**Public Service Broadcasters as Place-makers and the Politics of Relocation**

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My aims in this keynote are relatively modest. I will try to define what I see as the central issues about the *place-making* role of public service broadcasters (PSBs) and what I have called the *politics of relocation*, positioning Channel 4's relocation as one instance in a much longer history of the vexed relationship of the UK's PSBs with regional production and representation. This contextualisation will, I hope, provide a platform for the papers and panel discussion that follows.

By way of a conclusion, I will open out into a consideration of the UK's *governance* because debates about place and relocation within the broadcasting sphere are part of a wider political struggle between centralisation and dispersal and about where decision-making power lies.

There are four UK terrestrial PSBs: BBC; ITV; Channel 4 and Channel 5. They are regulated by Ofcom, which sets a target for the percentage of regional network hours and production spend for each PSB: 50% for the BBC, 35% for ITV and Channel 4, and 10% for Channel 5.

## Contexts in which PSBs Operate

### *London as a 'World City'*

The UK's television production is dominated by London, which accounts for 66 per cent of UK primary commissions; c.89 per cent of independent television revenue is generated by companies based in London. This broadcasting dominance is consequent upon London's role as what Saskia Sassen calls a 'world city', ones that have large populations, are financial hubs, HQs for numerous multinationals and are nerve centres for networked flows of money, people, knowledge, services and goods, of which broadcasting is one highly visible example. As Michael Curtin argues, these 'media capitals' are 'centres of media activity that have specific logics of their own; ones that do not necessarily correspond to the geography, interests or policies of particular nation states' (2003: 203). London's conspicuous 'success' as a world city and media capital over the last thirty years has accentuated the UK's profound regional disparities to which I will return.

### *Challenge of the SVODS*

As Ramon Lobato argues in *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution* (2019), internet-distributed television 'changes the fundamental logics' of broadcasting, accelerating and intensifying the logics of satellite broadcasting that started in the UK with the establishment of what was then BSkyB in 1990. No longer is television an almost exclusively national affair as it was in earlier eras but global and transnational. If the PSBs' historical role was to define the audience *politically*, as 'the nation', satellite broadcasters and Subscription Video on Demand companies (SVODs) operate to a global *commercial* logic in which 'territories' are not defined by national boundaries because they are conceived as markets not cultures. As Lobato argues, this new logic does not entirely displace or supersede the older linear logics of analogue broadcasting but introduces new layers of spatial complexity. There

is a substantial literature about this shift and the apparent paradox that globalisation has actually *intensified* the importance of locality and place.

However, there remain obvious and profound dangers for all forms of communal life from the SVODs atomisation of audiences into individual schedulers, their preferences driven by algorithms which have a merely predictive rather than the arguably educative, communal and cultural logic of the PSBs. The BBC's current Director General Tim Davie, in contrasting the BBC's 20,000 hours of network television and radio every year against Netflix's 200 hours argued: 'In many ways the case for authentically-rooted UK content is even clearer now than it has ever been. Because, without it, we would simply have a diet of global content. And however good that content might be, I think it would inevitably have a social and cultural impact on our sense of who we are.' The SVODs are now *producers* as well as distributors, commissioning original content from producers in the UK and elsewhere. In that role they have, so far at least, *intensified London's dominance*. In July 2019 Netflix set up a permanent base at Shepperton Studios in south-west London as the location for its expanding UK production, complementing Disney's earlier ten-year deal with Pinewood Studios in London's Home Counties hinterland. The SVODs are wealthy. Netflix has an annual production budget of £10.3bn, compared to the BBC's £2.3 billion, ITV's £1.1 billion and Channel 4's £680 million.

*Geographies of Scale*

In this transformed broadcasting landscape, PSBs have to work to three *interwoven* geographical scales:

1) To sustain and consolidate their role as *national broadcasters*, providing news services and a broad range of programming. They form part of the UK's cultural heritage and broadcast national occasions – royal weddings, state funerals and major sporting events such as tonight's European Championship semi-final – thereby fostering a sense of the UK as a nation, promoting a 'national identity', and sense of 'national community'.

2) As decentralised organisations that reflect in their programming the UK's regional and cultural diversity.

3) As global players which are expected to compete in the international market, producing programmes whose production values are high and whose audience appeal is world-wide.

There are significant *tensions and incompatibilities between* each role and PSBs face the difficult challenge of negotiating a balance between cultural differentiation and the economies of scale in the global era of broadcasting. How they have attempted to achieve this 'balance', is the main substance of this presentation but I wish to identify one further complication.

*Nations and Regions*

The UK makes a somewhat quaint distinction between the 'small nations' (Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) and the 'English regions'. Although both nations and regions have a shared opposition to London's dominance, they are neither a coherent nor united force. In particular there is a clear and widening disparity between the Celtic 'nations' which, post-devolution, have considerable political power and autonomy and a degree of control over

broadcasting, and the English regions that have far less political influence. It is a very straightforward matter, geographically at least, to define the three 'nations' but the English regions? That's far more problematic, contentious and unstable, in a state of what seems to be constant flux: the old county boundaries; 'cultural regions' (e.g. the north-east); conurbations (e.g. greater Manchester); combined authorities (e.g. WECA, the West of England Combined Authority); to say nothing of the new 'metro mayors' and so on. Nations and regions tend to be dominated by major cities and these have pronounced and longstanding *rivalries*. Bristol and Cardiff for instance, are forty miles apart but profoundly divided. The one the major city of South West England; the latter the Welsh capital. The competition to host Channel 4 brought these rivalries to the fore as each made rival bids.

**PSBS as Place-makers**

So what are the responsibilities PSBs have as *place-makers*, which I'm arguing distinguishes them from commercial broadcasters or subscription channels, which have no such responsibilities? Ofcom sees its quotas as a mechanism designed to encourage the PSBs to produce 'regional stories, characters, places and issues', to ensure that television 'reflects and responds to all the identities and communities of the UK's increasingly diverse society, and … help to maintain viable communities in the nations and regions' (2005: 56). Ofcom has recently revised and strengthened its policies regulating regional television production (June 2019), arguing that this 'helps to disperse and stimulate investment and job opportunities in the sector throughout the UK … [which] benefits the viewer by ensuring a diverse range of programming and editorial perspectives' and helps 'to address geographical imbalances within the national television production industry' (pp. 1/4).

The BBC and Channel 4 in particular, as publicly owned not-for-profit organisations, are expected to fulfil these obligations for diversity and inclusivity. The BBC's charter has a commitment 'to reflect, represent and serve the diverse communities of all the United Kingdom's nations and regions, and, in doing so, support the creative economy across the United Kingdom' (Public Purpose 4). In its 2017 'A Call for All' mission statement, Channel 4 stated: 'Our goal is to reflect the full diversity of contemporary Britain on and off-screen … we want our production partners to produce challenging and creative content that tells the stories of an inclusive Britain.'

**Location and Representation**

There is a dual aspect to these obligations. Ideally, regionally located PSB sites should play an important economic role as 'anchor firms' that help attract additional investment thereby stimulating and sustaining a local/regional media infrastructure and nurturing talent. But they should also have a *cultural function* in representing the particularities of their region to itself, to the nation and possibly internationally.

However, the first does not necessitate the second. In *Producing British Television Drama: Local Production in a Global Era* (2019), Ruth McElroy and Catriona Noonan observe that although the BBC filmed both *Dr Who* and *Sherlock* (2010-17) in its purpose-built Roath Lock Studios in Cardiff, neither represents Wales nor speaks to the experiences and identities of those who inhabit that nation. One producer referred to Cardiff as just a convenient production 'warehouse'.

Thus the mere fact of moving production out of London does not in itself constitute a commitment to regional creativity and cultural diversity. Relocation is therefore not a solution but part of a wider process.

With that important caveat in mind, we can explore *how* PSBs attempt to fulfil their place-making functions. Given the shared agreement about the significance of regional production and representation, the question becomes – what strategies do they deploy to discharge these responsibilities and fulfil their commitments most effectively? And a second question, what makes those aspirations so hard to realise? In order to answer these questions, we need to understand their histories. The PSBs have deployed different strategies to achieve a diverse and inclusive production and commissioning structure, models that were not conceived abstractly but in *particular historical contexts*. It is a chequered, oscillating history without a clear teleology, but I think that informed historical consciousness is essential to understanding the present configuration of UK broadcasting whose location is not based solely on either population size, geographical spread or economic 'efficiency'.

**Histories**

*The BBC* (1922- )

Under the founding guidance of John Reith, the BBC conceived itself as primarily a national broadcaster, the voice of the nation based in London. In his monumental history, Asa Briggs' argues that the BBC's 'doctrine of centralization' meant it was very reluctant to cede autonomy and resources to the various regional outliers that were set up. Objections to London's 'dictatorship' were voiced as early as 1927 and a 1936 *Report on Regions* called for a 'fuller delegation of responsibility to Regional Directors'. Frustrated by the lack of progress, in 1943, John Coatman, BBC North's Regional Director, advocated that 'powers of control' should be devolved to the regions because 'the best broadcasting is that which is in most direct touch with the life of the people'. Briggs further argues that the centripetal tendencies of television broadcasting – which required far greater resources and financial outlay than radio – 'bolster[ed] London's supremacy' to the detriment of what he calls the 'proud "provincialism" of the Victorian age' (1965: 308). Thus one could understand the development of television as a cultural form was a *regressive moment* in the longer history of regionalism in the UK, exacerbating inequalities.

In *The Regions, the Nations and the BBC* (1993) several contributors advocated a more radical policy in which a *portion of the licence fee* would be allocated to the regions and nations, which would have control over how this money was spent, with a number of small production locales acting as regional nerve centres. To quote from Sylvia Harvey's contribution: the 'retention of a major part of the licence fee within each region' could 'foster the spirit of independence, reconstituting the network on a more equal, participative and culturally democratic basis'.

However, the BBC has never pursued this policy of licence fee delegation. Rather it has flirted with the concept of various regional 'centres of excellence'. This incremental and often rather nebulous policy was given a more definite shape in Jana Bennett's Royal Television Society speech 'Beyond the M25: A BBC for all of the UK' (October 2008), which contended that the best regional policy was to develop a select group of 'sustainable creative centres, each capable of developing and delivering a flow of network-quality ideas over the long-term'. To do otherwise, she argued, would be an ineffective dispersal of finite resources. These centres of excellence are constituted *generically* – thus Bristol has the Natural History Unit and 'Factual', Cardiff has Drama and so on – rather than in response to the cultures of different regions by working with existing talent in those regions or attempting to foster a regional consciousness. These centres, do not, as their primary function, contribute to regional life but operate as sealed-off satellite organisations with the ultimate decision-

making power residing in London. This tendency has been exacerbated by the establishment of BBC Studios in which each 'centre' operates independently in its quest to make appealing programmes often for an international market. This policy is still current. The BBC announced in March 2021 that it will create a centre of excellence in Birmingham because the West Midlands is 'an area of deficit', an interesting phrase that shows the BBC strategy is essentially ameliorative.

Under pressure from New Labour, which was committed to encouraging significant regional growth and stimulating urban regeneration led by the creative industries (Lee et. al 2014), the BBC relocated five departments – Children's Television, Sport, Radio 5 Live, the Breakfast Show and Research and Development involving c. 3,000 staff – to MediaCityUK in Salford Quays, Greater Manchester, a process completed by April 2012. In 'Building Public Value' (June 2004) the then Director General Mark Thompson expatiated about the relocation's 'transformational impact on the creative industries and media talent base across the North of England'. However, this 'lift and shift' policy has been critiqued for its failure to work with local talent and that its creation took no real account of the wider economic-geographical reality of Salford, one of the UK's most economically and socially deprived areas. For some it exemplifies a 'neoliberal tradition of market-oriented and property-led urban development strategies' (Christophers 2008: 2314), designed to create a second UK global hub capable of attracting major international firms. Understandably, the BBC has a much more positive view of this relocation and its role in stimulating the regional economy and views the move as a major success.

The BBC's latest policy is 'Across the UK', announced in March 2021. This will:

- Increase cumulative spend across the UK nations and regions by £700m by 2027-28
- Increase network commissions from the nations and regions to *at least* 60%
- Move 'significant parts of BBC News' to centres across the UK; BBC Studios in Bristol, Cardiff and Glasgow to grow
- Commission two new drama series – one set in the North East of England (an 'area of deficit'); another in one of the devolved nations
- Commission 200 new and returning drama and comedy series over three years to 'reflect the lives and communities of audiences outside London'
- Relocate 400 jobs outside London.

Although this is still an ameliorative rather than radical strategy, it possibly represents a significant shift in BBC thinking. The BBC's *Annual Plan 2021/22*, proclaimed this initiative as the 'biggest programme of reform of our programmes, services and operations since the 1990s', one that would 'make a decisive shift in the BBC's footprint, relocating the centre of the BBC away from London to a distributed model that moves commissioning power and decision-making to the whole UK' (pp. 15, 29). According to Davie, this policy is about moving 'creative thinking as well as infrastructures', moving not just money and people but *decision-making power*, 'empowering local teams to have a major say in national projects', which he claimed goes 'way beyond' the old nations and regions division. Rhodri Talfon Davies, BBC's Director of Nations and Regions, in his talk to the Royal Television Society, argues that this policy commits the BBC to 'getting much closer to communities across all four nations, really embedding ourselves in those places and getting regional centres to tell the stories of their localities and feel rooted in those communities'.

*ITV* (1955-)

ITV was conceived as an interlocking set of strong, autonomous and distinctive regional broadcasters to counteract the BBC's London bias that had been criticised in the 1951 Beveridge Report (Briggs 1995: 352). The initial expectation was that there would be two competing providers for each region. Granada, based in Manchester, which had the North West franchise, was the most successful in creating a regional consciousness – Granadaland – with its flagship programme, *Coronation Street* (1960-) and through its encouragement of a raft of regionally-based writers. Granada's co-founder, Sidney Bernstein, a committed socialist, thought his ideological mission was to forge a *different type* of broadcaster: 'The [north] represented a part of Great Britain that was independent in character and remote from the metropolitan traditions of the BBC. If any English region could contribute to a change in the face of broadcasting this was it' (in Buscombe 1981: 121). He built the UK's first purpose-built television centre – and the most modern in Europe – on Quay Street in central Manchester, which fulfilled what Bernstein saw as his civic duty to make the centre of Manchester 'an attractive place where young people can live and enjoy themselves' (ibid.: 67).

I don't wish to idealise ITV. It was an avowedly a commercial operation and the multivolume history by Sendall et al. details the constant struggle to achieve a balance between nationally networked productions and 'regional' ones, and between those produced by the 'big four' franchise holders in the most populous regions and the smaller companies such as Tyne Tees. However, I do wish to emphasise ITV's founding vision, what its creators hoped it could achieve as a plural, multi-sited, regionally-based broadcaster. One of Granada's most distinguished executives, David Plowright, contended: 'The greatest asset ITV brought to national broadcasting was the distancing from London of a major part of the creative input into television. The change was not only desirable in itself but part of a revolutionary policy designed to give the regions hope for the future. Regional independent television brought an entirely new scrutiny to bear on British society'.

However, speaking in 1991, Plowright saw ominous signs that this 'hope for the future' was under threat. During that decade, the Thatcherite era of deregulated broadcasting, ITV's founding regional model was replaced by a more comprehensively market-driven one as the various companies combined and the franchised network began to unravel as the government enabled franchise holders to merge into larger corporations. When ITV plc emerged in 2004, ensconced in the former London Weekend Television Tower overlooking the Thames, it had become a global corporation without cultural or emotional ties to the regions. Although the *legacy* of ITV in various regions is still strong, its regional presence consists of a few programmes and the continuation of regional news broadcasts.

*Channel 4* (1982-)

Channel 4's constitution as a *publisher-broadcaster* is the driving force behind its model of regional production. However, according to Maggie Brown in her recently extended history of Channel 4 (2021), Channel 4's central London location meant that the majority of its early programmes were made by London-based indies, thereby reinforcing broadcasting's metropolitan bias and limiting its regional reach. In order to redress this imbalance, a new Glasgow-based senior post was created in 2002, Director of Nations and Regions with overall responsibility for Channel 4's strategy and corporate development outside London. Its first incumbent, Stuart Cosgrove, formulated a policy that stressed the broadcaster's faith in the cultural and creative power of regional based independent companies that would supply its programming: 'My work for Channel 4 is driven not by a dull plea for regional television, but

for the more exhilarating thought that some of Britain's best companies work from a regional base in creative cities far from London.' He thought these small, dynamic companies 'by their nature, are closer to ideas, popular influences and cultural change' and therefore were the best hope for encouraging a diverse and sustainable spectrum of regional production.

These 'indies' were often vocal in their frustration in having to travel to London to pitch ideas to the Channel 4's metropolitan commissioners, the '£125 cappuccino' as the phrase went. However, Channel 4 came under intense political pressure to increase its role in the nations and regions. The key question was whether this required relocation or could be undertaken by staying in London and increasing regional spending. In the government's consultation, Channel 4 contended that remaining in London was the preference of the majority of indies. However, there was a strong political push for relocation. This *force majeure* was embraced positively by the incoming CEO, Alex Mahon, who argued that relocation – 'the largest structural shake-up in C4's history' – would make 'Channel 4 even more open to new talent and fresh voices from underserved areas, and better reflect the diversity of all the UK … We are becoming more connected to – and rooted in – the lives of the communities that make up Britain. We're becoming more visible and accessible to our partners in the industry'. She also committed Channel 4 to increasing its regional spend from 35% to 50% by 2023, worth £250 million. Mahon argued that a regional presence would enhance the broadcaster's ability to work 'regularly with production companies with an established regional base … it is more meaningful to work with production companies and talent with *genuine roots and commitment* to a given region than undertake a "lift and shift" of production as a means of meeting the quota'. This statement makes an obvious sideswipe at the BBC but also at the notorious practice of 'brass plate' companies whose regional offices are fig leaves for London-based firms which exist solely to fulfil Ofcom's quota requirements.

In a much publicised competition, '4 All the UK', Channel 4 invited cities to bid to host its new headquarters or one of its two regional 'creative hubs'. In effect, Channel 4 committed itself to *strengthening* its existing role as the facilitator of place-making indies, thought to be the most dynamic engine of diversification and plurality because in close touch with regional energies. The competition winners were Leeds as the new headquarters and Bristol and Glasgow as the new creative hubs. However, the competition was criticised as being a significant waste of taxpayers' money – and also whether, in targeting already established media 'hot spots' rather than attempting to create new ones, Channel 4 *exacerbated* some of the existing regional imbalances in the UK's broadcasting provision. It is, of course, too early to judge whether Mahon's rhetoric will be matched by subsequent practice, whether relocation will indeed enable Channel 4 to work more closely with regional indies and how far this policy will ensure a diversity of voices and regional sustainability.

*Channel 5* (1997-)

Channel 5 is a second publisher-broadcaster but one whose values – 'modern mainstream' – production culture and commercial orientation differ markedly from Channel 4. It was lunched when multi-channel broadcasting was already established alongside an existing range of independent production companies. We should recall that its genesis in the 1990s was the subject of a prolonged debate about where the new channel should be located; there was a strong and persistent campaign to have the new broadcaster *regionally located*. In its response to the Government's White Paper about the future of broadcasting, the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) saw 'some advantage in licensees being based in major

regional centres in the north of England but separate from any of the existing ITV franchises because this would 'encourage a distinctive non-metropolitan identity for Channel 5, as well as local sources of programme supply' ('The IBA's Response, London, February 1989). Sheffield in particular fought hard to become Channel 5's headquarters as part of a proposal for a Northern Broadcasting Foundation so that broadcasting's 'deep historical imbalances' could be redressed. Chris Rowley, Head of Planning – Television at the IBA made the more radical proposal for the channel to be a part local, part national service distributed amongst 30-35 'city stations' in towns with populations over 300,000, which would benefit from local as well as national advertising revenue. The parallels with '4 All the UK' are immediately apparent.

However, this lobby did not prevail and in the government auction, buyers were bidding for a London-based company, thus reinforcing the capital's dominance. However, of late the broadcaster has proclaimed consistently – in response to Ofcom consultations and in numerous press releases – its commitment to regional broadcasting. In October 2020, it announced a marked increase in its year-on-year regional spend, up from 21.6 per cent in 2018 to 35.5 per cent in 2019, set against the Ofcom target of 10 per cent, This was the result, Ben Frow, the Director of Programmes argued, of a strategic decision to foster relationships with out-of-London producers. In particular, Channel 5 has invested over £20 million in Yorkshire-based programmes.

*The Wider Context*

In his magisterial *The UK Regional-National Economic Problem: Geography, Globalisation & Governance* (2016), Philip McCann delineates the profound structural imbalance of the UK's economy. He demonstrates that the UK is 'one of the most interregionally unequal large high-income country' globally, its sub-national government funding & capital expenditure among lowest of any large OECD economy (p. 409). Thus although some regions, notably London and South East England, have high productivity, other regions are among the lowest in Europe. As McCann points out, these inequalities are experienced 'almost entirely by lower 40% of the income spectrum', and that the government, business elites and the media collude in making sure this issue is not prominent in public consciousness and thus well down list of voter priorities. McCann argues that these destructive interregional inequalities are compounded by the UK's 'highly centralised, top-down, largely spaceblind and sectorally-dominated governance system'. As many commentators have argued, these inequalities fuelled the Brexit vote but leaving Europe has only compounded the problem – a classic case of mistaking the culprit. The present Conservative administration has declared its commitment to 'levelling up', and therefore has a direct interest in the role of the PSBs in addressing, to return to Ofcom's formulation, 'geographical imbalances within the national television production industry'. The role of television, unlike film, has always been a profoundly political concern in the Britain – as elsewhere in Europe – and we must always attend to that context in attempting to understand the UK's broadcasting structure, regulation and distribution.

**Slide 15: Conclusion**

I hope that analysis of television in the UK's nations and regions – its histories, complexities and contradictions will inform today's debate. There has been a range of strategies that have been deployed which form part of each broadcaster's distinct identity, itself the product of the historical era in which it was founded. I should like to conclude by recasting the issues I've raised as a set of questions:

- What should be London's role in the UK's media ecology?
- Should the SVODs/satellite broadcasters be *required* to invest in regional production?
- What should be the role of the PSBs as regional place-makers? How is this function best realised?
- What is the most effective strategy to nurture and sustain regional production that is 'in direct touch with the life of the people'?
- Is relocation out of London a solution? Partial solution? Does it mask or displace more fundamental problems?
- How do the PSBs address effectively the different geographies of scale – global/national/regional?
- What is the role of regionally-based indies? How can be supported and sustained?
- What should be the role of the regulator, Ofcom?
- What role should PSBs play 'rebalancing' the UK's economy? How should that be supported?
- How should the UK's far-reaching regional inequalities be addressed? What should be the government's role?

On that sonorous and potentially utopian note, I will conclude!

*Thank you.*