# The BBC and the Ross-Brand Affair: Public Service Broadcasting and New Populism in the Twenty First Century

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> "Though some make light of Libels, yet you may see by them how the Wind sits: As take a Straw and throw it up into the Air, you shall see by that which way the Wind is, which you shall not do by casting up a Stone. More solid Things do not shew the Complexion of the times so well, as Ballads and Libels."
>
> John Selden, "Table Talk" ( 1689 )

## Abstract

*The paper examines the condition of public service broadcasting in the 21st century by considering the meaning and implications of a particularly controversial programme broadcast by the BBC in 2008, one that drew enormous public and political criticism. The paper suggests that rather than being an unfortunate aberration the incident revealed significant changes that are taking place both within the BBC and the wider society and culture. It suggests that this can be seen not just within this particular programming incident, but within the shifting ways in which the nature of public service broadcasting is articulated both inside and outside the BBC.*

**Keywords:** BBC, public service broadcasting, culture, populism, humour

## *1. Introduction*

In the research literature about reading there is an interesting, if slightly coy, concept known as the "quick probe." It is a concept that appeared in a paper written in 1985 by Daniel Dennett, titled "Can Machines Think?"" and discussed at length by Keith Stanovich in his brilliant collection of essays, "Progress in Understanding Reading: Scientific Foundations and New Frontiers".

In his paper Dennett proposes "the following test for whether a city is a great city ( i.e., the type of city he would love). Dennett's test is whether or not on any randomly chosen day a person can do the following: (1) hear a symphony orchestra; (2) see a Rembrandt and a professional athletic contest; and (3) eat quenelles de brochet à la Nantua for lunch. This operational definition of a great city Dennett termed a 'quick-probe test.' The point about a quick probe is *not* that the items in it are particularly important – nor that they are in any way exhaustive. Indeed, Dennett notes that 'obviously, the test terms are not all I care about in a great city. In fact, some of them I don't care about at all. I just think that they would be cheap and easy ways of assuring myself that the subtle things I do care about in cities are present. 'The key characteristic of a quick probe is that it is associated with a very large number of characteristics that actually *do* define the concept of interest. So although Dennett might not care for Rembrandt, the presence of a Rembrandt in a city probably predicts a host of other things that he really does care about – for example, the presence of independent book stores, jazz clubs, public radio stations, science museums, and restaurants that serve dim sum. The quick probe is just that, a quick but risky way of getting at the larger set of characteristics that define the overall concept in this case, the concept 'cities I would like'…" (Stanovich 2000a).

The essential proposition behind this paper is that there is, perhaps, some utility in employing the quick probe to engage what is happening within a whole culture, in this case that of the United Kingdom in the 21st century, particularly as exemplified by the evolving character of that country's dominant cultural institution.

The "quick probe" here concerns an event on one of the BBC's radio networks, where the Corporation's highest paid person, Jonathan Ross, earning 6 million sterling a year, engaged in a bizarre prank with another would be comedian. One might argue about the individual significance of this particular event but as Stanovich notes, "the key characteristic of a quick probe is that it is associated with a very large number of characteristics that actually *do* define the concept of interest," (Stanovich, 2000b), in this case the insights offered about a major UK media institution and the condition of the culture it has to serve. Put somewhat differently, was the object of the probe an aberration, an error with no particular context, or is it suggestive of a larger reality.

## *2. The Ross-Brand Affair: a Narrative Account*

The details of the incident are basic and crude. It is useful, indeed necessary, however, to lay out the narrative to show both the nature of the incident, the tempo of the controversy as it unfolded and to provide a basis for examining what, if anything, it all meant. The BBC Trust, the governing body of the BBC and Ofcom, the British media regulatory authority, produced detailed timelines upon which this following narrative account is, in part, based (BBC, 2008; Ofcom, 2009).

On Thursday October 16, 2008 on the BBC's Radio 2 network, the Russell Brand Show was recorded with guest Jonathan Ross. Brand is variously described as comedian, actor, columnist, singer, author and radio/television presenter. Ross is described as radio/television presenter, comedian, "personality," film critic, toy and comics collector. Both were significant figures on the landscape of British entertainment culture and were prized figures for the BBC as it sought to compete in the ferociously competitive environment of British broadcasting in the early years of the 21st century. The programme was originally to have had as a guest the actor Andrew Sachs who had played the hapless waiter Manuel in the legendary comedy, Fawlty Towers. Sachs was unable to appear on the show and when the programme aired on the 18th October listeners heard Ross and Brand make phone calls to Sachs and leave several messages on his voicemail. As Brand was leaving the first message Ross can be heard blurting out that Brand had had sex with "your granddaughter," Georgina Baillie. In another message Brand is heard to say: "Andrew, this is Russell Brand. I'm so sorry about the last message, it was part of the radio show – it was a mistake." Other messages on the voicemail can only described as vulgar, even obscene. The final message is a series of clearly faux apologies offered while they are laughing.

On the day of the recording the producer, twenty five year old Nick Philps, a BBC employee "on loan" to Brand's production company, Vanity Projects, called Sacks and would claim later that the actor, who it appears had not listened in full to the voicemails, agreed to the broadcast going ahead. Sachs says that he "demurred." On the day of the recording the producer, Philps, wrote to David Barber, Radio 2's head of compliance – that is the person who ensures that programme content is in line with the BBC's editorial guidelines - highlighting the issues raised by the phone calls. According to the BBC account, he wrote, presumably in an email, " 'Andrew Sachs AKA Manuel is aware of it and happy…it makes some brilliantly funny radio. Russ and Jonathan both VERY keen for it to go out.' Mr. Barber listens to the material twice and emails Radio 2 controller Lesley Douglas recommending it is aired with a warning." The following day, Friday October 17, Douglas sent a one word reply to the question of authorization to transmit the material, "Yes" and would later tell the BBC Trust that she did so because Barber had " 'never got it wrong…'" (BBC, 2008). The show was broadcast on Saturday October 18, between 9 and 10.30pm, preceded by a warning to listeners about language that some might "find offensive", without the producer having submitted a compliance form and with no Radio 2 executive having listened to the whole programme, both in themselves serious breaches of editorial protocols.

The day after the broadcast there were only two complaints to the BBC, and just one referencing the voicemails. However, on Wednesday, 22 October a reporter from the Mail on Sunday contacted Sachs' agent, Meg Pool, to ask for a comment. When Pool and Sachs listened to an online recording of the show the actor was said to have been "offended." On October 23 Pool wrote to Radio 2 controller, Lesley Douglas, asking for a full apology. The following day the Mail on Sunday ran a story about the Sachs voicemails and by Tuesday 28 October the BBC was confronting a major scandal and serious political problems: complaints had risen to 4772; the media regulator OfCom, along with the BBC Trust, announced investigations; the Conservative Party leader, David Cameron, called for the BBC to be "transparent" and to make it clear how far up the editorial chain the decision to broadcast had gone; the government Culture Secretary, Andy Burnham, welcomed the BBC's apology to Sachs and that the issue was being investigated; and in the late afternoon the Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, entered the fray and said the incident was "clearly inappropriate and unacceptable."

By October 29, the number of complaints had risen to 18000, and the director general, Mark Thompson, announced that Ross and Brand had both been suspended pending the results of the investigation. Late in the afternoon of that same day Brand announced that he would be leaving his Saturday show. On 30th October Lesley Douglas resigned her position as Radio 2 controller, and the BBC announced that Ross has been suspended for 12 weeks without pay. Complaints stood at 37,500. David Barber, who perhaps as much as anyone could have prevented what was by then a full-blown disaster, resigned on November 7.

The BBC Trust issued its report on the 21st November 2008 and described the calls to Sachs as a " deplorable intrusion with no editorial justification." It concluded that there had been "a failure to assert editorial control by Radio 2, a failure to follow the compliance systems in place and a failure of editorial judgement" (BBC, 2008). Ofcom issued the report of its Content Sanctions Committee on Friday, 3 April, 2009 and fined the BBC 150,000 pounds, 80,000 pounds for breach of Rule 8.1 of the Broadcast Code (breaching privacy ) and 70,000 pounds for the breach of Rules 2.1 and 2.3 of the Code ( causing unjustifiable harm and offence) which it said reflected "the extraordinary nature and seriousness of the BBC's failures" and the "resulting breaches" of its code (Ofcom, 2009).

The BBC, which was in an utterly impossible and indefensible position since the content of the programme had clearly breached its own editorial guidelines, accepted the judgement without demure and, once more, said that the material "should never have been broadcast" (BBC, 2009). Ross returned to the BBC in January 2009 and worked there until his contract ended in July 2010.The BBC would receive, in all, some 42,851 complaints, the second highest ever, and Ofcom received 1,939.

## 3. Interpreting the Ross-Brand Affair

Commentary in the media was uniformly negative, the programme being variously described as "lewd," "crass," "obscene," "boorish," "silly," "tasteless," "ugly," "abusive." In its own public apology, to Sachs and his granddaughter, the BBC described the broadcast as "unacceptable and offensive." The director general, Mark Thompson, writing in The Observer said that it was "spectacularly wrong" (Thompson, 2008). A former deputy director general of the BBC, Will Wyatt, had earlier said that it was "completely inappropriate. It is like a couple of drunken teenagers in a phone box trying to rag one of their chums…" (Wyatt, 2008).

The comment by Wyatt about "drunken teenagers" is particularly relevant since it speaks to a core concern here, the sensitive issue of the dynamic tension between the broad ambitions of the BBC as historically defined and the appetites it must feed if it is to prosper, even survive, in a competitive age. It is not a new problem, but problem it is. Through their actions Brand and Ross had raised not just a protest at their clearly vulgar and unfortunate behaviour, but questions about the very nature of the BBC as a public service broadcaster. The Guardian reported on 30 October: " The Tories yesterday used the pair as symbols of a coarsening of the culture and an example of how public service broadcasting should change, realizing the BBC's worst fear that the story would escalate into a debate about how it should be funded and regulated." The piece identified two problems in the Corporation, " a trend to … promote marketing figures to run channels and large editorial departments – the thinking goes, at least partly, that marketing skills are needed to 'punch through' and have impact in our digital age. These figures, however, are left exposed when questions of editorial judgement arise. Secondly, even inside the BBC, it is acknowledged that Middle England feels abandoned by the Corporation's chasing of metropolitan youth."

In his Observer opinion piece Thompson tried to separate out what had happened in the programme from the "important but essentially separate debate about the boundaries of taste and creativity in modern comedy and entertainment." He continued by saying that at the BBC: "Our job is to strike the right balance in delivering content that feels modern and relevant to a wide range of audiences, some of whom are 18 and others 80. Our role is to identify comedy talent, writers, producers and presenters, and provide an environment and, most important, an editorial framework in which they can deliver programmes for different segments of our audiences. Not a rule-book that ensures that all programmes are risk and creativity free, but a commitment to back originality and talent in a context of responsibility and common sense…We have a difficult balance to strike at the BBC – between different audiences and different values, between creativity and control – but it is that difficult and delicate balance that the BBC's special brand of public service broadcasting subsists."

In reality the BBC's effort in damage control was to create a narrative in which the whole episode was an unfortunate and regrettable error that, as Thompson noted in the Observer, "nothing like this must ever happen again" and that "tight discipline will be required in the future." Sir Michael Lyons, the BBC's chairman at the time of the incident would say later in a speech "that not even a scriptwriter would have had the nerve to mix 'profanity, misogyny, bullying and black farce' in the way they did'" (Lyons, 2011). In other words, it was all an aberration. What neither Thompson nor Lyons, did, nor could, address was a far more difficult issue, that the "incident" was actually indicative of larger forces taking hold not just of the BBC, but the culture writ large. That if it, the broadcast, were a component of the "quick probe" it was profoundly suggestive of other issues about the culture.

One such issue that emerges from the affair is the nature of humour in contemporary Britain, the ways in which different populations, defined in considerable part by age and class, deal with humour, particularly what is sometimes called "edgy" humour, and what the limits of comedy can and should be. As Leon Hunt has asked: "What is the line between the artful or ironic offence of the alternative comedian and the more unacceptable offensiveness of ( for example) 'old school' stand-ups" and was the whole thing an example of what he calls "laddish cruelty" (Hunt, 2010). Also raised by the broadcast is the issue of privacy in an intrusive, pestering media culture. At the very least it seems to never have occurred to Ross and Brand, or anyone else involved, that Sachs may have had a right not to have puerile messages left on his voice mail. He was famous and therefore had a certain utility, to think otherwise would, to all those involved, seem slightly odd.

Such questions segue into an even more profound issue: what is the nature of this populist age and how might we, indeed can we, judge it, indeed can we any longer make judgements about the worth of culture in any large sense, as opposed to condemning particular instants? Jonathan Jones has made the case that what "killed television's cultural worth was irony and over-sophisticated, post-modern defenses of the lowest common denominator. By the turn of the century, there was no longer an intellectual position from which to unambiguously reject reality and game shows…we no longer have a vocabulary in which to say that sensitive, literate communication is better than a visual freak show, we're in trouble" (Jones, 2009).

Within the idea of making judgements about cultural worth is the clear assumption that it is important *to* make such judgements, that there are some appetites that should be fed, others that should not. The obvious retort to this position is, what's the problem with satisfying cultural appetites which may not appeal to "me" but which just happen to appeal to others? In the UK the question can be addressed by considering the virtues, or otherwise, of what, as previously mentioned, became known as "lad culture" (Benwell, 2004; Wheaton, 2000). Both are somewhat vague, but the first seems to be a reference to a male disposition to pursue with considerable vigour alcohol, sport and sex. What seems to define "lad culture" is that these are pursuits engaged in with a *knowing* boorishness. More recently in the United Kingdom there has been much public and private chatter about what has been called "chav" culture. "Chav," is a term which apparently first appeared in 2005 in the Collins English Dictionary and is defined as " a young working class person who dresses in casual sports clothing…" However, as Owen Jones points out in his spirited, if slightly romanticized, defence of the English working class the term seems to have broadened to include a number of negative features of working class culture, particularly among the young, including violence, drunkenness, teen pregnancy and racism (Jones, 2011). An assumption that became widely prevalent was that it was precisely, in part, these kinds of people to whom comedians such as Ross and Brand would appeal.

One might, of course, argue that certain cultural preferences may, to some, appear unseemly, but so what, let them go about their boorishness, and anyhow who decides what is or is not boorish? Where the issue becomes important for the public broadcaster is in deciding, in a competitive age, how do you provide for such taste? This is what the Ross-Brand affair was fundamentally about, in that people like Radio 2 controller, Lesley Barber, knew that both men instinctively understood that they appealed to a particular population which found them funny and that there was no need, nor point, in standing back and making a judgement as to whether what they were doing was appropriate or, as they would discover to their cost, defensible. That the need to satisfy these appetites was now in play for the BBC did not go unnoticed in the commentary around Ross-Brand. Indeed the very rise of Ross to being the highest paid BBC employee by far is perhaps the strongest evidence of all as to how the BBC was evolving. The BBC commissioned a study entitled, "Who are they?" the results of research into British 16 to 24 year olds.

It states that they are "hard to shock" and that "The Young do not often associate the BBC with things that are relevant to them." Writing about this Elizabeth Day, who identified the controversy as the moment when "Britain's culture wars broke out" quotes a media consultant, Simon Wakeman: " 'The BBC has been forced to start looking for new audiences to ensure its future survival. They have invested in repositioning themselves over recent years from being fuddy-duddy to something more cutting edge. This was part of it.'" She also quotes former director general, Greg Dyke, admitting that the generational divide was crucial: " 'Virtually all the young people I talked to – and by young I mean under 35 – thought that Jonathan Ross and Russell Brand were funny and that the whole incident had been blown out of all proportion. The older people I met didn't feel the same way. If the BBC ignores the next generation it does so at its own peril'" (Day, 2008). What he didn't say was that if the BBC recognized and provided for this "next generation" that seemed to rather like obscene pranks it would also be doing so at its own peril.

One interesting comment that emerged during the days that immediately followed the Mail story came from Noel Gallagher, of the band Oasis, and frequent guest on Brand's show, who, in an interview on 30th October for BBC Radio Ulster's Across The Line, said: "It's so typical of the English in general- 10,000 people get outraged, but only five days after it has happened. You know what? There's now a massive divide. Them and us." It seemed clear that "them" was what is sometimes referred to as "middle England," older, more affluent, more conservative, more likely to take offence at what others, younger, more liberal, less affluent might regard as "a laugh." Here was evidence of a profound dilemma, which the likes of Thompson and Day however grudgingly, had begun to identify.

These various comments were telling in that they suggested that there was a fissure opening up in Britain's cultural geology, between young and old. An attendant assumption was that it was the young who were " 'anthemic – approving and vocally affirmative'" (Mintz, 1985) of the humour of Ross and Brand, and Middle England which found it offensive. The problem with this, as the BBC Trust report points out, is that there were about 400,000 listeners for the programme and their "average age was 50 and more than 40% were over 55. Just over half were women" (BBC, 2008). Perhaps the commentaries which assumed that the programme appealed to the young were based on Ross and Brand's more generic image and that what should have been seen is that their appeal was to juveniles of whatever age to whom Ross and Brand appealed. The fact of the matter is that the idea of ethical standards, of making serious judgement about cultural products, of saying that this is good, that is tat was a position that was itself increasingly being called into question. Indeed in the latter years of the 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century this challenge to the idea that making judgements as to worth was passé found a powerful advocate, even a would be theorist, in the head of UK Endemol, Peter Bazalgette, whose particular claim to fame was that he brought Big Brother to British television screens and positioned himself as the chief theorist of unrepentant populism.

In response to the observation that there were those was too much sleazy sex on television he felt " there has not been nearly enough sex on television in the last forty years. Society is changing, you know… 16 to 34 year olds (are) much more open-minded about nudity and sex than those frightful people who read the Daily Mail in British suburbia, God Almighty, God help us…" He argued that to say that broadcasting today is worse than in previous decades was "invidious" and "stupid." He added: "…we have this fantastically exciting dawn of what I would call active rather than passive television, with things like 'Big Brother' and others…the potential of that is absolutely huge, and so to find moaners and groaners, and you know, people who are in their 50's whose documentaries don't get commissioned anymore, saying everything's crap, when in fact they just are just out of time…"(Bazalgette, 2004).

The phrase "just out of time" quite brilliantly, if perhaps unintentionally, captures the guts of the argument that is in play. It suggests that there was a time before, when certain kinds of programming were made by certain kinds of programme makers, which may have been fine for then, but are not fine for 'today' since history and life have moved on. However one views these arguments normatively, it is difficult not to conclude that Bazalgette and others of his persuasion are very much, so far, winning the argument, hence the rise of the likes of Ross and Brand and a generation of television producers with an apparent disconnect from ethical and professional behaviour.

Bazalgette's basic argument was that in providing a stage – and, as it evolved, a very large stage – for ignorance, banality and kitsch, which is cheapened culture, he and Endemol were somehow democratizing a medium which historically, he believed, had been elitist and dishonest, adding for good measure that the past wasn't all that great anyhow. The Ross-Brand affair took place, then, at a moment when there were important shifts taking place in prevailing assumptions about what one might call the place of the "ordinary" within cultural production, and when the language of public service broadcasting was itself shifting with the mood of the times and the domineering presence of competitors and the market. It was opening itself up, though it would never put it this way, to the urges of populism and the demands of the culture-as-market.

In the first instance there was some sense of this in the poverty of judgement by employees of the BBC over the space of two or three years between 2006 and 2008. The BBC, or its employees, had been engaged in what can only be described as an epidemic of serious, unethical and unprofessional behaviour, including the Ross-Brand programme, that had led to Ofcom fines and much Parliamentary and public rebuke. The other issue that had, and has, to be confronted is that epidemics do not happen without the presence of a pathogen. A clue as to the nature of the bacillus could be seen in one of those moments when deep shifts in the culture, and the human responses to those shifts, are revealed with astonishing, blinding clarity. The BBC's deputy director general, Mark Byford, was appearing before a parliamentary committee in 2007 following a particularly critical ruling by Ofcom about the BBC children's programme, Blue Peter, that had seriously damaged the BBC's reputation and integrity. Byford acknowledged, as he put it, that the "brand" had been harmed. The most famous and successful broadcasting institution in history was now a brand, as if it were a Nike product or a tin of beans, as if the scandals were akin to a salmonella outbreak in Big Macs.

The conflation of the post-modernist urge not to make judgements about other people's cultural preferences and to argue that vulgarity only really existed in the prissy moralizing mind of Middle England, was something that had to be engaged, hence the pondering of the particularities of certain demographics, even if the BBC had, in a sense, been here before. The problem of how to maintain a commitment to certain values, to standards and excellence while having to deal with issues of public appetites, was nothing new. In the late 1950s there was a profound sense inside the BBC that it had to modernize, while nurturing and then maintaining its ethical, journalistic and creative vitality. It was under severe pressure from a rampant new commercial competitor, ITV, and had to find a way of engaging with more of the viewing audience which was flocking to ITV. The BBC's then chairman, Arthur fforde, in a letter to Lord Reith, the BBC's first director general and founding genius, wrote: "My chief feeling is one of inadequacy…as to do what is possible to prevent a further slide in the direction of commercialization. The dilemma is that (a) if we turn our backs on all blandishments in the way of 'entertainment' or 'background music', and lose the large audiences in those fields, it will be said that we are not giving the public, en masse, what they pay their licence fee to get. (b) If we don't, it will said that there is no distinction between the BBC and the 'Independents', so why have a BBC?" (fforde, 1958).

That the BBC was able to evolve, create a commitment to intelligent populism, as well as more high minded content on, say, its radio services, in its news and current affairs output from the late 1950s onwards reflected a basic reality: that there was still a relatively broad based political and societal commitment to the idea that broadcasting should be committed to public service, that there was a public interest embodied in the lives, needs and demands of the public-as-citizen (Tracey, 1983). Those kinds of commitments had been significantly diminished in the decades following Margaret Thatcher's electoral victory in 1979 when the operative model for broadcasting, as in so much else, would no longer be the culture/public interest one, but a more market/economic model. There was also nothing particularly new in the BBC being embroiled in controversy. There had, in fact, long been a belief that it is actually part of its function to prod and nudge the culture with edgy provocations. Nevertheless it always sought to be in a position where it could argue that there was some redeeming quality to a programme, even if it had caused offence.

The problem with what Ross and Brand had done was that it was difficult to find any redeeming quality – except, of course, for all those who listened and thought it hilarious.

The BBC was here on the horns of a considerable dilemma because the days when the Corporation could argue that what it was about was a kind of creative, if cheeky, irreverence were gone, and what the Ross-Brand affair suggested was that while in previous times the BBC could live within its own interior imaginations, now it was having to face up to the need to open up to exterior realities which included providing for those who celebrated what has been called a "new offensiveness" in which " 'all the bigotries and the misogyny you thought had been banished forever from mainstream entertainment have made a startling comeback'" (Logan, 2009).

One measure of how the relationship between public service broadcasting and the society and the culture was shifting, of why Ross would be the highest paid employee, can be seen in the emerging grammar of public service broadcasting. In a speech in Banff, in 2000, Mark Thompson, who had just been appointed Director of Television for the BBC and would become Director General in May 2004, after a brief stint at Channel Four, argued that the idea of public service broadcasting had become tired and dusty, promoted by "people out there who believe that the whole purpose of public service television is not to change," and that if "elite culture is just one more niche, and one which appeals to a diminishing minority" and if it means patronizing does it have any role at all? The idea that there were those, of any standing, who believed that the purpose of public service broadcasting was not to change is, historically, nonsensical revealing of the emergence of a corporatist ideology which was bending the knee to the idea of the new populism and the market, mainly because the historical circumstance demanded that it do so.

In a speech to the Oxford Media Convention in January 2003, Thompson took his argument further and asked whether the old song that had traditionally sung the virtues of public service broadcasting would be able to "work its magic again?" In answering his own question, and channeling the change that would be wrought by the Blair government's 2003 Communications Act, he said: "to me, the Bill and the arrival of Ofcom have crystallized something which has been apparent for some time now: which is that regulators and policy-makers are increasingly finding themselves having to weigh the benefits and disbenefits (sic) of public service provision quite forensically, almost numerically, against the interests – and pressures – of the private sector." Thompson continued in his address: "The problem with the traditional public service song is that, no matter how much passion and conviction you bring to the performance, it's just too woolly and abstract to be measured against anything else. And if it can't be weighed properly, in the end it won't be valued properly. The dominant language of the new regulators is going to be the language of economics, competition and public policy rather than the historic language of public service broadcasting…"

Thompson's comments are interesting, if troubling. He is suggesting that what is happening is that an institution which is imbued with values that are hard, if not impossible, to pin down in language, let alone in an algorithm, is nevertheless faced with the need to articulate itself numerically – say in the number of listeners from a particular demographic . Would it be a stretch to suggest that the logic which is unfolding here is that if there is something – a value, a principle, a creative moment, a moral commitment – that cannot be represented numerically then at the very least a question mark will be placed against its continued viability? In fact, when Thompson speaks of the calculations that would now go into decision making one is reminded of a comment by Theodore Adorno in response to a failed effort to work with Paul Lazarsfeld on a quantitative study of American popular culture: "When I was confronted with the demands to 'measure culture,' I reflected that culture might be precisely that condition that excludes a mentality capable of measuring it…" (Adorno, 1963).

One is also drawn to another comment: "In almost all other lines of business it is possible to tell pretty accurately whether one's efforts are meeting with success or not. There is usually some unit of measurement available. It may be tonnage output per week, or comparative weekly costs, or a dozen other equally satisfactory tests, around which one can build one's comments, complimentary or otherwise, at the weekly staff conference. I should be grateful to anyone who would suggest a really reliable criterion for this business. I cannot find one." That would be John Reith (Reith, 1924).

Despite such arguments, there had to also be a rhetorical commitment to the idea of public service broadcasting. That language in recent years has been that of "public value." On first blush the idea doesn't seem that new. To declare in its report "Building Public Value" (BBC, 2004) that the BBC's purpose is to serve citizenship and civil society, promote education and learning, stimulate creativity and cultural excellence and bring the world to the UK, and the UK to the world.

There is, however, a revealing comment from the then Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, Tessa Jowell: " The idea of public value – which I believe in very strongly – will only survive if we are rigorous in its definition and application. Mark Moore, the inventor of the public value concept, said that 'Public value is what the public value'. There is a profound truth behind that simple definition" (Jowell, 2006). Indeed there is, but as a comment it is a remarkable echo of the 1981 statement by Mark Fowler, Reagan's first chair of the FCC who, in repudiating the language of the 1934 Communications Act which specified that station licence holders should broadcast in "the public interest, convenience and necessity," put forward the policy that from thereon "the public interest is that in which the public is interested," thus beginning the process of deregulation which many commentators believed would have disastrous consequences for the overall quality and performance of American television.

In the comments of Jowell, Bazalgette and Thompson, lies a whole world of change. Historically public service broadcasting did everything it could not to be bound by the tendrils of capitalist economics. It was in fact a venture that sought to keep at bay the materialism which constitutes capitalism. Its values embodied that other version of modernity, not its materialism, its impulse to produce, sell and acquire "things," rather its secular humanism that sought to elevate the human spirit, that saw in us, individually and collectively, possibility not as consumers, but as citizens, mature, ethically informed, thoughtful, creative, understanding with George Steiner that "the great and final things" cannot, should not, belong under any law of mercantile exchange (Steiner, 2003).

At the beginning of this essay the view was expressed that it was important to be careful about seeing too much in one particular event, in this case the Ross-Brand broadcast. It took place within a larger frame, in particular the way in which the BBC is having to respond to a world very different from the one it has historically been used to. An analogy might be to note that if you ask any half-way decent climate scientist, convinced of the high probability of human-induced climate change, if a particular weather event – say an outbreak of monstrous tornadoes – is evidence of our having reached a tipping point they will almost certainly admit to the imponderability of the question and note that the closer one gets to the singularity of a specific moment the more difficult it is to make that connection. Having said that there *were* aspects to the Ross-Brand affair that do seem to speak to something larger: the very fact of their presence in the BBC, (Jonathan Ross was not paid six million pounds a year by accident,) the clear understanding of the kinds of audience and tastes that they were hired to serve, the reflections of this in the way in which the BBC was now thought of and the importance of that corruptive concept – if one believes in creative independence – of public value, the way in which the BBC had come to see itself a "brand," and the rise of a managerial class for whom such terminology is utterly unproblematic. In the end it remains astonishing that no-one who was aware of the contents of the broadcast saw a problem. That speaks to an internal condition that was a result of the way in which the BBC was, and is, evolving. What is perhaps even more remarkable is that out of those 400,000 listeners only one person did see a problem.

The "probe" then does reveal something, that even in the 21st century perhaps because of the lingering scourge of class, the inflictions of economic stress and the catastrophic failure of education there are social and cultural deformities, that are readily commodified, by the likes of Ross and Brand on behalf of the Corporation. While not particularly planned their broadcast had a logic, a connectivity to one strand of popular taste, and rather than being a vulgar error here were two canaries in the gemeinschaft, evidence of something foul about the condition of broadcasting, and the society it serves.

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