

# **HOW IS CHANGING TECHNOLOGY CHANGING THE NATURE OF BROADCASTING? THE BBC AND THE CONVERGENCE OF DIGITAL MEDIA AND THE HUMAN DIMENSION**

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## **Summary**

Professor Esler opened by explaining the role of the Arts and Humanities Research Council in supporting research that produced people and ideas vital for the health of the creative industries in the UK, a sector occupying 8% of the economy and growing at more than twice the national trend. BBC broadcasting, which plays a central role in the creative industries, exists in the current convergence between digital media and the human dimension, in terms of the creative impulse and creative content. He suggested that to imagine that the future of broadcasting was about technology and not about the integration of technology and the human dimension was to make a serious error that would redound against the health of the UK economy. He proposed that the BBC and the AHRC formed a natural alliance in ensuring that the creative resources deployed by the 12,000 arts and humanities researchers in UK universities were deployed to maximum effect in the process of this convergence. He explained the richness of issues in this area in relation to broadcasting that had emerged in the course of recent ARCH/BBC Summits. Particularly important was the movement toward interactivity and mobility, so that the old notion of fixed scheduling to distribute programming was disappearing and meaning of the BBC brand in relation to content was undergoing a radical change. Yet even in this changing world the original Reithian commitment to providing public value and augmenting social capital maintained its appeal. The challenge was how to stick to the ideals underlying public service broadcasting in the revolution in broadcasting we are now experiencing. Here too the AHRC saw a coincidence of values with the BBC.

## **THE AHRC AND THE BBC AND THE CONVERGENCE OF DIGITAL MEDIA AND CONTENT**

I should begin by explaining why I am here addressing you tonight. I am the Chief Executive of the Arts and Humanities Research Council ('the AHRC'). We were established by Royal Charter (yes, we have one too) in April last year, after seven years of life as the Arts and Humanities Research Board. We form one of the eight Research Councils operating across the UK that are funded by the UK Government from the Science Budget as administered by the Office of Science and Innovation within the Department of Trade and Industry. The Science budget is about £2.6 billion this year and the AHRC's share is some £90 million. We are spending this year some £50 million on research by the arts and humanities researchers in UK universities. Arts and humanities academics represent about one quarter of all academics in UK universities. There were some 12,000 of them listed as research active in the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise. Of these 12,000, a full 7,000

came from departments rated as of international research quality. 7,000 people like this represent a staggeringly useful asset for any nation to have.

A central responsibility given us by our Royal Charter is to encourage the researchers we fund to disseminate their research findings. We want them to transfer the knowledge they produce into new contexts outside academia where it will have a demonstrable impact. We call this process, occurring by the movement of ideas or skilled personnel, 'knowledge transfer.'

The creative industries form an important context for the research and knowledge transfer activities of many of our researchers. As you may know, the creative industries constitute 8% of the UK economy and are growing at 6% per annum. The population of the UK spends more per head on culture and leisure activities than in any other country.

The arts and humanities academics in UK universities teach many thousands of the young people who each year enter the creative industries. There can be no more powerful example or driver of knowledge transfer than this. Our researchers are also the custodians and, increasingly, the impresarios of the UK's fantastically rich literary, historical, philosophic, theological, musical and artistic traditions and corpora, without which a vibrant creative industry sector would be impossible. Think of those recent cinematic triumphs *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and you see superlative knowledge transfer by medievalists in UK universities, even a long time after the original investment, to cite but one example.

The broadcasting activities of the BBC are clearly central in their extent, impact and quality to the creative industries in the UK. We are called upon tonight to consider how changing technology is changing the way in which the BBC operates as a broadcaster.

But it is not simply a changing technology that is having an impact on the BBC. What is causing the tectonic plates to move so dramatically and disconcertingly beneath our feet is the interaction between changing technology in broadcasting and changing ways in which people engage with it. In reality, the BBC finds itself part of the much larger convergence now underway between digital media and new forms of human interaction with it (especially in relation to creative content) that marks one of the most important moments in the history of industrialisation since the invention of the spinning jenny. Whereas science and business applications occupied computer experts in the 1980s and 1990s, the leisure and

entertainment industry is at the heart of this convergence, just as cinema and then radio drove technological innovation in the first three decades of the twentieth century.

Think of Apple Macintosh moving into music via the iPod and you will see a powerful example of this convergence. Or again, consider computer games which are just on the verge of incorporating complex narrative structures, emotional depth and artificial intelligence. There is also the case of our world-leading animation specialists. To imagine that the story is just about technology--what I mischievously like to call the 'heavy metal' obsession--is to make a mistake which, if carried into policy, could have tragic consequences for the economic competitiveness of Great Britain. *This is the first of the three major points I wish to make tonight.*

The emphasis on people as well as technology is necessitated from the very nature of broadcasting, namely, that there is an audience/user and that the technology is a tool to communicate. It is a tragic blunder to imagine that technology alone drives innovation. In broadcasting, in fact, the technology in itself is without inherent value. It is what people do (or choose not to do) with it that matters. This has really characterised broadcasting since its inception and is why arts and humanities research and media industries – particularly in the public sector – have a certain natural affinity. They have a shared interest in understanding people operating creatively in new contexts enabled by technological change.

For the UK successfully to be a leader in the coming convergence of digital media and content, and that must surely be our goal, it is essential that the 12,000 arts and humanities researchers in the UK, or at least some of them, be actively engaged.

The subject we are here to discuss tonight, how is changing technology changing the shape of broadcasting, reminds us that the BBC is at the very heart of this convergence. The AHRC is currently jointly running with BBC New Media department of the BBC a series of four Collaborative Inquiry Summits that bring together BBC personnel working in New Media and a large number of arts and humanities academics. We want to see what the two communities have to offer each other and how we can best support collaborative working and to begin a conversation between academic researchers and BBC personnel. *This natural alliance between the BBC and the AHRC is my second major theme tonight.*

The substantive topics of our Summits, and I will return to aspects of them below, are:

'From Passive Consumption to Active Engagement' (March 21st),  
'Mobile Worlds' (March 30th),  
'User Generated Content' (May 25th), and

These very topics give you some idea of the areas in which the shape of broadcasting is changing, not just because the technology is changing but because people are interacting with it in very new ways. We plan to consolidate a vibrant, long term collaborative partnership between the AHRC and BBC New Media, and these summits represent the starting point of what we anticipate will be a long and fruitful partnership.

We have started to plan for a second stage beyond these four summits where we will create a framework to support targeted research in the development of a range of pilot projects. The express aims of these pilot projects will be to turn collaborative research into successful BBC applications and to facilitate the flow of knowledge from BBC Innovation to and from the academic research base.

## **THE BBC AND THE ENHANCEMENT OF SOCIAL CAPITAL AND PUBLIC VALUE IN A TIME OF CONVERGENCE BETWEEN DIGITAL MEDIA AND CONTENT**

Yet we should recall that we are having this discussion in a context where the Government has confirmed that the BBC's Charter will be renewed but its governance and funding from the public purse, in particular the level of the licence fee, are under review.

Mention of the licence fee reminds us that the BBC occupies a unique position in broadcasting and the national life, whereby it enters into a compact with the Government and promises to deliver social capital and public value in return for public funding. How can this remarkable outcrop of non-commercial broadcasting maintain a viable and distinctive existence at a time when digital media and human interaction with them are evolving at a giddy pace?

At this point the theologian in me prompts me to raise the cry of *Ad fontes*, 'back to the sources', and so I must evoke the memory of John Reith. Many of you may have known him personally; I am reliant on writings about him such as Andrew Boyle's biography.<sup>1</sup> It is, admittedly, easy to be put off by Reith's moralism, paternalism and autocracy. Yet beneath all this was a powerful commitment to

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<sup>1</sup> *Only the Wind Will Listen: Reith of the BBC*. London: Hutchinson, 1972.

what I interpret and endorse as the capacity and role of the BBC to foster human flourishing.

This tendency is reflected in the emphasis in the current BBC Charter on broadcasting as a means of 'disseminating information, education and entertainment'. Perhaps the notion of 'education' is not the flavour of the month among BBC staff right now for the patronising and passivity it may imply.

In contemporary parlance, we speak of the role of the BBC in generating *public value* for its audience and in fostering *social capital*, that sense of cohesiveness and shared understanding that helps to glue society together. Do the millions of viewers who daily listen to distinctive BBC broadcasting such as *The Today Programme*, *In Our Time*, the arts and music programmes and so on, or access them on-line, really doubt that the BBC remains committed to something recognisably similar to Reith's high ideals? AHRC staff working on the Collaborative Inquiry Summits have told me how impressed they are by the commitment to the inculcation of public value and social capital evident among the wide range of BBC personnel they are meeting.

The daunting question that the BBC now faces is what does the Reithian commitment to delivering public value and augmenting social capital mean in our current momentous transition to new modalities of broadcasting. *This is my third theme for tonight*. The BBC has clearly begun to address this issue in documents such as *Delivering Public Value* and *Creative Futures* but in what remains of my time I would like to explore some of its ramifications.

## **PUBLIC VALUE AND SOCIAL CAPITAL IN AN ERA OF USER/TECHNOLOGY INTERACTION**

The technological shift that gives rise to these questions goes beyond a proliferation of channels and web streaming. Perhaps the biggest change is that programmes are no longer locked to schedules. The nation does not view/listen as one and the BBC can therefore no longer speak to the nation as one and know that everyone is receiving those messages within a shared time frame. This innovation is known as 'On demand' or 'third age' broadcasting.

The next biggest shift – which is as yet not well understood – is that the 'audience' is no longer merely a consumer but is potentially a creator of content that is mediated by the broadcaster. Does this mean that the BBC is no longer a broadcaster but rather a facilitator? If so, what is the nature of this facilitation role?

Just to give you a flavour of the challenges facing the BBC, let me mention Bebo, which my three children (aged between 17 and 21 and currently in Ireland, Sri Lanka and Scotland) appear to access at least once a day. This is a world-wide on-line register of people. Once you register you get an area of the site to yourself where you can put up information, photos, video clips quizzes about yourself and so on. Friends keep up with one another by looking at their respective sites. You can comment on someone else's site, but not change it. Suspect entries, if reported to the site controller, can be removed. The power of human imagination is continually leading to new dimensions to Bebo. Bebo clearly represents a revolution in social connectivity. This is our world!

Here are some of the key issues which have emerged from our Summits (and all I can do is to raise the questions, not answer them). Let me re-iterate that these all involve human motivation and human creativity in addition to the technological platforms:

- Do people perceive interactivity as a good thing and passivity as bad?
- What are the assumptions that are made about participation and engagement?
- What is or is not active engagement or passive consumption?
- What is the point and purpose of active engagement?
- How do users make decisions to buy/remix/share/steal content?
- How is "ipodinization" going to impact on our way of interacting?
- What are the social inhibitions on, and steps towards, participation?
- Do we want to live in a world where everyone is creating content?
- Lastly, and most critically, what does public service, the traditional role of the BBC to produce public value and augment social capital, mean to active users in an age of interaction?

Just as significant, in terms of content, in the context where the broadcaster produces programmes and they are made available over distributed networks, what does the BBC brand mean and how does it maintain public interest, let alone public loyalty, in what it is producing? This is the issue of mobile worlds. Here are some of the issues, and once again note the importance of human motivation and creativity:

- How do the new media affect the way we access information and news, music, games, services (bus services, film times, restaurant bookings)?
- How does mobile access to broadcasting impact upon and reflect social trends, inter-personal interactivity (as in chat), inter-generational relationships, gender differences, status, and new forms of social interaction and entertainment?
- What does it mean to be in a location? For example, what information do people want when the physical world meets the network?
- How does mobile access to digital media bear upon my sense of presence? How does it shape the way I answer questions such as 'Where am I? What am I doing? How occupied/interruptable am I?' and even 'Who am I?'

## **PUBLIC VALUE AND SOCIAL CAPITAL IN THE MOBILE AND INTERACTIVE AGE**

From all this it is clear that we are at the stage of raising questions more than answering them. What is the really big question? It must surely be how should the BBC in this changing digital world enable interaction with its audiences while remaining true to its commitment to providing public value and promoting social value.

One aspect of this must be that the BBC needs to think small, think local, think community. It is one of the few major organisations in the UK that has roots or can root itself deep within communities around the UK. It is part of the BBC's role to engage almost one-to-one with the audience. This is difficult for TV, easier for radio, but totally appropriate for web. But it must also meet the public's desire to be heard on BBC platforms while not exploiting that desire. It will need to strike an appropriate balance between commissioned material and unpaid contribution.

In the 1920s the founders of what became the BBC turned their back on the rampant commercialization that had already occurred in radio in the USA. Perhaps to this day the major difference between the BBC and commercial broadcasting is that the BBC, like our universities, creates spaces for risk-taking and innovation that are not straight-jacketed by the profit motive. Like the BBC, our arts and humanities researchers share a profound commitment to augmenting public value. We look forward to expanding that relationship with the BBC in the years ahead.

Back in the 1920s John Reith enlisted assistance from literary giants like Robert Bridges, George Bernard Shaw and Rudyard Kipling and from musical figures such as Walford Davies, Professor Tovey and

Hugh Allen (Boyle, p. 150). As the BBC takes its leading role in a new broadcasting revolution, the Arts and Humanities Research Council stands ready to work with it in facilitating its ongoing relationship with the outstanding arts and humanities research community here in the UK.



