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Public deliberation and the justification of public service media

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ABSTRACT

Any debate about the future of public media must include the public, but how the public is engaged matters. While public input is elicited by those making governance decisions about public service media, the methods of public engagement used tend to be non-deliberative and so do not provide opportunities for members of the public to discuss and reflect on relevant issues together. We argue that public deliberation is necessary to facilitate a collective public voice that can better justify governance decisions about public service media. To illustrate our argument, we analyse public discussions within an online deliberative assembly about the future of the public service media in the UK. We show not only how assembly participants reflected on and evaluated justifications of public service media in diverse ways, but also the role deliberation played in weeding out unjustifiable claims and facilitating a form of mutual justification among a heterogeneous public.

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Introduction

While there is no shortage of arguments in support of public media today, the context for making these arguments is unfavourable. Public service media (PSM) organizations operate in an unsympathetic political climate, where neoliberal thinking has long been ascendent in media policymaking (Dawes 2021; Hesmondhalgh 2019), and new critical populist voices accuse them of siding with an unrepresentative 'elite' (Holtz-Bacha 2021). At the same time, they face greater competition for audiences and users and often have fewer financial resources to cater for them, putting their claim to serve the whole public in question. PSM therefore face significant and pressing challenges to their legitimacy.

Public engagement has been identified as a response to these legitimation problems (Fehlmann 2023; Weiss 2022). PSM organizations engage audiences and users directly in their activities in different ways, from commenting on content via social media to more ambitious forms of 'co-creation' (Just 2020; Vanhaeght and Donders 2021). Meanwhile, those involved in governing PSM also seek to elicit public views when making policy and regulatory decisions (Donders, Van den Bulck, and Raats 2019; Rodríguez-Castro and Campos-Freire 2023). Focusing here on public engagement in PSM governance, we argue that greater attention to public voice could prefigure a more democratic approach, where decisions about the aims and activities of PSM are better justified to and supported by the publics they affect, but that limitations remain in how public engagement tends to be understood and conducted.

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A major weakness in methods of public engagement, we argue, is a lack of meaningful opportunities for members of the public to deliberate about PSM as a shared concern. While the voices of the most powerful stakeholders tend to dominate policy consultations, public voice appears most often in PSM governance through surveys and other forms of market research or via individual complaints and feedback. These methods address the public primarily as ‘consumers’ of content and services, with the focus tending to be on their preferences, behaviour, or responses to specific aspects of delivery, rather than their more general views about the public value or direction of PSM (Hasebrink 2011; Just 2020). Furthermore, they position the public as isolated individuals or members of market segments, and do not provide an opportunity for them to reflect together on the essentially collective question about the form and value of PSM.

We argue that more public deliberation is necessary to facilitate a collective public voice that can better justify governance decisions about PSM. Not everyone may agree about a complex and contested issue such as PSM, but the value of a deliberative process for public engagement does not depend on achieving public unanimity. Rather, deliberation is important in testing justifications to see how much reflective public support they can gain. Most critical, as the political theorist Rainer Forst (2001, 362; 2014; 2017, 29) stresses, is the role deliberation plays in distinguishing claims that are genuinely ‘shareable’ from those that are unjustifiable because they cannot be ‘reciprocally’ and ‘generally’ shared. This function of deliberation helps to facilitate a type of mutual justification among a heterogeneous public – what we call ‘public voice as mutual justifiability’ in contrast to ‘public voice as unanimity’.

In this article, we adopt this approach to deliberation to reflect on its role and value in the governance of PSM. We address two research questions:

RQ1: How do members of the public evaluate justifications of the value of PSM when they deliberate together?

RQ2: How does deliberation about PSM facilitate mutual justification among the public?

To answer these questions, we analyse an example of public deliberation about PSM designed to influence media policy in the UK: an online deliberative assembly that brought together 46 members of the public, over several sessions, to debate PSM’s future and contribute to a review of PSM led by the UK regulator, Ofcom. We treat the ‘public purposes’ Ofcom (2015, 4) uses to understand the value of PSM, which are all framed with reference to an implicit normative ‘good’ (informing the public, stimulating knowledge and learning, reflecting UK cultural identity, and representing diversity), as a proxy for justificatory claims to legitimacy. We then analyse how participants reflected on and debated these purposes, and how they responded to each other as interlocutors.

Below we outline the research context, before presenting the theoretical framework and method. We then discuss the findings, analysing the reflective discussions that emerged among participants in response to each justificatory claim.

Research context

Justifying PSM

The idea of ‘public service’, as applied to broadcasting and media more generally, is a contested concept that has been understood in different ways across contexts (Moe 2011). PSM organizations have been associated with different purposes and values and have taken different forms: they may be funded publicly, commercially, or through a combination of the two, and they may even be privately as well as publicly owned. In the UK, for example, the B.B.C.’s television channels, ITV1, Channel 4 and Channel 5 are all understood and regulated by Ofcom as ‘public service broadcasters’, but differ markedly. While the B.B.C. is publicly funded, the other television channels are funded commercially, mainly through advertising, and although Channel 4 is publicly owned and not for profit, ITV1 and Channel 5 are owned by private companies. Yet, despite their organizational differences, these and other media are all justified as PSM through

the claim that they serve 'public purposes' that cannot be met by commercial, market-based media alone (Keat 2011).

Historically, as Jean Seaton (2018, 445) argues, public service broadcasters appeared certain about the nature of the 'undivided public good' they served. Reflecting an 'ethos of paternalism' (Murdock 1999, 14), early public service broadcasters and governments tended to assume they knew what was good for the public and how it could be realized. Listening to actual publics therefore seemed secondary. To this extent, public service broadcasting appeared to reflect a more general democratic deficit in social-democratic models of citizenship (Dawes 2014). The assumption was that benevolent authorities could promote what was good for the public without also engaging the public in deliberation about how this was to be defined, and how it should be realized (Delanty 2000; Forst 2014; Habermas 1994).

Justifications for PSM remain strong in today's marketized media environments. PSM may have important roles to play in promoting, among other things, well-being and flourishing (Hesmondhalgh 2016), inclusion and diversity (Born 2005; Saha 2018), and citizenship and democracy (Neff and Pickard 2021). Yet justifications for PSM are contested. Those advocating neo-liberal, pro-market ideas have been joined more recently by populist voices in questioning PSM (Holtz-Bacha 2021). Meanwhile, PSM organizations face more competition for audiences and users from commercial, market-based media, including global digital platforms and streaming services, while often operating with reduced resources, limiting their ability to reach and serve the whole public. Faced with these challenges to their legitimacy, and a more general climate where the public tend to be more sceptical of authority and expect greater responsiveness from organizations that claim to act in their interests (Gregory and Willis 2023), engaging with the public has become indispensable for PSM (Fehlmann 2023; Just 2020).

As a result, PSM organizations have experimented with engaging audiences and users directly in their activities, ranging from offering limited participation such as commenting on social media to more ambitious forms of 'co-creation' (Just 2020; Vanhaeght and Donders 2021). At the same time, those involved in making policy and regulatory decisions about PSM, both within PSM organizations and in public authorities, also engage the public (Rodríguez-Castro and Campos-Freire 2023). Public consultations, audience, and user research, as well as channels for feedback and complaints are used to inform their decisions. This focus on public voice could prefigure a more democratic approach to PSM governance, where their aims and activities are better justified to and supported by the publics they affect (Moss 2018; Weiss 2022). Yet, current approaches to public engagement in PSM governance remain limited in terms of their democratic potential.

First, while public consultations are open to all to participate in principle, researchers note that they are often dominated by the most powerful stakeholders in practice (Donders, Van den Bulck, and Raats 2019; Edwards and Moss 2022; Freedman 2008). Public concerns may be represented by civil society groups, but public engagement in consultation processes is typically minimal. Following an analysis of public consultations on PSM across four countries in Europe, Rodríguez-Castro and Campos-Freire (2023, 238) conclude that they 'constitute a missed opportunity for PSM organizations to open their decision-making structures to structural participation' and 'cannot be considered a successful environment for citizen participation'.

Public voice appears more often in the findings of surveys and other market research, or through feedback or complaints mechanisms. But these kinds of public engagement position the public primarily as 'consumers' of content and services, with the focus on their individual preferences, behaviour, or responses to specific aspects of delivery, rather than their more general views about the value or direction of PSM (Hasebrink 2011; Just 2020). In this, they continue the UK trend towards a consumerist approach to policymaking since the 2000s, which prioritizes consumer research and market considerations (Chivers and Allan 2022; Dawes 2021; Lee, Oakley, and Naylor 2011). This tendency persists in the context of PSM even though research indicates that its societal value is important for the public (Nielsen et al. 2023), and that support for the value of public service as an idea is not reducible to personal preferences but 'appears to

transcend both sociodemographic characteristics and individual values' (Just, Buchi, and Latzer 2017, 1004).

Another weakness of public engagement in PSM governance, central to our argument here, is the relative lack of public deliberation. Rather than being addressed just as individual consumers or members of market segments, people need an opportunity to reflect collectively on PSM. Yet, even when asked about the more general value of PSM, the public have limited opportunities to consider relevant arguments together. For example, the UK media regulator Ofcom (2020a) does ask about the 'societal value' as well as 'personal value' of PSM in survey research. But surveys do not allow respondents to consider issues and different views before giving a response (Sanders 1999). In the absence of deliberative opportunities for individuals to consider perspectives and views other than their own, and collectively weigh up the merits of different positions when drawing conclusions, public justification and public legitimacy of PSM are weakened. After all, there is an important normative difference between justifications that are passively accepted or rejected and those based on good reasons that have been 'reflexively constructed or tested' (Forst 2017, 38). Indeed, as we argue further below, public deliberation is critical to establishing the type of mutual justification among a heterogeneous public that can better justify decisions about PSM.

Justification and deliberation in the context of media policy

Opportunities for people to reflect critically on their media environments are limited. Apart from short-term public controversies, media policy issues rarely receive wider attention in the public sphere, and the discussions that take place are often skewed by the strategic interests of commercial media (Freedman 2008; Loblich 2012). In this context, practical attempts to promote 'deliberative democracy', including those that bring together citizens as 'mini publics' to deliberate on public issues (Smith and Setälä 2018), are a much needed and still radical form of intervention in media governance and policy (Edwards and Moss 2020b, 2022).

Minimally defined, 'deliberation' refers to 'mutual communication that involves weighing and reflecting on preferences, values and interests regarding matters of common concern', while 'deliberative democracy' refers to 'any practice of democracy that gives deliberation a central place' (Bachtiger et al. 2018, 2). An emphasis on reflection through mutual reason-giving and listening is a core feature of deliberation (Bächtiger and Parkinson 2019). Rather than seeking to capture existing preferences, deliberative methods allow participants to learn about an issue of shared concern and discuss it with others to arrive at a more informed and considered view. Meanwhile, the 'democracy' element of 'deliberative democracy' connects deliberation to collective decision-making. Participants are engaged not just as consumers or audiences to be researched, but as participants in a democratic process.

'Mutual respect' and the 'absence of coercive power' have remained consistent ideals for deliberative democrats, alongside the assumption that, as people reflect together on shared issues or concerns, they may change their initial views (Bachtiger et al. 2018). Empirical research confirms the possibility that people's views can change because of deliberation, including that they may become less polarized (Fishkin et al. 2021). But deliberation does not need to lead to a rational consensus or convergence of views to be valuable; it can also be important for clarifying differences among positions before trying to reach a compromise or allowing people to vote. Indeed, in contexts of inequality, raising people's consciousness about their different interests would be more desirable than a putative consensus (Mansbridge et al. 2010, 68–69).

Rainer Forst (2001) provides an important account of the value of deliberation that underlines the role of mutual justification within deliberative discussions. He argues that deliberation is not about the conversion of interlocutors into 'we-thinkers', who transcend their different interests and identities to forge a new consensus or discover a pre-existing one (Forst 2001, 364). Instead, the main value of deliberation is to be found in the negative function it plays in discrediting claims and

distinguishing 'unsupportable reasons' that cannot withstand scrutiny from those that may be shared and mutually justified (Forst 2001, 366).

For Forst (2001), the decisive bases for such scrutiny are the principles of 'reciprocity' and 'generality', as defining features of public reason. 'Reciprocity', as Forst (2017, 28) explains, 'means no-one may raise claims that she refuses to grant others (reciprocity of contents) and that no one may simply assume that others share her own evaluative conceptions or interests so that she could claim to speak in their name or in the name of higher values (reciprocity of reasons)'. 'Generality', meanwhile, means 'nobody may be excluded from the community of justification'. Claims that breach these principles of reciprocity and generality are not shareable or mutually justifiable. How claims that do meet these minimal criteria are weighed up and ranked is then a political matter, which can only be determined by seeing which attract reflective support through ongoing deliberative-democratic processes (Forst 2001, 366). But, even though a rational consensus where everyone agrees may be unattainable, Forst (2001, 365) argues that those who disagree are likely to be more willing to accept a majority decision as justifiable where they can see that the reasons for it have gained widespread reflective support and do not violate the criteria of reciprocity and generality.

In this article, we draw on Forst's arguments to guide our analysis of participants' discussions in our deliberative assembly and in particular to capture how mutual justification works. We explore how participants used the opportunity to reflect together on justifications of PSM, the degree to which the deliberative context expanded the perspectives they encountered, and the ways in which the principles of reciprocity and generality were woven into their assessments of the legitimacy of claims as the basis for mutual justification. Before presenting our findings, we next describe our method in more depth.

Method

Our online deliberative assembly was conducted in 2020, as part of a country-wide review of PSM, *Small Screen: Big Debate*, run by the UK's media's regulator, Ofcom (2020b). *Small Screen: Big Debate* was conducted because of Ofcom's statutory obligation, established under the UK Communications Act 2003, to review the performance of PSM providers against their public purposes. It was also designed to reflect more broadly on the future of the UK PSM system and generate policy recommendations to inform a subsequent UK Government white paper and media bill.¹ By bringing together 46 members of the public to debate the future of UK PSM over an extended period, our assembly aimed to use public deliberation to add more depth to the data obtained through surveys and more standard consultation procedures. Reflecting the ambitions of *Small Screen: Big Debate*, the deliberative assembly was open and wide ranging: it covered all PSM organizations in the UK,² and participants were encouraged to raise and reflect on any issue related to PSM, from questions about values and governance to those about practices and content.

The design of the assembly followed the Citizens' Assembly model (Involve 2024). Because of the pandemic, the event had to be held online and was broken into parts to ensure participants were able to sustain their focus and attention. We held four 90-minute sessions over a two-week period based around different activities: 1. Learning about PSM; 2. Deliberating about the value of PSM and its future; 3. Formulating recommendations; and 4. Voting among alternatives. Participants were allocated to smaller breakout groups that remained the same for the first three sessions. In each, they participated in a guided discussion, supported by a facilitator, about the session topic. At the end of sessions they shared their discussion outcomes with the wider group. In the final session, participants used the Slido platform to vote on a set of recommendations about the future of PSM, compiled by the research team based on the previous discussions. Before the event, participants received an outline of the history, organization, and public purposes of PSM in the UK to ensure they had a common starting point for discussions. Experts were on hand during the sessions to answer technical and factual questions.

The Behavioural Lab service at the London School of Economics and Political Science recruited participants.³ While we aimed to select a diverse group, some demographics were under-represented. For example, although there were participants from different regions in England, the devolved nations were less well represented (there were only two participants from Scotland, one from Northern Ireland, and none from Wales), and the sample was skewed towards those with higher education qualifications (35 out of the 46 participants had an undergraduate degree or higher). However, while not representative of the UK population in a statistical sense, the group was diverse enough to allow scope for various views to be expressed and each breakout group included a mix of ages, ethnicities, and regional locations to facilitate this (see Table 1). We stressed to all participants that we did not expect them to adopt any particular position within the assembly (e.g. being either supportive or not of PSM), and facilitators ensured the discussions were as open, inclusive, and respectful of different views as possible.

The assembly outcomes, including the recommendations and the results of voting, were published in a final report (Edwards and Moss 2020a). Certain priority issues emerged from the assembly: ensuring PSM is genuinely independent, effectively regulated and overseen, reflects diversity adequately, protects public-interest content that may not be commercially viable, and provides accurate and trustworthy journalism (Edwards and Moss 2020a, 33–4). Our findings were shared with Ofcom, as a contribution to the wider *Small Screen, Big Debate* consultation. But important questions remained about the nature and value of the public discussion that had occurred in the assembly *before* participants had voted on recommendations. We take up these questions in this paper.

Table 1. Citizens' assembly participants.

Gender	Male	23
	Female	22
Age	18–24	10
	25–34	15
	35–44	6
	45–54	4
	55–64	9
	65 or over	1
Ethnicity	White (includes Gypsy/Irish Traveller)	22
	Black/Black British (Black/African/Caribbean)	6
	Asian/Asian British (includes Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Chinese, Other Asian)	14
	Mixed	0
	Other	3
Occupation	Managerial and professional worker	20
	Intermediate occupations	4
	Routine and manual	0
	Not working/long-term unemployed	1
	Not Classified (student/retired)	16
	Unspecified	2
Region	Scotland	2
	Northern Ireland	1
	Wales	0
	North East England	0
	North West England	2
	Yorkshire and the Humber	1
	East Midlands	2
	West Midlands	2
	South East England	3
	South West England	3
	East of England	1
	Greater London	26
Education	Unspecified	2
	A-level	10
	UG Degree	23
	Masters Degree	11
	Doctorate	2

Our analysis focuses on themes in the group discussions that drew on or considered justifications of PSM as a prominent theme – these were particularly but not solely concentrated in the second sessions, where we explicitly asked assembly participants to reflect on the four public purposes of PSM outlined by Ofcom (2015, 4): 1) ‘informing our understanding of the world’, 2) ‘stimulating knowledge and learning’, 3) ‘reflecting UK cultural identity’ (purpose 3), and 4) ‘representing diversity and alternative viewpoints’.⁴ As noted above, we took these publicly-stated purposes of PSM as a proxy for justificatory claims.

We adopted a thematic approach, first reading the transcripts closely, identifying common threads of discussion that related to the public purposes. We coded these parts of the discussions, and drew connections among codes by placing them into broader themes (Braun and Clarke 2012). The main aims of the analysis were twofold, in line with the focus of our research questions. First, we wanted to understand how participants evaluated the stated public purposes of PSM in the assembly. Second, we wanted to examine the dynamics of public deliberation among participants to see how it might support mutual justification. We therefore paid attention not just to individual responses, but also to interactions between participants during the discussions, and we were interested in whether and how ideas of reciprocity and generality were deployed in their reflections.

Findings

The discussions in the assembly show that PSM is a contested issue, generating different and conflicting views. Some participants appeared sceptical of any justifications for PSM. One participant, for example, requested an ‘honest conversation’ about whether the B.B.C. was still needed, given the UK’s changing social context:

P3G4⁵: I think we need to start having an honest conversation to sort of say, look, the B.B.C. once was great but with the diversification of the population, there is now an ultimate need to start having the discussion to sort of dim down the B.B.C., if not say total goodbye to it.

Linking PSM to broadcasting, another questioned the need for it from a more individual perspective of their media consumption and use, saying: ‘I don’t see the public broadcasting thing as having a huge role in my, kind of, media consumption in the future [...] there is no real reason to use it’ (P2G7).

However, most participants seemed to think PSM that served some public purposes were necessary. As we evidence below, most disagreement during the discussions focused on which of the four public purposes were most important, how they should be interpreted, and the extent to which they were being realized.

Informing our understanding of the world (purpose 1)

Several participants stressed the importance of the first public purpose of ‘informing our understanding of the world’. One participant put this point, stressing that ‘public service means to inform’:

P5G1: The main focus of it should be on informing us of news, world events and things and focusing on impartiality and ... that’s, that would be the number one thing for me and then, obviously, other things would be important as well. But I think that public service means to inform.

A focus on informing through high-quality, impartial news and analysis was viewed as ‘more important than ever’ in the context of concerns about misinformation and disinformation. Consider the following exchange:

M: So the first one is informing our understanding of the world, so through news, information, and analysis. Is it still relevant? Is it still important? Is it still a priority?

P6G6: Yeah, it’s important. Very important.

P1G6: I'd say more so than ever before.

[...]

P3G6: But I would say that may, again, may be more important than ever before especially with all the sources of false news out there, it's, I think it's even more important than ever before that we have reliable, credible news sources.

Exchanges within other groups echoed the point, emphasising how reliability and trust distinguish PSM from other sources of news and information:

P3G1: Maybe, picking up on your question, but also something [P2G1] said, you know, with respect to whether it's the B.B.C., ITV, Channel 4—They're all reputable broadcasters or sources of information, you know, whether, when whether you're looking at it for online information, a website or going watching B.B.C. News at 10 o'clock or something. You know, you still, by and large, or to a high percentage trust the information that is said on those news programmes. If you're receiving information through – whether it's Twitter or Facebook, or whatever it is – there isn't necessarily a reliable source.

P5G2: What's more, most important, I think, like, the world's getting like more and more complicated and there are more and more resources for information so for me, the most important thing, I guess, is to bring, like, reliable and easily accessible, understandable news information. That's ... because that's why I, for example, go to the B.B.C.—Because it's something simple, and I don't need to look at, like, 10 other resources if I trust this one, if that makes any sense.

Since the benefit of reliable information is something that can be applied to everyone, the first purpose seemed to be reciprocally and generally justifiable. Reflecting this, the importance of this purpose appeared to be recognized widely across groups, or – more precisely – nobody disputed it openly. Challenges to this purpose were more about how well it was realized. There were concerns about whether PSM do always inform the public impartially, especially in terms of independence from government. As one participant said:

P4G8: [I]n other countries they [PSM organizations] are totally the mouthpiece of the government, 100%, and will get locked up that very afternoon that they're not saying what the government wants them to. But, um, in this country I don't think we have independence from the current government either.

Here, participants draw on the criteria of reciprocity for their critique, as they highlight the potential for public media to become politicized and a vehicle for the interests of specific political groups, rather than benefiting everyone.

Stimulating knowledge and learning (purpose 2)

As Keat (2011, 68) has discussed, where the role of PSM in news and information is usually seen as straightforward to justify, activities that are viewed as promoting 'specific conceptions of the good' and challenging the liberal principle of 'state neutrality' are more questionable. Discussions in the assembly reflected this. For example, consistent with the second purpose of 'stimulating knowledge and learning', some participants clearly felt that PSM should play a broader role beyond just information and news provision, arguing that education through media should be available to all and was a generalizable justification:

P4G1: I think there's far more than, than just news and current, current affairs. There's education, this stimulative thought which if you're paying [...] to a commercial model so many things will get left by the side, inevitably, inherently in fact.

P4G5: And, for me, they [PSM] play a role in expansion of knowledge and also in enriching one's life. I think that's what's important.

But this then raised questions about which types of content should be classed as 'educational'. Are science, history, arts, and sports all to be included as 'stimulating knowledge and learning'? The paternalist assumption that broadcasters, governments, or regulators can determine what is good for the public without asking the public themselves appears questionable given people's diverse

interests and evaluations (Keat 2011). One participant drew attention to this potential problem by asking: ‘who decides what is good for us?’:

P4G4: I think one of the challenges of, one of the roles of public service broadcasting is to present the stuff that we might not necessarily choose for ourselves or which is, in some way, beneficial for us. But there is a question in a diverse British population, who decides what is good for us? You know, what I may like, is very different from what other people want.

An exchange from Group 6 is illustrative of the issue here, and of how the criteria of reciprocity and generality can be used to identify non-justifiable claims. One participant challenges the idea that arts should be publicly funded, since it is not something that interests everyone (and therefore cannot be justified on the grounds of reciprocity of reasons), and could be provided by private media:

P2G6: I think that public service broadcasting is always going to have to be funded by the public and that funding is always going to have to be mandatory. And I don't think it's right to say that, you know, we have to fund things that maybe only some people want. Like, okay, with some things like informing, it's important that everybody has that and so everybody has to pay for it. But you know, if people want things like the arts, I think they should be able to just get that from the private sector because there's plenty of it and it's not right to force everyone to pay for that.

A second participant disagrees. Given the educative benefits of arts and the need to ensure these benefits are widely accessible, particularly in the context of an unequal society, they argue that a role for PSM in providing art is justified:

P1G6: [R]espectfully, [P2G6]—I totally disagree with you. And to go back a bit to the, the art stuff [...] I think is important to invest in and should be made available so that, you know, a lot of things just people can't access, especially with education and learning later down the line. I think there can be such a high [...] barrier to people actually carrying on with lifelong learning, that having some sort of direction, at least provided by insightful programmes on public service broadcasts which can guide people towards things they might not learn about before, is incredibly valuable.

Finally, a third participant seeks to move the discussion forward. They suggest an alternative to both views, which would support educational content that might not be provided by the market (including ‘arts’) but in a way that is sensitive to people’s varying interests and evaluations (and so, for example, would include ‘science’ and ‘sport’ as well as ‘arts’):

P3G6: I do think you could go one or two ways. [...] you only broadcast what is with, without question, essential for every single person in the nation to view. Like, you know, current, current events, news like Coronavirus news, and you only broadcast that, so it becomes more of a 24 hour news channel or you have to broadcast a represent, a representative sample based on the percentage of the viewers out there [...] You give the arts programmes a percentage of time – broadcast time – based on the number of people interested in the arts. Give the science programmes a representative sample of airtime based on those interested in science, and sports, and so on. Because otherwise some of us are paying a licence for, for programmes that we're not interested in.

Understood from this perspective, if the second purpose of stimulating knowledge and learning is to be mutually justifiable, it must be interpreted and implemented in a way that reflects people’s different interests and evaluations and so respects the principles of reciprocity and generality.

Some advocates of public media may question the market language of what audiences and users are ‘interested in’ used by the third participant in the exchange above. As Baker (2002, 12) notes, if ‘edification’ is about developing and potentially changing people’s preferences, using existing interests as a guide is problematic. Indeed, some participants viewed PSM’s educative role as an antidote to market-driven personalization based on what people already like. But, while this is an important consideration and reason for PSM to expose publics to different types of content, the central point remains. For the second purpose to be justified, the challenge is not just to persuade others that PSM has an important educative role, but to show that this role is defined in a way that is sensitive to people’s diverse interests and evaluations and is genuinely shareable. If it is understood in

a way that simply assumes some interests or evaluations carry more weight than others, the criteria of reciprocal and general justification are not met, and the justification can be 'reasonably rejected' on these grounds (Forst 2001).

Reflecting UK cultural identity (purpose 3)

The third public purpose ('reflecting UK cultural identity') was also contested and debated by assembly participants. While some participants talked about UK identity being evident in things like a distinctive sense of humour, others questioned the idea that there is a national identity to reflect:

P6G2: I was still born and bred here and so it's one of those weird ones where I do, I'm British, but my British is different from someone else's British, you know, who may not have another identity from another country, for instance, you know? So, yeah, the term British is a strange one for me. So when they say we represent, like, British values or British content, you know, I find it difficult to support a claim like that, you know? Because what is Britain? What is British?

P4G4: The question of is there a national culture, a national character, and everything that goes with that. And I'm not convinced in the modern Britain there actively is, and therefore the ambition and some of the ambitions stated in terms of public service broadcasting and what it can do, again, I find quite questionable. There was probably a time where the majority of people in the UK were Christian. That is probably no longer the case. And where you then have that diversity, can you actually talk about using public service broadcasting to create unity and to create a shared culture and everything that goes with that? And that then raises the question about the fundamental purpose of public service broadcasting. You know, is it actually feasible?

For the third purpose to be justified, the 'UK cultural identity' that is 'reflected' must be genuinely publicly shareable, given the different interests and identities that make up 'the public'. However, the second speaker challenges this assumption and takes it to its logical conclusion, raising the question of whether realizing this purpose of PSM is possible. Nonetheless, they go onto to identify 'core values' that people can share and that would preserve the integrity of this purpose, such as 'respect' and 'sustainability', which could be reciprocally and generally justifiable:

P4G4: Or is it feasible only at a lower level, that there are certain values that should be consistent across all communities, in terms of respect, for example, in terms of understanding of sustainability and other things that we might think are important but lots of the detail, lots of the sort of the core values – what might have been considered core values of hundred years ago – can no longer be created as shared values through public service broadcasting?

In practice, several participants felt that what was represented as 'UK cultural identity' in the implementation of the third purpose privileges the lives and values of certain groups (and therefore breaks the principles of reciprocity and generality):

P4G1: To reflect UK culture and society – Which I don't think it does accurately at the moment. [...] I think that's probably one of the shortcomings that needs to be addressed.

P1G3: I feel like the B.B.C.—well not the B.B.C.—but all channels are really trying, but they're really not succeeding. They're way behind the curve. And the fact that, you know, for an example of a, of a same sex couple on, on Strictly – They should have it and they shouldn't make a big deal of it. It shouldn't be, oh, my God there's a same sex couple. It should just happen.

In effect, by privileging some groups over others, the way the third purpose is implemented is unjustifiable. This often led to participants proposing alternative approaches. To avoid the problem, for example, one participant suggested the third purpose ('reflecting UK cultural identity') should be combined with the fourth ('representing diversity and alternative viewpoints'): 'I just think the cultural identity and diversity points could be put into, made into one point as opposed to having two points' (P2G3).

Representing diversity and alternative viewpoints (purpose 4)

The importance of the fourth purpose ('Representing Diversity and Alternative Viewpoints') seemed to be widely recognized across groups within the assembly. As one participant said, PSM must represent 'society at large' because this is in 'the public interest' - a reciprocal and general justification:

P5G3: In terms of public broadcasting, I guess it's kind of imperative to be diverse, especially if you are paid for by, I guess, society, you have to have shows, characters, people even within the organization that reflects that. I think it's very important to kind of make sure that your shows kind of reflect, I guess, society at large. That's, again, the thing that I would take from it. So it's being kind of – You represent society in a meaningful and, and insightful way as well. So it's not just shallow and kind of done for clout or just because you're funded. You kind of want to do it because it's in the public interest.

However, some participants questioned whether PSM are needed to achieve this purpose, noting that diversity might be served through the market. For example, one participant argued that streaming services such as Netflix outperform PSM organizations in this respect:

P7G1: I do prefer Netflix over maybe B.B.C. when it comes to watching entertainment shows, just because I think in terms of representation Netflix is able to cater for more people or different people of different backgrounds.

While the market may cater to different groups, it does not necessarily promote mutual understanding. Market segmentation might enable audiences to avoid difference as much as engage with it. In this context, as Stuart Hall (1993, 35) argues, a key purpose of PSM is to educate the public in the 'art of "living with difference"'. Along these lines, some participants saw the need for the fourth public purpose to promote mutual understanding (echoing the generalisable benefit of education discussed earlier) among groups who, despite other differences, are all members of the same public. Consider, for example, this exchange:

P1G3: I think we need to see how other people live and other people's points of view. Even if we don't agree with them, I think we have to see them in order to maybe get some understanding of them.

P2G3: With globalization, as [P1G3] just said, and every, the UK is full of, it has a melting point, point of – A melting pot with different people so I think that's really important, to understand the different cultures that we live beside.

Some participants stressed the importance of this purpose in its absence. One participant said PSM produce diverse content, but then marginalize it, keeping it away from the mainstream, for fear of challenging some audience members:

P3G5: I mean, they do have a lot of diverse, a lot of diversity, but, you know, a lot of that diversity is served on things like B.B.C. 3, which is miles away. You know, there was a great documentary on the LGBT communities on B.B.C., B.B.C. 3—It's online. Why isn't it on B.B.C. 1? Not primetime? It's like, all of a sudden, you know, all these kind of like, you know, stuffy middle-class people don't want to see, you know, gay kisses, or they don't want to see Black people or they want to see this or that.

While the importance of diversity was recognized across groups, not all participants agreed about the emphasis it should receive. Looking at one final exchange illustrates this point. One participant says that an 'overemphasis' on diversity is 'alienating the vast majority of people in this country', and they argue for diversity with a 'small "d"':

P3G2: And whilst I agree about diversity, I think there's an over-enthusiasm which is alienating vast swathes of population and I don't quite get that. [. . .] And the diversity issue should be dealt with, as it is through Channel 4, for example, and one or two the other channels, but not this overemphasis on it. Should be a small 'd' not a big 'd' in capital.

Another participant disagrees by saying they advocate diversity with a 'capital D'. They argue that ensuring PSM represent diversity better is 'incredibly important' given the 'damage' not being represented can do:

P6G2: So diversity to me, I think, yeah, capital D. I think that's incredibly important. I think just not being represented is, is something that is quite damaging, quite wrong and I don't just mean from an ethnic standpoint, like you said, gender, age, social background, class, ethnicity, because when you do look at the B.B.C.—or at least what B.B.C. is projecting globally – you do get a sense of middle class, elitist kind of an image.

This exchange shows how the fourth purpose may be contested, but also returns us to the point about general and reciprocal justification. The first participant questions the amount of emphasis placed on diversity, while the second participant stresses that all groups must be represented adequately by PSM for it to be justifiable. One group cannot expect their own lives and experiences to be represented, but deny representation to others who are part of the same public, without breaking the principles of reciprocal and general justification.

Conclusion

Any debate about the future of public media today must involve the public, but how the public is engaged matters. Common methods of public engagement often fail to provide opportunities for the public to reflect on the value and governance of PSM together. In the absence of public deliberation, PSM cannot be normatively justified with good reasons that have been 'reflexively constructed or tested' (Forst 2017, 38). Furthermore, when addressed as isolated consumers or members of market segments, the public are not able to consider the collective question of the future of PSM together, let alone express a collective voice. In this article, we have tried to illustrate the value of taking a different approach to public engagement, focusing on how members of the public discuss justifications of PSM when they have time and space to consider the issue together in a deliberative assembly.

Our first research question asked how members of the public evaluated justifications of PSM when they deliberated. Given an opportunity to reflect on PSM in depth, the discussions generated various views, ranging from a seeming rejection of the need for PSM altogether to different and nuanced ideas about which PSM purposes were most important, how they should be interpreted, and the extent to which they were being currently realized. These views reflected people's different evaluations, interests, and identities, and their critical considerations of their lived experience with PSM, which offered a basis for them to question who justifications of PSM apply to, as well as their legitimacy when compared to practice. More structured and limited methods of public engagement, like surveys and similar methods, would be unable to engender and so capture this same diversity of public viewpoints to inform decisions about the governance of PSM.

Our second research question asked how public deliberation might facilitate mutual justification. Given the complex and contested nature of PSM, we did not expect our diverse participants to reach a consensus through the assembly. But we have argued that the value of deliberation is best thought of in terms of mutual justifiability rather than unanimity. Our analysis showed how the criteria of 'reciprocity' and 'generality' were at play within discussions, distinguishing justificatory claims that are 'mutually justifiable' (because they could be 'reciprocally and generally argued for') from those that are not 'shareable' (because they failed to meet basic principles of reciprocity and generality) (Forst 2001, 362; 2014; 2017, 29). The purpose of 'informing the public' through news and current affairs appeared easiest to justify in reciprocal and general terms, supporting Ofcom's (2020a) survey research where 'trusted and accurate news' is both the highest 'personal value' and 'societal value' respondents attach to PSM. Justifications perceived as diverging from a liberal principle of 'state neutrality' proved more contentious (Keat 2011). Discussions in the assembly suggested that the other purposes of PSM could gain public support, recognizing, for example, that PSM may be educative or valuable in representing cultural identity and diversity, but these purposes must be understood in ways that are mutually justifiable. Commercial media can justify appealing only to market segments or mainstream audiences (excluding minorities), based on the principles of profit maximization and customer satisfaction. PSM, by contrast, must be justified in ways that are shareable by all.

Our analysis therefore highlights the value of deliberation as a mode of public engagement in PSM governance, not just in capturing people's reflective views about PSM but in testing claims and ensuring they are understood and implemented in ways that can be shared among the public – what we call 'public voice as mutual justifiability'. Such deliberative processes could help decisions about PSM secure more public support. Since it is unlikely that everyone will agree, decisions about the future of PSM will need to be determined in a majoritarian way, by seeing which proposals attract most backing through ongoing democratic processes (Forst 2001, 366). But there is good reason to think that those who disagree with majority decisions are more likely to accept them when they can see that the reasons for them have gained widespread reflective support and have withstood critical scrutiny through deliberative processes, proving to be 'shareable' (they do not violate the criteria of reciprocity and generality) if not fully 'shared' (viewed as the best decision by everyone) (Forst 2001, 365; 2014; 2017, 29). As Forst (2001, 365) puts it,

One simply sees that other positions were not morally rejectable and have gained more support given the values and interests of a majority of citizens. One understands the prevailing interests and values, even though one does not share them; thus one accepts the legitimacy of the decision and its reasons without adopting them.

This acceptance of decisions depends on the educative nature of deliberation, whereby participants come to appreciate the views of other members of the public and the need to accommodate them (Laden 2001). A key limitation of using consumerist methods of public engagement, especially in relation to services designed for 'the public' as a whole, is they lack this educative feature: they separate us into isolated consumers or groups rather than help us to understand and negotiate our differences.

What would more deliberative public engagement in debates about PSM look like in practice? As stressed by theorists of deliberative systems, no single deliberative exercise will be adequate, and so there is a need to think about how different sites and practices of public engagement can work effectively together to achieve deliberation at scale (Dean, Boswell, and Smith 2019; Parkinson and Mansbridge 2013). Regular mini publics like the deliberative assembly reported on here could be used, while members of the public could be brought into committees to inform or monitor PSM decision-making more directly (Weiss 2022). There would be a need for wider public engagement, extending opportunities to participate to all affected. Currently, as noted above, when media issues receive broader attention in the public sphere, discussions tend to take the form either of short-term public controversies or are framed strategically by the interests of private media (Freedman 2008; Loblich 2012). In the absence of independent spaces (see Coleman and Blumler 2009, 166–198), PSM organizations could use their significant reach and resources to initiate more constructive, reflective public debates about their future. Elsewhere, we have also stressed the need for governments and regulators, such as Ofcom, to reimagine policy consultations in more deliberative ways (Edwards and Moss 2022; see also Donders, Van den Bulck, and Raats 2019).

While our analysis is limited to the UK, our findings are likely to be relevant to other PSM systems that face similar legitimacy challenges. But further research is required to investigate how meaningful deliberative public engagement about the future of PSM can best be realized and supported in varied contexts. Given conflicting views among the public, open public debate may seem risky for governments, regulators, and PSM organizations. Fielding individual complaints and feedback or tracing the preferences and behaviours of consumers through surveys and other forms of research may be easier ways to manage public engagement. But while these methods may inform governance decisions about PSM, they cannot justify them adequately. A more meaningful public debate about PSM cannot be put off any longer. As critics of public media continue to push for it to be reduced, if not eradicated entirely, ensuring it is justified to the public is not just a normative aspiration but an increasingly existential matter.

Notes

1. The government subsequently produced a White Paper, called 'Up next: The government's vision for the broadcasting sector', and (at the time of writing) a Media Bill is being considered by the UK parliament.
2. The legislation applies to all B.B.C. channels as well as ITV, STV, Channel 4, S4C and Channel 5 (Ofcom 2020b).
3. To secure informed consent, participants were given information about the project and asked to sign a consent form before participating in the assembly. Our research gained ethical approval through the Research Ethics Review process at the London School of Economics and Political Science, and was passed by the Chair of the Department of Media and Communications' Research Committee as a low-risk project. Participants received a £100 retail voucher for participating in the assembly to compensate them for their time.
4. The public purposes in full are as follows: 'Purpose 1: Informing our understanding of the world – To inform ourselves and others and to increase our understanding of the world through news, information and analysis of current events and ideas. Purpose 2: Stimulating knowledge and learning -To stimulate our interest in and knowledge of arts, science, history and other topics, through content that is accessible and can encourage informal learning. Purpose 3: Reflecting UK cultural identity – To reflect and strengthen our cultural identity through original programming at UK, national and regional level; on occasion, bringing audiences together for shared experiences. Purpose 4: Representing diversity and alternative viewpoints – To make us aware of different cultures and alternative viewpoints, through programmes that reflect the lives of other people and other communities, both within the UK and elsewhere' (Ofcom 2015, 4).
5. 'P' refers to participant number within their group, while 'G' refers to the group number.

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