

Climate Change and the Role of the Public Service Broadcaster

The role of broadcast media in educating audiences and setting the agenda in order to raise public awareness on climate change, stimulate the public debate and shape national policies.

I am going to talk this morning mainly about the public service broadcaster I know best - because I worked for it for more than a quarter of a century. And perhaps the BBC, whatever you think of it, can be a useful model for discussing the public service broadcaster's responsibility on climate change.

Public service broadcasting, by one definition (see the US Museum of Broadcast Communications, <http://www.museum.tv/>) includes sustaining an informed electorate, and cultural and educational enrichment.

I have problems with that. First, broadcasting means something quite different to today's under-25s - if in fact it means anything at all. Beyond that, the definition virtually tells you it is the broadcasters who know what you want and need to be informed, cultured and entertained. That argument is not new. When I worked in the BBC World Service newsroom more than 30 years ago there were mild debates about what should go in the headlines at the start of each news bulletin. The old school thought the headlines were there to tell the listeners what the BBC's journalists judged to be the most important global news. So you'd get a headline about a general election in Mongolia broadcast to audiences in Latin America - or *vice versa*. The modernisers thought headlines should be vaguely relevant to their listeners. They lost the argument.

Today it's different. Because technology has given audiences so much choice, increasingly they simply don't bother with what they haven't chosen, however important we may think it is.

Some of my former colleagues argue that journalism is being changed so much that it must re-invent itself quite radically. Kevin Marsh, the head of the BBC's College of Journalism, tells journalists that the traditional story they set out to tell people is now finished as a way of reporting the news. He writes: "The web is enabling our former audiences to come to their news in *their* ways at *their* times. Our old image of gripping them with *our* 'stories' is no more. The story is dead... You thought you were writing a carefully crafted story. The [audience] thought you were offering them a news alert so they could go off to assemble their own context and background... Forget mass audiences. Think masses of individuals."

On Kevin's suggestion that the story is dead, and that our real job is to provide news alerts, he may well be right. I just don't think he's saying anything especially new. Much of the best journalism has always been about prompting the audience, not to be content with the little we can tell them, but to use it as a starting point that helps them to frame their own questions. When journalists report the world as it is, not as some people would like them to think it is, then they provide both a motive and a means to start changing it.

The theme for this session assumes as a given that journalists do have a responsibility to do something about climate change. I think we do - but that it's not necessarily the responsibility UN ESCO appears to assume. One reason for my saying that is a persistent memory from my early years as environment correspondent. Time after time I'd be walking through the newsroom when a colleague would call out: "Hello, Alex - it's a very quiet news day today. We might even have room for some of your climate rubbish"

I found great difficulty for a long time in persuading colleagues to take climate change seriously, at every level of news. For many years the BBC, and most of the British mass media, did not report it very much.

One reason is the nature of news itself. Events usually stand a much better chance of being reported than trends and developments, which are also harder to film or record, at least without expensive trips to the Arctic or the Amazon or somewhere similar.

To compound the problem, for many years there wasn't much political leadership in Britain. If the politicians weren't serious about the climate, editors could argue, why should they be?

Another factor is the BBC's record in reporting on science of any kind. Not long ago I met an Australian journalist, who told me of the attitude she and her colleagues took to science. "If it's green and wriggles, it's biology", she said. "If it stinks, it's chemistry. And if it doesn't work, it's physics." For many years the BBC employed very knowledgeable science journalists who were also very good broadcasters. It wasn't their fault that there wasn't much coverage. Even now science still often struggles for airtime against politics, economics and the arts - still, in many ways, the BBC's comfort zone.

Then there are the climate sceptics, perhaps more accurately called climate

deniers. The real sceptics are the scientists, because that's how science works. The deniers should be heard. But that doesn't mean there's some Platonic ideal of balance which gives them an automatic right to restate their case whenever a mainstream climate scientist is on air. And that's what happened in the BBC for many years.

Part of me regrets the fact that the BBC took a long time to wake to the threat of climate change, and to the strength of the evidence that it is happening. Even now, journalists are having limited success in persuading people that climate change matters. A writer in *New Scientist* magazine (25 July) said "opinion polls over the years have shown that 40% of people in the UK and over 50% in the US resolutely refuse to accept that our emissions are changing the climate. Scarcely 10% of Britons regard climate change as a major problem."

But part of me is glad the BBC took its time - because of a word I used just now about an entirely different group of people. That word is scepticism. I do worry when anyone tells me that public service broadcasters have a responsibility to educate audiences, set the agenda, raise public awareness, stimulate debate and shape national policies. I worry because what journalism is about is reporting. And when you get into educating, setting, raising, stimulating and shaping, you are straying well beyond journalism. You are telling people what should matter to them, when our job is to tell them what is happening, and then leave them to make of it what they will.

There are plenty of people in society who think it is their job to tell the rest of us what matters - politicians, religious people, people who have an interest in persuading us to think as they do. I don't trust people like that, at least not until I've had a chance to test their claims.

For them, a public broadcaster which accepts a responsibility to tell its audience what should matter to them is a prize worth having. It is a megaphone. Instead of reporting what it finds, it becomes a relay station for what it's told. It doesn't matter whether the message it passes on is well-intentioned or not. It's nothing to do with reporting. And all that stands between us and that abuse of broadcasting is the sceptical journalists who question everything, and who questioned the case for climate change for nearly two decades. Now they accept it, as a news story that deserves covering - but not because anyone has told them to.

You will probably remember what happened in the UK six years ago. In the months before the invasion of Iraq in 2003 the British Government published a

dossier which claimed that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction which could be made ready for an attack on Britain in 45 minutes. A colleague of mine, Andrew Gilligan, reported with distinction from Baghdad during the invasion. Shortly after returning to London he said in a live broadcast that the government had, in his words, "sexed up" the dossier. At the end of the bitter row which then broke out Gilligan had himself left the BBC, and so had its chairman and director-general. The Corporation was badly damaged by the episode. Yet Gilligan was correct: the Government's dossier *had* been manipulated, in a way which meant the policy dictated the intelligence, not the other way round.

I don't want journalists to tell me what to think. I want to work that out for myself. What I want them to do is to tell me what's happening, and to warn me about what I ought to doubt. And the people I trust to do that are journalists - so long as they remain sceptical.