

# Digital broadcasting

## 13841



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

## **Abstract**

This essay intends to discuss the following statement;

Digital Broadcasting will have a fundamental effect on viewing patterns, popular culture and audience identity.

This will be done firstly by looking at the history of the BBC and the original intention of Public Service Broadcasting. It will discuss how by John Reith's successful approach to broadcasting, the BBC became a National Institution creating popular culture and a National Identity. It will examine how these first steps and ideas have major role in the introduction of Digital Broadcasting today and whether the initial "Reithian" values have any meaning in today's society. It will finally conclude what effect if any, these changes will have on British life as a whole and whether the fear of change is justified.

In the 20th century the advance of technology has been fundamental in the way we live our lives today. The recent introduction of Digital Broadcasting to Great Britain has caused many technologists to become swept up in a sense of awed enthusiasm about the infinite possibilities of the new digital age. In its early stages digital broadcasting is only available to a minority and it will take ten years or so to become a new way of life.

Digital Broadcasting has thousands of new services to offer its viewers and listeners. Instead of pictures and sound being transformed into waves, the new technology turns them into a series of digits which are transmitted through the air and received by television or radio aerials. Digital

Broadcasting is more efficient than analogue, giving space for six channels where analogue would give you one. Digital brings better picture, better sound quality and more choice and cinematic style. The new era gives the audience greater interaction with its broadcaster and also the opportunity to shop, book holidays, bank and play games all from remote control.

It is not just television that is going digital. Radio too will offer the listener a transformed experience in what we enjoy the most. The sound quality will be crystal clear and free from interruption. New digital radio sets will offer a built in display panel which will show graphics as well as facts and figures relating to the programme you are listening to.

These are the things that we have come to expect from a broadcasting journey lasting 80 years. The new technological change is revolutionary as radio was 75 years ago and as television was 25 years after. Overnight we will move from a world of scarcity with limitation, to a world of plenty where an infinity of services become possible.

The fear of change is as great as it was 77 years ago when broadcasting began. The digital age brings risks as well as opportunities. The risk that globalisation of culture may threaten national identities; that the powerful gateway controllers may restrain rather than promote diversity; the risk of a possible two class society; the information rich, ready and able to pay for their increasingly expensive media, and the information poor who cannot. Are these threats true to life ? How could this be avoided ?

The introduction of digital broadcasting has followed a similar pattern to the advent of broadcasting itself 77 years ago by its gradual availability to all. In

1922 the British Broadcasting Company was founded. Owned by a consortium of radio manufacturers Peter Eckersley one of the companies first employees said,

“ The BBC was formed as an expedient solution to a technical problem”.

(ECKERSLEY, 1922, pg112)

The government had decided that there was going to be no radio free for all. Led by 33 year old John Reith the BBC set to work at inventing broadcasting. The BBC was set up as a public service, meaning that the provision should be public goods rather than of a private commodity.

Funding the public service was decided when it was felt that advertising could limit the number of programmes broadcast. Therefore to move away from the governments intervention a licence fee paid for by the owners of radios sets would mean money could be reinvested into the research and development of the service. Advertising was ruled out by the Sykes Committee of 1923 because of the detrimental effect it had on programmes in America. The American notion of broadcasting was based on freedom whereas John Reith” s British one was completely different.

In 1926 the Crawford Committee decided that the BBC should become more selective in its programmes and it was suggested that,

“ the broadcasting service should be conducted by a public corporation acting as a trustee for the national interest and its status and duties should correspond with those of a public service.”

(NEGRINE, Politics and the Mass Media, pg82)

The early creation of public service broadcasting saw the BBC become informer and educator not simply entertainer. The BBC was closely involved with the Adult Education Movement becoming an integral part of young adult life after leaving school at 14. Reith's commitment to the public service mean that the service was of very high quality. The tradition of the BBC as a public service also brought high mindedness to the pioneers of broadcasting, who felt that the broadcasting was their unique privilege. In the early stages of the BBC John Reith was not alone in his uneasiness with popular culture, therefore in the first 25 years of broadcasting a pull in both directions was noticeable between what the public wanted and what they ought to want.

Reith's bureaucratic "Iron Fisted" approach moulded the BBC into a unique character whose long time monopoly created a national institution for Britain. After developing as a small series of regional networks, the BBC became primarily a national broadcaster. The people of Britain were brought together and radio became an everyday part of British life. The FA Cup final was first broadcast in 1927, in the same year the Proms brought classical music available to everyone. The Coronation in 1937 became the biggest event to that time in broadcasting history.

A lot like digital, these new innovations were originally only available to the minority until Reith opened the range out to reach the masses. By the end of the 1930's, 70% of households owned a radio set. However that was 70% of Britain and not just London. A feud was stirring between the North and South as the concentration of broadcasting was based in London. The people of the

North feared a loss of their regional identity through the suppressed use of regional accents. This anxiety was shared by the Ministry of Information was suggested,

“ Something might be done to diminish the present predominance of the cultured voice upon the wireless. Every effort should be made to get working class people to the microphone.”

(HOME MORALE COMMITTEE, pg144)

In the General Strike of 1926 press production came to halt meaning that news was solely heard on the radio for the first time. At that time Winston Churchill wanted to take over the BBC and use it for mild propaganda. Reith however was totally against this, his arguments were successful and the BBC ran itself on its own power supplies throughout the strike continuing its public service. When the strike had ended Reith commented that,

“ Since the BBC institution and since the government in this crisis were acting for the people, the BBC was for the government in this crisis too.”

(REITH, 1926, pg 120)

This impartiality showed the first step to the BBC” s independence. The first major changes in broadcasting happened during and after the Second World War. An initial decision not to broadcast during the war was revoked meaning that a huge recruitment campaign had to be launched after most of the BBC staff had been called up. This saw the beginning of the end of the stuffy high mindedness that had engulfed the BBC and it enabled the public to at last get what they want. During the war a shift in programming saw the

BBC show its first substantial use of audience research, they asked soldiers in barracks what they wanted to hear and then played it. A concentration of programming with intent to entertain and inform was intensified during the war to keep up spirits and moral.

In 1945 the BBC's public service was enhanced by the introduction of television. John Reith labelled television as "a social menace of the first order" which seemed an odd statement, but perhaps he felt that after years of grooming radio for success, TV would arrive and steal its thunder. In 1955 the BBC lost its long time monopoly in broadcasting. ITV's new service funded by advertisements created a duopoly which was thought to be better for the industry. ITV brought with it the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA now ITC) whose job it was to regulate the channel. The introduction of ITV brought challenge to the BBC, though John Reith's original ideal for public service broadcasting included ITV by means of programmes being informative, educational, entertaining and overall of a public service.

The past twenty years have seen many changes in British Broadcasting, breakfast television, teletext and live television have all arrived. Quality of sound and picture has been a major technical development. New terrestrial channels such as Channel 4 and Channel 5 have brought a greater choice for the viewer and the ever increasing influx of new independent radio stations like Virgin 1215 and Talk Radio have challenged the BBC's long time monopoly. The BBC itself introduced Radio5, then re-launched it to become a 24 hour news and sports station called Radio Five Live.

The advance of technology in the last ten years has brought the British public more choice. Sky and Cable broadcasting companies have been offering a wider range of programmes on and anything, Originally un-regulated the massive scale of choice brought new sources of entertainment. As in 1937 when the FA Cup final was first broadcast on radio, the Cricket World Cup of 1992 was exclusive to Sky Sports causing major increases in sales.

Terrestrial television has changed in many ways since its introduction in the 1950's, two channels has become five and the quality of programming has improved a great deal. John Reith's initial public service ethos as discussed earlier created a base for broadcastings future, future that is until now. The introduction of digital television will eventually see a change in Public Service Broadcasting but not the end. Digital has brought its doubters and sceptics but surely this change will be good for the audience, but will its be good for the BBC ? The new ideal for Public Service Broadcasting that enters the new millennium is similar to a large menu. Unlike the old Reithian values set out at the beginning where an audience was given a service that was selected for them, the paying viewer can select a specific programme or genre of their choice at any time. Therefore broadcasting becomes a different type of public service, creating a pay per view system which offers a world wide choice. ONDigital's new pay per view system is the first in Britain. Chief Executive Stephen Grabiner claims,

" Our research shows there is a high dissatisfaction with existing pay TV operators. We know people want more choice and they are prepared to pay for it, but they also want to be valued."



(GRABINER, www. itn. co. uk, 17/02/99)

The standard of programming however can then be open to question as more channel availability can create a lack of quality. This lack of quality is where the BBC can succeed where others might fail. The BBC throughout its 77 year history has been committed to Public Service, its role as digital broadcaster is one that can safeguard national culture by expressing a range of British talent across a world wide stage as well as a UK one. It can encourage diversity by bringing a range of new services and an extended choice in greater depth. The most important way it can offer quality is by its unique way of being funded, the licence fee is mandatory for television ownership therefore its annual intake is guaranteed.

When cable and satellite originally emerged, there was a worry regarding a lack of programming quality. The more new choice available to the viewers, the more the audience will decline for existing broadcasters. In January 1999 35. 8% of all television viewing belonged to satellite and cable, the BBC making up 28. 7% and ITV a further 25. 2% Another factor that accounts for some of the loss audience is the renewed popularity of films on video. New films until recently have been available quicker on video than they are on Sky, Cable or terrestrial. Sky” s new offering , Sky Box Office advertises the very latest movies on demand the first of its kind in the UK will have an effect at not only reducing terrestrial audience but also on Cinema audiences too.

In the Broadcasting Bill of 1990 the IBA was replaced with the Independent Television Commission (ITC). As Cable and Satellite grew the alarm bells

rang with a worry about lack of quality programming. The ITC's new role of licensing body and regulator covered all non BBC channels meaning the new companies would not get away with broadcasting anything. It differed from its predecessor in that it will not be the broadcaster or publisher of programmes. The future brought greater competition for the commercial television stations. The ITC is required to issue a licence to prospective broadcasters and it is then up to them to meet the guidelines set for them.

As entertainment becomes easier to obtain, changes in viewing patterns increase with more choice on offer to the viewer. An effect of Satellite television is the death of family viewing which is more often in middle class families who can afford more than one television. Instead of arguing about what to watch, the father and son watch the football in one room whilst the mother is in the kitchen watching anything but. This is one of the first examples of splitting up an audience, when BSkyB bought the rights to the Premiership in 1992 it meant that when a viewer wanted to watch football they could originally only see it in one room therefore people who didn't had to go somewhere else to watch their programme. Originally there was uproar about taking football off terrestrial television and making people pay extra. In order to gain more viewers Murdoch's company had to front up big cash in order for the clubs to buy decent players and therefore making the coverage worth paying for. This was a great launching pad for Murdoch's company. Football has since returned to terrestrial television as ITV have bought rights to the FA Cup and the European Champions League.

Freedom of choice can mean lack of schedule which can ultimately threaten the terrestrial television viewer. The BBC has in the past ten years lost many

of its monopolies on sporting events. Domestic league football, Boxing, Ryder Cup Golf and recently Test Match Cricket have all been snapped up by BSkyB. BSkyB having many specific channels is open to moving sporting events to midweek or to the evening during terrestrial prime time. Viewing Patterns ultimately become scattered, if you wanted to catch Eastenders on a Monday night, but also now with more choice available you wanted to catch Manchester United on Sky Digital. Something would have to give, therefore if you video Eastenders you can watch it later or not at all.

A recent article in a newspaper has warned the BBC to start making more quality dramas and documentaries rather than cheap quiz shows. However it seems that the BBC has shot itself in the foot by not using licence payers money to invest in keeping national sporting events which are surely in the public interest. Maybe if they had done this they would not need to produce cheap quiz shows to fill time.

More choice will increasingly affect the way we run our lives. Hurrying home from work to watch a certain programme or going to the pub on Saturday night has been occurring for a long time, but it may not continue. Match of the Day is not the only place you can see Premiership football now. The introduction of the video recorder saw the downfall of programme scheduling and on commercial channels, advertising. If the show is on video it is preferable to fast forward during the advert breaks meaning they are subsequently ignored. This however causes the adverts to be shown again more often on other channels eventually meaning that the advert will reach the viewer.

As we move into the millennium we are becoming ever increasingly dependent on computers. A digital television picture is an additional component to our everyday PC, it is offering us a new facility for our computers but it is also updating our televisions by turning them into computers. Our 21st century technological wizardry is trying to make our lives as easy as possible by letting the viewer do everything from the touch of a button in front of a large screen that used to be called a television. John Reith" s initial Public Service Broadcasting idea has moved on in time. Firstly it was changed when ITV was introduced, since then it has been reformed with the introduction of the ITC and is now in touch with societies needs. Reith ruled the BBC in those early days with an " Iron Fist" a lot like Rupert Murdoch has ruled his BSkyB company, though a quest for world media domination was not what Reith had in mind. Public Service Broadcasting has moved with the times, but the advent of new technology and better services is the main reason behind changes in viewing patterns. Viewers can now watch many different things at the same time, one persons idea of entertainment is now more likely to be different to another, Digital Broadcasting solves this problem by giving something more.

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