broadcasting is envisaged. Could it be that our classic definition of citizenship loosely defined as a commitment to political participation, discourse, and civic values would be migrating toward “a new ethos of freedom of choice in lifestyle and consumption” (p. 223)? Or as Schejter bluntly asks (p. 160) “is there room for a public broadcaster in the world of hundreds of available channels?”

There is no question that the emerging wave of technological devices is likely to transform the way people use the content that they select to interpret, manipulate, critique, and, ultimately, make sense of the world they live in based on what both private and public broadcasters put on the various distribution platforms. In this sense, Public Broadcasting and the Public Interest brings to the fore the vital role that PB can and should play in developing an original, distinctive, and independent service aimed at expanding the common good and encouraging civic engagement. This collection is the latest installment in the perennial debate surrounding both the mandate and the financing of public broadcasting. It is intelligently articulated, theoretically sound, and politically enriching. Without a doubt, a book that every communication scholar or student with an interest in media, broadcasting, political economy, or regulation will find stimulating.

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