

Words count. Take a word like public. This is a word handed down to us from Greece and Rome – a world beyond the private that every citizen holds in common. Thus the Athenian public square and public debate. So today a public footpath and a public library. And for the purpose of this lecture, a public service broadcaster.

We don't do noble in these iconoclastic times, but for me the idea of public qualifies above any other. This conception of the public realm is at the heart of our western civilisation. The great gift of the European Enlightenment was to revive the classical tradition and insist that there was a space held in common beyond church, monarch or state in which ideas and expression were permitted free currency – submitting themselves to independent scrutiny and examination by a plurality of diverse others and only of value if they survived it. Immanuel Kant famously summed up the spirit of the Enlightenment by calling on individuals to dare to know, but one can only dare to know if there is a public space that permits me – and you – access to information and knowledge that gives us the material to base some daring on. Information will inevitably be doctored by censors, spin doctors, thought manipulators, power brokers and influence peddlers. The powerful in both the private and public sectors want us to believe their truth. Our only recourse is an independent public space which allows us to compensate by freely challenging and testing these partial truths – and sometimes actual lies – so that we can arrive at the truth. Parliament, courts and universities are part of this public space, but so, crucially, is an independent media.

Public and state are thus two very different ideas – and it is vital to be clear about the distinction. We don't talk about state footpaths or state libraries. To be public is to be independently available to every citizen, to offer fairness to all, and to be transparent and accountable. Thus a public footpath. Thus a public law. The state, in a liberal democracy where parties compete for power in regular elections, is also plainly part of the public realm – but necessarily it is a protagonist of the particular ideology of the governing party. And at the limit it has the power to coerce. Even a democratic state has to be checked, balanced and held to account – and that requires it to be scrutinised in turn by the wider public realm, of which the media is a crucial component.

In my view this distinction between state and public is the alpha and omega of any discussion of public service broadcasting in which the BBC is often called a state broadcaster. It is not. It is the institution above any other in the country that is consecrated to embodying this quality of "publicness" in television, radio and the internet – the Enlightenment public space supplying us the opportunity as citizens to establish the truth of the matter in a world of competing truths and views. It is paid for by every citizen who owns a television or radio contributing the licence fee – not a regressive tax as is sometimes described but the universal fee that maintains this public space. And equally it has continually to engage with its public to ensure it is doing its job and so sustain its legitimacy.

Most of us – maybe all of us – would go along with the argument so far. But now the hard questions begin. Should just one institution, the BBC, have a monopoly of this licence fee? Wouldn't it be better to distribute the fee to all those many broadcasters in a digital age that want to support the public realm in particular programmes, say through an arts council of the air? In particular

shouldn't Channel 4, our other public service broadcaster, be eligible for some licence fee to support it as advertising revenues dwindle in a multi-channel, digital future? In which case, perhaps the BBC should be much smaller in size. And whether on today's scale or smaller, are the mechanisms by which the BBC daily verifies its own publicness robust enough?

My answer is that an institution to embody public service broadcasting across the gamut of programmes and potential audience subsets, so achieving critical mass, is a first order necessity. The BBC, despite its occasional falls from grace, still justifies the trust we give it in discharging this role. We need it because public service values do not come out of thin air; they have to be grounded in the daily reality of actually making programmes day in and day out for the universe of citizens – and our being able to judge whether the standard is being met. There are two wins. We guarantee sustained PSB and thus a crucial part of the public realm; and we have a benchmark to judge the efforts of others. Any discussion about how and if there should be further public support for Channel 4 can only start once we are certain there is a strong BBC – and that we don't end up weakening one to help the other.

For translating the high falutin' theory into actual programmes is tough. Lord Reith defined the BBC's role as entertaining, informing and educating – and insisted on objectivity and impartiality as values underpinning everything. I think that remains a pretty good starting point but I would go further. Today's ever more strident commercial values and pressures are undermining the private sector's capacity to sustain an independent truth-seeking media even as the powerful are becoming ever more astute in hiding what they want to hide. I argue for a reassertion of Reith's ideas – a new Reithianism. Put simply, a public service broadcaster has to enlarge and enrich my life as a citizen by trying to establish the truth of matters across the range of its programmes – in drama and documentary as much as in news and current affairs. It follows that we should ask three questions of the BBC. Do its programmes enlarge our lives as citizens? Has there been a diligent attempt to capture the truth of the matter? Is it proactively ensuring that it is serving the public realm by making sure information is available to the universe of citizen viewers and listeners?

The centrepiece of the BBC's role in our lives as citizens is thus the provision of information. It must furnish news that is objective and impartial. It must provide for discussion and debate that fairly reflects a wide range of views. It must in its documentary and current affairs provide us with a depth of analysis that deepens understanding. It must be creative and energetic in ensuring that every citizen in these islands gets the chance to join in. And in all these areas we need to know that the programme makers are attempting to find and tell us the truth of the matter. They may not always succeed. They must always try.

Here there is an encounter with three more pivotal words – truth, objectivity and impartiality. Michael Jackson, one-time chief executive of Channel 4 and a former controller of BBC One and Two, once said that public service broadcasting was a redundant piece of voodoo. There was no such thing as objectivity or truth; rather there was a plurality of objectivities and truths depending on your vantage point and values. Instead of trying to deliver programmes which struggled for an unattainable balance and objectivity, it

was much better for programme makers to break out of the straitjacket and offer a plurality of deliberately partisan programmes so that viewers could watch those that conformed to their prejudices or which aggressively challenged them.

I could not disagree more with Jackson's view, or the post-modern view of truth that lies behind it. I think many of Channel 4's subsequent problems – crystallised by the rows over *Big Brother* or the doubts that the excellent expose of Islamicist fundamentalism in *Undercover Mosque* could be true because of the channel's unenviable record of dodgy editing excused because truth is only in the eye of the beholder (a referral which today the police and Crown Prosecution Service apologised for...) having being robustly sued by Channel 4 and the programme maker) – root back, in my view to Jackson's mistake. It has been good to see that Channel 4 itself in its latest mission statement – Next on 4 – wants to recommit to what it once considered voodoo. For there are truths about matters, and they can be sought even in hard circumstances.

One of the most memorable demonstrations for me of the idea of objective truth-seeking in public service broadcasting was 25 years ago during the Falklands War; Brian Hanrahan, restricted by war-reporting rules, was reporting from the aircraft carrier *Hermes* about the numbers of Harriers that were returning during a raid. He had counted them out, he reported, and he had counted them all back in; and none were shot down. Not only the British public believed him – but so did a world public. Everybody knew that this was classic BBC objectivity, that the reporter and entire organisation were committed to truth and tried as far as they could to broadcast it, and that Hanrahan had counted the planes out and counted them back. These values were an important reason why our cause was more legitimate than the Argentinian juntas.

Getting to the truth of any matter is tough – but the BBC sets itself this task every day. As a national community we allow it to drop or qualify that mission at our peril. When broadcasting began in the 1920s the US imposed the fairness doctrine on its broadcasters in the same way Britain established the Reithian values that underpin the BBC; in a world of spectrum scarcity it was clear that those privileged to occupy it had to commit to fairness and truth-seeking.

The fairness doctrine was done away with by Ronald Reagan. Echoing Michael Jackson, the Reaganites said there was no one truth but rather a market in truths, and now that there was a multiplicity of channels viewers and listeners should be free to choose the truth they wanted. The ideology of free markets, post-modern views of truth, the interests of commercial television and radio and the political interests of the Republican party neatly coincided – with the Reaganites correctly calculating that in such an environment money would buy more conservative views of the truth than liberal. So it has proved, with everybody of course claiming that what they present is objective – and the American public growing ever more cynical about what they hear and watch. But worse, the spin doctors and manipulators have had an ever-easier ride. The most recent scandal is the disclosure that the Pentagon in the run up to and during the Iraq war gave privileged access to a network of ex-military chiefs, who then proselytised pro-Iraq-war views on TV and radio networks who not only did not challenge them very hard – but because they

were organised as a market of truths saw no especial reason to challenge them. The American public was manipulated, with no champion attempting to find truth besides which they could benchmark what they heard. The American public realm has been degraded.

Which is why the BBC as a news and current affairs organisation is so indispensable to this country, and why, as channels multiply in a digital world, it will become more important as the broadcast organisation committed to truth-seeking above any other in which so many versions of the truth are being thrown at us. That was its instinct during the Iraq war, and while I do not want to re-open old wounds about the BBC charge that the British government had knowingly sexed up dodgy dossiers which it knew would deceive that convulsed the corporation – the BBC went beyond what it knew at the time and should not have done – it did so because it was trying to get at the truth of the matter. And from what we know now, it got much closer than anyone else even if it over-reached itself. Two important values were in tension; the desire to get at the truth and the desire to break a story even if pushed beyond the limits of what the reporter knew, notwithstanding the quality of his source. The BBC lost its then chair and director general in defence of the first value, as well as triggering the new system of regulation by the BBC Trust. I recognise that the corporation was at fault and some change was needed, but whether it, and reporter Andrew Gilligan, deserved quite this degree of penalty – and little or no accompanying recognition for the value of its desire to truth tell and uphold a public realm – I have always doubted. In the future, we will need it and this instinct more than ever.

The quest to get at the truth, to equip the citizen with facts and knowledge and to sustain the public realm is at the heart of all good journalism – and excellent broadcast journalism is not the sole preserve of the country's public service broadcaster. But there is a subtle difference between the journalism of a privately owned newspaper and a public service broadcaster, summed up in the *Guardian* editor – I should say then *Manchester Guardian's* – C.P. Scott's famous dictum that facts are sacred and comment is free. A public service broadcaster's priorities for ranking news importance – its lead, second lead and so on, the so-called running order – have to correspond to the truth of what is important that day rather than what the newspaper, with its particular worldview and political stance, considers important. Each report has to contain internal balance and seek for the truth of the matter. And the links between the reports have to be punctilious, with the language attempting accurately to convey the truth of the matter. Current affairs analysis and documentary have to follow the same rules.

The BBC gets a lot of flak over its judgement calls every day – and sometimes rightly. For example I was struck during the coverage of Northern Rock – in which the BBC consistently broke story after story ahead of other news organisations – but where gradually the government was transmuted into a quarry so that the language in which news reports got housed became very loose. On the morning Chancellor Alistair Darling was set to make his statement in the House that finally Northern Rock was to be taken into temporary public ownership, the news bulletins talked of him “justifying” his decision – implicitly putting the BBC on the side of the Chancellor's critics. The verb for an impartial, truth-seeking broadcaster surely should have been that the Chancellor was going to “explain” his decision.

It is a small matter; but small matters in different contexts many times a day add up. Sometimes it is a question of what should be the lead story; was the tragic story of the disappearance of Madeleine McCann so important it deserved to be the lead of so many of the BBC's bulletins for so many days – and even sending presenter Hew Edwards to Portugal? Plainly not. Should the BBC have been so ready to charge MPs with personal skulduggery when they voted to limit freedom of information provisions extending to them because it would qualify their ability to serve their constituents? The House of Commons did have a case and it had to be heard. Is the tone of some political interviews – this politician is definitionally and necessarily lying to me – helpful or even right in trying to get at the truth of the matter?

These are some famous criticisms and the BBC should be attentive to them. But equally we the public need to judge them against the mass of the BBC's coverage week in and week out. Jeremy Paxman or John Humphreys now and again go beyond what is acceptable in public service broadcasting terms in their challenges; but in the main both men have earned their reputations justifiably for being impartial indefatigable truth seekers in a way that other parts of the media find hard to reproduce.

And the BBC operates against the background of a coarsening wider media culture in which regard for objective truth-seeking news values, and willingness to back it with investment, is weakening almost by the month. This is a world in which the Express Newspapers had to publish a front-page apology to the McCanns about alleging their complicity in their daughter's disappearance. In which Channel 4 in the *Great Global Warming Swindle* broadcast a programme in which one interviewee, Carl Wunsch, said his comments had been so distorted it reminded him of Second World War propaganda. Tony Blair's parting speech about the media last June would have been braver had it been given earlier than three weeks before he left office; but his characterisation of a feral media bent on seeking impact and driving down standards struck a chord. Intense competition, ever more pressure to ask journalists to do more with less, and a growing editorial and proprietorial willingness to organise the news so it tells the right sensational story, suiting the editors and readers prejudices, is a fatal cocktail. Nor are politicians the only victims. In this world the maverick scientist who claims against a mountain of contrary evidence that there is a link between MMR and autism gets avalanche exposure – sadly tempting the *Today* programme into the scrum – and when some parents are frightened into stopping inoculating their children, there is suddenly a public health risk. Never believe that good journalism doesn't count.

On the other hand, contemporary journalists face public and private power which is ever-readier to obfuscate, bully and spin – protected by onerous libel laws and flanked by a clever, well-financed PR industry. If news is something someone does not want the rest of us to know about, it is getting harder and harder to get beyond the press release – and when asking even innocuous questions, to get straight answers. In a print universe where reporters can write three or four stories a day, in 24/7 news – where the pressure is on to make instant news calls rather than let a story gestate for an hour or two to get a firm line of sight on what is happening and where control of access for pictures enormously empowers the subject of the story's capacity to dictate the character of the story – we need well-funded news

rooms with a spirit of truth-seeking. Rather than castigate the BBC for its weaknesses, it needs applauding for making so few mistakes – and still breaking stories and offering high-quality analysis.

Business editor Robert Peston's coverage of Northern Rock was outstanding. A recent *Panorama* on the superbug *C.difficile* was a model of PSB – well researched, balanced, watchable and hard-hitting. *Newsnight*, for me at least, is a must watch; it manages to be funky and surprising. *Today* is as lively and inquiring as ever. *World at One* has recovered from losing the inestimable Nick Clarke. The news bulletins on Radio 1, Jeremy Vine on Radio 2, and Radio 5 Live carry truth-seeking journalism into as broad a constituency as possible. Every day there is all of this; and we take it for granted. Sometimes the quest for objectivity and perceived balance forces the BBC into a contrived adversarialism. For example, I sometimes bridle at the new fashion for interviewing the BBC's senior journalists after a big political interview to interpret objectively what we have just heard; their own prejudices only just bubble below the surface, and it makes the reporter more important than the elected politician. It explicitly tells the audience that politicians are so duplicitous that their words cannot be trusted unintermediated by the impartial BBC which is locked in an adversarial relationship of permanent scepticism. In any case the BBC's political editor is only human; too much of such power corrupts. We should not be surprised that politicians' response is to become even more careful in what they say. To quest for truth should not demand a culture of permanent adversarialism; when the BBC's leading interviewers get into trouble it is because they have become prisoners of this culture.

The BBC cannot escape the wider media culture. Newspaper coverage of Europe, especially from some Conservative titles, has been extraordinarily careless of the truth in their anxiety to prove that Brussels is a menace rather than a friend of Britain; had the European Commission been Madeleine McCann it surely would have earned an apology by now. Eurosceptics want to know why the BBC does not ape the slanted coverage, accusing its desire to be truth-seeking as no more than liberal bias. I thought to give in to pressure from the Eurosceptic lobby and launch an internal inquiry whether the BBC's coverage into the EU was biased because it did not reproduce the same systematic bias as parts of the written media – many of whom no longer maintain a Brussels office – was weak. And although the inquiry declared that the critics were wrong, the whole action implicitly accepted the canard, reinforced by Andrew Marr, that the BBC has a cultural liberal bias.

The BBC is liberal, but in the Enlightenment sense of that word; we live in a liberal democracy with liberal institutions, and with the rise of authoritarian regimes around the world, thank God that we do. The BBC is open to every opinion, and those who cannot take the heat of being exposed to harsh cross-examination and evidence-based reporting fall back on the charge that the BBC is biased. Sometimes it's Eurosceptics; sometimes the Israeli government; sometimes the Palestinians; sometimes the British government. I don't argue that every BBC judgement is right – I've cited some of my own concerns – but I do stand by the view that it tries to get it right. It tries consistently to seek the truth of the matter for every citizen. And it does so more than any other news organisation in the country.

It is more beleaguered than it should be. The recent licence fee settlement was mean; Gordon Brown as Chancellor bowing to pressure from

commercial broadcasters that the BBC should be kept on short rations for no better reason than to show he was a politically correct BBC sceptic. The consequent rounds of redundancies and shaving of editorial budgets, together with too much public self-flagellation over every misdemeanour, has led to a growing crisis of morale. The BBC is nothing without its committed staff. More of us outside should speak up for the organisation and what those staff deliver. I sometimes wonder whether it has any friends at all – scant reward for its extraordinary contribution to our country

For who should speak up for it? The new structure has great strengths, but one of the difficulties is that the Trust is essentially the BBC's regulator, and regulators are not advocates. Equally it is very hard for the Director General to be the credible advocate of the organisation he is leading. Politicians feel there are few political rewards in speaking up for it, and every non-BBC journalist or critic wants to prove his or her credibility by giving it a kicking. And now there is a further threat to its funding by so-called top-slicing the licence fee and giving a proportion to the challenged Channel 4.

The BBC's best protection and best guarantor that it is doing its job is us – the public. I think the BBC does too little to tap this resource and latent support, both to protect itself and to make sure that it is doing its job. It invests hugely in establishing which of its programmes are watched and by whom; it is concerned by its market share, its reach and size of audience. But there is a disconnect between the rhetoric of public service broadcasting and the practice of dissecting one's audience as a supermarket chain does its consumers.

We are consumers, but we also watch and listen to the BBC as citizens. The BBC, like the regulator Ofcom, has well-established metrics setting out how many hours of news, drama and factual programmes it broadcasts. But both should go further. Alongside these quantitative measures of its programme output, I would want to develop qualitative measures to assess what I have called New Reithianism – and the questions I posed earlier. How well is the BBC – or Channel 4 – enlarging our lives as citizens? How much is truth-seeking embedded in what it has broadcast? And is it upholding the public realm by packaging what it does so creatively that everyone in the country has access to it? Every day it should be trying to pass the citizen, truth-seeking and public-realm tests – quizzing its viewers, instigating flash crowds, organising citizen juries, getting audience feedback. It would simultaneously have much greater confidence that what it was doing was right, grounded, and keeping it honest; and it could confront its critics with that knowledge. The BBC did make a commitment of this type at the time of Charter Renewal, but progress since has been terribly slow – indeed as far as I can see glacial. Instead it should act.

Should it be smaller? Name anything you would cut. Even the suggestion to privatise Radio 1 and 2 is misguided in my view; they are crucial to the BBC's capacity to be a universal broadcaster – to carrying public service broadcasting news and current affairs to a universal audience. Arguably the BBC should have more rather than fewer digital channels. Is it straying into too much commercial territory in its internet and educational ambitions? This is policed pretty forcefully by the Trust, but there will always be areas of contention. I was surprised at BBC Worldwide's purchase of the Lonely Planet Guides; the BBC can only justify commercial trade publishing of

its self-generated intellectual property – and it loses crucial support if it strays too far beyond that mission. Equally it has to be careful about its website; the benchmark should always be whether any activity delivers public purpose.

Should Channel 4 get part of the licence fee? Here I think there is need for some lateral thinking. The BBC, under financial pressure, wants to keep it for itself. But it needs to think strategically. At the moment it is the capital ship – the aircraft carrier – at the centre of a flotilla of public service broadcasters. There is Channel 4 along with the public service obligations attached to ITV and Channel 5. Sky, free from this obligation, might have chosen to play the voodoo card, but if there were temptations Sky has resisted them – not least because of the high standards elsewhere. In a digital world we need to preserve the flotilla effect. Ofcom should resist the blandishments of the commercial broadcasters to be freed from public service obligations; and we need to find ways of keeping Channel 4 well resourced. Maybe there should be a licence fee supplement consecrated to Channel 4; maybe a deal can be done to cut Channel 4 into BBC Worldwide contributing to its offer and sharing in its profit flow. We need to keep the BBC strong, but the best means to do that is not to make it the only repository of public service broadcasting. It needs buttresses and supports.

For it is a great Enlightenment institution – recognised outside this country for being one of our very best national achievements. It is a global name with global reach. If its reason for being is to be one of the principle upholders of Britain's public realm, paradoxically it gets very little public reward or acknowledgement for doing so. It is time that we the public had better mechanisms for certainly expressing our concerns – but also our appreciation. You've got your faults, BBC. But you are loved.