Public Service Broadcasting in the Age of Information Capitalism
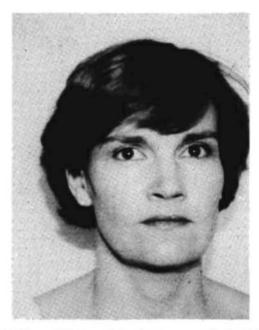
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This paper looks at two contemporary phenomena: information capitalism, and public service broadcasting. The crux of the paper is the question whether the ideal of public service broadcasting can survive the new technological and economic arrangements impinging on broadcasting; and secondly, whether the public service ethos is worth saving, in view of all the shortcomings and inherent contradictions within the system.

To answer these questions, we need to clarify what we mean by technological revolution, or, what I feel is more appropriately referred to as "information capitalism". The paper will focus on what I see to be some of the key cultural, ideological and political questions thrown up by this new order, and how these changes may affect the present and future systems of broadcasting regulations and programme content.

The paper also looks at what is meant by public service broadcasting, and how the concept has been applied in the South African context. It outlines some of the main crises to have bedevilled the system internationally, and focuses particularly on the somewhat spurious claim that public service broadcasting is politically neutral and non-aligned.

After reviewing the criticisms levelled at the alternative to Public Service Broadcasting: Deregulated broadcasting, the paper concludes that the former is indeed worth saving, but only as part of the broader broadcasting and televisual arrangements — ie., within a "mixed economy" which would include deregulated television arrangements.

The Director-General of the SABC recently announced that the present television broadcasting system is to be phased out and replaced by a new

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system which will take South African broadcasting into the twenty-first century. This announcement, taken together with the realisation that the whole structure of the information economy on an international scale is changing rapidly, prompts the question whether the ideal of public service broadcasting can survive the new technological and economic arrangements impinging on broadcasting; and secondly, whether the public service ethos is worth saving, in view of all the shortcomings and inherent contradictions within the system?

In discussing these questions, I will first outline what I mean by public service broadcasting, before looking at information capitalism, and the interaction of the two. Finally, I review deregulated broadcasting as the alternative to public service, and point out that the latter shortcomings preclude it from being acceptable as the sole form of national broadcasting.

Public service broadcasting

Too often, commentators and critics of broadcasting media institutions have interpreted them as being static and immune from change. Broadcasting technology institutions have always had a history of transition. To understand the present (and crucial) transitions in South Africa and other countries modelled on the Reithian (Commonwealth) 'public service' formula of broadcasting, it is necessary to go back to its origins and ethos, and look at some of the crises it has faced, particularly in more recent years.

Public service broadcasting not a precise term. it is generally understood to comprise four elements:

- Independence: a public body with a high degree of financial policy-making independence from both governmental and commercial sources;
- Programme balance: a statutory requirement to educate, inform and entertain the audience. This is translated into a commitment to balanced scheduling across the different programme genres. Thus one institution is required to cover all the audience's needs and tastes;
- Geographic balance: a service provided to the whole of the (national) audience, regardless of geographic distribution, in return for a basic, initial fee usually in the form of an annual licence-fee;
- Impartiality: political output is obliged to be balanced and impartial, distanced from all vested interests, particularly those of the government of the day. (Kuhn, 1985; BRU, 1986).

Public service broadcasting, with slight variations in form, is the norm in all West European countries. The tradition of public service broadcasting is strongest in Britain, embodied in the BBC. Radio, it was argued, was a scarce resource, and should therefore be developed and regulated in the interests of the nation.

A South African detour

The BBC model was exported to British Commonwealth countries such as Canada (Collins, 1985), Australia (Harding, 1985) and South Africa (Hayman and Tomaselli, 1989). John Reith, the first Director General of the BBC, was largely responsible for the creation of the ideal-type model of public service (Briggs, 1961; Burns, 1977). At the invitation of the then Prime Minister, Barry Hertzog,

Reith toured South Africa in 1934 (Reith, 1934). His recommendations were incorporated in the Charter of the SABC, set up under the The Broadcasting Act (no 22 of 1936).

The public service ideals of the SABC are summarised as the SABC's "Mission", which is held to be that "The SABC operates a quality broadcasting service which

- takes note of and adapts to the changing demands of the day
- takes into account the wishes and needs of the various language and cultural groups in South Africa in order to *inform, educate and entertain* them constructively
- disseminates a positive message about South Africa and its peoples."

(SABC AR, 1985:2 emphasis added)

The heavy hand of Reithianism ensured that the early SABC instituted a scheduling policy which included a large proportion of educational and informational output, while the entertainment component was not designed to reflect the tastes of the general populace, but rather to 'raise' them through an emphasis on 'high' culture. The project was not seen in democratic terms: rather it was to be a dictatorship under the cultural hegemony of the (English-speaking) middle classes. Reith had presumed a high degree of consensus in Britain (Williams, 1974:33), and repeated his assumption in South Africa. His recommendations for the guarantee of autonomy through the appointment of persons "apparently not tied to any particular interest or pressure groups within the whole hegemonic alliance . . . indicated that he was unaware of the degree of conflict between the two (language) groups" in South Africa (Hayman and Tomaselli, commenting on Reith, 1934:2).

The transfer of a cultural ideal, ie., public service broadcasting, and its institutionalised form, ie, a public broadcasting corporation, from one society to another, raises (at least) two questions:

- what are the results of transferring cultural forms from one society to another. in which the dominant ideological matrixes are not the same; and
- how does the content / form of an ideology change when it becomes embedded into an institutional / bureaucratised form (ie., what is the practice of liberalism as expressed through its institutionalisation in a public broadcasting corporation under the dominant influence of more authoritarian ideology).

I don't profess to have the answers to these questions. Nevertheless, certain pointers should be kept in mind. When the ideal of public service broadcasting was introduced throughout the commonwealth, liberalism was the dominant ideological construct of British politics. This was not the case in South Africa, where Johan Muller suggests that the dominant cultural theory, insofar as it has underpinned the material and institutional forms and enforcement of apartheid, could be referred to as *Afrikaner conservative cultural theory* (Muller and Tomaselli, 1989). The theory that was dominant elsewhere (liberalism) became oppositional here. Nevertheless, in the recommendations made by Reith for the establishment of the SABC, it was assumed that liberalism *was* the pre-eminent theoretical construct, and much of the charter of the SABC reflects this anomaly. In its actual *structure*, however, the SABC has been greatly influenced by the philosophy underlying the structures of segregation, and later, apartheid. For Reith, the benefit of radio lay in the fact of a single channel, national distribution, which would prevent channel specialisation and the segmentation of the audience. In this way, Reith maintained, radio could act to "interlock governor and governed in a real ensemble" (quoted in Rosenthal, 1974:133). The SABC had another agenda: to provide a service for each of the linguistically and racially divided groups within South Africa.

In the period of the 1950s and 1960s, the real discrepancies between the ideals of public broadcasting (i.e. as a force for national unity and consensus) — and the institutionalised form of broadcasting in South Africa (as part of the mechanism for legitimating racial separation) — became irreconcilably apparent. In the SABC Annual Reports, the main contradictions evidenced themselves as a clash between 'national interest' and 'national culture'. Statements concerning individual channels indicate that the 'national interest' was to be best served by the multi-channel policy, which was not intended to create a sense of *'national'* culture, but rather to underscore (and to some extent create) *separate* cultural forms in compliance with the broader aims of apartheid policy. An example from the 1967 Annual Report makes the point: . . . Radio Bantu has again helped to bring home to the Bantu population that separate development is, in the first place, self-development through the medium of their own language (SABC AR 67:10).

Indeed, apart from the initial division of channels between English and Afrikaans services in 1937, it has been the elaborate arrangements to provide 'ethnic' channels for the different black languages which has marked out the SABC's policy most clearly. At first, no provision at all was made for the needs of black listeners: the Broadcasting Act made no mention of black languages or culture. From 1949 onwards, half an hour per day was transmitted on the medium wave English and Afrikaans services in the three main black languages (Xhosa, Zulu and Sotho). A Rediffusion cable service was started in Orlando in 1952, and was expanded to the rest of Soweto by 1959. This service was not extended to other 'locations'; the SABC extended its programmes aimed at black listeners on the MW English and Afrikaans services instead. Radio Bantu was introduced with the inception of VHF/FM transmission the early 1960s. As the FM network was expanded, so the inclusion of black programmes on the MW services were phased out, and when all the black languages became available on FM, the Rediffusion system was closed down and dismantled. (See Hayman and Tomaselli 1989 for more details). With nine radio services in the Sotho and Nguni languages, Radio Bantu had come of age.

This detour into the shaping of the South African variant of public service indicates briefly how the transposition of an institutional model — public service broadcasting — based on one particular set of ideological assumptions — liberalism — takes on a different content when established under the dominance of a different set of ideological assumptions — Afrikaner conservative culture — while at the same time, *maintaining its outward form* and charter.

Before considering the key question of our paper, that is, how the new information technology has, and will continue to impinge on public service broadcasting, it is necessary to outline the main characteristics of informational capitalism, and some of the questions which arise from it.

Information:
From public resource to private commodity

The main characteristics of the new information capitalism, some of which are emerging in South Africa, can be summarised as:
- a process of automation in which human efforts are redirected from production per se towards research for the planning, design and develop-

ment of knowledge to be applied in manufacturing of material goods; which results in

- the development of hi-tech enterprises in the production and sale of information as commodities (i.e., databases, software etc), enabling further productive processes (Curry-Jansen, 1988: 6);
- a shift from largely national to largely international markets in the information and cultural sphere (see Mattelart et al, 1984:27ff); and the concomitant
- creation of a two-tier market divided between the information rich (high-cost specialised information and cultural services) and the information poor (homogenised entertainment series on a mass scale) (see Garnham, 1986:38).
- a movement which favours the ideology of a 'free-enterprise market', privatisation and deregularisation, resulting in the progressive destruction of public service ideals as the pre-eminent form of cultural allocation; together with a
- a focus on TV as the locus of an increasingly privatised, domestic mode of consumption; Sypmtoms of these structural changes have been identified as
- expansion of new TV delivery services such as video-cassette, fibre optic and interactive cable networks and Direct Broadcasting Satellite, under market control and on an international basis;
- a destruction of the clear distinction between television and telecommunications;
- progressive deregularisation and privatisation of national telecommunication monopolies (eg., the competition provided for British Telecom by Mercury);
- spending cuts on educational and research facilities leading to the move of universities, technikons, research institutes etc towards the private sector, and the concomitant increase in corporate sponsorship of both sport and the arts;
- proposals to make profitability the criterion for the provision of public information through such bodies as the Stationery Office (Britain), the Ordinance Survey and the US Government Printing Office (USA). Locally we see a similar trend in the charging for research information by the HSRC, which now charges a fee for data search facilities (private correspondence);
- The shift in library services in the USA from the principle of free and open access towards access to proprietary data basis on a payment by usage basis.

The thread that runs through all these changes can be summed up as a shift in the dominant definition of public information from that of a public good to a privately appropriated commodity. "Privatisation of information means that information that was once available as part of a citizen's right to know is now available only at a price. It also means that information that does not generate a profit will not be produced" (Curry-Jansen, 1988:7). Internationally, this trend has been described as an "unholy alliance" between Western Governments and multi-national corporations (Garnham, 1986:38).

The classical liberal models of democracy were premised on the assumption that knowledge is a social resource, a public utility and a collective good. Under this dispensation, knowledge was a right rather than a privilege. Of course, the liberal ideal was never fully realised in practice. As Habermas pointed out, there has always been a disjuncture between the ideal of the public sphere, and the concrete institutions which constitute it. From the outset of capitalism, copyrights and patents have been abridgements to the free flow of information, designed specifically to protect capital investments. In post-industrial societies, this trend is exacerbated as knowledge is no longer simply regarded as a resource used in the production of commodities, but becomes a commodity in itself. Tessa Morris-Suzuki (1986:89) has referred to this phenomena as "cultural capital", under which, she suggests, the source of profit is not surplus (labour) value, but "accumulated social knowledge".

Yet the changes have not occurred evenly, or in an uncontradictory way. For example, although cable television on a *mass scale* has become a real possibility with the advent of optical fibres, growth in cable television has been slower and patchier than initially anticipated. In Britain, for instance, British Telecom already have the technical capacity to install a house-to-house fibre-optic telephone cable network. Yet they cannot afford the 20 billion pounds sterling outlay until they have permission to use the same network to relay home television, health services, videophone, and video shopping facilities. The present licensing arrangements preclude the company from competing with the television industry. (Sunday Tribune Business, 27.8.89:2) This example illustrates that the widespread use of the new generation cable technology will depend entirely on its economic, rather

than technical, feasibility. The main growth area of cable is in terms of Integrated Services Digital Networks (ISDN), which are heavily funded by private companies (and the state) for their *commercial* capabilities, particularly in the realm of banking (telebanking), and data transfer (teledata). Yet even the latter has not been as well received as might have been anticipated. In Britain, for instance, the chief users of interactive teledata are travel agents, who can not only dial up airline booking schedules, but can make direct on-line reservations. In most cases, particularly in Europe, and to a lesser extent in America and Canada, the large-scale distribution of cable television has followed only its commercial applications.

Nor has all state-produced information been commoditised. An obvious counter-example is the use of carefully constructed 'information' for the purpose of propaganda/legitimation emanating from government bodies such as the SA Department of Foreign Affairs, the Bureau for Information, etc. This movement has gone hand-in-hand with a marked movement in the *selection* of information thought to be sensitive in terms of national security (RSA; UK-Ireland; Israel) and financial/trade secrets (Curry-Jansen, 1988).

Broadcasting, too, has been redefined as a product in some quarters. The British Government's White Paper on Broadcasting (1988) noted that "broadcasting and telecommunications are increasing, converging" (quoted in Thomson, 1989: 65), with the argued result that broadcasting is seen as just another economic activity. Paraphrasing Oscar Wilde, Thomson suggested that politicians who allow "the white-hot technological revolution" to be a substitute for "serious policy" run the risk of "knowing the price of everything, and the value of nothing" (ibid:66). What then, is the value of information technology, and what questions does it raise for policy-makers?

The crisis in public service television

Public broadcasting as we know it internationally, exists nowhere in its 'pure' state. In South Africa, the sytstem has long been under the twin assaults of commercialisation and the breakdown of the principles of monopoly. These adaptions appear to be inevitalble, and indeed desirable, in the face of the successive waves of crises to hit public service broadcasting worldwide, particularly after the 1970s.

New technology has undermined spectrum scarcity as the classic rationale for regulation. It promises (or threatens) to increase the number of programme outlets (both on and off air) considerably. Allied to this is a change in the *legal* status of alternative broadcasting dissemination. In most countries serviced by public broadcasting, there is now a *de facto* 'mixed information economy', with the widespread dissemination of private channels, cable services, CCTV (eg, in hotels and apartment blocks) or pay television (eg, M-Net). The proliferation of viewing opportunities leads to two consequences: a change in the viewing habits on which public broadcast ethos is based (already VCRs have changed the pattern of viewership); and a change in the content of material broadcast.

The generalised access to increased information opportunities might be thought to bring the principles of the US First Amendment closer than ever before. Yet they also raise new problems — those of coping with abundance rather than scarcity. There is no *a priori* reason to assume that increased opportunity of information will automatically mean increased opportunity to tell (and hear) and present counter-views. In post-industrial societies, "the sheer quantity of information draws shock, outrage, or subversion rather than needing to suppress it. Quantities of information bring new strategies of control, misinformation, . . . the leak and the smear" (Mulgan, 1988:7).

Balance is the first victim of these changes. Typically, the restrictions placed on private channels are far less stringent than those placed on public service channels. "Injunctions to inform and educate the audience are unlikely to prove meaningful with reference to cable television" (Kuhn, 1985:40). Potential viewers pay directly for their consumption, either on a subscription basis (M-Net), or on a pay-per-view basis, as with cable TV. In terms of the informational-entertainment mix, the *market* will be the guiding factor in what programmes are shown: gone are the days when Reith's (perhaps inappropriate) missionary zeal ensured that viewers saw 'the best' of national productions, and not simply the most popular. Some of this thinking was still evident in the BBC Delegation's evidence to the Hunt Commission, in which it alleged that unregulated cable television will be "socially divisive, (and will) sacrifice hard-won programme standards and coarsen the popular taste which has been painstakingly developed

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by public service broadcasting" (BBC, 1982:34).

National coverage is another ideal that will be sacrificed. Cable television (and even M-Net) is geographically less evenly distributed than public TV, since the more densely saturated areas are the most profitable.

The changing nature of Western society is closely related to technological development. Post-industrial society typically offers more leisure time and greater differentiation in the choices made to fill it. Dallas Smythe (1977:25) has argued that leisure time is no longer time for private play, nor it is simply 'recuperation' time. Rather it is *work*, the process of using leisuretime 'productively'. This in turn leads to the opening up of greater commodity opportunities, not only in the form of entertainment, but also of education and other 'enrichment' activities. Television is able to fulfill some of these needs, and in doing so, provides a saleable asset in terms of commodity exposure through advertising time. Computer software for games and tuition also readily come to mind here, and in an interesting juxtaposition of the two, the BBC has a system whereby the 'computer programme of the week' can be downloaded onto the subscriber's own disk.

While the fallacy of ever assuming a national consensus in the planning of broadcasting institutions has adequately been demonstrated (Williams, 1977), the period of late capitalism displays even greater cultural and moral pluralism. What is acceptable to one audience is not necessarily right for another, and most Western countries are beginning to acknowledge this in their media policies (Kuhn, 1985:13).

In effect, this translates into more numerous broadcast outlets, fragmented both *geographically* into regional / local channels and also in terms of *interests*. Specialist television channels such as sports (already mooted here), entertainment (eg., TV4; M-Net), MTV (rock/pop music videos), public affairs, education and children's programming will mimic the pattern already established in radio broadcasting. This differentiation undermines the shared experience that comes from watching the same programmes, and has been argued to mitigate against promoting communication between different segments in society: "Instead the apparent openness of new networks can paradoxically foster greater closure" (Mulgan, 1988:8). (In South Africa, this principle has been realised and acted on from the outset of broadcasting. Multi-

channel broadcasting arranged along ethnic lines has effectively been used to divide South Africans from one another both linguistically, culturally and geographically).

In *financial* terms, *revenue* has slowed down, and the international trend is that it does not keep up with inflation. The SABC is only too aware of the problem: the poor financial position in the recent past has been cited as the biggest single crisis facing the corporation. The largest proportion of revenue derives from advertising, and there is only a finite pool of advertising revenue which shrinks in an economic downturn, and furthermore, must be shared across all media (print, broadcast (including M-Net), promotions etc.).

Concomitantly, costs have escalated. *Capital and operating expenditure* have increased world-wide, since public service organisations have built up and are continuing to build up vast broadcasting empires. Second and third channels, extension of broadcasting hours into the late night and 'breakfast time', local radio stations and regional television services have been an international pattern. The decline in the value of the Rand on foreign exchange markets has meant that the import of equipment, technical spares, along with programme purchases, payments to news agencies and overseas correspondents, are costing more than was budgeted for (SABC AR, 1984:19).

Production costs are enormous. Technological advances tend to favour the large scale over the small, the mass product over the minority. It is characteristically cheaper to buy product than produce it at home. This has led to the importation of a large proportion of programmes, resulting in fears of cultural domination by American products. Canada is a prime example of the difficulties of maintaining a high level of expensive national television programmes. (Collins, 1985). In order to combat this state of affairs, there is a necessity for states to subsidise educational and culturally valuable television in order to support regional, minority or national culture. A second line of attack is to impose quotas of home-based production. This has been done in Canada, while similar quotas have also been mooted in the European Community.

In South Africa, the production of 'culturally valuable television' has been open to criticism on the grounds of its overtly ideological content, as well as favouring the interests and history of certain minority groups (Afrikaners) over others. In terms

of local content, the SABC has no formal quota system. The Equity ban on sales to South Africa has meant that programmes are purchased in European languages (suitable for dubbing), but more usually from American networks. Language-equity is attempted between English and Afrikaans programming, and to this end, dubbing of imported programmes is undertaken on a large scale. Figures for the percentage of local versus imported programme content indicate that the lowest category of local content is English Drama (7,7% in 1985) (Afrikaans drama is 17,1%) while the highest (apart from weather and presentation 100%), is Religious programming (Eng 96,6%; Afrikaans 98,5%) and Education (95,6%; 92,5%) (SABC AR 1985).

It is in the area of the *political*, particularly the demystification of public service broadcasting's commitment to impartiality, that the most devastating criticisms have been levelled. The media in general, and television in particular, are no longer conceived of as 'mirrors' of reality, but rather as providing a heavily selected interpretation of events, which structure reality for us, which shape and frame a world for us to inhabit and accept as real and legitimated, which set the agenda with which . . . we are led to discuss the terms of our lives (Hoggart in Glasgow Media Group, 1976:x)

Television is regarded by both media and political analysts as a "core political and ideological institution of any society" (Kuhn, 1985:28). While it would be incorrect to suggest that television creates a political climate (a la the simplistic arguments of Nel le Grange etc) it is generally accepted by critical theorists that it selects and reinforces elements in the social and political structure which legitimate and reinforce existing elements within the political-social construct, with the prime purpose, and result, of legitmation and consensus for the dominant political-social arrangements.

The independence / impartiality couplet is a particular ideological construct of the public broadcasting ethos, and has never been applicable to all countries, even those in Western Europe. In France, the governing political party has controlled the broadcasting system since the second world war, and has openly appointed political sympathisers to important decision-making posts in both radio and television (Kuhn, 1985). In Italy, the Christian Democrats controlled the state monopoly broadcasting organisation for most of the time since the second world war (Sassoon, 1985). To

a lesser degree, other governments (notably West Germany (William, 1985) have also exercised undue influence on the political output of broadcasting content.

Among those countries committed to a Public Service Broadcasting system, Australia holds one of the worst records, particularly during the right-wing government of Malcolm Fraser in the 1970s, which intervened to have politically critical programmes banned from the air (Harding, 1985). The so-called 'Goldilocks' view of the BBC's political output, 'not too conservative, not too labour, just right' (Negrine, 1985), has always been misleading. Witness the Suez crisis (1956) and the 1926 general election; the coverage of Northern Ireland, the treatment of the trade unions, nuclear disarmament (Goldie, 1977:71).

Broadcasting services within the public broadcasting tradition have always defined their role in terms of the liberal-pluralist principles. They may acknowledge fringe or even radical opinions (though not in South Africa) but nevertheless they have always privileged the mainstream social-political movements. The BBC's view on this was articulated in the *Annan Report*, in which it was stated that the BBC could not pretend to be impartial between the maintenance and the dissolution of the nation. Nor could it be impartial about those things which Parliament had decided were unacceptable by making them illegal (BBC evidence to *Annan Report*:268).

This is not very different from the SABC's view of its "Community Responsibility" : The SABC accepts the responsibility towards each population group in South Africa and will further the causes of harmony and co-operation in all its programme services and **will provide no platform for incitement to confrontation, revolution and disorder** (SABC AR, 1985:1).

Thus, both in South Africa and other public service broadcasting corporations (Kuhn, 1985:30), parliamentary forms of political activity fall easily within the accepted purview. However, extra-parliamentary political behaviour appears both illegitimate and a threat to parliamentary democracy. While the reproduction of parliamentary struggle does expose broadcasting to problems (cf Stewart, 1988), it does not pose a moral danger, since it is only balancing competing and already legitimated parliamentary views. The difficulty arises when reporting on areas outside this consensus: for BBC the acid test was the Falklands conflict

(Harris, 1983). The SABC has dropped all charade of even-handed reporting on extra-parliamentary politics. 'Radicals', a term which remains undefined by either the SABC or state ideologues, will be given short shrift: The SABC's point of departure in its news coverage was that, in the prevailing circumstances, it was more important than ever for the public to be kept fully informed about the realities of the South African situation. At the same time the SABC insisted on reflecting those realities in such a way that radicals were not given a platform for the propagation of revolutionary ideologies, activities, plans or unrest, and thus threatening the security of the country. The SABC's chief concern is the well-being of the country and its people. (SABC AR, 1985:8).

Criticisms against the supposed neutrality of public service broadcasting have been levelled against the system since its inception. What constitutes a crisis in the present conjuncture is that they are now more visible, and are reinforced by much academic output, most of which has been located *within* Marxist writing rather than *between* Marxist and liberal-pluralist approaches. (Glasgow Media Group, 1976; Goldie, 1977; Briggs, 1979; 1980; Schlesinger, 1978; Harris, 1983; Curtis, 1984;). Therefore the BBC (and other public broadcasting corporations for that matter) don't have a cadre of liberal-academic allies.

If public service broadcasting is in such dire crises, is it worth salvaging? I believe it is, particularly if taken as part of a mixed media economy, since the alternative, totally deregulated broadcasting, impoverishes broadcasting solely to the level of entertainment.

Free market arguments and deregulated broadcasting

The free-market system of media allocation, particularly television allocation, is most clearly developed in the United States, where the regulatory body is the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). The television marketplace in the US is regulated firstly through the competitive structure of entry, and secondly, through the regulation of its broadcast content. Property rights to the use of the spectrum was allocated according to strictly economic criteria, ie. by leasing them to the highest bidder. Television is a consumer product, just like like any other, described by Mark Fowler, Chairman of the FCC, as just "a toaster with pictures" (Porter, 1989:12).

Theorists of deregulation have developed their arguments not only for the supply of broadcasting services, but for the whole of the radio spectrum. The chief target of their criticism has been the 'public interest' rationale for regulation, which has been influential since the New Deal. Their stance has been that "the public will was best expressed by the choice exerted by individuals between competing products and services; and it was price competition which was the best method to achieve this" (Porter, 1989:5). Fowler and his associates proposed that 'communications policy should be directed towards maximising the services the public desires" and that broadcasters' should "determine the wants of their audiences through the normal mechanism of the marketplace": by promoting competition, removing artificial barriers to entry, preventing any one firm from controlling price or eliminating its competitors, and in general establishing conditions that allow the price of goods to be as close as possible to their cost of production (Fowler and Brenner, 1982 quoted by Porter, 1989:7).

Unfortunately for the protagonists of deregulation, the US Congress did not go along entirely with their thinking. Firstly, there was the problem that, in Congress' words, the government had committed "the original electromagnetic sin" of reserving an insufficient proportion of the spectrum for radio and television use, which led to a spectrum scarcity. More significantly, the Supreme Court ruled in 1969 that where the two conflict, the rights of the viewers and listeners to receive suitable access to social, political, aesthetic, moral and other ideas and experiences take precedence over the broadcasters' claims of free speech under the First Amendment. The question which then faced the FCC was whether the *market* or the *trustee* approach to broadcast regulation would best protect the rights of viewers and listeners.

Samuel Brittan, editor of the *Financial Times*, and a member of the *Peacock Committee* (on Financing the BBC, 1986) is a strong proponent of the 'free market' model. Brittan's idea of free speech can be summed up as "The right of anyone to publish material, or produce a work of art, so long as he can attract consumer support or finance himself in any other way and observe the law of the land" (Brittan, 1988:3). A "free market in ideas" is a special case for him, deserving particular consideration "because we are . . . dealing with . . . the communication of ideas, and the dis-

semination and analysis of news and artistic endeavour, that freedom of entry by producers and freedom of choice by consumers to the maximum feasible extent which are so vital. . . . no one person or group, or committee, or 'establishment' can be trusted to make a superior choice" (ibid:5).

Brittan's starting point was the classic libertarian argument, self-consciously based on the American First Amendment, which stated that "Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech or of the press . . .'; which the Peacock Report took to mean that "broadcasting monopolies are to be prevented and that government intrusion of a negative, censorious kind is to be avoided" (quoted ibid:2). Invoking the enlightenment argument that censorship belonged to the dark ages, and had no place in the modern state, Brittan quoted the Report as saying "The end of all censorship arrangements would be a sign that broadcasting had come of age, like publishing three centuries ago" (Ibid).

Turning to broadcasting in the UK, Brittan notes that it is organised as a 'duopoly', with the BBC having a monopoly on tax finance (licencing is seen as a "household tax"), while ITV and ILR companies have a monopoly on advertising finance. [In South Africa, the financing system of broadcasting is more complex. The SABC is financed both through licencing (R82 681 000 in 1985) and advertising revenue (R245 097 000 for same year). M-Net is financed through subscription and advertising revenue (no figures available).] Brittan notes that broadcasting in the UK is highly regulated — the BBC has had the right to interpret its responsibility to 'educate, inform and entertain', while the ITV companies have been regulated by the Independent Broadcasting Authority, a government-appointed body. For Brittan, this amounts to censorship, either directly, in terms of individual programmes, or more insidiously, through the IBA "vetting of schedules and programmes and its long-term power to withdraw franchises from contractors who displease" (ibid:4). In effect, the system of regulated broadcasting curtails freedom of choice, a choice that could be restored through deregulation. A second criticism of the duopoly system of broadcasting is the high cost of running it, and the financial mismanagement which is assumed to be a direct result of lack of competition. Quoting the Peacock Report, Brittan concurs that: No amount of scrutiny by accountants or consultants can be a substitute for the direct pressures of a competitive market (quoted ibid:6).

Once again, deregulation, and the financial competence associated with free enterprise, are seen as the answer to public service profligation.

Criticism of the free-market approach

The concept of the free-market approach has been vigorously criticised. Sue Curry-Jansen (1988:2) noted that " . . . there are no 'free markets', only markets controlled by capitalists, kings, communists or pirates, for markets are complex human organisations which cannot exist without order, hierarchy, power and control".

For James Curran, the Peacock Commission exemplified the liberal-market approach, which he felt was inappropriate to deal with a very delicate cultural product. Curran contended that contrary to the unstated assumption of the Peacock Commission, money is not neutral. Viewers paid a licence fee to be allowed access to television, but advertisers bought time to be allowed access to viewers. Thus the question needed to be posed as to whether media freedom implied the freedom to broadcast, or the freedom of listeners to receive a broadcast cross-section of opinion.

Curran cited three common misconceptions regarding the way in which a market-related media is supposed to generate greater 'freedom of the press':
● The market generates greater diversity;
● The free market guarantees freedom of the press; and
● The market guarantees a *responsible* press.

Diversity?

In fact, argued Curran, market-domination reinforces a trend towards concentration of ownership. This in turn leads to a lack of competition. The proposed deregulation of British broadcasting, as suggested in the White Paper on broadcasting (1988), will increase the number of channels, but this will not be matched in the range of choice: "Anyone knows this who has twiddled the knobs in an American hotel and watched a dozen similar versions of the the weather forecast, with the real choice being which commercial sponsor you prefer" (Thomson, 1989:66). Deregulation will result in an increased concentration of ownership, and since it is considerably cheaper to buy programmes than to produce them, the sum total of programmes on offer would decrease.

The position is further exacerbated by the recent rise in publishing/production costs, making for high entry costs. The celebrated shedding of large numbers of printers in the wake of the introduction of on-line compositors has not reduced production costs substantially. Nor is the technical possibility of a cable grid likely to lower the cost of television.

Guaranteed freedom?

Conglomerate newspapers serve the *general* interests of their parent companies. An example of this is that Rupert Murdoch is a loyal supporter of the Thatcher government. Journalists who are unhappy with the political line taken by Murdoch are given short shrift. Of the editorial staff of the (London) *Sunday Times*, 100 have left since the change in ownership.

A responsible press?

Advertising distorts the pattern of news and information coverage, since an elite audience is more profitable than a broad audience. (An example of this would be the closure of the *Rand Daily Mail*, when the readership became too diverse to attract top-paying advertisers, who preferred to have only the cream of the market. Hence the establishment of *Business Day*, with its carefully stratified readership.

Conclusion

From the above discussion it is apparent that the accepted model of public service broadcasting, in its present form, has moved far from the original intentions of its authors. Furthermore, in the face of on-going technological and social changes, it is likely to change more radically, over a shorter space of time. Concomitantly, economic and political calls for deregulation in countries such as Britain, and to a lesser extent South Africa, need to be clearly thought through in the light of what we know about free market media models in America, and the results of their impingement on Canada. These are issues which have received very little critical attention in South Africa, where most of media criticism has been confined to facetious comments on the political content of the SABC. While this paper has no specific suggestions for the development of a modernised broadcasting system, it is hoped that the arguments put forward will suggest that the merits of the public service ethos deserves its continuance, albeit in a modified form, and without some of the excesses of the Reithian condescension to the popularist culture.

This paper looks at two contemporary phenomena: information capitalism, and public service broadcasting. The crux of the paper asks the question whether the ideal of public service broadcasting can survive the new technological and economic arrangements impinging on broadcasting; and secondly, whether the public serivce ethos is worth saving, in view of all the shortcomings and inherent contradictions within the system?

To answer these questions we need to clarify what we mean by technological revolution, or, what I feel is more appropriately referred to as 'information capitalism'. The paper will focus on what I see to be some of the key cultural, ideological and political questions thrown up by this new order, and how these changes may affect the present and future systems of broadcasting regulation and programme content.

The paper also looks at what is meant by public service broadcasting, and how the concept has been applied in the South African context. It outlines some of the main crises to have bedevilled the system internationally, and focuses particularly on the somewhat spurious claim that public service broadcasting is politically neutral and non-aligned.

After reviewing the criticisms levelled at the alternative to Public Service Broadcasting: deregulated broadcasting, the paper concludes that the former is indeed worth saving, but only as part of the broader broadcasting and televisual arrangments — ie. within a 'mixed economy' which would include deregulated television arrangements.

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