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SOME CONTRADICTIONS OF THE ASSAULT ON THE BBC

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The government's green paper on the future of the BBC was widely seen as an **'unprecedented threat'** to the Corporation's future. In fact, it is merely the latest scuffle in the struggle to strengthen market forces inside UK broadcasting and to diminish what remains of a non-commercial ethos in the digital media landscape. What are the contexts of and motivations for this 'hollowing out' of public service broadcasting and to what extent, given **justified criticisms** of the BBC's performance, should we be exercised about this?

First, the green paper and the proposed restructuring of British broadcasting is part of a wider move by the government to sell off public assets and to discipline those services that remain in the public sector. The Chancellor's proposed programme of privatisation for 2015/6 alone is set to yield some **£31.8 billion** and we can expect state holdings in banks, land, student loans and the Ordnance Survey to be sold off in next few years. But, as the *Financial Times* **revealed** recently, this is also likely to include Channel 4, reckoned to be worth at least £1 billion. Indeed, the **green paper** promises to 'consider the full range of options for reforming the BBC's commercial operations, including the full or part privatisation of (BBC) 'Worldwide' so it may be that a significant section of our broadcast resources are about to be sold.

Second, commercial interests in broadcasting are **thriving**. The BBC has suffered funding cuts of some 16 per cent over the last five years and has been promised a very modest rise in the licence fee only if it is willing to act as an **adjunct to government welfare policy** by paying for free TV licences for the over 75s. Sky, meanwhile, has recently announced profits of £1.4 billion while emerging players like BT, Netflix and Amazon – which just paid £160 million to sign up Jeremy Clarkson and his colleagues for a new motoring show – are encroaching on the audiences and content served by public service broadcasters. ITV may remain a public service operation but its profits – set to be around £850 million this year – are based less on growing audiences than its ownership of lucrative formats. Indeed, its strength is at least partly based on how lightly regulated it is making a takeover bid from US company Liberty Global all the more likely. This disparity between commercial and non-commercial sectors reflects **the situation in Europe** where the top five private companies have the same revenue as the continent's public service broadcasters and where commercial revenue is growing at precisely the same rate that public service revenue is shrinking.

Third, public service broadcasters may remain by far the most significant producers of UK originated content but there has been a dramatic fall in investment in several key genres. **Ofcom figures** show spending on original drama has declined by 44 per cent since 2008 and by 30 per cent in relation to original comedy. According to **Ofcom**, there is now 'minimal provision

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in some genres', for example, arts, classical music, religion, education – programmes that are at the heart of a public service remit – while commercial public service broadcasters have virtually abandoned original children's programming

This is the context in which to understand the government's latest proposals further to diminish the scale and scope of the BBC as a public service broadcaster. Dressed up as a sober debate about the purposes, scale and scope of the BBC, the green paper consists of a series of proposals that, while drafted in Whitehall, could easily have been conceived by *Daily Mail* leader writers. It is effectively payback for the **support given to the Tories** by press barons during the recent general election.

Culture secretary John Whittingdale **insists** that he is 'committed both to the future of the BBC and to its underlying 'Reithian mission'. Except that in the very next paragraph he goes on to question the relevance, in a digital age, of the principle of 'universality', one of the foundational principles of Reithian public service broadcasting. Instead of encouraging the BBC to reach out across all platforms and to serve all audiences, the starting point of the green paper is that the BBC's very success is now its problem.

So, scale, not independence, accuracy or quality, becomes the key issue. The BBC, it suggests, should focus not on popularity but marginality – on 'underserved audiences', ie those affected by that wonderfully neutral phrase: 'market failure'. In other words, the BBC should relate only to audiences and genres that commercial broadcasters deem to be unprofitable and so leave the latter to gobble up large audiences while leaving the crumbs to the Corporation. Indeed, the whole document is obsessed by the BBC's 'impact on the market' and manages to list more negative than positive consequences arising from the fact that the BBC reaches some 96 per cent of the UK population each week.

There is an obvious question that follows from this obsession with the BBC's size. Why should we measure the BBC simply in terms of its wider impact on the marketplace? Do we judge the NHS on the basis of whether it makes life difficult for Bupa or do we welcome its status as an institution that treats everyone irrespective of background or income? Do we want to curb spending on schools in case this hits the pockets of the independent sector and 'crowds out' commercial competition?

This is an austerity-led consultation, obsessed (much the like BBC itself) by the pursuit of 'efficiency' and 'value for money'. This applies even to those services where it would be hard to apply standard economic arguments such as the provision of different language services within the UK. So, for example, it notes that the cost of S4C in Wales and BBC Alba in Scotland is 'considerably higher than cost per hour for English speaking content'. This is hardly breaking news – how could it be otherwise in serving more dispersed communities? – and totally misses out the whole point of public service broadcasting which is about reaching out to minority audiences *despite* the cost. By noting that these services are expensive to run because there are relatively few Gaelic and Welsh speakers, it also contradicts its own stated aims: to shift the BBC away from popular programming and to focus on content not provided by the market.

The green paper does raise some important questions on underlying values and performance. For example, it is absolutely right to refer to the fact that the BBC has a poor record in both hiring and representing ethnic minorities. But how on earth will a smaller, narrower and more ghettoised BBC relate better to groups that it has previously marginalised? Does the Culture Secretary imagine that a 'market failure' broadcaster will suddenly offer more prospects to under-represented groups as opposed to seeking those groups who, at least in the long-term, may yield valuable subscription revenue?

The BBC needs radical surgery but this skewed and hugely partisan consultation will do nothing either to democratise the BBC or to secure a more pluralistic and diverse media landscape. We urgently need new voices to counter the dominant, monotone we hear throughout both online and offline spaces. We urgently need to find ways of providing funding to **hyperlocals, community broadcasters and investigative journalists** who are assuming public service roles that are increasingly being shed by commercial operators. We urgently need media outlets that are truly independent of vested interests and bold enough to challenge 'common sense' arguments on, for example, immigration and austerity. We urgently need media outlets that look and sound like the audiences to whom they are supposed to be accountable. A partisan campaign fought on behalf of the BBC's commercial rivals and designed further to weaken public services in this country really isn't the way to go about this.

This is a message that may even get through to some Tories. After all, the BBC is hardly a bastion of radical views but – as with the argument put forward by political sociologist **Claus Offe**, back in 1982, about the welfare state more broadly – a contradictory institution that serves both as an instrument of ideological control *and* as a counterweight to free market ideas. Offe acknowledges the existence of right-wing and left-wing critics of welfarist arrangements and **notes** that both sets of critics 'have become more vociferous and fundamental in their negative appraisal of welfare state arrangements'. But – and this is a crucial point in terms of some Tories being reluctant to sanction a full-scale attack on the BBC – 'neither of the two approaches to the welfare state could or would be prepared, in the best interests of their respective clientele, to

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abandon the welfare state, as it performs essential and indispensable functions both for the accumulation process as well as for the social and economic well-being of the working class'.

None of this should lead us to being indifferent about the future of the BBC or of public service broadcasting in general. The green paper is a short-sighted, neoliberal-inspired assault on the concept of public broadcasting and not an attempt to make the BBC more accountable to and representative of its audiences. Ofte certainly wasn't thinking about the BBC but perhaps he was prescient, should there be a grass roots public campaign to defend the Corporation, to **suggest** that '[t]he machinery of class compromise has itself become the object of class conflict.'

Des Freedman is Professor of Media and Communications at Goldsmiths, University of London. He is the author of *The Contradictions of Media Power* (Bloomsbury 2014) and *The Politics of Media Policy* (Polity 2008) and the current chair of the **Media Reform Coalition**.



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