

Speech to the Cambridge Union Society

John Ryley, Head of Sky News

12 January 2010

“Television and Democracy”

Good evening.

Over New Year I enjoy reading the newspaper columns which make predictions about the forthcoming 12 months. I enjoy even more going back to last year's predictions and reminding myself how risky predictions can be.

For example a magazine called Spirit & Destiny said in January last year that Gordon Brown would be forced out of office in 2009 and an early election would be called.

Clearly having had their fingers burnt, they're going out on a limb in 2010: they predict Australia will regain the Ashes, petrol prices will shoot up and the Post Office Unions will continue their strike action.

I'm surprised that they haven't really stuck their necks out by predicting a British general election sometime in the spring.

I would love to tell you who is going to win that election, but I'm afraid the latest issue of Spirit & Destiny magazine has not yet arrived.

What I can predict is that this election will be quite different from any that has gone before.

Why? Because the relationship between politicians and the media has changed. And the good news is that that change has the potential to reinvigorate democracy.

Which brings me to my topic for this evening: the role of television in a democracy and its ability to challenge the status quo.

Television should be a great tool of democracy, providing a direct line to our political leadership like never before.

- I will argue, however, that - at least until relatively recently - the potent power of television has been undermined by the establishment.
- I intend to argue that, it was only the intervention of BSkyB, through Sky News, which began to change the relationship between television audiences and those in power.
- And I will further argue that, it is only because of Sky's willingness to continue to challenge the status quo that, at this election and in future, we will begin to see the release of television's full potential as a force for democratic empowerment.
- Finally, I will enter the world of Spirit and Destiny magazine by daring to predict the future by considering the barriers that remain. And I will ask how we can tear down those barriers, to further release the true power of television: to inform, to engage and to challenge both the public and the political classes.

Let's start with a brief review of the relationship between the broadcasters and the politicians.

There was a time in Britain - not too distant - when the most challenging question a politician might expect to face during a television interview was: Tell us what you would like to say to the nation, Minister."

There was nothing inevitable about this. From the advent of the printing press, 500 years earlier, the print media's role has been to subvert, to challenge and to democratise knowledge. From day one - IT WAS the tool of pamphleteers, polemicists and revolutionaries. It was the catalyst of the renaissance, the driver of humanism and a powerful force for good

throughout Europe and the world. From the first Gutenberg bible, to Thomas Paine's Rights of Man, to Das Kapital, the printed word removed from the ruling elite, at a stroke, the ability to control information and – I hope I am not overstating my case – free-thought.

Little wonder then, that the ruling elite in the last century should be suspicious of any new media and seek to control it.

From the start, the politicians imposed Draconian controls on television services which now seem almost Stalinist: they nationalised the BBC and erected tough barriers for companies wanting to run commercial channels.

The governors and the management of the BBC – and the commercial channels which followed – were editorially 'free' but the stick-and-carrot relationship with government ensured they remained docile.

For the BBC, the carrot came in the form of the licence fee, an addictive drug.

For the commercial companies, the granting of an ITV licence was – in the words of the erstwhile, head of Scottish Television, Roy Thomson – "a licence to print money".

Yet what the Lord – or in this case, the Government – giveth, the Government can soon taketh away. As a result, the relationship with the original broadcasters was (and remains today) tinged with menace. The licence fee and arm's length regulation of the broadcast media offered only an illusion of independence, more often resembling a dog's choke collar: the broadcasters were forever fearful that, were they to get too frisky, their political masters would jerk them back into line with a single tug of their leash.

Hardly surprising then, that the politicians soon had these original broadcasters domesticated. The nature of the relationship was set early on.

On 1st September 1939, the day Hitler invaded Poland and 48 hours before Britain declared war on Germany, the government told the BBC to take its television service off the air

immediately. BBC Television didn't return until June 1946 - seven years later - to broadcast the National Victory celebrations. And a BBC wartime undertaking not to broadcast any discussions due to be debated in Parliament for the forthcoming fourteen days - that in effect killed off any topical discussion - remained in force until 1957.

To be honest, there was little house-training required. In the words of Gordon Brown, many of those first lords of television learned the game "on the playing fields of Eton". They had little incentive to piddle on the family carpet.

The result - for much of the sixties, seventies and eighties - was a cosy duopoly of BBC and ITV, playing by the rules, not rocking the boat. Why would they? The status quo suited everyone, except perhaps the viewers.

The broadcasters and the establishment conspired together to patronise the public. The regulators' (who were in the main cut from the same cloth) had a concept of public service broadcasting which was - frankly - aloof, snobbish, patriarchal, almost Victorian.

They knew - or thought they did - what was good, and bad, for the public. They decided the broadcasting diet: what sort of religion, children's' programming, drama, light entertainment, or news should be in the schedules, and how much of it.

Even when Channel 4 came on the scene in 1982 - with a remit to break the duopoly - little really changed: it was governed by all the same rules.

Which brings me to my second point: what changed? In a single word: Sky.

I suppose I would say that. But look at the evidence:

The Government justified its control of broadcasters by the scarcity of broadcasting frequencies, the spectrum - as it's called. It argued that, with room for only a small number of channels, you couldn't let 'just anyone' run a TV station. I mean, who would ensure 'standards'?

The argument lasted until 1989 – just 21 years ago next month – when Rupert Murdoch launched Sky TV. Whatever else you might say about him, he was not ‘just anyone’ and he was certainly not part of the cosy status quo. A highly competitive, commercially successful Australian, Murdoch was the classic outsider. And he set out to shake things up.

Sky News was in the vanguard of this onslaught on the broadcasting status quo: its mission was to disrupt television’s formula for presenting news. And we have been doing it ever since.

Before Sky, TV news was handed down in tablets of stone by newsreaders with clipped tones and sniffy airs. The news was only on at fixed times of the day – the way it still is on ITV, Channel 4 and Five.

The biggest news stories might merit a 30 second newsflash between programmes. For everything else you had to wait until the next news bulletin, sometimes several hours away.

Only a major Royal death was deemed to merit a full scale interruption of the schedule.

In the seventies, there was a programme editor at ITN who was known as the “Bus conductor” because if a late story came in – more or less regardless of its scale or importance – he would say “This bulletin’s already full, there’ll be another one along later.” His world had not been touched by the concept of breaking news.

Sky News and, in America, CNN, changed all that. The news was on when the viewers wanted it, which was all the time. If a big story broke, we told viewers about it immediately. And we kept going with it, because we understood that, when big news happens, people have an enormous appetite for the facts and they don’t want to wait. Sky News’s first slogan was “We’re there when you need us.”

Today, with news and information available on demand, instantly, this may not sound particularly radical. But in 1989, there was no Internet, no twitter, no SMS. Only the Wall Street Gordon Geckos carried mobile phones and they were the size of the average house-brick. So, in 1989, news on demand wasn’t radical... it was revolutionary. 24-hour news

hasn't just been a liberation for the audience. Being able to bring breaking news to viewers in real time has been a breath of fresh air for us journalists as well. It has brought with it an entirely new way of working and of approaching an emerging story.

Over the years, we at Sky, have learned to trust our viewers: as soon as we hear something, our viewers do too, while at the same time we help them to understand the quality of the source. We trust our viewers to make their own judgments as to the validity of any emerging story... and, as a result, they trust us, as the place to which to turn to for breaking news.

It was this ethos which meant Sky was the first to report the shooting of Jean Charles De Menezes. But we were also clear that the victim's status as a suicide bomber was only 'suspected'. It was this same approach which meant that Sky was also the first to report the death of Princess Diana... the shooting of Jill Dando... and the 7/7 bomb attacks on the London tube.

The 7/7 bombings were, in fact, a seminal moment in the development of rolling news in the UK. While the authorities were insisting that the explosions on the Tube were caused by a power surge, Sky News reported the facts as they emerged, pieced them together and reached the conclusion that London was under attack.

Sir Ian Blair, the then Metropolitan Police Commissioner, said later: "At that stage [09.20am] we were pretty unclear, because we didn't know whether these were bombs or an electrical surge ... we switched on Sky as everybody else does to try to get some idea of what's going on..."

In such cases, you can never be certain which way the story will turn. As a broadcaster you have a choice: keep it to yourself, until you can be certain that whatever you eventually say will not be too big an embarrassment. Or share it with your viewers, with the risk that you end up with egg on your face. The status quo of TV news before Sky came along was the former - our philosophy has always been the latter and it has paid great dividends.

In this way, Sky has transformed not only our own channel, but those of the old broadcasters too. They have learned a thing or two from us.

For example, for a while on 7/7, the BBC reported only what it could officially confirm. Subsequently it did some audience research which showed that viewers trusted Sky more than BBC News 24. As a result, the BBC changed its policy and now reports information as it emerges much more readily.

Fortunately, while the old broadcasters may be learning from us, they still have some way to go to catch up. Our corps of reporters and correspondents is small compared with the BBC but their ability over the past 21 years to 'get the story' is unrivalled: In China, Dominic Waghorn was the first Western broadcast journalist to lift the curtain on illegal land grabs and baby snatching with his devastating - and award-winning-reports. We decided to push the envelope as hard as possible and risk the consequences. We reckoned you don't know what you can get away with until you try it.

Last year, Stuart Ramsay was the first Western journalist to reach Pakistan's Swat valley, and show how the Taliban had taken control there. Sky was banned from Pakistan for seven months because of this story.

Ramsay, together with Emma Hurd, also risked imprisonment - and possibly worse - to report the unravelling of Zimbabwe.

Alex Crawford braved the most dangerous parts of Afghanistan to interview warlords and report on the heroin trade.

And at Westminster, Sky's political editor Adam Boulton is regarded as one of Britain's finest political journalists of his generation, noted for his own impartiality. All these people are award-winning journalists, all regularly the targets of head-hunting raids by other news organisations.

I tell you this not to boast – well maybe a little – but to make an important point: for decades the politicians argued that broadcasters had to be controlled for their own – and the public – good. The politicians argued that the market could not be trusted to maintain standards; they told us that giving viewers what they wanted was a dangerous aberration.

Sky's experience tells us directly the opposite: broadcasting standards have been maintained and even raised, viewers can be trusted.

But our critics have had one more arrow in their quiver. That is to question Sky's impartiality. On occasion, they do this by trying to whip up concern about the fact that BSkyB's largest shareholder, News Corporation, also owns some of the UK's most widely read newspapers. In his public sparring with The Sun following its switch to support the Tories, Lord Mandelson even sought to blur the boundaries between that paper's editorial decisions and those of Sky News.

Now, Lord Mandelson is smart enough and experienced enough to know that there is no such link, but you can see why it might suit him to create a different impression. I'm guessing some of you might have heard similar claims before so let me address this head on.

At Sky News, we provide impartial and independent news. That's not because Ofcom tells us to but because it's what our audience expects of us. In simple terms, it's good business for us to be impartial. It's the foundation of the reputation that we've built over two decades and we have no intention of jeopardising what we've fought so hard to establish.

That's not to say that there aren't different ways of approaching television news. Whatever you think of Fox News, there is no denying that it has shaken up the sometimes staid world of US TV news by using commentators like Bill O'Reilly and Sean Hannity alongside its core news output. Although it has my admiration, I know that the Fox News model would not be right for Sky News. For some, opinion will be the right path to follow. For us, it is impartiality.

However, I believe that I should be free to make that judgement as a journalist. I neither want nor need to be subjected to the controlling hand of a regulator armed with a set of codes and sanctions.

In an era when audiences can choose from an almost limitless choice of information - on air, in print and online - it is anachronistic, patronising and unnecessary to enforce a universal obligation of impartiality on all forms of television news. We should trust journalists to exercise editorial judgements and we should trust viewers to choose the news that they want to consume.

Sky News has only been able to challenge the status quo thanks to the support of BSkyB, which has invested more than eight hundred million pounds in news over 21 years. There are few companies which have shown such a long-term commitment to journalism. In fact, Sky News is the only UK TV news service which does not receive any form of public subsidy. Nor would we ever consent to compromise our independence in that way.

As well as financial investment, the management of BSkyB, including at times both James and Rupert Murdoch, have given support and encouragement to successive heads of Sky News to take risks and innovate. But never has the editorial policy of Sky News been controlled by the CEO or Chairman of BSkyB, nor anyone else for that matter. That's our job as journalists, based on the true independence and accountability that comes from a commercial funding model. Only by standing on our own two feet can broadcasters be truly independent.

Which brings me to my third point: our proven quality and our independence is what allows Sky to innovate, to take risks, to challenge the status quo. And it is this ability to innovative which is reshaping British politics and enhancing democracy.

Tell me which is the odd one out? Britain, Israel, Iran, Afghanistan or Russia? Britain of course... We are the only one of these countries where political leaders refuse to debate their policies on television come election time.

That was until now.

You will also have no doubt seen the recent announcement that this year things will be different: the leaders of the three main parties will at last debate each other on television in the forthcoming election.

Following that announcement I read an article in The Guardian questioning whether this was a good idea or part of the Americanisation of British politics (which is shorthand for “a bad idea” in Guardian parlance).

But what the author failed to understand is that an election debate isn't Americanisation – it is Normalisation.

It is to our country's great shame that, until now, Britain has been practically alone amongst Western democracies in failing to hold a leaders election debate. How could this be?

I fear the answer lies in that historical relationship between broadcaster and politician which has existed for so long in Britain. In the words of Lord Byron:

“My very chains and I grew friends,
So much a long communion tends
To make us what we are:--even I
Regain'd my freedom with a sigh.”

It wasn't that the old broadcasters didn't want a debate, merely that they were enslaved to their political paymasters. To return to my earlier metaphor, the dog had forgotten how to bark.

Meanwhile, the politicians have resisted the march of television every inch of the way. They understand better than anyone the capacity of TV to expose them, warts and all, in front of the voters. They fear its unpredictability, its uncontrollability, its – dare I say it – independence.

As a result, unbelievably, it wasn't until 1978 that the first radio microphones were admitted into the House of Commons – 56 years after the formation of the BBC.

We had to wait until 1985 for cameras to be admitted to the House of Lords.

And it wasn't until 1989 – barely 20 years ago – that cameras were finally admitted to the House of Commons.

Every step of the way, the NO lobby – led by some of our most senior politicians – warned that exposure via the TV cameras would lead to the trivialisation of politics.

Incredibly, they argued – without even the tiniest hint of self-parody – that public confidence in our political leaders would be undermined were we to see them in action.

I leave it to you to judge for yourselves whether these fears were well-founded, but they should never have overridden the democratic case for opening up politics to public scrutiny.

The last great bastion of resistance was the general election debate.

At election time, the political classes are especially nervous about the unpredictable nature of live TV. They doubtless remember Tony Blair being harangued by the angry partner of a cancer patient, or Jack Straw, the then Home Secretary being booed by police officers. Both caught live on TV.

As a result, every election time, since the idea was first mooted in the UK, there has been a ritual dance between politicians and broadcasters. The broadcasters ask for a debate, knowing the answer would almost certainly be no; the governing party leader or the front runner duly refuses, and the broadcasters shrug wearily and get on with covering the campaign as best they can.

Until now.

Last September – in the Sky News tradition of challenging the status quo – I decided on a different approach.

Over the years, others tried to bring the politicians to the table through careful negotiation.

Sky News avoided that traditional path.

We decided we wouldn't ask anyone's permission to stage a debate. Instead, we took a decision: we'd commit to hosting a debate. We'd set the time and date. We'd provide three chairs and send out the invitations. It would then be up to the politicians to decide whether they'd show up.

This was definitely not the way things were done. Any deal should have been stitched together in once smoke-filled rooms, negotiated between men in suits. The Jeremiahs and doom mongers said "it will never happen".

Nevertheless, we pressed on. We campaigned on TV, on the web and in the newspapers. Thousands signed our petition.

And our take-it-or-leave-it approach transformed the debate about a debate.

Within two months we had 'in principle' commitments from all three main party leaders to participate.

It became clear that for the first time a debate was on the cards.

Sky recognised that – much as I might like it to be otherwise – a debate could not be 'the property' of any one broadcaster, just as no one political party could be allowed to exercise a veto over it.

We recognised the biggest risk to the project would be if we allowed the politicians to drive a wedge between the broadcasters. So we sat down with our competitors to find ways to make

this work. What started as a unilateral campaign, turned into a major cross-broadcaster collaboration.

There have been hours of painstaking negotiations, at the highest level. But it has been worth it.

Finally just before Christmas, we were able to announce that the debates – three of them in fact - would actually happen.

The Telegraph called it an “historic breakthrough”.

The Times said the debates: “could change the shape of politics by raising voter interest and providing drama that could alter the campaign.”

And the Mail welcomed the idea saying ‘ These televised debates, imperfect though they may be, can only help to re-engage voters with those who seek the honour of representing them’.

So how did we get there? What’s changed?

Well, principally, politics had changed.

The political parties realised that the scandal over MPs’ allowances and expenses had triggered a crisis of confidence, not just in particular individuals or parties but the whole political system. They recognised that it could no longer be ‘business as usual’. The electorate was ready to punish the party which did not change the way it did business.

So the parties decided they had no choice but to take the risk of participating in a debate, or, at least, they recognised that it would be more risky NOT to participate.

So politics changed. But so did the broadcasters.

As Iain Dale, one of the most respected Conservative political bloggers in the country puts it:
“Without Sky News’ relentless campaign to make these debates happen I am not sure we’d have had [this] announcement today.

And his Liberal Democrat counterpart, Mark Pack adds:

“It’s a credit to Sky that after so many years they finally were the broadcaster willing to call the bluff of party leaders and be willing to empty chair any who didn’t turn up – hence forcing the current agreement.”

In the next few months Sky – now working in partnership with the BBC and ITV – will be pushing at the political boundaries. The public will get to see our political leaders engage on the mass medium of our age for the first time, and our democracy will be the better for it.

The fine details are still being worked out. But I can tell you today that the broadcasters, not the political parties, will determine those rules and let the British public rather than the political spin doctors determine for themselves whether we have been fair.

I can further confirm we are in talks with the parties in Scotland to bring about debates that satisfy their local needs and we will be talking to the Welsh parties shortly.

I believe that these debates will transform the nature of the campaign: and that in doing so they will raise voters’ interest and heighten political engagement to a level we have not seen in this country for many years.

That would be a triumph for democracy – and not a bad achievement, you might think, for a 24 hour news channel which will not celebrate its 21st birthday until next month.

I’ve used the metaphor of the dog on the choke collar this evening. The great American newspaperman, HL Mencken, took the view that “Journalism is to a politician as a dog is to a lamp-post.” A nice image. But I don’t altogether agree.

I believe that journalists and politicians can and should work together in the cause of democracy. We at Sky News are doing our bit by ensuring that not only politicians but all branches of government are subject to proper scrutiny. Which brings me to my final point:

There remains one more branch of our democratic system which broadcasting has still not properly penetrated. The courts.

If the legislature is to be subject to far greater scrutiny, so too must the judiciary, so the public can fairly judge the balance of responsibility between them.

A coherent, and fair, judicial system is the keystone of a democratic system. Today, any member of the public has the right to walk into any court, any day, and see justice being done, but few have the time or the means to do so. There can be no logic for excluding the cameras from events which are already held in public.

Nor, may I say, any public interest: the decline in public confidence in politics is perhaps only matched by the decline in confidence in the judiciary.

The public wants to understand how a householder can be imprisoned for defending his family and his property. They want to know how a man can avoid jail for viewing child abuse on the Internet. They will certainly want to know if the CPS decides to prosecute a Parliamentarian over his expenses.

Far from being the downfall of the judicial system, I believe exposure to public scrutiny could be its saviour, enabling the public to understand the constraints under which our judges operate - the complexities of many of the cases before them which are inevitably oversimplified in a two minute news piece.

Over the years, Sky News has devised innovative ways to circumvent the ban on broadcasting within the courts.

We won permission to run live transcripts of proceedings, produced by stenographers.

We mounted nightly reconstructions with actors of the Hutton Inquiry into the death of the scientist Dr David Kelly. .

We used 3D digital graphics to reconstruct the Soham trial of Ian Huntley and his girlfriend Maxine Carr. In America, we used actors again to reconstruct the Michael Jackson trial.

The ban on cameras remains, though there are signs that resistance is weakening. The new Supreme Court HAS installed cameras. The Chilcott inquiry into the Iraq war is being televised.

The broadcasters, collectively, have been lobbying for cameras in court, probably for as long as they have lobbied for election debates. But so far it has been fruitless. It's time for a new initiative.

So watch this space. After the General Election, Sky News will be campaigning hard to lift the ban on cameras in courts. It's precisely what you would expect from a truly independent news organisation able to push boundaries and challenge the status quo.

We will explore every opportunity to mount a legal challenge against the ban on cameras, we will launch a public petition, as we did for the Leaders' debates, And we will remind our viewers, listeners and website users about the campaign every time we report from OUTSIDE a court with no pictures of what has taken place inside.

I will be asking the BBC if it wants to join our campaign - I look forward to the answer.

So in conclusion, television has a lot to contribute to democracy. But it takes broadcasters with guts, with creativity and with a willingness to challenge the status quo to make that contribution.

For many years, broadcasters in this country enjoyed far too cosy a relationship with their political masters, which is what they were. It took a new young pup – something of a mongrel – to shake them out of their complacency.

The Sky News hound is in full howl and even the old dogs are waking up to a world of possibilities.

I want you to know, we're ready for them. And I believe the competition to come between us will be good for television, good for politics and good for democracy.

Thank you.