

# ***“Inform, entertain and educate” ?***

## ***History and development of Public Service Broadcasting***

*“The BBC is the origin and cornerstone of public service broadcasting in the UK. It is a key part of our culture and our public realm and it plays an important role in making our democracy function.”<sup>1</sup>*

Since his beginning (1922), British public service broadcasting has been characterized by purposes which, during these years, have helped it to emerge as a role model in the media world. Today, it represents an essential institution for British people.

The public service broadcasting's idea was born with the figure of John Reith (known as Lord Reith) who started to broadcast first radio programmes by the commercial society *British Broadcasting Company* (BBC). The BBC was established by a company who fabricated radio devices and after, in 1927, it became a public company called *British Broadcasting Corporation*. Thank to the institution of special Commissions, in particular those of Sykes in 1923 and Crawford in 1926, the society started to receive a contribution from citizens with the goal to be independent from any kind of influences by the State. Reith succeed to imprint the mission: *“to enrich people's lives with programmes and services that inform, educate and entertain”* and to be *“independent, impartial and honest.”<sup>2</sup>*

The model of public service broadcasting had to confront with a lot of changes during years. In this last decade, the quick development of new technologies and in

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<sup>1</sup> *Review of the BBC Royal Charter. Section One: The role of the BBC, 2005.*

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/insidethebbc/howweare/mission\\_and\\_values/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/insidethebbc/howweare/mission_and_values/)

consequence, the settlement of new broadcasting systems has influenced all the branch causing a period of decline.

The three “musts” explained by John Reith, the purposes of independence from the Government and freedom from private and commercial companies, have defined the model of public service broadcasting.

The aim of my thesis is to analyze through an historical way, the main changes of the public service and how they have caused a redefinition of it. In addition, my work would examine how the public service broadcasting has reacted to these new realities, what role it could carry out now and if the model based on the three Reith’s purposes is even achievable.

Since I have attended history of communication’s course, I have noticed a great interest in the British culture and in his radio and TV broadcasting models. Big differences from our service and from the American one, have attracted me to analyze it. In addition, having the chance to visit BBC’s studios in London crossing through his history, I was attracted more and more in it. I have perceived how important British people consider that service and how much confidence they replace in it. For these reasons, I have decided to examine in depth this argument, focusing on the development of the idea of public service broadcasting in the United Kingdom and emphasizing many Government’s conclusions drafted after the work of special Commissions.

Even if the figure of BBC is so related with the model of public service broadcasting, in UK there are also different types of public service that I have analyzed in my work. They are broadcasters who receive funding especially from advertising: *Independent Television (ITV)*, *Channel 4* and *Five*. Moreover, I decided to examine the importance of the digital and multichannel television and the impact of it which has caused significant changes in the public service, in particular in the BBC’s system.

First of all, before to see the development process of the BBC and the others broadcasting stations in UK that I have analyzed in the heart of the first chapter, it is essential to describe the concept and the aims of the public service and how it has spread over in Europe. On the basis of the Reith’s ideas, it is necessary to support and encourage all common political and social values, which are

fundamental for a democratic society and for the right performance of the public service. The concept of the “audience”, who is considered as a political collective entity, is strictly related with the principle of citizenship. Moreover, on the basis of the principle of citizenship, there are three essential conditions, according to Ernest Gellner, which are: culture, social organization and political organization. The progress of these three elements has allowed to the public service to create the right conditions for a proper exercise of its function. However, the gradual growth of the service in Europe is related with his historical development and in his different traditions and cultures. Even though, the main mission for the expansion of every kind of service is to provide information and to ensure political programmes. Nevertheless, it is difficult to identify a single public service broadcasting model and so, every European Western country has evolved it in according to their own ideals and their political, economic and social rules. For example, the German public service is organized on a federal system of networks and a program schedule which reflects the character and the cultural realities of the civil German society. Instead of, in France, the public service broadcasting have developed with the birth of the Radio Télévision Française (RTF) in 1949. The two are different: the French system, opposite of the German one, is characterized on a centralized control by the Government.

However, the monopoly of British public service broadcasting was born with the Reithian Theory which is based on two fundamental points. First of all, he believed in the public service as a public owned organization but politically independent from the State and so, it should be a public service also in his founding principles. Secondly, Reith considered that this service has the assignment to educate and entertain the audience, without producing offensive contents. Education, in particular, has provided not only through programmes made for children or for schools, but also with a lot of arts and religious programming which had an educational agenda.

Reith’s theories have been so criticized, especially for his paternalist behaviour against spectators who were considered “childish”, but the BBC, under its control, became a real cultural model for the country.

My analysis goes on with the description of the BBC, from his birth until the second postwar period, going through reports drawn up by special committees of inquiry. The first committee was presided over Sir Frederick Sykes in 1923, with the task of found out a permanent financing system for radio's programs. Sykes' conclusions have led the certainly that this medium of potential influence must be run by a public control. Consequently, in 1926 under the Crawford's Committee, the public service broadcasting passed to be managed by a public body established by a *Royal Charter*, a constitution which has the aim to decide the goals of the service, and an oversight body called *Board of Governors*. Furthermore, the Commission established that the BBC had to benefit of the broadcasting monopoly and had to operate in the public interest keeping total impartial approach against the different political fronts. So, the *British Broadcasting Company* passed to become a public body called *British Broadcasting Corporation*.

One of the most significant moments for the public service was the first radio speech address to the nation by King George V, which steady connections between the BBC, the monarchy and the British citizens. Moreover, in 1936 the *Corporation* has started to broadcast regularly a television service and after an interruption in 1939 caused by the Second World War, the programming restarted in 1947 with the increase of the TV licences for an expansion of the service outside of London. After this, the technological development of the broadcasting sector and the economic resumption led the Government to consider the introduction of commercial television in the British broadcasting system which happened with the approval of the law called *Television Act* in 1954. My survey goes on with the birth of three independent televisions with commercial purposes, which marked the end of the BBC's monopoly. Commercial television started to transmit in 1955 with the new broadcaster *Independent Television* (ITV). It was structured with a federal system which provided the settlement of different regional televisions companies funded by advertising. After an initial competition, BBC and ITV have settled down and gave birth to a period of cohabitation called "*comfortable duopoly*". In the Eighties, afterwards the birth of *BBC2*, the Margaret Thatcher's Government introduced the fourth TV channel in UK: *Channel 4*. In particular, the new channel aimed to broadcast programs for minorities. In addition, the fifth channel,

*Channel 5* (today called *Five*), started to transmit regular programs in 1997, with an initial problem caused by great competition of pre-existing channels.

My thesis continues to analyze that, with the intromission of other commercial channels, the notion of public service started to expand and with birth of multichannels' platforms and the digital TV, it underwent a sort of revolution. In 1986, the *Independent Broadcasting Authority* (IBA) released to the private consortium *British Satellite Broadcasting* (BSB) the first authorization for broadcast programs directly from a satellite. At the same time, Rupert Murdoch entered in the British broadcasting system with his *Sky Television*. At the beginning of Nineties, the two companies decided to merge to gave birth to the *British Sky Broadcasting* (BskyB) which started to expand the British satellite service with a large variation of different channels for any kind of audience. Britain was the leader in the rollout of digital television services, which made his entrance in 1998. The Government with the *Broadcasting Act* of 1996 emphasized the transition to the digital television and in 1998, *Sky Digital* broadcasted the first program in a digital way. Therefore, the BBC has reacted with the production of some digital services and with the birth of six new channels, one of which is a 24 hours news' channel. Moreover, in october 2002, the BBC gave rise to a free digital service called *Freeview* which has contributed to the recovery of BBC after a difficult period. Important development of the television system has brought new legislative initiatives. The most significant was: The *Communication Act* (2003), which has delivered important changes to the regulatory structure of media and communications sectors in UK. The key principles of the Act are *to ensure access to high quality services* and *to ensure that the goals of public service remain at the heart of British Broadcasting*.<sup>3</sup>

In the last paragraph of my work, I am focused on the reorganization of the BBC after these important changes in the television sector. In particular, the BBC has shown the interest to increase the regional production which was monitored by two sectors: BBC Nations and BBC Regions. Moreover, in march 2005, Blair's Government published a *Green Paper* with the purpose to offer some advices for

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<sup>3</sup> Petros Iosifidis, *Public Television in the Digital Era. Technological challenges and new strategies for Europe*, 2007, p. 86.

the renewal for other ten years of *Royal Charter* which should propose the principles features for the BBC in the twenty-first century. In addition, the document proposed to found two new bodies replacing the *Board of Governors*. They are: the *BBC Trust*, with the aim of view the activity and the management of the company, and the *Executive Board* with the task of operate in the administrative sector of the company. All the proposals contained in the Paper were accepted and the Royal Charter was finally drawn up in 2006 and it runs until December 2016. The three Reith's terms are always the first goal of the enterprise that in addition, in the last years, has provided a wide range of new services for digital platforms that the audience appreciated.

Over the year, the concept of public service broadcasting in Britain has changed extremely. First of all, the social and economic changes and the significant increase of the telecommunications sector has brought both a growth in the consumption of goods and a digital divide between who can benefit and who can't have access to new innovative services. Furthermore, in my work I have observed that the concept of public service broadcasting has evolved fitting with the social and economic changes in the country. Thank to the Government legislative proposals, I was able to analyze the numerous approaches adopted by the broadcasts for a quickly adjustment in a new and innovative system. Therefore, in this last decade, public service and his tasks are grown up and his role has turned. On the other hand, the cultural differences, the democratic values and the principle of citizenship do not lose their fundamental role in the service because of the audience needs to recognize itself in common purposes which ensure a real communication.

In addition, the changes of these last years caused to the public service broadcasters a loss of level of audience than private sectors which have more availability to spend and to gain TV rights. After this analysis, it is necessary to ask if the model of public service broadcasting could be achievable now. Moreover, even if his role remains fundamental and ingrained in British society, it does not have the same role as in the past. In fact, it is so difficult to impose it in developed countries where citizens prefer to have much choice in what they would like to see even if they have to spend much money for it. In addition, it is not only a problem of what they would like to see and about the quality of programs. The other issues

are the costs and so, for how long time they could keep the service and what role can it actually play.

In conclusion, with the establishment of a system composed mainly from private companies, the model of service public broadcasting underwent a great downfall. In reply to this decay, the *British Broadcasting Corporation* has committed itself for start a convergence to the digital but never losing sight of its political and social functions. In fact, in little time, it has been able to extend well-advanced itself in the exploitation of new technologies than other European countries. However, even if the public service broadcasting is not in a good period, it continues to be a key part of UK and the principal motor of innovation. It is a service that has contributed in a strongly way to the training of British society driving it in important stages of his social and economic progress. Moreover, it has helped to aim to general well-being, providing an high quality programming attainable to everyone. In a future, it is necessary that the public service broadcasting succeed to stay on more and more creative, innovative and dynamic, not forgetting to adapt to society's values. It is not any more enough to *Inform, Entertain and Educate*, it needs something different.