Neither private property nor public service: critical reflections on the conceptual framework of public service media

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Introduction: Public service as an ineffective counterweight to private media

Private property did not come about spontaneously or naturally. Instead, as John Bellamy Foster et al. have stated (2021: 1), it 'requires as its basis enclosure and exclusion'. Those are not afterthoughts but core features of the historic expropriation of common resources and their transfer into private hands.

This act of expropriation has generated intense criticism. 'What crimes, wars, murders, what miseries and horrors would the human race have been spared' pondered the Enlightenment philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau in 1754 (1987: 60), 'had someone pulled up the stakes or filled in the ditch and cried out to his fellow men, "Do not listen to this imposter. You are lost if you forget that the fruits of the earth belong to all and the earth to no one!"' A century later, Karl Marx (1977: 889) argued that the precondition for a capitalist mode of production based on private property involved the 'so-called "clearing of estates", i.e. the sweeping of human beings off them' that was accompanied by – as a chapter in *Capital* puts it – 'bloody legislation against the expropriated'.

I start with Rousseau and Marx's powerful condemnations of enclosure because they resonate so clearly with a belief that private property – despite its hegemonic status and sacred reputation among world elites – remains a fundamental barrier to the fair distribution of common resources. Inequality has been entrenched as a result of the creation of what Thomas Piketty (2020: 99) calls 'ownership societies', political and ideological structures that fetishize private accumulation and profitmaking. This is as true for media and communications as it is for any other sphere of economic activity where harms are produced by the systemic inability of private property relations to offer equal life chances to everyone irrespective of their wealth and background. In recent years, oligopolistic markets, the explosion of advertising, the reach of public relations, the diminution of journalism and the failures of policymaking have generated a 'hyper-commercial' media (McChesney 2004) that ill serves citizens and produces instead 'a profound cynicism and materialism, both cancerous for public life' (2004: 166).

There is, therefore, a need both to develop concepts and to build institutions based on principles that directly confront the logic and consequences of private transactions conducted through market relations. This is particularly relevant to the legacy of public service broadcasting (PSB) in the 20th century as well to its current reincarnation as multi-platform public service media (PSM) in the 21st century, both of which are seen by supporters as compensating for the shortcomings of commercial media models and the asymmetrical consequences of market relations. Buffeted by the neoliberal storms of the last 40+ years, there is a strong normative attachment to the idea that PSM remains an effective means of resisting the enclosure and fragmentation of media landscapes and standing up to the exclusions, biases, misinformation and commodification of marketized media systems.

The relationship between public service and commercial media is often expressed in terms of the former model offering a *countervailing* vision and practice to the latter. For example, Jonathan Hardy (2008: 233) argues that 'PSB offers a powerful countervailing force to full media commercialism…PSBs are necessary to counter the market failure arising from reliance on purely commercial media' while Barbara Thomass suggests that, in an age of corporate media

conglomeration, 'PSM is needed as a counterweight and to enforce the principles of universalism in media supply" (2020: 34). In particular, there is a strong belief that the 'publicness' of PSM lies above all in its contrast with the for-profit imperatives that are characteristic of private property relations. For Robert McChesney (2004: 241), PSB refers to a 'nonprofit, noncommercial broadcasting service directed at the entire population and providing a full range of programming'. Goodman and Chen (2011: 86) argue that what is distinctive about the PSM mission is that 'it eschews the agendas of profit-making, partisanship and special interests.' This makes it, as the Carnegie Commission stated back in 1979, 'a unique form of social dividend that Western society has devised as a counterweight to the implacable economic laws of the marketplace' (quoted in ibid: 90). PSM is thus conceived here as an intervention specifically designed to act as an alternative to market logic and to rescue democracy from an otherwise tawdry, individualised and commercialised landscape through the provision, as the BBC's first director general John Reith famously put it, of education, information and entertainment.

So just as Marx long ago complained that '[p]rivate property has made us so stupid and one-sided that an object is only *ours* when we have it – when it exists for us as capital, or when it is directly possessed, eaten, drunk, worn, inhabited, etc.' (2009: 106), PSM, as a sphere of non-commodified activities and interactions, is meant to 'exist for us' as knowledge, edification and enlightenment. Based on principles of independence, universality, citizenship, quality and diversity (Born 2018: 130-136), PSM as Paddy Scannell famously put it (1989: 136), is 'a public good that has unobtrusively contributed to the democratization of everyday life' and has been found to increase levels of public knowledge, stimulate political participation, incentivise 'hard' news and combat disinformation – all performed without crashing commercial media models (Reuters Institute 2016).

In this article, I want to propose a different – and much less positive – genealogy of both the concept of 'public service' and the resulting institutional models of PSM. I argue that, at its very best, public service media has improved the 'vast wasteland' (1) that is commercial broadcasting but at its worst, it is simply an accessory to state actors and contaminated media markets that reproduce elite power. What it is not, and has never been, is an effective and consistent antidote to the shortcomings of commercial media and a reliable bulwark against the consequences of private property, concentrated ownership and state control. Media practices and institutions based on the concept of public service all too often lack independence, accountability and transparency as well as the voice of the publics in whose name they operate. If we are to rescue, or perhaps resurrect, truly meaningful *public* media, it is time to own up to the inability of PSM to adequately serve, represent and give voice to publics who are, in effect, disenfranchised from actually existing commercial *and* public service models.

Of course PSM – in relation both to its conceptual underpinning and its specific institutional forms – is now in crisis and faces attacks from both neoliberal and right-wing populist governments, intensified rivalry with commercial broadcasters and streaming services, falling revenue and technological developments that problematise PSM's universalist aspirations (Enders 2022). In this context, many people have understandably jumped to the defence of a beleaguered PSM sector including organisations like the Public Media Alliance, Voice of the Listener and Viewer and the European Broadcasting Union together with a range of trade union, academic and civil society initiatives such as the *Public Service Internet Manifesto*, the British Broadcasting Challenge and the Media Reform Coalition (2). A recent book by Patrick Barwise and Peter York on *The War Against the BBC* (Barwise and York 2020) dramatizes the high stakes with its sub-title: 'How an unprecedented combination of hostile forces is destroying Britain's greatest cultural institution…And why you should care'.

My conclusion is not that we should be indifferent to the debates on PSM, nor should we concede ground to those critics – whether from the political right, conservative think tanks like the Institute of Economic Affairs and EPiCENTER, or PSM's commercial rivals – who argue that PSM is fundamentally inefficient and unnecessary; and nor should we refuse to participate in campaigns to defend PSM institutions that are under attack where the end result would be a weakened public and a stronger for-profit landscape. This is particularly important when we are seeing, for example, attempts in the UK government's 2023 Media Bill to restrict the scope of PSM, to lighten the requirement to provide content in specific at-risk genres (including culture, education, science and religion) and to liberalise the need for PSM institutions to meet their now increasingly emaciated remits (Chivers 2023).

However, I believe that we should be more honest about the structural flaws of our actually existing PSM institutions – their intimacy with governments, their complicity with dominant ideological frames, their lack of representation, their inability to withstand market pressures and their failure systematically to act in the public interest (Cullinane 2016, Freedman 2019, Mills 2016). We should be critical not least because that is likely to be a more effective way of fighting for democratic rights and processes than a knee-jerk defence of flawed organisations. This is particularly the case for media scholarship where, as Puppis and Ali (2023: 11) have pointed out, 'given the innate tendency of scholars to be defensive of PSM, critical analysis is sometimes not prioritised'.

In order to do this, we should recognise, and act on, the limitations of the concept of public service in generating and sustaining independent and accountable media systems. In part this is because 'public service' is a highly elastic term that, especially when applied to the media, lacks definitive criteria and is 'directly contradictory' (Syvertsen 1999: 5) about whether it is related to the idea of a public utility, a public sphere or the public interest. But it is also the case that the concept of public service is not the unproblematic and robust engine of democratic rights that we would like it to be but, overall, an instrument of state power and control. If we want to secure a media system produced by and generated for publics, we need to adopt a far more radical and active notion of the public and a far less defensive attitude to the shortcomings of existing public service media organisations.

Critiques of public service

In the limited space available, I want to provide three arguments that challenge the idea that public service media organisations act necessarily as counterweights to the flaws of the market and as champions of the publics in whose name they perform their duties. My examples are mainly taken from the UK but, given that it is still seen as an exemplar of a media system with a strong public service component. I believe that those examples are relevant to media landscapes across the world.

1. Being a public service doesn't insulate you from the power of the state

Why did numerous states – including ones not just in Europe but North America, Australia, Asia and Africa – make a decision to establish, at different historical moments, public service broadcasting? There was no great mass movement demanding this: people did not march on their capitals demanding that government set up a not-for-profit broadcast channel nor did this feature as a significant feature of election campaigns. Instead, PSB was a tool that reflected the belief that broadcasting was too precious to be left to the vagaries of the market or the authoritarian instincts of undemocratic regimes and that the 'national interest' would be better served by a public service

model than a commercial one. Adherence to the idea of public service was, in many cases, a shrewd strategic move on the part of the home state to develop a broadcast system that was nominally independent but, in reality, accountable to elite interests as part of a more widespread 'nation building' or 'depoliticization' exercises. Yet PSBs, as Jay Blumler once argued, have always been 'creatures ultimately of the state…highly politicized organizations' (1992: 12).

Writing about the UK, Jean Seaton, co-author of the influential book, *Power without Responsibility*, argues that there was real concern after World War 1 about Bolshevik propaganda and, in response, an elite consensus that public service was a 'modern and efficient' way of running utilities (Curran and Seaton 2018: 196). While there was a technocratic belief that the public corporation 'depended on the rejection of both market forces and politics in favour of efficiency and planned growth controlled by experts' (2018: 200), there was also another critical concern in relation to national security. Seaton argues that one of the reasons behind setting up the BBC as a public body was 'because the government were concerned that the new medium [of broadcasting] might interfere with the security and military use of the airwaves' (2018: 200). In these circumstances, a non-market monopoly was a helpful development for the state while universalism, one of the core principles of public service media, was less about a desire to equalise distribution of resources than to make sure that the new service had the widest possible reach if it was to be effective.

Simon Dawes, in his study of the history of British broadcasting regulation, makes the crucial point that, as with postal, telegraph and telephone services, the government's overriding priority was to establish *control* over these new critical infrastructures. The idea of 'public service', he argues, superseded the state's instinct first of all to establish its hegemony over what was a new and disruptive technology.

> Prior to the preoccupation with ensuring the 'public interest' or an ethos of 'public service', the regulatory focus at the inception of broadcasting was actually on the principle of 'public control', whereby 'public' and 'national' control were synonymous with 'government' and 'state' control, rather than with that of the people. (Dawes 2021: 6)

This affects even the personalities who first shaped the broadcast institutions. Stuart Hood, a former controller of BBC Television, argues that BBC founder Lord Reith was unambiguously hostile to profits and dividends and totally dedicated to the concept of public service. Yet, according to Hood (1980: 54), this 'had nothing to do with socialism; his instincts were authoritarian and he recorded in his diary his admiration for Hitler's methods'. Moreover, Reith could not have gathered the necessary support from a Conservative government at the time of the BBC's launch unless 'it had been in the interests of a number of powerful interests including the politicians he so despised' (1980: 54).

The decision to award monopoly oversight of the airwaves to a public corporation was the result of a debate inside the ruling class about the best way to reconcile fractured interests following World War 1 and the rise of communism internationally. It was not a rejection of the market per se and certainly not a rejection of private property but a decision that the state needed, at its disposal, a range of institutions and methods to protect the economy and the 'national interest' – a project that remains relevant to this day. These tensions were, according to Hood (1980: 55) best resolved through 'the setting-up of a Corporation which seen not to be under direct political control, but was yet keenly aware of its social tasks which included "objective" reporting of news and opinion'. Indeed, the BBC passed its first major political test – it might not have been 'under direct political control' but it famously supported the government in the 1926 General Strike. As Lord Reith wrote in

his diaries: 'They want to be able to say that they did not commandeer us, but they know that they can trust not to be really impartial' (quoted in Stuart 1975: 96).

Domestic issues were not the government's only concern as the BBC was always designed to be a critical source of 'soft power' for a country that was desperately trying to hold on to what was left of its empire. An internal BBC discussion document written for Lord Reith in 1927 makes it clear that the UK needed a coordinated form of colonial broadcasting, especially in order to counter Bolshevik ideas. 'The greatest political and moral stronghold in the world is the Commonwealth of English-speaking peoples…This is a strong argument in favour of using every possible means of maintaining a consolidated British Empire' (quoted in Pinkerton 2008: 183).

In 1932 the 'Empire Service' was launched and was later rebranded as first the 'Overseas Service' and then, in its current iteration, BBC World Service. Over the last century, therefore, the BBC has played a significant role in communicating the UK's strategic interests across the globe. It has brought much valued journalism to countries in the grip of authoritarian rule but it has also worked with the UK state to advance key foreign policy objectives. From Sir Ian Jacob who, as Controller of the BBC's European Services in 1946, was a key member of the Russia Committee that coordinated the British state's anti-communist propaganda to the close links between the BBC's External Services and the Foreign Office's Information Research Department, the BBC has long been an important and reliable voice of UK foreign policy.

As Tom Mills argues (2016: 66), 'during the Cold War period, the BBC was not only distributing propaganda material in close cooperation with the British state, it was also supplying the intelligence on which that propaganda was dependent.' The BBC's monitoring service in Caversham continues to act as a proxy information source for the military with former BBC journalist Owen Bennett-Jones claiming that it was 'generating material for the British intelligence services that was made available only to a select group of senior BBC journalists' (Bennett-Jones 2018). Today, World Service broadcasts in some 42 languages and is supported by the Foreign Office which in 2021 handed it £94 million to 'build on their great work upholding global democracy through accurate, impartial and independent news reporting' (BBC 2021).

The extent to which the BBC is a 'state broadcaster' or merely a 'public service broadcaster' is, of course, significant when you think of the government mouthpieces in, for example, Hungary and Russia that masquerade as PSM (European Federation of Journalists 2019; Vorozhtsova 2023) and the ongoing controversies over political interference in PSM in many countries (Gruber 2021). The BBC is far from being a simple ventriloquist for the state – not least because that would undermine its ability to reconcile the tensions that permeate our social structure. Instead, as Tom Mills argues:

> the BBC needs to be understood in the broader context of the historical development of the British state, particularly the emergence of a professional and ostensibly impartial civil service and the development of extensive capillary functions, some undertaken by institutions with a considerable independence from ministers of the Crown. (Mills 2016: 22-23)

Yet while the BBC is not a wholly obedient vassal, neither is it, as with many PSM institutions, meaningfully independent of the strategic interests and short-term needs of the governments that control its purse and ultimately shape its future through key appointments, political pressure, regulatory reviews and legislative change. In these circumstances, Bennett-Jones (2018) is surely

right to conclude that 'the BBC, in both its international and domestic manifestations, deserves the epithet "state broadcaster"'.

2. Being a public service doesn't offer you immediate or automatic protection from market forces

In January 2024, the ITV drama *Mr Bates vs the Post Office* revealed to millions of viewers that the publicly-owned UK Post Office had systematically immiserated and, in some cases, criminalised hundreds of sub-postmasters because of its refusal to acknowledge the existence of an IT fault with the system developed by its private sector partner Fujitsu. The scandal demonstrates that being a 'public service' doesn't automatically make you antagonistic to market forces nor indeed a champion of the public interest. This is because the public and the private do not exist under capitalism in glorious isolation. You cannot insulate the public from the private in media industries – just as with health, housing and education – because private and public property are so intimately related. The belief that PSM could ever act as an effective counterweight to commercial media assumes that PSM would be able consistently to withstand both the economic influence of an aggressive market and the political pressures of interventionist states.

Consider C.B. McPherson's notion that property is based on the notion of *rights* and not *things*: either the right of publics not to be excluded from 'the use or benefit of something' *or* for the right of property holders to exclude publics from this very same use (1978: 4-5). Property is therefore a relational, not simply a tangible, phenomenon and very much connected to the ability to shape the distribution of resources – or what we might call power (Freedman 2014). The relationship between private and public is therefore dynamic, historically specific and dialectical with a constant tussle between private and 'common' forms of property relations.

For example, rebutting claims by commercial interests that PSM 'crowds out' private sector activity, the economist Mariana Mazzucato has argued that organisations like the BBC – at the level of both technology and content – play a hugely productive role in stimulating market activity: 'the public sector not only "de-risks" the private sector by sharing its risk, it often "leads the way", courageously taking on risk that the private sector fears' (Mazzucato 2015). Indeed, for Mazzucato, PSM's role cannot be seen in relation to market failure alone but rather to a wider understanding 'of how the public sector shapes and creates markets' in what she describes as 'the entrepreneurial state' (ibid). For Mazzucato, this means developing a set of performance metrics that reflect the BBC's leadership role in the creative sector and that capture the 'social value' of PSM far better than the limited cost-benefit analysis often employed by neoliberal interests.

Yet while this is undoubtedly true, in most countries the private sector outstrips its public counterparts in terms of investment, resources and lobbying power while public services themselves are increasingly subsumed by market logic. The enclosure discussed at the start of this article has, therefore, significant consequences for the institutions that are enclosed: on their organisational culture, on their value systems and on their operating practices. As a result of 40 years of neoliberalism and their susceptibility to techniques of 'new public management', public sector organisations in health, education and media have adopted many of the practices of their commercial counterparts (Leys 2001) – including the introduction of internal markets, the use of outsourcing and casualised labour and the supplementing of publicly generated income with commercial activities, notably advertising and partnerships in the case of the media (D'Arma 2018; Raats 2023). For example, as a result of commercial lobbying, PSM institutions in 15 European countries are now required to undergo 'market impact assessments' and 'public value tests' precisely in order to restrict their footprints in domestic media landscapes (Rodriguez-Castro and

Campos-Freire 2023: 225). This is part of what I have previously described as the 'disciplining of public broadcasting' where broadcasters 'are forced to adapt to and internalize market-friendly practices' (Freedman 2008: 170).

This is not to suggest in any way that questions of ownership are irrelevant. Concentrated private ownership has long been linked to a decline in content diversity (Mosco 2009) while hedge fund acquisition of newspaper titles has led to the evisceration of newsrooms and the offloading of assets (Coppins 2021). Meanwhile, the granting of licences and advertising to favoured oligarchs is a hallmark of authoritarian governments in Central and Eastern Europe (Štětka 2015) and has contributed to the erosion of press freedom across the region. The implications of specific forms of property ownership for media labour and content are, therefore, hugely significant. Yet my broader point is that public ownership, even where it is conceived and operated as common property held in the public interest, cannot exist as an island of socialism in a sea of capitalism. Organisations and systems necessarily adapt to their broader environments which, in a capitalist world, are overwhelmingly dominated by private actors and/or by states seeking to promote private interests. The idea that PSM can act as a counterweight to the market without the market exacting its own toll is both utopian and disarming.

3. Being a public service doesn't stop you from legitimating hegemonic interests

As outlined at the start of this article, PSM is seen by some as a necessary refuge from the banality and harms of commercial media systems and market logic yet PSM institutions are far from innocent purveyors of an unadulterated public interest. Instead, it might be more useful to consider PSM as an expression of a broader welfarist ideology that seeks to blunt the sharper edges of contemporary capitalism while operating firmly within, and reinforcing consent to, established relations of power. As such, PSM is not simply about the provision of high-quality content and universal services but, as Claus Offe wrote in relation to welfare, 'the source of false conceptions about historical reality' (1984: 156) because it obscures the relationship between the spheres of production and private property from that of the state and citizens. Just as Offe refers to the '*political-ideological* control function' of the classic welfare state (1984: 156) that sought to mitigate class conflict and to equalise asymmetrical power relations, PSM, in claiming to 'represent' audiences as citizens rather than consumers, can be said to perform a similar role.

Writing about the need to prioritise a robust conception of the public in any democratic media system, Dan Hind argues (2010: 56) that 'the doctrine of public service pre-empts and forestalls democratic participation in setting the agenda and broadcasting the content of journalistic inquiry' precisely because PSM, above all, reflects the interests of powerful elites. Indeed, Hind suggests that the very concept of public service now provides a useful discursive tool for centrist political actors to attack voices both to their left and right: 'public service has inspired a good deal of nostalgia in recent years and has re-emerged as a model for liberal critics of neoliberalism' (2010: 54).

This speaks to the contradictions of PSM as both a progressive cultural intervention and an 'openly paternalistic project, which justified the devaluation of vernacular forms of creativity and expression, thereby further compounding the problems of representation' (Murdock 2010: 180). Public service, according to this perspective, is far from an emancipatory project but one of social engineering that recognises the inequities of market societies and then seeks to provide a politically acceptable outlet for public discontent. Like many other examples of state-controlled public provision, what may be seen as significant constraints on the market are simultaneously forms of social regulation.

> The motives…of those who sought to clean up the music halls, of those who campaigned to provide parks, libraries, reading rooms, working men's clubs, and organized games, were in large part those of social controllers consciously seeking to shape the tastes and habits of the working classes. (Thompson 1981: 200-201).

This doesn't mean that we should be indifferent to attempts to shut down libraries, sell off parks, scrap social housing or privatise our broadcast networks – not least because at least some welfare initiatives *were* the result of popular pressure (if not PSB as already stated). However, it does require an honest accounting of the structural and institutional limitations of PSM in relation to its ability to withstand government interference, represent disenfranchised publics and, in particular fully to hold power to account. Research has shown that the BBC, as the best resourced PSM institution and embodiment of the public service ideal, has failed to challenge the dominant consensus at critical times including, for example, the 1956 Suez crisis (Mills 2016), the 1984-85 miners' strike (Jones 2009), the 2003 Iraq War (Wells 2003), the 2008 financial crisis (Berry 2016), the Covid pandemic (Philo and Berry 2023a) and the 2023 assault on Gaza (Philo and Berry 2023b). In these circumstances, PSM more closely resembles an 'ideological state apparatus' (Althusser 1971) than an 'imperfect beauty' as Seaton has described the BBC (Curran and Seaton 2018: 337).

Conclusion: Where is the public in public service media?

If public service media organisations are to be worthy of the name, they will need to demonstrate a thoroughgoing engagement with, and mobilisation of, the publics who provide the justification for their existence. At the present time, they have not achieved this. The public remains all too often a passive component, conceived either as a 'bewildered herd' in need of grazing, atomised individuals in need of a shared culture, consumers in need of immediate satisfaction or members of distinct social groups in need of recognition. They are rarely, if ever, granted the power to organise their own representation or to shape PSM institutions according to their own messy preferences (Hind 2010).

This reflects the distinction made by Craig Calhoun (2005: 283) between 'the public capable of (or entitled to) political speech, and the public that is the object of such speech or its intended political effects.' Most institutional enactments of 'the public' in PSM reflect the latter: a public, or series of publics, that is the object exposed to the speech of powerful others and not a public that acts in its own right. This is not a situation that can easily be corrected given the 'structural and normative marginalisation of its public' (Cullinane 2016: 307) and the fact that, as Nicholas Garnham once pointed out, PSM are institutions 'responsible not to the public but to the real, though hidden, pressures of the power elite, government, big business and the cultural establishment' (1978: 16).

If this is the case, then Dan Hind is surely right to argue that, for all the balm contained in the discourses of universalism, diversity and independence that are at the heart of PSM, 'unreformed state-owned ("public service") media can no more adequately serve the public than commercial institutions can' (2010: 9) and that the very concept of public service has, in reality, 'very successfully frustrated the emergence of a meaningfully sovereign public' (2010: 55). There is a significant and historic gap between the 'ideal type' and the more compromised institutional embodiments of public service where the public remain peripheral to core decisionmaking. As this article has argued, this gap is not an accident or an aberration but reflects the structural imbalances of power built into public service media institutions. Instead of incessantly defending PSM as 'the least worst option', we need to focus instead on how best to secure the self-emancipation of publics if we are ever to secure a genuinely 'public media'.

There is not sufficient space in this article to address in detail how this might be achieved. We might, for example, want to pursue the 'radical visions' for media policy set out by James Curran in *Power without Responsibility* for public trusts, financial redistribution and newsroom autonomy (Curran and Seaton 2018: 504-507), Victor Pickard's proposal for a series of public media centres as key sites of community infrastructure (Pickard 2021) or Dan Hind's call for public commissioning (Hind 2010). Or we might want to turn to the idea of a 'media commons', a form of property that protects against both market impoverishment and state control, as proposed by the UK Media Reform Coalition (2021). This complements Graham Murdock's persuasive argument that we need to see publics as 'communards' whose activity will generate meaningful spaces of public discussion and collaboration (Murdock 2010). But even a 'commons' cannot protect against either creeping or aggressive enclosure and often provides more of a symbolic than material form of resistance to the market. As John Bellamy Foster et al. have commented, there is often a romantic element to commons theory which needs urgently to be complemented and activated by actual struggles for control of resources. Many contemporary uses of the commons 'no longer consider the working class as a crucial part of the issue, as if the commons could be treated as a reified category, a kind of rarified public space (or ecological space) separated from human productive relations' (2021: 22-23).

Either way, given that capitalist property relations have set the parameters for both commercial and not-for-profit media models, an anti-capitalist politics with class at its heart will be necessary to secure the conditions for a democratic public media that, as this article has argued, the concept of 'public service' has failed to do. To generate a media system that meaningfully holds power to account and fully represents all its citizens will require a fundamental challenge to the grip of both private property and state patronage and the development of a fresh model of media where publics are not passive but the collective source of creativity and change.

Endnotes

1. This was the phrase used by the former FCC chairman Newton Minnow in a 1961 speech to the National Association of Broadcasters to refer to the 'procession of game shows, formula comedies about totally unbelievable families, blood and thunder, mayhem, violence, sadism, murder, western bad men, western good men, private eyes, gangsters, more violence, and cartoons. And most of all boredom.' Available at: https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/newtonminow.htm.
2. See www.publicmediaalliance.org, www.vlv.org.uk, www.mediareform.org.uk, www.ebu.ch, britishbroadcastingchallenge.com and http://bit.ly/signPSManifesto.

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