

“Britannia Rules the Waves? Popular British Programming on American Public Television”

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The central theme of this roundtable discussion focuses on the question of how public service broadcasting is changing in the 21st century. Debates surrounding the function that public service broadcasters continue to serve, both domestically and globally, have been circulating for years, particularly in regards to the programs they produce, who they serve, and how they are funded. These questions, and public broadcasting in general, have recently come back into focus in the United States after the October 3, 2012 Presidential Debate, where Republican Presidential Candidate Mitt Romney stated that he is going to stop the government subsidy to PBS as part of his spending cut-back measures as he deems it not critical enough to keep “borrowing money from China to pay for it.” But how much is American public broadcasting dependent upon government funding? PBS Officials responded to his statements in a *Washington Business Journal* article, pointing out that only 15% of their total budget was made up of taxpayer money.¹ Are the days of PBS officially numbered if Governor Romney gets his way? Despite the fact that the majority of PBS programming and stations are funded through donations from private businesses and from, as is pointed out during telethons, “viewers like you,” it may be necessary to restructure our current public broadcasting model to incorporate a commercial element that is seen in several of the UK’s terrestrial broadcast networks – namely ITV, Channel 4, and Channel 5.

The UK has been host to a variety of similar debates surrounding the future of public service broadcasting for a number of years. The BBC, which is partially-funded by a mandatory licensing fee that is collected from every household with a signal-receiving set, has been the central focus of this debate as citizens question the necessity (and relevance) of its current funding model in the contemporary media landscape. As has been discussed by scholars like Michele Hilmes², there are considerable differences between the ways that public service television operates in the US and in the UK. Whereas the main American broadcasting system was developed using a commercial model, public service served as the cornerstone in the development of the British broadcasting system – a concept that has continued to serve as its foundation as their terrestrial broadcasting system transformed from a BBC-run monopoly to one of multi-channel competition. While the BBC is funded through the aforementioned license fee and revenue from BBC Worldwide, their commercial branch, the other terrestrial channels are all built upon what is known as a commercial public service model. Instead of relying primarily on a license fee and funding from the government, these additional channels are funded through commercial means (advertising and sponsorship) while still operating under public service mandates. Each new network was developed to diversify the content airing on British television,

¹ Charlotte Kelly, “PBS responds to Mitt Romney’s proposed cut for PBS, Big Bird,” *Washington Business Journal* (October 4, 2012). <http://www.bizjournals.com/washington/news/2012/10/04/pbs-responds-to-mitt-romneys-proposed.html?page=all>.

² See: Michele Hilmes, “Who We Are, Who We Are Not,” *Planet TV: A Global Television Reader*. L. Parks, S. Kumar (Eds). New York, (New York: New York University Press, 2002); and *Only Connect: A Cultural History of Broadcasting in the United States*, (3rd Ed.). (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing, 2010).

especially at a local level. Prior to the multi-channel-era in Britain, many people complained that the BBC was inherently London-centric in its content,³ and ITV was partially developed to incorporate regional variation and address the needs and desires of citizens who live elsewhere in the country. Channel 4 and Channel 5 were added to fulfill additional needs.⁴ As Edward Buscomb discusses in *British Television: A Reader*, British television was carefully regulated so that all terrestrial network television contributes to the overall public good – even television produced for profit.⁵ The success of these other stations, and the addition of satellite programming in the UK, has put the BBC’s mandatory licensing fee in jeopardy many times over the years, as citizens question whether or not the £145.50 annual fee is still needed. Some citizens decide that having TV sets that do not receive any form of broadcast signal (including satellite) is preferable to paying their television license. It is possible that the BBC may be facing a major change in its funding model when their current charter ends in 2016. If this occurs, they may have to look towards their competitors for inspiration on how to proceed.

So, where does this leave the future of public service television in America? Despite what Governor Romney’s threat implies, PBS continues to serve a vital role on American television. Like ITV, it provides a voice for local communities, supplies programming that is not available elsewhere, and, as *Downton Abbey* illustrates, is still capable of producing critically-acclaimed programming that can cross over to the mainstream. There have been calls to cut funding to PBS in the past, and, as has been the case with the BBC, they will most likely continue to appear from time to time. If we are to take these threats seriously, and see *Downton Abbey* as an example for what public service broadcasting is capable of producing in the face of all of its contemporary competition, perhaps revising the current model wouldn’t necessarily be a bad thing. Looking to the ways that Britain has revised and diversified its approach to public service broadcasting in the face of commercialization and the changing media climate might be the key to unlocking a whole new future for PBS and the communities their affiliates serve.

³ “Introduction,” Catherine Johnson and Rob Turnock, eds. *ITV Cultures: Independent Television Over Fifty Years* (Open University Press, 2005): 1.

⁴ For more information on commercial public service television see: Catherine Johnson and Rob Turnock, eds. *ITV Cultures: Independent Television Over Fifty Years* (Open University Press, 2005); Jeremy Tunstall, *Television Producers* (Routledge, 1993); Sylvia Harvey, “Channel Four Television: From Annan to Grade,” *British Television: A Reader*, Edward Buscomb, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁵ Edward Buscomb, “Introduction,” *British Television: A Reader*, Edward Buscomb, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000): 3.