The Vanishing Vision: The Inside Story of Public Television

James Day

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An attempt to answer the question 'Who writes the news' is at the heart of a book by a warrior who has retired hurt but undefeated. James Day, author of *The Vanishing Vision: The Inside Story of Public Television,* has few illusions as to who writes the news, especially the news on commercial television in the USA, but more about that in a moment. Day's rage is measured, taking deadly aim rather than firing blindly into the ether.

Day, past president of both National Education Television and WNET/New York, points enviously to the public broadcasting networks in Japan (NHK), Britain (BBC) and Australia (ABC), and mourns the fact that the combined influences of parochialism, political interference and competition policy were among a host of factors that worked against public broadcasting taking root in the United States. As Day puts it in the introduction to his well-documented and well-written account of his involvement in public broadcasting over 40 years from its inception, the *enfant terrible* of broadcasting had many enemies in addition to lack of funding, all of them allegedly contributing to poverty of information about conditions in the environment.

As Day quite rightly observed at the time of writing a few years ago, the crisis in public broadcasting is not limited to the US. Governments of different political stripes in Britain, Canada and Australia have also tried to silence public broadcasters, resorting to a variety of punitive tactics from slashing funding to initiating commissions of inquiry whenever politicians felt they were being unduly criticised. Although Day devotes pages to the efforts of the Nixon Administration to cripple public broadcasting in retaliation for critical coverage of America's role in the Vietnam War, his analysis of the problems confronted by public broadcasters also identifies difficulties engendered by what he perceived as too much 'independence'. By endeavouring to avoid creating a monolithic enterprise akin to the existing networks, public broadcasting in the US became a bureaucratic monster with too many masters as 300 affiliated stations clamoured to exert influence upon programming and content. Herein lies a huge dilemma for public broadcasting. If it offers the same fare as commercial broadcasters, it has no purpose. If its role is defined as providing an alternative to commercial television, it is damned for failing to be 'objective' in its coverage of conditions in the environment.

Public broadcasting in the US tried to fill a political and educational vacuum, producing innovative programming such as *Sesame Street*, a product created by the Children's Television Workshop that filled the black hole that was children's television (Chapter 9). Ironically, the launch of this program promoting cultural diversity coincided with some dark moments in US history: the violence attending the civil rights movement, in particular the race riots in the late 1960s. It is worth paying close attention to Day's recollections of a program that failed to survive in the 1970s, an innovative news program called *The 51st State.* This nightly news program is described as telling news 'from the bottom up' (Chapter 11). However, the program drew condemnation for its lack of objectivity, objectivity being a key tenet of professional journalism. In a radical departure from conventional journalism practice, reporters on *The 51st State* had to dig up their own stories. Instead of gathering information from routine rounds (beats), journalists produced stories about squatters being evicted from federal housing, a Vietnam vet being assaulted by police, a drug pusher on the run, interviews with drug addicts and other stories that lured audiences away from commercial stations. Not

surprisingly, this radical practice of initiating, rather than passively reporting 'stories' deriving from events staged by sources aimed at generating coverage of issues of their own choosing such as press conferences, stepped on too many toes. The program was trimmed, then axed, after two seasons.

As Day (p. 353) writes, America is virtually alone among Western democracies in failing to recognise the importance of broadcasting as a public service, relying instead upon 'a sixty-year old regulatory statute enacted during the New Deal, when television, cable, and satellites were the stuff of science fiction'. Day's rage is palpable where he argues that unwillingness to regulate has now been taken to its absurd finale in the US, with continuing calls for the privatisation of public television. For Day, public broadcasting is the last refuge of the in-depth documentary that cannot find a home on commercial television due to its length or treatment of 'sensitive' socio-political issues. As for comprehensive coverage during election campaigns, forget it. The commercial networks confine election coverage to horse-race and hoop-la, presuming their audiences suffer from attention-deficit disorder. Enter the democratic deficit. Small wonder so many scholars are so depressed. But if there are lessons to be learned from the US experience, they do not appear to be heard by politicians in Australia who deregulated the broadcasting industry in the 1990s.

Whilst there are many cross-national system differences between political and media systems in the US, the UK, Australia, Canada and NZ, the high cost of communications technology has resulted in governments looking at ways of cost-cutting public broadcasting. Public broadcasting is an easy target for economic rationalists and yet the irony of the situation is that the very people who seek to stifle dissent may be the ones most in need of fair and accurate coverage of political debate at a later date. And it may well be that the information subsidies that government, major political parties, and corporations provide to the news media, coupled with tight formats and organisational constraints imposed upon journalists, actually diminish rather than enhance the capacity of citizens to access a diversity of political news and views from the news media.

The trouble is, when critics debate the value of public broadcasting, they tend to become emotional, even irrational. In Australia, there are strenuous objections to proposals to offset the costs associated with public broadcasting with sponsorship. As acerbic critic Philip Adams said, 'corporate moolah is rapidly replacing government funding: logos branded on to cultural events like the smouldering brands on a bull's backside ... it's easy for democracy to get drowned in the suds'.[1] For the moment, there are some countries holding out against the global corporate communications environment driven by the so-called free market, but as political scientist Samuel Huntington argued, conflict is likely to occur where there is a clash of cultures.[2] Of course, much angst is generated by what people perceive to be the effect of media content and material on the net upon individuals. This explains the intensity of feeling about children being exposed to violence on television and pornography on the net.

As the recent official review of the role and function of the ABC concluded, the integrity of the public broadcasting network in Australia is based upon freedom and independence, with the network's primary function being to provide the citizenry with 'balanced and objective' news as a public service.[3] As the author of the report, businessman Bob Mansfield sagely concluded, this is not possible if there is insufficient funding to undertake these activities, staff do not have the skills or training to comply with these requirements, and governments do not acknowledge that an 'independent' broadcaster is not an agency for government propaganda. And so it can be gleaned from the reactions of scholars from the left and the right, from the friends and foes of public broadcasting networks, and from high levels of anxiety in the community as to their

overall security, that a debate over whether public broadcasting is a substitute for a larger regulatory environment is, in effect, an exercise intended to narrow the terms of the debate over the multiple roles and functions of public broadcasting and the need for intervention in the marketplace to ensure a plurality of views in keeping with liberal democratic theory and practice.

The Vanishing Vision provides instructors and students with a range of perspectives on the need to rethink broadcast policy and regulatory regimes in what is commonly—if somewhat flamboyantly and misleadingly—described as 'a borderless communications environment'.

References

1. Philip Adams, 'Gagged by gifts of suds', *Weekend Australian*, 23–24 May 1998, p. 31.
2. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Touchstone, New York, 1996. See Amos Owen Thomas, 'Transborder television: the response of advertisers in Asia', *Media International Australia*, 86, February 1998, pp. 38–53; David Birch, 'Communication policy in Asia: limited democracy and the public sphere', *Media International Australia*, 86, February 1998, pp. 87–102.
3. Bob Mansfield (The Mansfield Report), *The Challenge of a Better ABC*, Vol. 1, *A Review of the Role and Functions of the ABC*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1997, pp. 8, 9, 24 and 28.

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Technopoles of the World: The Making of Twenty-first Century Industrial Complexes

Manuel Castells and Peter Hall

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Castells and Hall have put together an original and important work for those interested in the relationship between high technology and regional development. They base their analysis on case studies gathered from a comprehensive international examination of numerous industrial complexes that have experienced or are pursuing regional development through high technology. In so doing, they provide a profitable historical profile of such development beginning with the almost mandatory examination of the Silicon Valley phenomena as well as charting lesser known developments around the world.

The nature of the topic covered here is innately multi-disciplinary and because of this the work is not readily categorised. It is best described as a planning/economics work because of its primary concern with determining how to generate regional economic growth through high technology industries. However, the significance of information itself and information flows to the processes described in the work ensure that sociological/historical aspects are not ignored. The authors recognise that innovation and enterprise are as much social phenomena as economic activity and as such the work draws on a variety of disciplines including; planning, economics, geography, sociology, history and business.

In the preface and first chapter, the book describes how '[c]ities and regions are being profoundly modified in their structure, and conditioned in their growth dynamics by the interplay of three major historical processes: technological revolution, the formation of a