Supporting public service broadcasting in Azerbaijan

Richard Lucas

In the contemporary world of media pluralism old state broadcasters in post-Soviet and other transitional societies are still wrestling with the challenge of transforming themselves into modern public service broadcasters. Azerbaijan has chosen to follow a different route. Leaving the state broadcaster in place it started a new public broadcaster, the Public Television and Radio Broadcasting Company, or ITV, in August 2005. Introducing public service broadcasting was a requirement for Council of Europe membership, but the solution Azerbaijan chose was a bold and imaginative one.

ITV remains state-funded, with income supplemented by advertising, but its independence is enshrined in the 2004 law that established public broadcasting. Its management is answerable to a Broadcasting Council which, in theory at least, has an arms-length relationship with the state.

But to what extent is ITV genuinely developing public service broadcasting in Azerbaijan? In its first year on air critics began to accuse ITV of being too close to government. There was a sense that ITV’s bosses were talking a good talk, but the output did not live up to the promise and was not sufficiently distinctive.

The role of the OSCE
The OSCE has been at the forefront of civil society efforts to ensure that ITV meets the Council of Europe’s requirements and fulfils its public service mandate. The organisation has sponsored extensive monitoring of output, most significantly during the 2005 parliamentary elections. Senior managers at ITV clearly consider the OSCE to be the watchdog of the international community and, in particular, of the CoE. Hence the organisation enjoys a level of authority that can provide significant leverage in assisting ITV to live up to its promise.

Taking up the concerns of international observers, the OSCE commissioned the BBC World Service Trust to carry out an independent assessment of ITV’s operations and output and come up with a set of recommendations to address its training and development needs.

The independent assessment was led by Michael Randall, BBC World Service Trust’s Project Manager for Eurasia. He was accompanied by the author of this article and by Azer Khalilov, a senior producer with the BBC

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1 Richard Lucas is a former BBC editor and manager and has worked on a wide range of media support projects in transitional and post-conflict societies over the last nine years, including as Director General of Radio Television Kosovo.
The expert team interviewed a wide cross-section of managers and staff at ITV, monitored the output, and met with outside observers and media commentators.

ITV is a new model for broadcasting in Azerbaijan and inevitably it will take time to reach its full potential. It would be unrealistic to expect otherwise. In response to the main charge articulated by the international community and some observers in Azerbaijan that ITV has not adequately fulfilled its independent remit, the BBC World Service Trust concluded that to some extent, the criticism was fair. The station’s news and current affairs output differs little from that of its rivals and betrays a pro-government bias. There is insufficient evidence of established editorial principles or a clear understanding of audience needs.

However, ITV has achieved a good deal in a relatively short time: it boasts an excellent infrastructure, is well organised and has a predominantly young, enthusiastic staff. This is the advantage of starting something new rather than trying to transform a state monolith. It produces a good range of professionally made programmes which celebrate the diversity of Azerbaijan’s culture and seek to educate its population.

If it has yet to win its public service laurels, ITV presents plenty of potential and a solid foundation for future development. What ITV needs is the will and the editorial and production confidence to translate its energy into a fresh, creative approach to programming and a new kind of journalism focused on the needs of the audience and a determination to break free from the deadening hand of official expectations.

This is, of course, expecting a lot in a country where the government keeps a tight grip on the broadcast media, and where intimidation of journalists, criminal sanctions against libel, and self-censorship inhibit media freedom. It would be naïve to ignore the political and media environment in which ITV functions. It is only sixteen years since all media was owned and operated by the government and less than a decade since official state censorship was lifted. There is no tradition of editorially independent journalism and most broadcast media in Azerbaijan are politicised.

In global league tables on press freedom Azerbaijan usually languishes near the bottom. The 2007 Freedom House Survey of Media Freedom places Azerbaijan 164 out of 179, on a par with Russia and below Armenia and Georgia. It had dropped a few places since the previous year’s survey. Although Azerbaijan’s constitution guarantees freedom of speech and the press, independently-minded media have a tough time of it.

Having commissioned the independent review the OSCE decided to seek funding from member countries to translate the training and development recommendations into a programme of action. This is now underway, and is a clear signal that the international community is ready to support ITV in