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Deregulation, New Technology, Public Service: Vision Versus Rhetoric

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The idea that the contents of the media of mass communication should be public, should in some sense be both controlled and protected, an element within the welfare state, is older than the century. To the Victorians it seemed that mass literacy would inevitably open up the minds of the urban working classes to manipulation and pollution. Two armies lurked in the unlit streets of the Victorian city waiting to pounce intellectually upon the innocent young: an army of revolutionists and an army of pornographers. Victorian social analysts sought to explain the behaviour of the new urban masses by examining the influences which played upon them and gaining an understanding of how the new crowded society came to be mentally open to agitational influence, and to moral degradation.

The industry of printing, once the newspaper stamp acts were removed in the 1860's, was not in itself susceptible to direct controls at the point of production. Yet still there was an elaborate machinery which attempted -- highly successfully -- to impose the elements of a
public service upon the Victorian novel. From Mudie's Circulating Library, which for many decades was responsible for the bulk of the print orders for Victorian fiction, to Lord Reith's monopolistic BBC was but one bound. Where Mudie ensured that no novel entered his library (which was almost the same as saying that no novel was published) unless it conformed to his standards of moral usefulness, Reith in his time ensured that the BBC provided the best of everything in music, talk, education, religion. Both Mudie and Reith found themselves inventing though unconsciously the underlying aesthetic of their respective media. Reith invented a language (the best English), a religion of his own (in subtle ministrations in the BBC's Hymn Book), a political stance (or a stance towards politics) in his sturdy eschewing of matters of controversy.

A nervous young man once approached Lord Reith of the BBC for a job during the 1920's and was asked whether he knew a great deal about music. "Not a great deal", he replied. Then it was inquired whether he had learned a great deal about electricity. "Not a great deal", he replied again. "That's a pity", remarked the great panjandrum of the early BBC, "because those are the main things we're concerned with -- music and electricity." The greatest of many the many paradoxes of radio and television history is that its masters found themselves obliged to pronounce upon -- indeed to be responsible for many things for which they could have had little preparation. They came very rapidly to hold influence in every area of modern politics and culture. Their arbitrage was and is felt everywhere in modern societies -- in the sports which we play, in the authors whose names
we know, in the growth of dialect and language, in the construction of the political personalities for whom we vote, or don't vote, in the songs we sing and in the ways we choose to subject ourselves to or reject all other fresh moods and forces at work within society. The nature of broadcasting power is impossible completely to describe since, like many other forms of arbitrage, it dissolves at the edges into all others. Those who wield it usually feel themselves to be following rather than leading the other forces discerned to be at work in the world. That is generally in fact their statutory duty.

The very existence of broadcasting is one manifestation of a social mystery: the invisible causality between culture and production. The content of broadcasting is a shaping force, but it is constructed somewhere between the broadcaster and the audience. The subject in broadcasting is social in character. So is the object in broadcasting. The broadcasting infrastructure consists of laws and contracts and institutions to achieve which countless lines of power and persuasion have come into play. What emerges from the system is a continuing never-complete text, an endless informational flow. Like the output of a computer whose inmost programme never quite reveals itself, never explains the full extent of its possibilities.

Alongside broadcasting -- and preceding it -- there have grown up the other mass media, mainly in the private sector, where supposedly they function within a different system of legitimation: the market place. Newspapers, film and record industries have flourished and waned relatively sheltered from the barrage of public
disquisition with which broadcasting has had to contend. Yet, in the conditions of the new electronics, computerization and telecommunication devices, it is increasingly clear that all the mass media are thoroughly mutually dependent -- and indeed that they have always been far more interconnected in their economies than the institutional housing led us to suppose. We are witnessing a very complicated and still hesitant political trafficking in new public doctrines and technical systems which between them are bringing about a convergence in all of the information machinery of society. Moreover, it is also clear that the convergences are international, intercontinental and even inter-ideological. At the centre of our societies a vast entertainment/informational industry is emerging, coming in from the peripheries of the economy and from the edges of our consciousness. As more and more of economic life becomes more and more dependent upon the information flows, upon the heartland of the telecommunications system, the possibility arises of quite new ways of conceptualising mass communication and its role in the world.

As we look back on the evolution of radio, television and the other mass media of cinema, newspaper, magazine, music industry, we can see the way in which the convergences of the present decade were being prepared. Despite the great divide between publicly regulated and non-regulated media which has been felt in the past to be decisive, the mass media of the twentieth century have in practice been held together by public doctrine and by increasingly interdependent institutions.
There is no doubt that we have passed an important turning point with the de-regulation, so-called, of American telecommunications. Throughout the western economies there is a parallel wave, in which new technologies are being fitted into free market mechanisms, or, rather, analogies, contrived simulations of free-market situations, in which inherited public service radio and television, plus, in some cases, quasi-public service cinema, are being fed into new technologies produced in Japan, Europe and the United States in such a way as to open up the content of these media to direct audience transactions, something which has in the past been either technically or juridically impossible, or both.

For most of the present century there has existed a kind of loop linking the various new communication technologies, the institutions which house them (public and private) and the prevailing theories and doctrines of media influence. The crowd psychologists of the late Nineteenth century, the Arnoldian theorists of education and the social Darwinists had their ideas fused into a prevailing paternalistic doctrine of public service. Cinema, radio and television all came to be subjected -- with little protest -- to a variety of systems of regulation. Within the aegis of regulatory laws both public service institutions and competitive private capital were allowed to struggle for the allegiance of the new mass audiences.

By a strange paradox the very laws which came to enshrine press freedoms seemed actually to legitimise the new institutions which either managed or harmonised the operations of the new media of the Twentieth Century. From the 1881
French press law to the 1934 Communications Act they all seemed in a sense to converge on the notion of public regulation. Post Versailles fears about the volatility of the new working class voters, the atmosphere of the New Deal, the fear in Europe of American domination of mass entertainment, the determination to solve the problems of industrial society through education -- all of these made it seem natural for cultural expression to be, in a sense, nationalised into regulatory systems. There were also, of course, technological imperatives which further underlined the need for a statutory basis for the new medium.

It became rapidly clear that mass politics had come to depend in a sense upon an apparatus of mass entertainment. But political groups of every kind -- and I mean every kind -- came to accept the inevitability of the various kinds of monopoly, which were entailed in the modern media -- sometimes they even relished them. Occasionally they tried to modify them. Cinema came to be dominated by a tiny number of great chains of exhibition houses, tied to a few powerful distributors, in turn tied to a few, mainly Hollywood-based, production studios.

Radio, at first thought to be a highly local medium, came to be re-organised into strong networks, usually under a single national authority, but sometimes into a tiny band of competitors. Television grew up analogously with radio, but with tighter controls, bigger periodical rows and public investigations. The newspaper, too, submitted in many countries to press councils, redistributive subsidy systems or other forms of state intervention and aid. It would have seemed odd to the Victorian cam-
paigners for freedom of speech that so many new means of expression so willingly submitted themselves to controls or, as in the case of cinema, to self-censorship. But the quantities of political power and capital locked up on the new media were such that regulation seemed acceptable. In many countries the regulatory system actually held the ring between private capital with its desire to multiply itself and public service which was concerned to bring out the educative potential of the media.

In the United States the Federal Communications Commission thus enforced the Fairness Doctrine, the Prime Time Access Rule and other controls over the networks, not always satisfying the reformers with the results. In Europe, on the other hand, public broadcasting institutions enabled the manufacturing and distribution industries of radio and television to proceed very rapidly, while protecting the press quasi-monopoly of advertising. The culture of television on the two sides of the Atlantic has been different at root but surprisingly interactive. The more highly regulated European systems have ensured the development of indigenous television systems, albeit dependent on a fairly high level of imported American programmes, and of course, American films. Even the lightly regulated American system gave birth to a Public Broadcasting System aided by Congress which attempted to mitigate the efforts of the extraordinarily intensely competitive networks. But despite the Atlantic contrasts the central culture of the medium developed within an odd synchronicity. One side developed the technology and the audience for a half-hour and then a one-hour nightly news, and then the other side did. The talk-show crossed the Atlantic. So did the
soap opera, the techniques for covering the pageantry of monarchy and presidency, of election, moonshot, state funeral. There were different bases for the cultural politics of different societies, but a surprisingly homogeneous cultural history. Moreover, the regulatory agencies have been themselves, inevitably and conveniently, the locations of intense national debates, where theories of mass media locked horns with the vested interests of successful institutions. Each wave of the technology, each expansion of the media, was accompanied by a wave of national committees of investigation and report. Each society tried out different versions of its original model and in very few -- Italy is the great exception -- has the original system shaped in the 1930's and 1940's actually broken down.

However, the latest wave of new technology has been accompanied by a renewed bout of doctrinal reform. The new religion is de-regulation, the release of a new series of electronic media into a free market-place, albeit one rigged by the fact of the existence of the inherited media. What has triggered off this new willingness to experiment is only in part the arrival of governments with new and radical economic theories. The main factor is the arrival of the information media in late industrial society at the commanding height of the economy itself: where formerly radio, television were toys with a certain industrial potential, they now, in the conditions of new technologies of satellite, optic fibre and microchip, have moved to the very centre of economic life. The progress of whole economies has come to depend on the rate of progress achieved in the information sectors.
In the age of the mass audience entertainment and information have come to be state-controlled institutions, if not directly state-controlled. Just as press censorship came to be rejected as inadmissible in modern democracies, so doctrines of educative paternalism made a state apparatus perfectly admissible for the new media, especially the moving image media. Now, in the 1980's a major shift in values is underway. In Britain, France, even Scandinavia, satellite is being treated as inevitably and acceptably a private sector undertaking. The Murdoch enterprise suddenly offers or threatens to step across the careful regulatory boundaries. The privatisation of vast areas of telecommunications (in Britain, the whole of British Telecom itself) and the new obligations towards competitiveness in telecommunications are causing knock-on changes in cultural politics which will inevitably reach very far indeed.

Suddenly all the established rules and taxonomies of cultural politics and cultural institutions are ceasing to work. With the arrival of cable, satellite, teletext and videotext, the careful institution-building of the seventies and the radicalisation and professionalisation of the sixties media are beginning to look like the nostrums of the schoolmen, the results of controversies of which the supports have simply rotted away. The precise alignments of technologies and institutions, the divisions between media, the distinctions between film and programme, between book and periodical, educational and non-educational, public service and commerce, censored and uncensorable, all are being subjected to severe doses of entropy.
The sheer imperative pressure being exerted on the inherited doctrine and machinery is coming from industry. For the flows of information arising in the modern economy are only in small part the results of cultural, educational or artistic activity. The greater part of the flow is generated by the bureaucratic processes of society, governmental, corporate, commercial, and by the needs of productive industry itself. The greater the level of differentiation of product in an economy based on consumption, the greater the flow of information generated by the complexities of distribution and promotion. The whole aesthetic of post-war society has gradually shifted to take account of these new priorities of economic life. One might instance the part played by the advertising revolution of Ogilvy and Bernbach in the early 1950s which left the image as the basis for insinuating the product into the consciousness of the consumer. Writers as different as Vance Packard and Daniel Boorstin made great play, a decade later, with the perceptual effects of this alteration, but perhaps they underestimated its potential. For today in clothing, food, housing, personal transportation, recreation, private travel and tourism the consumer has been quietly shifted from the choice of product to the consumption of the image of the product. The long-term implications for society of that change are still being revealed not insignificantly in the course of the present pressure to open up more and more of the media and of the public arts to sponsorship and advertising.

Information is today the invisible ingredient of all manufactured goods, steadily increasing in the proportion of the total cost of goods and services, increasing too in the pro-
portion of the workforce who are engaged in the collection and processing of data. The breaking open of those institutions which were founded in the period between the two wars on a public philosophy of educationism can now be seen to have been inevitable. We are living through that transformation and the new technology is partly the occasion for it, partly the cause, partly the effect of the process.

It is fascinating to see how ingeniously the breaches are being made in the walls of public service in television alone. First in the arrival of sponsorship, especially in sport and in very high cost cultural spectacle such as opera. Here, commerce creates an event - a football match or a cup competition, and spends sufficient funds to attract high calibre participants. It may be in a major established sport such as football or tennis or a marginal one such as snooker, or show-jumping. Within a few years the sport and its associated sponsored events are built up in public consciousness and become the source of very big audiences. The broadcasters hooked into competitive channel by channel conflict cannot resist the challenge and the action of major sporting events is intensified. The result is that one set of games monopolises television screens for an unconscionable number of hours, making a balanced schedule of programmes impossible. The advertiser, frequently of a product such as tobacco, normally banned on television - purchases an extraordinary opportunity to influence markets. The control of the public service over its own content is severely diminished.
With the coming of cable a further intensification of competition for major events is inevitable. A newcomer to a competitive market place must spend more, must wager more to gain a first foothold on the audience. In the case of cable the audience has to be induced to make a major additional investment itself regularly and further sums of a high order are spend on inducing subscribers to remain.

In Britain the advent of satellite is turning into a most powerful challenge to the public service system hitherto. It has become clear that neither the BBC nor the commercial regulatory authority, the IBA, can afford to inaugurate a DBS service alone. They are having to collaborate. However, in order to induce the commercial television companies to invest the many hundreds of millions of pounds necessary the IBA is having to be given permission by government to extend the licenses of the regulated companies by a further seven years giving those companies a guaranteed further life of twelve to thirteen years. That in turn will mean that the IBA's only sanction over its regulated companies - the threat of losing their licences - has been or could be effectively removed. At the normal rate of annual increase the major operating companies are being permitted to collect a total of twenty-five billion pounds in projected revenues over the period of time concerned, in order to persuade them to invest four hundred million pounds in a satellite.

A further and different kind of breach in public service comes from the co-production of programmes with foreign or commercial enterprises. It has become impossible to produce
major historical costume drama or opera or ballet on television on the basis of normal programme revenue. A small army of knowledgeable entrepreneurs and middlemen have sprung into being, pledging investment in a product, pre-production, in exchange for overseas rights, video rights, cable rights, etc. However, it is clear that the growth of external funding is now on a considerable scale and large areas of television content now depend on it, drama in particular. The range of what is possible today in broadcast drama has come to be determined by forces outside the regulated, accountable, national systems - a further and most serious breach in the prevailing doctrines and institutions of public service.

The mass media are becoming indeed an open market place, a field over which a new set of entrepreneurs, highly motivated by reason of the enormous investment they have undertaken, are trampling. The regulatory systems with their delicate political and content balances, their public accountability and corporate pride are now being forced into business deals of a kind of which they have no experience and into bidding against partners in a game where they do not possess the relevant stakes. Whether it is a 'good thing' or 'bad thing' we cannot say, but it is surely a different thing, something which the creators of the present systems are not equipped by their history or their powers to deal with. For researchers and commentators an important series of new issues now arises in an era in which the ultimate controls and levers of the mass culture simply are no longer within reach of public accountability, even though they remain formally in the public sector.
I am aware that most of what I have had to say is heavily marked by my European, particularly British, experiences. In Europe the existence of broadcasting as a public service (even when financed by advertising) has meant that radio and television have been the greatest of the instruments of social democracy, more potent in their ability to engineer harmony and unity and a sense of justice than the health service, or even than parliamentary democracy itself.

We need therefore to think hard about problems of social equity and information flow in the future, to ask whether differential pricing systems might breed a growing sense of social compartmentalisation, whether lack of disposable income renders certain sectors of society deprived of part of the public experience. Secondly we need to think a great deal about the laws which entrench intellectual property, to ensure that they do not hinder the flows of knowledge and entertainment. We must also examine constantly the laws which institutionalises censorship of text and moving images for these can easily slip backwards in an era in which public authorities play a smaller role as editorial authorities, and the machinery of civil law a greater role.

But the most important change of all for researchers lies in the need to gain a better understanding of the processes which implant meaning into text and image. How does a society create its flow of meaning? Who creates it and under what terms? How do the dominant modes of representation evolve? How does a group, a class, a gender, an age group, a nation, a set of values, an era, acquire its image in a given society? Where is the argument over that repre-
sentation carried on and how can it be influenced?

The cultural economy is becoming more complicated but its main protagonists are not altogether new, often familiar institutions but with new roles and powers. We need to understand better how a cultural product comes into existence in this new environment, what trade routes it has to traverse, what constraints and further loads of meaning it acquires along the way.

Those are some of the issues which require a fresh emphasis. But overall there is a need for a new conception of the nature of information as a resource - for a new image of information.

We know little still about the nature of information as a commodity, this ever renewable resource of a society whose value is created and destroyed in different ways from other goods and resources. How should we think about information? Perhaps as a kind of river flowing through a society which can be polluted and dammed but which never ceases to exist, which is never the same but never disappears, which actually increases in value with its usage and never quite wears out, which is fundamentally different in nature and potential from all other goods and resources which it is coming increasingly to resemble.