

Public broadcasting and the intelligent butterfly

In reality the public broadcaster has much in common with the butterfly motif used for the title of this article, by settling on the map of community happenings to interview and broadcast what “appears” to be news. But freedom from economic and political pressures and freedom to select what news will be the event of the day are prime elements.

By **PATRICK CRADDOCK**

MANY journalists will see the butterfly image as fanciful and irrelevant to any discussion on the question of what constitutes public broadcasting. But within this image lie numerous interpretative possibilities for understanding public broadcasting and the way that it differs from its commercial brother. The map is the community with many locations. The intelligent butterfly is the public service broadcaster with the ability to choose where to land on the map. The choice of the intelligent butterfly rests on the independence of the broadcasting organisation, a public willingness to accept the validity of the democratic process, a willingness to give voice to a diversity of viewpoints and the adherence by the journalist to a code of ethics.

Independence

Public broadcasting and its responsibilities are adjusted from generation to generation and from country to country. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) is an organisation with a reputation for public service broadcasting. It has a highly developed sense of independence and a commitment to public service both in radio and television. When the BBC began radio transmissions in 1921¹ it was forbidden to broadcast any news bulletins before 7 pm or make commentary on public events. The restrictions remained in force until 1938. Behind the pressure to contain the fledgling BBC was the Newspaper

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Proprietors Association (NPA) who saw radio as a threat to the established printed media.

Within a few years the possibilities of radio began to show. During the British General Strike of 1926 there were hardly any newspapers on the streets and the NPA allowed the BBC to broadcast news. The BBC acted in a tame manner, as it was aware of the power of the Government to direct its news coverage. But a few years later in 1936, during a huge fire that destroyed the Crystal Palace, the first live news telephone report was broadcast over the BBC.

Eventually the BBC was established as a public institution under a Royal Charter. This gave it more freedom to resist commercial and political pressures. The newspaper proprietors were kept at bay and broadcasters hoped their new independence would stop the government control of the BBC. In theory they were correct, but in practice the power was still with the government as it had the prerogative to review the Charter, to appoint the Board of Governors and control BBC funding. Only the state could increase the radio licence fee, which was the main artery for BBC survival. But this decision to give a charter unleashed the long trek towards the BBC becoming the public broadcaster it is today. It also served as a model for many other fledgling broadcasting organisations, such as the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

Public broadcasting as a democratic process

Public broadcasting is first of all the freedom to gather news, information and opinion within a safe environment. It is both able and willing to resist the advertiser, the Government and other pressure groups. But public broadcasting is more than its negatives. By definition it is “public” and an underlying assumption in public broadcasting is that the public wants to get involved and participate as citizens. This involvement may not be invoked, but nevertheless, it is assumed that in a democracy each and every citizen is part of the community with a role to play in its development. It includes all ethnic groups, genders, the old, the young, the sick, those with jobs and those without paid work.

But there is a “beware” to be added. In a democracy the right to vote is limited. Prisoners in jail forfeit their vote while they are imprisoned. Those people officially declared mentally ill by the state and living in an institution lose their rights to vote. Children are another group with no voting rights.

When we talk of public broadcasting the voice of the people means everyone. It includes all individuals and groups deprived of their democratic

heritage by the government. All these people should have a voice in public broadcasting. Public broadcasting is also international. Opinions on Fiji, for example, may come from many sources and be offered over a public broadcasting station.

Nationalism is a pariah philosophy for the public service broadcaster, as it excludes rather than includes a diversity of viewpoints. The 1987 military coup in the Fiji Islands was reported and analysed by many broadcasting organisations around the world, both public service and commercial. The broadcasting media were visibly shocked to know that there were so many diverse viewpoints in their community. For example, in New Zealand the public service arm of Radio New Zealand found that many Maori were vocally sympathetic to Rabuka and supported his nationalistic aims.

Since the Treaty of Waitangi last century, increasing numbers of New Zealand Maori have felt Europeans cheated them on land issues and sales. Newspaper coverage at the time of the 1987 Fiji coups showed a predominance of white middle class views and covered the story of the Government which talked of sending a naval vessel towards Fiji with the argument that it was going there just to protect NZ citizens. But it was left to public service radio in New Zealand to cover some of the vast number of views that surfaced about the impact effects of the coups.

The BBC World Service has consciously extended its boundaries well beyond the borders of its home country (Britain). BBC correspondents live and work in many parts of the world. As part of their public broadcasting training they are expected to become familiar with the customs and history of the country they work in. Many of the correspondents are also fluent language speakers of their guest resident country.

Diversity of views

But for public broadcasting to work there has to be citizen access to the media and opportunities to express numerous opinions.² The more media channels there are available the more opportunity there is for a diversity of community views to be heard. But while diversity creates the opportunity for an increased public broadcasting participation, the reality can be different.

New Zealand for example, has always had a non-commercial radio network. But at the same time it ran a number of commercial radio stations sited throughout the community. For many years these radio stations were under one

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senior management, with local managers on the sites. The public service philosophy influenced the content of the commercial stations. But that has changed. Commercial managers demanded and got autonomy and through that process made more money by shaping programmes to audience listening statistics. There has been a steady rise of a number of new private radio stations in NZ, which rely entirely on advertising income to sustain their costs.

The radio audience listening figures are related to the amount of revenue that is received by the station and this equation is used to direct the subject matter of the radio programming. The result is the implementation of a philosophy that says if the radio station has a high number of listeners, the radio station is giving the public the type of programming they want. This outlook is directly opposed to public service broadcasting which clearly recognises that there are both minority and majority audiences. For example, five per cent of four million is a significant number of listeners. Some NZ stations can only boast of having small audiences, but they seem to care about their station and its content i.e. the Concert Program. Any attempt to close this station meets with a healthy "no" from its audience.

A recent example illustrating the belief that the greater number of listeners or viewers that a broadcasting station has, the more it is serving the public good was expressed by the former Fiji Television Ltd chief executive Peter Wilson. He argues that:

The commercial model is democratic. It is driven by advertising revenue which in turn is driven by ratings, which reflect the popularity of the programmes with the audience.³

There is no doubt about this clarity of this thought. The audience research supports it. Take the Fiji Sevens off the TV screen and put on Shakespeare for a month, and the manager will start to wonder if he can pay the staff their next salary. In commercial radio and TV, the programme often becomes an envelope to wrap around the commercial, which in turn buys the bread and butter and pays the broadcasting rent.

Nevertheless, I believe that this logic is wrong. The viewpoint is untenable if the radio media it is intended to serve the public good. Minorities get a raw deal. A Shakespeare's play may have a small but interested audience when the Education Department chooses it for study and examination appraisal. Perhaps it has a place on Fiji TV?

It can be argued that a survey of the simplest kind would reveal that a community has a number of interests. A large percentage of the viewing audience is interested in an American situation comedy and cops and robbers, but they will other have other interests as well even if they don't raise a hue and cry about them.

There are vast numbers of children who go to school at a primary and secondary level. They and their teachers who have an ongoing interest in studying for exams. The military forces are a sizeable group of people with skills and special interests. The United States runs radio stations for the military. One function on this type of radio station is to keep the troops informed about events in their home country and to have on-air request letters and dedications from family, friends and lovers.

Fairness

When the public service broadcaster tries to put their service principles into practice on a "map", a dilemma occurs. There is never enough time on any one broadcasting or even several channels to air all the views and the channel may also be accommodating other areas of broadcasting such as music, drama, talks and features. One theory argues that everyone should receive the same opportunity to air their views on radio. In practice this is impossible. Perhaps the closest that public broadcasting gets towards this principle is when a general election is approaching. Managers and editors sit down and allocate set specific time schedules for each political party to go on air and they then set programme durations.

To say that this system is fair is to exaggerate. A minor party will argue that they should have the same time as the governing party in Parliament. The government in turn will argue it should have the major share of the air time as it has more members in Parliament than the Opposition. A second variant of this theory of "fairness and equality" is to give large community groups their own channels. In Fiji, the Hindi, Fijian⁴ and English-speaking communities have their own radio language stations.

In New Zealand, the media administrators for many years, rejected requests by the Maori community to have their own radio station. It dealt with the concept of "fairness" by allowing a limited number of radio programs to broadcast in the Maori language and having a Maori and Pacific Islands section within the main organisation structure. Maori elders and supporters seeking the

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licensing of special Maori radio language stations used a number of arguments, saying they were the indigenous citizens of New Zealand with their own language and culture, and said with some enthusiasm that they were taxpayers.

Dianne Stogre Power, a Canadian radio broadcaster who lived and worked for many years in New Zealand undertook a scholarship study of public radio in Fiji, Hawai'i, New Zealand and British Columbia in Canada. Her first recommendation was for Radio New Zealand to survey 24 hours of their programming and then analyse their results for a Maori perspective with its content and images.⁵ In addition, she asked for an active development plan to recruit Maori broadcasters into every level of administration, production and presentation. For Ms Power, the words of the media administrators in New Zealand were insufficient. She clearly wanted to see more Maori people making programmes for Maori people.

A number of pithy comments dot this short report and illustrate the many attitudes broadcasters have toward public broadcasting.

Public radio is a chameleon. It takes on different characteristics depending upon its environment, how it defines its roles and its perception of the "public".

Dianne Stogre Power, radio broadcaster

Radio is too good a medium to be left to market forces. It's about soul, soul is about culture, about language.

Ashley Wickham, Pacific broadcaster

The biggest hurdle is the management attitude which still does not accept that New Zealand public radio is mono-cultural.

Piripi Whaanga, Maori broadcaster

The CBC can't afford to offer culture to anyone — well, I guess it's a white capitalist culture.

Ray Hudson, manager CBC, Vancouver

An ideal scenario for public broadcasting is a three-mode loop with the development of news, an analytic and interpretative mode of the data and then feedback from the public that will lead to the gathering of more news and comment. Public broadcasting or public journalism is prepared to offend the powerful, express controversy and seek community "diversity" by having many

voices on the air. For example, when the ship sinks in the ocean with the loss of people and property, the public broadcaster will instinctively think of the many people involved. Interviews are held with the survivors, the owners, the bereaved relatives, and the insurance company. After this first wave of interviews the public broadcaster may find there are other questions arising. Was the ship seaworthy or overloaded? Why did it ignore the storm warning? This is a scenario many public broadcasters may begin working on, but they then abandon it to the detriment of their profession, as they are asked by editors to cover new stories.

Objectivity

Journalists do not continually follow-up the same story, as there are never enough journalists to do the work. The media research facilities may be insufficient, the work hours of the journalist are required for other work and the public (customers) will expect a constant flow of new stories to hold their attention.

In reality the public broadcaster has much in common with the butterfly motif used for the title of this article, by settling on the map of community happenings to interview and broadcast what “appears” to be news. But here we see the journalist and the editor deciding what is valid community information. The decision to cover or not cover a story is based on this theory of what is in the public good or good public broadcasting. I hesitate to go deeply into this quagmire, recalling the philosopher Karl Popper advising his readers that a theory is merely the best conjecture available at that time.⁶

Nevertheless, if we are to define public broadcasting, it is necessary to outline some of the components that make it work. Freedom from economic and political pressures and freedom to select what news will be the event of the day are prime elements. Davis Merritt, the American editor and journalist talks of journalism as an “intellectual journey”.⁷

My reading is that the intellectual journey is symbolised by where the butterfly lands on the community map. On this visual map of where the community lives, there are experts who will give their views on a particular issue, but there are lay people who can and should also be asked to comment. This engagement of the total community hopefully leads to a number of scenarios where there are questions both asked and answered on the possible solutions to any problem.

A journalist with a public broadcasting philosophy will persistently and

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consciously seek to get the views of the public on the issues of the day. Interviews with officials and experts are essential and a journalist will canvass them. But it is often necessary to deliberately seek out and encourage the lay person to speak. But, to obtain that voice requires a special effort from the public broadcaster. A journalist looking at the map notes that a farmer is obviously to be found working in a field and farmyard, rather than in the slick environs of the broadcasting studios. As the journalist drives to the farm with a tape recorder under their arm and checks the questions for the interview, she/he may have time to contemplate the views of Hirsch and Gordon, who were writing about newspapers, but could equally have been writing about any media including radio and television.

Those who dominate the selection process... make the best judgement they can of what interests and concern their readers. In this judgement the press is inevitably influenced not only by what it knows about its readers, from their social class to their hobbies, but also by the ambience in which journalists, and particularly editors and news editors live.

When the journalist shows a lack of partisanship by not taking sides in a dispute; by adopting a position of detachment and neutrality; by being accurate with facts; seeking the truth through looking for relevance, the broadcasting organisation gains credibility and public broadcasting can become a reality.

An able journalist and public broadcaster will look for objectivity. But what is it? Talk to a politician before and after their election and you receive two answers. The first answer will relate to the desire to use the media to obtain power, the second will reflect the views of a person in power who wishes to use the media to express views and opinions compatible with the retention of the newly acquired power. This sense of what is ethics is ably summed up by John Hurst when he says, "Objectivity in the practice of journalism is what the Australian Journalists' Association's Code of Ethics say it is".⁸

If the definition is simple, at least it implies that any assessment of what is right or wrong, good or bad in media needs discussion and more discussion. The Fiji Media Council Code of Ethics expects that journalists and news organisations should report and interpret the news with scrupulous honesty by striving to disclose all essential facts and by not suppressing relevant, available facts or distorting by wrong or improper emphasis.

An example from a Radio New Zealand (RNZ) radio programme series

illustrates some of the difficulties of being objective. The Continuing Education Unit of RNZ planned a radio series designed to improve safety procedures for people who went to sailing in small boats. Research showed that these weekend sailors seldom took lifejackets, torches, flares and other precautionary measures. Many drowned when the boats tipped or they got caught in bad weather. The radio producer researched his radio programmes, and arranged to have them scheduled on air. In addition to this work he arranged for a large sponsorship for the series. But then came the rub. New research that came out showing that a certain brand of lightweight boat made of aluminium had a poor safety record. There were numerous cases of these boats capsizing in choppy seas. The producer was reluctant to use this information in the radio program. He argued with some justification that there was no concrete proof that these aluminium boats were unsafe, and in addition, he said, that if the small boats were unsafe, the Government should have taken action on them. Another argument, less convincing was that the sponsorship money might be jeopardised.

His way of dealing with the dilemma was to fill up the programme time with audio material not related to the aluminium boats. It was a case of censorship by omission and also a case of poor public broadcasting ethics.

The public broadcaster requires time to research and prepare an approach to radio topics. This time in research ensures that when the public broadcaster begins an interview he or she is more informed about their topic than most of their listening audience. Many South Pacific countries now have private radio stations. These stations try to live by the fruits of their labour. They sell air-time for commercials to be broadcast and have sales teams in their communities drumming up business for the station. The cost of broadcasting a commercial will depend on the size of the audience the advertiser can promise. A radio station that can promise an advertiser an audience twice that of their competitor will get the advertisement and of course the money that goes with it.

The impact of advertising on public broadcasting is a mixed one. A commercial radio station is always looking to maximise its listening audience, to please its advertisers and through sheer economic necessity to outbid its competitors. It will reduce the diversity and frequency of radio programming for minority audiences. It will try to reduce running costs. In short "market forces" govern it.

There is nothing innately wrong in catering for your audience interests. This is what the public broadcaster is seeking to do day after day. If a hundred thousand or a million people choose one radio station to listen to in preference

to another, I applaud their choice. But what about questions raised on independence of views, diversity and the ethics of the journalist? Will the manager provide transport for the journalist to visit an outlying farm or will the journalist rely only on a telephone call? Will the local girls' tennis team be given a "fair" coverage or will most of the sports coverage time go to the rugby teams who have major liquor sponsors? Will the manager of the small radio station allow a major hard-hitting radio investigative programme into a soft drinks manufacturer who sponsored many of their radio programs, or seek a way of avoiding making a decision for fear of losing the sponsors money to the opposition?

Finding answer to these awkward questions may be a difficult one for the radio manager of a commercial station. There is no doubt in the mind of this public broadcaster what the answer should be. But I do have another question — is it possible to be a public broadcaster on a local commercial broadcasting station and to serve two masters?

Out of the 1986 Peacock Commission on financing British broadcasting came the underpinning of the *1990 Broadcasting Act*. A principal obligation was that the BBC as the prime public broadcaster in Britain, was required to commission a percentage of programs from independent production companies. The requirement was for a "sufficient amount of quality programmes". The precise definition of quality was not defined, but a listener to BBC Radio, and TV also, can judge for themselves the meaning of "quality". The BBC World Service has a number of private companies supplying programmes on such diverse topics as collecting and editing praise and criticism on programmes that have already been broadcast and another programme series on farming issues around the world.

It is interesting to see this attempt to marry the forces of social marketing and social change, instead of seeing them as two separate entities forever locked in mortal and moral combat. It not only produced interesting programmes but it may be the only way that public radio will survive in a culture that sees globalisation and hence more power to the marketers as an inevitable development.

No discussion of radio and its future can end without a view of the impact of the Internet. On my computer I can access some of the thousands of radio stations that fill the world's day with information, music and advertising. To access the information I merely need the address of the radio station, a simple piece of software worth about US\$30 and patience. I listen to the live broadcasts from the radio stations and if I have the skill and the tenacity I can access some

programmes that have already been broadcast.

It seems wonderful. There it is, radio on demand from anywhere in the world and access to programmes past. But what of the future of Internet radio for public broadcasting? Certainty, there is more choice, but much of what is available is already similar to what is already there. I access the local radio station in downtown Dallas, as an over hyped announcer encourages me to order pizzas and to avoid the main traffic junctions during the rush hour.

To find the gold or even the silver and bronze in this great race of radio by Internet, I will need more time to search the airwaves than I ever hope to have. And besides, even when I win this hypothetical race and I know more than I do now about the availability of the pizzas of Texas, they will have no relevance to me in the South Pacific. If public broadcasting is to have meaning either in state, private and on Internet radio it will have to offer a variety of local content that will affect my view of life. It will advise and show me that life is not all instant food, non-stop music and it will question the voice behind the microphone that offers instant solutions to life, either through an excess of religion and the ritual pleasures of spending to enhance ego.

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Notes:

¹ Crissell, 20.

² *Deakin Theory*, Week 4:6.

³ *PJR*, 5:1:44.

⁴ *Deakin Theory*, Week 4:8

⁵ Stogre Power, 53.

⁶ Breen, 57.

⁷ *MIA*, 75.

⁸ *Deakin Theory*, Week 1:1.

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