

The role of PSB in supporting Social Media

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The title of this talk seems to imply that social media is a good thing. In many ways it is, but, as we all know, it also has harmful aspects too. Think of the recent UK Twitter-naming of individuals claimed to be child abusers, and your own Irish Twitter Gate during your Presidential Elections.

Benefits of Social Media

The good aspects are, of course:

- social media gives individuals a voice, reducing the dominance of the professional media
- It enables speedy people-to-people mass communication. Remember how important Facebook and Twitter were during the Arab Spring
- It allows broadcast programming to become interactive, with the broadcaster able to take into account the views of the public.
- It can enhance democracy by allowing members of the public the chance to quiz their elected representatives, and to raise issues which have failed to interest the professional media and politicians. Through Facebook and Twitter, politicians can keep directly in touch with their constituents, and the constituents have the potential to bring direct pressure to bear on the decisions of their MP.
- It can get round censorship eg currently in the reporting of Syria, where overseas journalists are banned from entering and filming. The footage used off the web is generally identified as unverified, but it usually all that there is.
- It can provide a forum for debate and for campaigning

Perils of Social Media

The dark side of social media is that, because it has no – or hardly any - imposed standards, it can cause rumours to rush round the world. These can sometimes unfairly damaging people. Social media can be used for hate campaigns and for false information in a variety of forms, including faked pictures and footage. Falsehoods distributed during an election campaign can swing the result.

The need for standards on the web and in social media

In the UK we are now seeing a current wave of demands for compensation from those who wrongly twittered the name of a senior Conservative politician in connection with allegations of child abuse. Catching people out in inaccuracies on the web, on Facebook and on Twitter, and punishing them, is a fairly new development. This, more than anything, will drive people to consider what they say and to take into account the possibility of libel. Too many people think they can get away with anything on the web and on social media. But the web does need standards just like all other kinds of publication, and here is a sign of these standards beginning to be introduced. The Conservative politician who was wrongly identified on the internet as a child abuser is collecting large damages from the BBC after an edition of Newsnight carried comments enabling him to be identified. His lawyers are in negotiation with ITV for large damages. And the hundreds or thousands of individuals who identified him on Twitter or Facebook or anywhere else are being tracked down by his lawyers, asking for an apology and a modest donation to the BBC's Children in Need.

As with the press, the necessary standards should ideally be self-imposed. This is especially relevant at the time of the publication of the UK's Leveson Report into the Press and phone-hacking. But it is very hard to devise a self-imposed system for something as anarchic as the web and social media.

Could it be realistic to envisage two kinds of electronic media? One in which users agree to abide with certain agreed standards of accuracy and decency, and one which carries on where anything goes, as now? This is already happening a bit, with clear public preferences for trusted websites. Those parts of social media adhering to an agreed code of conduct could be badged in some way. In cases of transgression, the badging could be removed. This would be incredibly controversial, with howls of stopping the freedom of the internet. But that freedom wouldn't be stopped. There would just be identification of trusted sources. It could be a beginning. After all, over the centuries, it has been felt wise to put restrictions on printed publications to try to uphold decency, prevent libels and incitements to hatred and racism.

Even professional journalists, of course, have difficulty complying with the libel laws. The general public finds them even more difficult. But just as the population has learned to enjoy complicated computer games, buy on line, download aps for their hand-held devices, so the ordinary citizen is going to have to understand how to verify statements and how to avoid issuing or repeating a libel, as well as being careful about incitement to hatred or violence, and issues of decency.

Identifying contributors to social media

Many contributing to social media do not consider risk to themselves or to those they mention. Many contributors use aliases and think they are untraceable, but this is not necessarily the case. Persecution is common in authoritarian regimes, angered by those who dare to speak against them. But, though brave contributors may suffer, *without* social media, the protesters in autocratic regimes have no voice.

Developing social media for the public good

As well as giving a voice to the voiceless, the growth of social media enables much more participative forms of governance to be possible, at the expense of big, top down governance, of a one-size-fits-all type. So what are the ways in which Public Service Broadcasters can help social media develop *for the public good*? They can:

- Spread awareness of life-enhancing opportunities, and understanding of how to use them
- Spread awareness of harmful ways in which social media can be used, and how this can be combated.
- Use programming to publicise anti-bullying organisations and other organisations which help individuals over cyber-bullying
- Emphasise to those using Twitter and Facebook for allegations that there are risks in this and that those spreading untruths may be identified and prosecuted.
- Use their programming to help listeners and viewers towards trusted websites rather than dubious ones
- Try to provide help to the poor, the disadvantaged and the elderly so that they may also benefit from using social media

This effort comes at a cost: the public broadcasters need to develop systems and provide staff to handle social media

They need to make sure that, when they use pictures sent in by the public, or take twitters into account in news programming, rigorous checks into their provenance and veracity have been made. This needs wise, experienced journalists and editors. It needs dedicated, specialist staff. The BBC assigns such staff, and spends major sums in dealing with material which comes in from the public.

When launching into this world, they set up a special department, in 1997, BBC Online, later renamed BBC New Media. They issued special Guidelines called "Interactive Producer Guidelines" in 2002. Then came the creation of a Director of New Media, and in 2008 a Head of Social Media was appointed, and Editors of Social Media for the new departments of BBC Vision and BBC Audio and Music. There was active encouragement for the use of producer-hosts to mediate the notice boards and chat rooms, and special measures were put in place to delete unsuitable material that appeared. Experienced people were introduced to ban and un-ban members of groups, and to supervise the content uploaded. Some tasks such as welcoming new members were automated, but it was soon found that there was no substitute for a real person doing the supervision.

The future: difficulties ahead for PSBs

What I have been talking of so far applies to what is happening now. But what of the future? Rushing towards us is a time when fewer and fewer watch on TV sets or listen on radio sets. Viewing on pcs and hand-held devices is the preference of the young and is a trend that is galloping towards us. The PSBs now funded by a license fee will lose their income base if we all stop buying TV sets and use pcs and hand held devices instead. It is likely that in the future the charge for PSB will have to be based on licenses *for such devices*. But public support for this is going to be hard. It is much easier to continue with an old-established tax or fee, rather than accept a new one. If a new kind of licence fee were introduced, based on pcs and hand-held devices, there would be major lobbying from the suppliers of the new devices to try to abort any such scheme before birth.

Another option for PSB funding could be to use micro-credit cards, set up to handle pennies rather than pounds, and for the PSBs to charge for their programming item by item. But this has the disadvantage that the heartland of PSB, such as the broadcasting of Parliament, would bring in very little income, while Celebrity Skate Boarding, or whatever is the top entertainment show of the future, will bring in a lot. So it would be hard to finance socially useful programming in this way. The balance of power within the organisations would shift towards the entertainment side which brings in the money.

A further alternative is funding through a kind of Arts Council of the Air ie a pot of public money which can be bid for competitively, by any broadcasting organisation prepared to make programmes with the motive of benefiting the public rather than

making money. This is done in Ireland, in New Zealand and in Singapore. The PSB money goes not to support an organisation, but to individual series or programmes. The broadcasting organisations hate this, because it leads to lack of continuity, making it impossible to mount such specialist programmes as the David Attenborough wild life series, or to run the Proms. These kind of programmes require dedicated long term specialisation to ensure the necessary quality. This solution has been seriously considered by the UK's regulator Ofcom but was finally abandoned. However, it will doubtless have to be re-examined.

Some argue that, in the future, PSB funding will have to be reduced to support only the most key PSB functions and provided out of taxation – difficult at a time when cutting government expenditure is essential, in order to reduce the crippling burden of Government debt. Even though the licence fee would be discontinued, taxation would rise.

Whatever systems are adopted for the future, this is something we have to get right, or PSBs as we know them will be on the way out, or to greatly diminished futures, within the next decade.

More personalised decision-making

This is important because there is a major contribution which PSBs can make in the future towards helping social media develop in socially useful ways. As already touched on, social media enables us to move away from Big Government in favour of much more local and personalised choice. Imagine if much of the UK'S Health Service could be delivered in this way, ie, if it could become a 2-way dialogue, based on the needs of the individual, with budgets devolved to the individual, through vouchers or other such systems. And the same for education.

Some governments, for example that of Namibia, are already writing into their Strategic Plans the intention of making their country into a Knowledge Society. If others do this too, then the major changes which are happening already in the way we purchase goods and services could spread into the way we use our government. The EU has, through its Broadcasting Directives, backed the Knowledge Society and the role of PSBs in supporting and developing it. It has also backed concentrating on European content – a move opposed widely by broadcasters in the UK who have argued that the internet is so global that there is no way quotas could be used to ensure a certain proportion of European content in such material.

The use of social media is galloping ahead anyway, however much the EU may want to guide it. PSBs have to run fast to keep up with what is happening and have to make their contribution by offering the highest standards, and the motivation that

what they do should be socially beneficial. There is a bottom-up revolution going on over social media, driven by millions of individuals who like social media and are themselves innovating in the ways they use it.

This is happening at a time when Big Government is increasingly becoming recognised as unaffordable. Consumer-led solutions are cheaper. Little by little they are likely to be adopted in a variety of areas. And this will all be because of two-way digital communication.

2-way information is the key to the governance of the future, and both social media and PSB are crucial to this. A free media is crucial to the quality of government – you cannot have an effective, open government without a free media. And a PSB plus a full range of social media and internet access provides the freest media of all. This combination has the potential to bypass commercial interests as well as those of central and local government.

A slower end to Big Government in less developed countries.

One disadvantage of social media is that it is not universally available. This may be due to lack of infrastructure, or poverty, or lack of skill through age or lack of training. So while people in the developed world often behave as though the internet and social media are as freely available as the air we breathe, this is far from the case. The poor and the elderly in the UK and Ireland already feel excluded from the internet age, and this has to be managed through the continuation of traditional methods of dealing with them. In most of the developing world, of course, the new information world is only available to small elites and to the educated young. They have to use huge ingenuity to access it, often at high personal cost.

So the majority of the world is still reliant on radio and TV and newspapers for its political information. In many countries these are far from free - even in countries with reasonably democratic structures. In such countries, even though only the elite may have access, the internet and the rise of social media does, however, make it harder for the state, or commercial organisations, to control the content of radio, TV and the press.

I was in Zimbabwe last year, and very few people there have their own pcs. But figures counting the number of hits to news and information websites covering Zimbabwean developments show that nearly all the access is in the daytime. This can only mean that those who have office pcs are not just using them to tally their firm's accounts, or collate government forms. They are sitting at their desks covertly finding out what is really going on.

We also have examples from the revolutions in Libya, Egypt and Syria and in other parts which have experienced the Arab Spring, of how the internet and social media proved crucial to disseminating accurate information, despite attempts to censor it. When you visit countries such as Egypt, which I went to shortly after their revolution, I saw how people there gave a very high priority to the reform of the media, so that state control, particularly of broadcasting, cannot continue to offer only a government line.

The same is true in many other countries where there is a longing for quality broadcasting which is fair and open and unbiased in its coverage. This is of course very difficult to achieve, especially as there are vested interests in the continuation of existing large state broadcasters.

The leadership role of PSBs

It is especially in such countries that the PSBs need to lead their people into the digital world. They can link their programmes into the internet and into social media and expand the horizons of the whole population. This makes a contribution to Freedom of Information: the more the population has access to the wealth of information on the web, and via social media, the harder it is for Governments to control what the public see and hear.

By using all the potential for interactivity in broadcasting, it becomes less of a machine for transmitting material, and more a responsive system which viewers and listeners can influence and ultimately control.

Some people argue that in the digital world, with lots of choice, there is no need any more for a PSB. The market will supply all that is needed. But the market is out to maximise return, not to serve those parts of the population, such as children, the elderly, the poor, and the disadvantaged minorities. None of these provide lucrative markets for the supplier. It is widely accepted that there should be some state provision of education, otherwise huge numbers would have no access to it. It is equally important to provide socially-inspired broadcasting, in order to reflect local culture, to increase understanding of the modern world, and to offer free and fair reporting.

So what we have to do is encourage PSBs to work together with the internet and social media, always with the motivation of furthering social progress, rather than making profit. We need each to grow stronger and freer.

Already there has been a huge advance in openness, through the availability of key documents on websites, through cheap communications for action groups, through platforms for minority views, and through communication upwards as well as

downwards. Now we have to develop this so that it is available universally, so that it cannot be tampered with or switched off, and so that it reaches, in time, all the citizens, using access through internet cafes, mobile phones, hand held devices and internet booths in public places. This is what will make the world a better place for all of us to live in.