Trying to Intervene:
British media research and the framing of policy debate

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In this informal paper, I develop some themes drawn from my experience of attempting to use my academic research as a basis for intervening in media policy debates in the UK in the past decade. My research focuses on issues of public service broadcasting (PSB) and public culture and media generally, and includes major studies in the last decade of the BBC and Channel 4, the two main British public service broadcasters, the UK television industry, and digital television and convergence. I researched and wrote the first independent inside study of the BBC as an organization, an ethnography based on two years' fieldwork mainly in BBC television in the late 1990s with updates to 2004, which is combined with wider historical and contemporary analysis of the industry and of media politics in the UK in this period.[1] On the basis of my research, I have occasionally managed in the last decade to move into policy-related work and advisory and consultancy roles with government, the PSBs, and major cultural bodies, although with difficulty, as the following will show. Although my experience no doubt stems from the nature of my research, which analyses critically the effects of the neo-liberal economic reforms that have swept over the British media and Britain's public sector institutions — including the BBC — in recent decades, it forms part of a larger set of developments concerning academics' capacity to intervene in policy debates. This wider story is of the growing ambivalence of public and private bodies to academic involvement in policy, of the waning public profile and legitimacy of academic research, of the closure of channels previously available to academics for communicating policy-relevant findings in the press and political weeklies, and of a degradation of the quality of analysis and understanding in these outlets.

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[1] Georgina Born, *Uncertain Vision: Birt, Dyke, and the Reinvention of the BBC*, London: Vintage 2005. The closest previous study, solely on the BBC news operation, is Phillip Schlesinger's work in the 1970s: *Putting Reality Together*, London: Constable, 1978.

In Britain, there are a number of key bodies charged with policy review and development: primarily the government Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS); the new (since 2003) telecommunications and media super-regulator, Ofcom; the BBC's new (since 2007) overseeing body, the BBC Trust; and two "Select" Committees of Parliament — attached to the House of Commons and House of Lords — which engage in continuing reviews of the communications landscape. Already there is an interesting issue here, since in some eyes, Ofcom has outgrown its proper regulatory role by becoming proactive and proposing major policy shifts. It is also striking that issues of media and communications have become "sexy" as topics of public debate, given the high visibility and status of these industries under the "creative economy" imperative of the last 15 years, so that there are media pages in almost all of the quality newspapers and weeklies.

How does the British academic media and communications' community interface with these policy bodies and processes? Its main professional body is the Media, Communications and Cultural Studies Association (MeCCSA) of the UK, which holds a meeting each year, and which contains several ideological currents. These currents include, *inter alia* and not necessarily mutually exclusively, a Marxist or post-Marxist wing, a libertarian wing, a few advocates of neo-liberal policies who work well and easily with the reigning political regime, and a public-interest oriented group keen to engage both constructively, on the basis of our research, and critically with current policies. (As well as myself, this group includes Sonia Livingstone, Jean Seaton, Sylvia Harvey, Maire Messenger Davies, David Hesmondhalgh, Julian Petley, Steven Barnett, Ivor Gaber, and others).

Another local struggle in the UK is internecine: there is a group of distinguished media academics of the upper generation who disagree with attempts by myself and other colleagues to intervene in policy, arguing that these efforts entail unacceptable compromises with the capitalist media and bring merely cosmetic gains. Our proper role, in their account, is to disdain from such intervention and to undertake only critical research unsullied by contacts with industry and government. As a result, it has sometimes been difficult to achieve a working unanimity; MeCCSA is large, it can be unwieldy, and it acts primarily as an academic forum.

Underlying the situation for academic media scholars is a deeper shift in the past decade, one that affects academics' profile and capacity to influence policy and public debate. Both MeCCSA and individual academics are increasingly hampered by the declining status and authority of academia, in general, in public life in the UK — an extremely important and under-discussed issue. The role of the public intellectual and policy adviser has been taken over by the increasing numbers of freelance consultants and think tanks, and these are the people/groups to whom government, regulators, broadcasters, and policy debates turn. They are hired by the project, and they tend to be tamer and better attuned to what the policy bodies (and government and industry) want to hear.[2] What these hired hands do is bolster up and reproduce what Bourdieu identifies, with characteristic oxymoronic irony, as

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[2] For an analogous account of the role of consultants in the BBC, see Born, *Uncertain Vision*, chapter 6.

the ideological "consensus in dissensus, which constitutes the objective unity of the . . . field."[3] The upshot is a strong, largely unchallenged ideological consensus in the UK among industry, government, influential policy bodies, media commentators and consultants — such that it makes sense to speak now of a two-headed media and political class. The consensus is broadly economically neo-liberal, while at the margins it is fine-tuned for public service ends, as befits a positive-regulation-oriented polity and in line with the historic PSB traditions of the UK.

This new consensual (or hegemonic) reality, as well as its not-coincidental boundedness and drive to keep out independent and non-aligned arguments, is signaled by two further crucial developments. First, even the quality national broadsheets, including those broadly of the left (*The Guardian* and *The Independent*), have media sections staffed by editors whose "common sense" falls within the neo-liberal consensus, and for whom there is comfort and kudos in speaking the same language as the industry — pro-market and pro-corporate, suspicious of public interventions and of any talk, however grounded or informed, of matters democratic or cultural. The result is that it is extremely difficult to gain space to write in the national press, even on evidence-based research of national importance. The space of debate is curtailed; it is peopled in part by canonized celebrity columnists, some of them substantial figures such as Timothy Garton Ash or Simon Jenkins, but with no claim to expertise on media issues. But mostly, the quality of media coverage is superficial, collusive and unanalytical. Glaring symptoms of industry ill-health or malaise are overlooked; fashions in commentary pass for analysis, such as the discourse of "trust" that has been brought to the epidemic of corruption, fraud and fakery afflicting British television in the last decade, which obscures the causes of this breakdown in the media ecology. One of the main causes of fraud — also in the BBC's recent "Crowngate" crisis — is the still-growing outsourcing of production, beginning in the early 1990s, to "independent" commercial production companies, under government policies to marketise television and radio production. This "independent" production sector has consolidated rapidly and is now polarized between large multinational firms and small, barely viable companies. The large firms predominate under a system of "preferred suppliers" operated by the broadcasters, and as a result these firms can more or less dictate terms to the broadcasters, including the BBC, while it is extremely difficult to enforce their compliance with quality, ethical and employment standards — a major cause of the rash of faked shows. And yet, this clear chain of causality underlying the fakery scandals is barely mentioned in the copious media coverage.[4]

The second trend marking the determined framing of policy and the drive to keep alternative, even scholarly, voices out is the change in the last decade whereby huge fees are charged for major public policy events. Effectively, this represents the privatization of media policy debate in the UK — an extraordinary development under a Labour government. Thus, the two major annual TV industry events — one in Edinburgh,[5] the other in Oxford[6] — now cost academics approximately £1,000 (for three days) and

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3 Pierre Bourdieu, "Systems of Education and Systems of Thought," *International Social Science Journal*, 19, 1967, p. 191.

4 For a discussion of this situation, see G. Born, "Television's Faustian Pact," *New Statesman*, 30 August 2007, available at: http://www.newstatesman.com/media/2007/08/bbc-industry-government

5 The annual *Guardian* Edinburgh International Television Festival.

£350 (for one day) to attend. To translate, given that my normal annual research budget from Cambridge University is between £500 and £800, if I do not have a specific research grant with funding for such events, half my annual budget could be spent attending just one single, one-day policy event. I am currently contesting this trend, in which even the most prestigious and influential Labour think tanks — such as the Institute for Public Policy Research — collude, and I am fighting for media policy events to charge lower fees to academics and interested public bodies. But there are additional ways to keep independent academics out. Ofcom holds major media policy conferences which are little publicized in advance, and to which it simply does not invite any but the most friendly academics. (There are, in fact, just two non-economist media scholars in the UK who are invited to almost all of these events, and indeed help to program them).

In sum, these developments are part of wider changes to the effect that academics are no longer credited with the authority that they once were. This is no reflection of the declining potency of academic research. Rather, the commissioned, in some ways "tied," work of think tanks and columnists is now thought to be (or at least is presented as) *the* source of acute analysis and new ideas.[7] Academics are seen as irrelevant, slow-footed and unexciting. This is a worrying turn, one that suggests that falling university salaries in recent decades have been paralleled by a sweeping *déclassement* of academics in the public mind.

The main successful organization intervening in media policy in the UK is an NGO called Voice of the Listener and Viewer (VLV), a public body with clout due in part to its considerable legitimacy as it is seen as genuinely publicly representative. VLV has a membership, now aging, which is committed to the historical values and institutions of PSB; but its high profile is due also to the extraordinary talents and energy of its leader, Jocelyn Hay, who is consulted by government on most media policy matters and who gets a voice in many debates. Unfortunately, Mrs. Hay is now retiring, and some of the academic community in the UK are considering how — Trojan-Horse-like — to continue to support the VLV and make use of its valuable legitimacy. In the conditions I have sketched, this legitimacy will ebb away if it is seen to be too "academic." So, that is an immediate, significant political challenge.

In addition, valuable and effective NGOs and lobbying groups form at critical points in the media policy cycle, forming alliances and attempting to influence the policy discussion. Two notable examples are Public Voice, a UK coalition of voluntary sector associations and non-profit media organizations, which helped to secure a number of significant improvements to the latest Communications Act (2003) — the most important of which was a definition in law that the new regulator, Ofcom, has a "principal duty . . . to further the interests of citizens," and 3WE (Third World and Environment Broadcasting Project), a founding member of Public Voice, which campaigns for better television coverage of international issues, and which successfully campaigned for the Communications Act 2003 to include a requirement for public

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[6] The annual Oxford Media Convention, supported by the *Guardian* newspaper and the New Labour think tank, the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR).

[7] An ironic recent example is the columnist John Lloyd's influential book, *What the Media are Doing to Our Politics* (London: Constable 2004), a scathing critique of declining standards in journalism and of media cynicism about the political process, but which is itself cursorily referenced and lightly researched.

service television to cover "matters of international significance or interest."[8] But our challenge is that these efforts are ad hoc and tend to dissolve after the event. Thus, a current task is to form a sustained "rapid response" academic policy group with sufficient expertise and unanimity on key policy matters that we can assist such NGOs and intervene forcefully at critical moments, which, given digitization and convergence, are coming thick and fast. We are presently working on this through MeCCSA, and I think we will achieve it. An enduring source of support for academic input on policy matters remains those NGOs, such as the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom,[9] that act in part as a front for the trades unions in broadcasting and media. These organizations remain powerful because industry and government have no alternative but to meet and listen to them; the upshot is a welcome platform for diverse informed voices.

Further insights into the dynamics I have outlined can be gained by zooming in to my specific experiences with the BBC and Channel 4 in relation to my independent research. *Uncertain Vision*, my BBC ethnography, examines the transformation of PSB in Britain in the last decade under the combined impact of commercialization, globalization, and the "new public management," a slate of neo-liberal reforms visited especially on the BBC. It analyzes BBC Director-General John Birt's implementation of these radical policies through the introduction of marketization and market research, outsourcing, auditing and accountability practices — all intended both to boost efficiency and increase the BBC's democratic functioning by effecting greater responsiveness to its audiences. The ironic findings are that these and other forces acted to inhibit creativity and erode the space for high quality program-making, in part through the extreme centralisation effected by rationalised and market-led scheduling, and by foregrounding generic values such as efficiency, value for money, and accountability that displaced the creative idioms of program-making. The book also analyzes subsequent developments, particularly the reign of Birt's successor, Greg Dyke, who fostered a renewed commitment to creativity and high quality production, as well as populist successes, but who was forced peremptorily to resign in 2004 as a result of the BBC's conflict with government over the justification for Britain's involvement in the Iraq war.

In light of this study, the BBC's dealings with me have been markedly (perhaps predictably) ambivalent. On the one hand, a number of senior figures — from BBC Governors, to heads of production departments, to news executives, to the current Director-General — have sent me warm and grateful feedback, writing of the cogency of my analysis, and in one case of the "shock of recognition." Many of these people have been willing to stay in dialogue about the contemporary challenges facing the corporation. I was invited to participate in a key policy seminar on which my work bears significance, on impartiality in news. I have been able to follow up aspects of my earlier work, such as with senior news executives on the impact of digitization and the Internet on BBC news operations. And I occasionally do BBC radio and TV myself, reviewing shows (such as the relaunched flagship current affairs strand, *Panorama*), and speaking on aspects of the BBC's history. On the other hand, there is a strong sense of

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[8] For accounts of these developments, and critiques of Ofcom's functioning, see Sylvia Harvey, "Ofcom's First Year and Neoliberalism's Blind Spot: Attacking the culture of production," *Screen*, 47, 1, Spring 2006, and Don Redding, "The Non-Democratic Regulator: A response to Sylvia Harvey," *Screen* 47, 1, spring 2006.

[9] See http://www.cpbf.org.uk/

being carefully managed, kept at arm's length, even pleasantly buried. My book was never reviewed in any of the numerous on-air cultural and book review slots (and might well have been). I have never been allowed by the BBC to take part in any sustained way in serious policy discussions. I am aware that, despite passionate appreciation by some of those working in the BBC and in television, my book has not been allowed to surface within the BBC, nor within the industry. Those who appreciate my work, including media professionals and journalists, have puzzled over this, but this double tactic seems to me to be understandable, if regrettable. It reflects a policing of the boundaries of discourse on television and PSB in the UK and the enormously sensitive nature of the public debate.

A similar ambivalence is evident in the larger policy sphere. On the one hand, I was invited to give written and oral evidence to the House of Lords Select Committee addressing the future of the BBC during the recent 10-yearly review of its Royal Charter. I did so, and was informed that my contributions had been important (which was obvious since whole lines of questioning in the Committee meetings took off from my written evidence). On the other hand, I am regularly not invited to take part in Ofcom policy deliberations on the future of PSB in the UK. As I wrote this article, an edited book for the second Ofcom review of PSB in the UK was being pulled together; as one of the foremost academic experts on the BBC, I offered an essay, but it was declined. Certain dominant New Labour think tanks also marginalize me in their work on broadcasting and media. For example, the IPPR and the Work Foundation — directed by Will Hutton, a leading New Labour writer also capable, however, of critical independence, who refused my attempts to make contact following my book's publication. My arguments are not in tune with the dominant consensus, and this seems to be sufficient to avoid me.

With Channel 4 (C4), the story has in some ways been different. Five years ago, I did some research on how C4 was getting into digital TV and the Internet in what were then early days in the UK. My study turned out to be highly critical of what purports to be our second PSB, one that is ostensibly committed to experiment and innovation, diversity and minority provision. In short, I found that C4's strategizing for digital TV and the Internet was limited to entirely commercial thinking, with no commitment to, nor creative thought about, the public service potentials of the new media, nor about its remit for diversity and minorities.[10] It happened that a major policy initiative related to C4 was floated by Ofcom at around the time I was publishing, so I found that I had a rare opportunity to publish a serious and substantial article in a national broadsheet, *The Daily Telegraph*. I wrote a critical, questioning piece, highlighting C4's drift from its legal remit in the new digital conditions and its abandonment of its public service orientation. Soon after, I was invited to lunch by C4's corporate relations executive, who assured me that C4 had just rediscovered its public service ethos! In fact, no such shift could be discerned, but within a year, the deputy chairman of the corporation suddenly began to speak in public of C4's

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[10] See G. Born, "Strategy, Positioning and Projection in Digital Television: Channel Four and the commercialisation of public service broadcasting in the UK, *Media, Culture and Society*, 25 (6), 773-799, 2003; and G. Born, *Uncertain Futures: Public Service Television and the Transition to Digital — A Comparative Analysis of the Digital TV Strategies of the BBC and Channel Four*, Media@LSE Working Paper, n. 3, 2003: http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/media@lse/mediaWorkingPapers/ewpNumber3.htm

determination to refind its public service principles — for which it would henceforth need considerable public subsidy. This remains today the state of play in policy terms for C4; it is a key theme of Ofcom's current review of PSB in the UK. I gained satisfaction from realizing the small but possibly crucial role I had played in turning C4 round, one that followed directly from the rare chance to air my findings in a major newspaper. Once again, as in the BBC, there are friends and admirers of my work within C4, including senior channel bosses and creative executives, through whom I remain in touch and with whom I engage in dialogue. I am guardedly welcome to visit and interview people at C4, and recently gave the final keynote in the national conference marking Channel 4's 25th birthday on the corporation's public service record, a lecture attended by some of the executives I had recently interviewed. But there is little doubt that, for all this, my participation in the policy battles and scenes that matter around C4 is severely limited.

The point, then, is that the challenge of intervening in policy debate is much more complex than we often acknowledge. Inasmuch as our independent research results in critical findings about dominant governmental and institutional policies, it is little wonder that our work is treated ambivalently and suspiciously by government and industry. But critical independence is of course the key function that our research should perform, not just for intellectual reasons, but in terms of its capacity to drive policy thinking forward in less earthbound, interest-tied, short-term ways. We should reflect on this contradictory reality, and let the research funding bodies — which can espouse naively consensual views of policy-relevance in research — know about it, too. In short, discomfort and ambivalence *may* be an inevitable response to valuable and probing research.

A final dimension of the struggle to intervene moves outwards to the international arena. Recently, an international policy discussion list has been formed through the International Communications Association (ICA), with the purpose of sharing information and considering whether there are any supports or initiatives that could be developed through this global scholarly body. It is still early days, but my own interest lies in the potential power of the ICA to discern and take up key "universal" policy issues and, on that basis, add its lobbying weight to national struggles. For example, it might be possible to engage in an international dialogue between all those researching and/or committed to public service or public interest media, a critical area as we move forward with digitisation and convergence. Of course this is inescapably a value-laden activity; it necessitates straying on to the territory of trying to identify potentially (near) "universal" policy concerns — and that is difficult, and may even prove divisive. But the point about the ICA is that it is a large and powerful professional body, and therein lies its possible political strengths.

Moreover, identifying such (near) "universal" values may be less onerous than it might be supposed. As well as the classic values of freedom of speech, of the press, and academic freedom, it may well be possible to create cross-national alliances on such additional common principles as support for human dignity, diversity of voice, and universal access. In turn, this might be translatable into statements that would support and add legitimacy to national policy interventions as well as engagements with international policy fora. I hope it is apparent how much our need is, at least in the UK, for additional legitimacy, visibility, and force when dealing with crucial national policy debates. If, as my own research shows, the technological and economic forecasting commissioned by media corporations universalizes

certain commercially-oriented representations of the media future, representations that circulate globally at policy and industry events, with immense impact on national media industries and policies,[11] surely our role as independent researchers of the globalized mediascape is to develop and publicise a *counter*-discourse of plausibly universalistic values to underpin future policy and regulation, both national and cross-national. In this, given the conditions I have explored in this paper, the contribution of international agencies such as the ICA may become increasingly urgent and important in providing the backing for our efforts as individual scholars and indeed for our collective national academic activities.

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[11] For analyses of the impact of forecasting, see G. Born, "Future-Making: Corporate performativity and the temporal politics of markets," in D. Held and H. Moore (eds.), *Cultural Politics in a Global Age: uncertainty, solidarity and innovation*, London: Oneworld 2008; and G. Born, "Future-Making: The art of forecasting and the temporal politics of markets," paper presented to the European Association of Social Anthropologists annual conference, University of Bristol, UK, September 2006.