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“Hideously White”

British Television, Glocalization, and National Identity



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This article will argue that despite gaining praise from around the world for its particular form of “public service broadcasting,” the British Broadcasting Corporation has proved to be surprisingly poor at reflecting the local, linguistic, racial, cultural, and religious differences throughout the United Kingdom. Tracing its historical development, it will argue that in the past century the British Broadcasting Corporation was responsible for simply producing a form of cultural hegemony that attempted to conceive “Britishness” within an extremely narrow set of conventions, excluding all manner of people and communities in its attempt at “making the nation as one man.” In contrast, this article will argue that new cable and satellite channels are now gradually breaking down the very notion of a “unilateral” or “unilingual” voice, eventually providing a “common culture” for those viewers who do not fit easily into any neat definition of British citizenship.

Keywords: *television; globalization; public service broadcasting; citizenship; national identity; new media*

The British journalist David Aaronovitch recently argued that the influence, quality, and relevance of television were rapidly in decline. In particular, he suggested that the arrival of satellite and cable television was slowly eradicating the shared national experience that the old three-channel system (at least in Britain) had once gloriously produced. In contrast, the present multichannel system was now creating mindless and diverse entertainment, watched by an ever-decreasing audience:

An increasingly fragmented market is served by an increasingly risk-adverse industry. The consequence of this is likely to be the reduction of the part that television plays in our national conversation. . . . And you can’t help wondering, what with all the other diversions and possibilities open to the citizens of the millennium, whether we are not seeing the dying era of what Clive James called the crystal bucket. The Age of television is over. (Aaronovitch 2000, 1)

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This lament for the death of television is nothing new, nor is the claim that the end of the terrestrial monopoly has led to an increasing fragmentation of (British) society. Aaronovitch's views represent a whole generation of critics who assume that the changes taking place in television equal the destruction of the medium itself. Brought up on a diet of traditional broadcasting methods, these critics tend to despise many of the changes that define the new broadcasting age. In particular, they look back longingly to a time when the whole nation was seemingly bound together by a limited number of choices—bathed in the warm glow of what Raymond Williams (1971) once referred to as a "common culture."¹ In Britain, the British Broadcasting Corporation's (BBC's) *Wednesday Play* is usually regarded as representing the epitome of such a tradition, when single plays such as *Cathy Come Home* (BBC, 1966) could apparently alert the whole nation to important political and social concerns.² Indeed, Aaronovitch chooses the BBC's 1970 adaptation of Jean Paul Sartre's *Roads to Freedom* to highlight this unique period, a play that he remembers (through personal experience) transcending the class system of British society. For him, this drama stands as a symbol of an age when the whole nation could be brought together by the healing power of high art on the small screen.³

Yet how much truth is there in Aaronovitch's claim that the old three-channel system once united the British nation? Like many "golden age" critics, his version of history is filled with grand and sometimes misleading assumptions, built perhaps on a somewhat nostalgic vision of the past that distorts any objective and impartial appreciation of the present. In particular, it represents a view of British "culture" that refuses to acknowledge or understand the fundamental changes taking place in British broadcasting or the sort of programming its audience now demands. So, in order that we understand a little better the historical period that he so fondly remembers—and the image of national unity that it tends to construct—let us briefly remind ourselves of the sort of broadcasting that Aaronovitch and others now so dearly mourn.

"Internal Colonization"

According to Herman and McChesney (1997), the BBC brand name is now considered to be the "second most famous in the world after that of Coca-Cola" (p. 46). Yet although we hear a lot about "Coca-Colonisation" and even "McDonaldization" (Ritzer 2000), we seldom hear about the globalizing influence of the BBC. However, it could be argued that the BBC (or, perhaps, "public serviceization") produces a product that is as internationally persuasive and pervasive as any other global corporation. It has certainly been responsible for producing a form of cultural hegemony that has helped to dictate and form British public opinion and social

attitudes for nearly a century. In particular, the BBC has played a crucial role in conceiving and cementing notions of "Britishness" (both at home and abroad), intent on constructing a deep sense of national consciousness and consensus.

Part of this "national consensus" was aided by the highly centralized structure of the BBC. Although the company seemed originally friendly to local broadcasting, this policy was to change radically by the time it became a corporation in 1927 (see Scannell and Cardiff 1982).⁴ By the 1930s, all of its local radio stations had been closed down by its first unelected director general, John Reith. Instead, a *National Programme* from London was introduced, accompanied by regional programs from five centers in the Midlands, North, South, West, and Scotland (Wales and Northern Ireland were only introduced later). But, as Scannell and Cardiff (1982) explained, it "did not produce an equitable balance of forces between London and the rest of the country. . . . The National Programme was, in every sense, the senior service" (p. 167). For Reith, centralized control was a crucial aspect of the smooth running of the BBC monopoly, so that, as he put it, "one general policy" could "be maintained throughout the country and definite standards promulgated" (p. 166).⁵

Despite its apparent commitment to diversity, this centralization of the BBC tended to homogenize both its vision of "culture" and its image of "Britishness." Quoting George V's first speech on BBC radio, Reith argued that broadcasting had the effect of "making the nation as one man" (quoted in Scannell 1990, 14)—binding the country together in the pursuit of common interests and ideals. As such, the BBC (primarily based in London) became the spokesperson for the whole country. In an often-quoted piece of classic Reithian philosophy, the first director general explained that the BBC had a moral right to dictate its views onto—what he assumed would be—a grateful and passive audience. "It is occasionally indicated to us," he wrote in *Broadcast over Britain* (1924), his personal manifesto, "that we are apparently setting out to give the public what we think they need—and not what they want—but few know what they want and very few know what they need" (quoted in Briggs 1961, 238).

This high-minded philosophy meant that BBC culture tended to represent only the tastes, opinions, and attitudes of a small section of British society. It led to what Michael Hechter (1975) has termed "internal colonisation," the occupation of one part of society by another (also see Hartley 1996, 45). As a result, the culture and opinions of a large section of its viewers were simply ignored or downgraded. According to Richard Collins (1998), "instead of their *actual* audiences European public service broadcasters too often served a reified ideal public which existed only in their imagination and not in the living rooms, kitchens, bedrooms and cafes of European television viewers" (p. 10). This resulted in a system of broad-

casting that tried to transmit and dictate its own particular form of cultural, social, political, and national hegemony. As Tom Burns (1977) has put it in *The BBC: Public Institution and Private World*,

BBC culture, like BBC standard English, was not peculiar to itself but an intellectual ambience composed of the values, standards and beliefs of the professional middle-class, especially that part educated at Oxford and Cambridge. Sports, popular music and entertainment which appealed to the lower classes were included in large measure in the programmes, but the manner in which they were purveyed, in the context and the presentation, remained indomitably upper middle class. (p. 42)⁶

Commercial television in Britain did originally try to produce strongly based regional programming, with individual franchises located in London, the Midlands, and the North. However, it soon became clear that the regions could not develop big enough audiences to keep advertisers happy, and a national network of broadcasting was set up (also leading to the introduction of Independent Television [ITV] News) (see Crisell 1997, 84-87). Although the ITV network managed to contest some of the middle-class (and London-based) bias of the BBC, it was still tied to many of the fundamental principles of public service broadcasting. As Paddy Scannell (1990) puts it, "The British system is sometimes presented as a mixture of public service and commercial broadcasting as represented respectively by the BBC and ITV, but this is misleading. The terms under which commercial broadcasting was established by government made it part of the public service system from the beginning" (p. 17).⁷ As such, ITV was still implicitly tied to many of the same regulations and government policies that had helped steer and construct the cultural and national conception of the BBC.

"In the Name of National Unity"

While many may have enjoyed this illusion of social solidarity (the cozy duopoly is clearly at the heart of Aaronovitch's conception of the golden age), the culture it tended to create left little room for the dissident or minority voices that it could not contain or assimilate. As Stuart Hall (1975) has put it, "Monopolizing the channels of public discussion and debate in the society, television also centralized the power to make its images of social life stick. It communicated, at rapid speed, highly selective, if not distorted, images of one community or section of society to another" (p. 281). Subsequently, the social attitudes and opinions constructed by British public service television (in both its commercial and noncommercial forms) were rather narrowly defined, producing and maintaining a particular view of the nation-state. As Sreberny-Mohammadi (1996) pointed out, any

national culture "may barely represent minority languages and tastes, even disallowing such diversity in the name of 'national unity'" (p. 129).

As such, the old three-channel public service system (the BBC was awarded a second channel in the 1960s so as to compete more efficiently with ITV) clearly found it impossible to successfully reflect the cultural and linguistic diversity of the British Isles. Welsh speakers, for instance, felt virtually ignored by a TV network that did little to represent or reflect their particular language, culture, or concerns. When the 1979 conservative government went against its original pledge to create a Welsh-language channel, widespread disruption ensued. As well as a growing refusal to pay the license fee, transmitters were raided and closed down, and there was even the threat of a hunger strike from the president of the Welsh national party, Plaid Cymru (see Harvey 1994, 116). Partly because of this pressure, when Channel Four was set up in 1982, it became Sianel Pedwar Cymru (S4C) in Wales, the first prime-time Welsh-language channel. Indeed, Channel Four was, as a whole, bound by the Independent Broadcasting Authority to "find new ways of serving minority and specialised audiences."⁸ While the channel was welcomed by many, some critics felt that it was too little too late, an attempt to maintain hegemony in a period of cultural fragmentation by offering a small space to "marginalized" voices.

As this suggests, the nostalgic vision of a whole nation bound together solely by the three-channel system is clearly not a memory shared by all—particularly by those who felt decidedly left outside of the mainstream. Even Aaronovitch (2000) conceded that despite its triumphs, the so-called golden age also had "*Miss World and the Black and White Minstrels*" (p. 1). Indeed, the BBC's *Black and White Minstrel Show* is an interesting example of the type of programming that continually failed to take into account the varied composition of its audience. Consisting of white performers "blacked-up" to sing and dance, its ill-judged version of American vaudeville was reminiscent of the most degrading Hollywood stereotypes, presenting black people as "cheerful, rolling-eyed simpletons" (McQueen 1998, 155).⁹ However, the program (that surprisingly ran as late as 1978) was until that time, according to David Milner, "the single most regular exposure of 'black' people on the television screen" (quoted in Tulloch 1990, 144). As John Tulloch (1990) put it,

Although black community organizations and to some extent the CRE [Commission for Racial Equality] have been in a position to extract some concessions from the corporate [public service] system—in terms of ethnic minority programming and moves towards positive action in recruitment and training—the real gains, after twenty years of negotiation, have been small compared to the achievements of US blacks in wresting concessions on integrated casting and job recruitment. (p. 150)

Perhaps surprisingly, recent findings from the Broadcasting Standards Commission suggest that British television is still dangerously unrepresentative of its ethnic communities. Monitoring speaking Asian roles in a "composite week," the commission found that four appearances of the same Asian character in a soap opera accounted for 40 percent of all Asian men on ITV. Likewise, an Asian news reader accounted for 30 percent of all Asian-language-speaking women. The worst performance of all the six channels monitored was BBC2, where 97 percent of the characters in speaking roles were white, 2 percent were black, and only 1 percent (five people) were Asian (Younge 2000, 8-9).

This is a decidedly poor finding for a channel compulsory funded by all U.K. residents. As one might expect, Channel Four did slightly better with ethnic minorities, accounting for 7 percent of those surveyed overall. However, fifteen of the Asians (accounting for 50 percent of those surveyed) were found in one documentary about Indian restaurants in Manchester. However, it is interesting to note that the only satellite channel monitored (Sky One) actually came out on top, mainly through its heavy reliance on American imports.¹⁰ Ironically, the British public service tradition—which prides itself on balance, impartiality, and creating a sense of nationhood—seems to be less able to reflect the racial and cultural mix of its viewers than a system that has always been based almost entirely on commercial forces. Recently, even Greg Dyke, the current director general of the BBC, attacked his own corporation for being, what he termed himself, "hideously white." Comparing their problems with those currently facing the British Police Force, he proclaimed that "the BBC is a predominantly white organisation. Quite a lot of people from different ethnic backgrounds that we do attract to the BBC leave. Maybe they don't feel welcome" (quoted by Helen 2001, 3). This was a tragic admission for such a crucial British institution at the beginning of the twenty-first century—an admission that clearly reveals the influence of a history that has tended to exclude minority voices in the dogmatic and ideological pursuit of "national unity."

Reconstructing Home

The inability of British terrestrial television to satisfy minority needs has meant that certain sections of the audience are now increasingly turning to cable and satellite for the majority of their viewing. There are now around twelve dedicated Asian channels in the United Kingdom providing Asian-language news, film, and music. One such channel is Zee UK and Europe (a subsidiary channel of Zee Asia) that has a potential audience of 2 million Asian viewers in Britain and a further 8 million across mainland Europe (see Qureshi and Moores 2000, 132). A wholly owned subsidiary of the Indian company Zee Telefilms Ltd, based in Bombay, it took over from its

predecessor Asia TV in March 1995 (see Cormack 1999, 416). For many Asian viewers, this channel provides their main source of non-English programming, broadcasting in languages such as Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, Bengali, and Tamil. As well as screening many Bollywood films, the channel provides several movie quiz shows and celebrity gossip about film stars and directors. It also transmits "high-quality" Pakistani dramas while making its own "lifestyle" and children's programs (see Qureshi and Moores 2000, 132-33). This sort of TV clearly plays an important role in cementing relations between Asian families and communities, providing a "common culture" for those viewers who do not fit easily into any neat definition of British citizenship.¹¹

Critics such as Aaronovitch would presumably argue that a channel such as Zee UK only helps to dilute the possibility of a shared national culture. Yet this channel reaches and reflects the interests of an important (and ever-growing) cross-section of the British nation in a way that the five terrestrial channels clearly cannot. Like the Welsh-language channel S4C, it can be seen as providing a crucial service to an important section of British viewers whose own sense of national identity can never be completely contained by one unilateral or unilingual voice. As this suggests, the technological and institutional changes that have recently taken place in broadcasting do not necessarily signal the end of television; rather, they reveal a world in which the cultural and ideological certainties of the past can no longer be maintained as they once were.

Consequently, it could be argued that the system of communication that is emerging through cable and satellite television better reflects the complex cultural and national diversities of contemporary Britain and Europe. In sociolinguistic terms, a mixture of languages, accents, and dialects is now gradually challenging the once almost divine authority of BBC Standard English. As a viewer of Zee UK has put it in reference to one of the station's own children's programs,

It's a guy sitting there, and he's talking in Urdu and then he changes to English. . . . Like a lot of us if we were sort of talking amongst each other, we wouldn't be talking pure English. We would be talking English and Urdu and Punjabi, sort of everything mixed, you know. That is what he does. (Qureshi and Moores 2000, 133)

As this brief observation so clearly suggests, BBC Standard English—like BBC "Standard Culture"—is now desperately inadequate at reflecting the needs and demands of many of its viewers.¹² Indeed, the movement away from "broadcasting" to "narrowcasting" is an inevitable process for a society whose own sense of identity is becoming increasingly diverse (see Richardson and Meinhof 1999, 87-102).

The recent report from the Runnymede Trust (a sponsored commission into the future of multiethnic Britain) certainly appears to suggest that the very idea of one-nation broadcasting is now at best anachronistic, at worst racist. Devolution, the Good Friday agreement, and globalization, it argues, have undermined the very notion of "Britishness" (see Travis 2000, 1). As the report puts it, "More and more people have multiple identities—they are Welsh Europeans, Pakistani Yorkshirewomen, Glaswegian Muslims, English Jews" (Runnymede Trust 2000).¹³ As a result, people are producing what John Hartley (1999) has termed "do-it-yourself citizenship" (pp. 177-88). Rather than obediently kowtowing to centralized control (whether in the form of the English government, its legal system, or the BBC), these British communities are now gradually redefining and re-creating their own sense of national and international identity. Satellite television may shrink the world, but it also allows smaller communities to speak to and for themselves, to bypass or challenge larger and more powerful nation-states and their omnipotent ideologies.

Roland Robertson (1995) has defined such a process as "glocalisation," a phrase (originating in Japanese business) that suggests the complex interplay of the global and the local that acknowledges many of the positive aspects that globalization has forced onto local communities. According to Robertson, the very process of globalization has also "involved the reconstruction, in a sense the production, of 'home,' 'community' and 'locality'" (p. 30). Anthony Smith (1991, 143) described such a process as the "globalization of nationalism," resurgent nations seeking to position themselves in the new global space (quoted by Robins 2000). Cable, satellite, digital television, and the internet are and will increasingly be complicit in the reproduction, reconstruction, and redefinition of these communities. Despite the doom-laden prophets of globalization, there is much evidence to suggest that home-produced programming in Europe is still strongly favored against foreign imports. According to Herman and McChesney (1997), in "Western Europe, the top-rated TV programmes are nearly always domestically produced, and there is widespread recognition that audiences often prefer home-grown programmes, if these have the resources to compete with Hollywood productions" (p. 42). As John Sinclair (1999) pointed out, it is a tendency also replicated in parts of Brazil and Latin American countries.

Conclusion: From "Big Brother" to "Little Sister"

It is too early to predict all the changes that new media and the digital revolution will produce, but surely the expansion of the number of channels available should be welcomed rather than condemned out of hand. S4C already has its own digital channel, while cooperation between local

regions means that together smaller channels can collectively compete with larger companies (see Cormack 1999, 436-37).¹⁴ Perhaps the age of television is not over, but the age of a centralized, state-run media monopoly is. We might lose a little (enforced) common ground, but what we might gain is a complex multichannel system that better reflects the multicultural society Britain is today. Of course, digital television will not instantly produce a democratic network of "glocal" communication, but it might just help challenge centralized notions of national identity previously upheld and maintained by large, powerful conglomerates like the BBC. In particular, it will enable smaller and more marginalized nations and communities to ask questions such as, Who are we? How have we been constructed? and How should we conceive our future? The new broadcasting age might not answer all these questions, but it will generally enhance rather than disable such questions being asked. As James Lull (2000) put it with reference to the particular plight of the French Canadians,

The explosion of more and more culturally specialized media channels on cable and satellite TV, French-speaking radio and print media, video, and popular music together with the Internet and other information technologies make it even easier for French-speaking Canadians to imagine themselves as members of an alternative community—a symbolic nation they hope will eventually become politically viable too. Modern nations *depend* on mass communication for just such symbolic presence and continuity. (p. 235)

It is no secret that much of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1948) (particularly the ironically named "Ministry of Truth") was based partly on his experiences of working for the BBC (see Crick 1980, 284-87). The very notion of Big Brother is one of a centralized, monopolistic power that attempted to inflict a totalitarian uniformity on all its citizens, regardless of their individual identities. As such, it seems strangely appropriate that a country like China has recently given e-mail the nickname "little sister," as a result of a similarity in pronunciation (see Yue 2000). Whatever the reasons for its coinage, it seems a surprisingly suitable name for a form of technology that, in some cases, actually allows subversive discussion to take place away from the prying eyes of a ruling elite. As Eric Kit-Wai Ma (2000) has recently explained, the internet in China can provide "an effective and safe platform for discussing politically sensitive issues within and beyond the country border" (p. 30). It has not been my intention here to play down the potential problems of the "digital divide" or to create a utopian picture of the "new broadcasting age." However, I would like to warn people of the dangers of looking back nostalgically to a time when state-funded broadcasting seemed to unify and consolidate a seemingly "organic" nation. Appropriately enough, it was Raymond Williams (1971) who once wrote, "If

there is one thing certain about the 'organic community,' it is that it has always gone" (p. 252). Aaronovitch's golden age has clearly gone; I suggest we let it rest in peace and get on with shaping and determining television's diverse and divergent futures.

Notes

1. This opinion is shared by many within the industry of a certain generation. As the British television playwright Dennis Potter once put it, "Television seemed to me the most democratic medium. I thought that if I wanted to write both for my parents and the people I grew up with, and the people I was now moving amongst, there was only one medium capable of that, and that was television, and that's still the case. It cuts across the lines, the hierarchies inherent in, for instance, print culture" (interview with Paul Madden, unpaginated program notes for a National Film Theatre screening of the *Nigel Barton Plays*, November 1976).

2. *Cathy Come Home's* depiction of modern homelessness is generally credited for helping to create Shelter, a charity designed to help the homeless in Britain.

3. Aaronovitch (2000) remembers the difficult experience of watching his own middle-class father meeting his girlfriend's working-class father. *Roads to Freedom*, he argues, provided the "bridge over which they advanced towards each other" (p. 1).

4. On its arrival, local broadcasting was actually an important aspect of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). Between 1922 and 1924, nineteen local radio stations had been set up in Wales, Scotland, and England. As a result, individual channels could provide listeners with a balanced mixture of local and national programming. While important programs (such as a talk by a national figure) could be transmitted to the whole country, the network could also choose to listen to successful local shows. According to Scannell and Cardiff (1982), this process meant that these stations "developed in themselves and in the areas they served a considerable degree of local pride" (p. 165).

5. The BBC "enjoyed a monopoly of broadcasting until the state permitted commercial television in 1954 and commercial radio in 1972. It has guaranteed revenue from the licence fee, freeing it from commercial pressure and the exigencies of profit" (see Scannell and Cardiff 1982, 161).

6. Indeed, many of the television writers, directors, and producers often validated by "golden age" critics (among them Dennis Potter, Kenith Trodd, Ken Loach, John McGrath, and Don Taylor) were—although eager to promote their working-class backgrounds—actually continuing a long BBC tradition by graduating from either Oxford or Cambridge.

7. For a fuller explanation, see Crisell (1997, 113).

8. This was quoted from a speech by Willie Whitelaw to the Royal Television Society, Cambridge, 1979.

9. Also see Ross (1996, 95-97).

10. "If you took the overall output, including imports, it had by far the highest percentage of ethnic minority appearances at 13% to 8% black, 1% Asian and 4%

others. However, when you took out imports such as *Star Trek*, the number fell from 62 to just 12, although the percentage only fell to 10% which still leaves it in first place" (Younge 2000, 8).

11. According to Marie Gillespie (1995), the Asian families she studied were often fragmented by the sort of British and American films provided by terrestrial television alone. As one respondent told her, "When it's Indian films it's all of us together but when it's English films it's just me and my brother" (p. 81).

12. Admirers of Bakhtin might like to bring in theories of heteroglossia and dialogism to explain this multiuse of language and voices—as opposed to the "monologic" world of public service broadcasting (see Holoquist 1990).

13. See www.runnymedetrust.org.uk.

14. According to Cormack (1999), "The best way forward for regional broadcasters is likely to be selective co-operation with other similar regions. Some Scottish Gaelic programmes, for example, have been co-produced with the new Irish-language station *Teilifís na Gaeilge*, and Scottish Television's Gaelic soap opera *Machair* has been broadcast there" (p. 437).

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