THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC SERVICE MEDIA

Special Issue Editors

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The future of *public service broadcasting* (PSB), or *public service media* (PSM) as it has come to be known with the increasing use of multimedia platforms, is more uncertain, and unchartered, than perhaps ever before.

With the emergence of networked issue communities, citizen journalist blogs, non-profit news sites, and the spontaneous viral sharing of information and campaigns, one could claim that there already exists public media *de facto*, complementing and perhaps even duplicating some functions of institutional public media *de jure*. In many mature PSM countries, the debate about public service media entails claims how those institutions now distort free media markets. In addition, the commercialization of the legacy and online media landscape is diminishing the original public service ethos of serving the citizens. And yet, given the viral disinformation, as well as both government and corporate control of the media, it would seem that the role of public service media is ever more important, both for existing countries with public service institutions, and for nations building their democratic media systems.

Defined as a public good, in the first half of the 20th century (see in this issue Andrijašević, pp. 23-40), public service broadcasting kept its legitimacy through national legislatives at first, and later through the directives of the European Commission. According to Tyler Cowen (1992) public goods have two aspects: nonexcludability and nonrivalrous consumption. Especially today, because of digital technology and the digital switchover that was applied to majority of PSM televisions in Europe, there are many ways to consume PSM services as a 'free rider' – without paying the license fee. On the other hand, because of the 'digital divide,' a large number of citizens do not have access to PSM services online. Therefore, the relevance of the argument for PSM as a public good is in question, and can no longer be used to advocate the state's protection of PSM by the law and through the right of licensing fees.

However, there is another argument that still works when advocating the importance of PSM – the argument that PSM is a form of social capital. Pierre Bourdieu defines social capital as "the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 119). James S. Coleman sees social capital as the aftereffect of relationships between individuals. Unlike other forms of capital (physical, economic or human) social capital can be found in the structure of relations among different social actors (Coleman, 1988).

Programming and services of PSM are a result of complex relationships between journalists, editors and other media professionals on one side, and people active in political, economic and social processes in the society, and the public and audiences on the other side (Car, 2012). It is about communication and activities among people whose actions resulted in the publication of media content which permanently, except in exceptional cases, remain in the analog or digital archives as 'witnesses of time' – a data baseline that allows us to chronologically or thematically view the development of society

at the local, national, regional or global level. It is the kind of 'base of knowledge' that is often used not only by media, but also by artists, and scientists in their research.

Because PSM programming archives are a real form of social capital with an enormous value for social development, it is the citizens' role to support the funding models which guarantee the existence of independent PSM and its production of quality programming and services in the public interest.

Another argument towards advocating PSM is the idea that access to information is a human right. By the definition, PSM is programming and service

made, financed and controlled by the public, for the public. It is neither commercial nor state-owned, free from political interference and pressure from commercial forces. Through PSB, citizens are informed, educated and also entertained. When guaranteed with pluralism, programming diversity, editorial independence, appropriate funding, accountability and transparency, public service broadcasting can serve as a cornerstone of democracy. (UNESCO, 2011)

Only politically and economically independent media can provide the public with non-biased information, without hiding any important information from the public (what can be in the interest of corporations or political elites, or other power-centers). That should be the main difference between PSM on one side, and state media and commercial media on the other.

One of the first countries to disregard the public service ideal of independence and plurality was Italy, a country with PSB by long tradition. During Silvio Berlusconi's four mandates, he, as the Prime Minister, had power over both his commercial media conglomerate as well as the public service broadcaster RAI.

Unfortunately, just before the conclusion of this special issue, news concerning the political takeover of PSM in Poland broke. A member of the Polish government – the Treasury Minster appointed a former ruling-party lawmaker and election strategist – Mr. Jacek Kurski – to run Polish public service radio-television. A similar back step from public service to state media started in Hungary in 2010, when Hungary's media laws changed after Viktor Orban became Prime Minister (Dunai, 2014). The situation is not promising in other European countries, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Macedonia (SEEmediaobservatory, 2015). It was in June 2013 when the Greek Government decided to close down ERT – Greek PSM, because of a "unique lack of transparency and incredible waste" (cf. Berka and Tretter, 2013: 6) and after two years in June 2015 ERT was back on the air while more than 2.600 staff members, made redundant in 2013, had been offered jobs by the station (BBC, 2015). National PSMs are in a constant struggle to survive, financially or independently.

In Iceland, the center-right Independence Party proposed "selling certain State assets", including the State's share in Iceland's national television and radio broadcaster, RÚV (Iceland Monitor, 2015). A serious re-envisioning about the possible future of public service media is happening in mature public service countries such as Finland. While a

parliamentary working group will announce their vision around mid 2016, a ministerial working group on media markets has recently suggested that the Finnish public broadcaster YLE should mainly act as a distributor and purchaser of Finnish productions (LVM, 2015).

According to the watchdog organization Freedom House (2015), already six EU countries – Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Hungary, Italy and Romania – rank as merely 'partly free' in terms of press freedom. Is it that, while proponents of independent media and scholars of democracy happily continue to believe in the sanctity and eternal life of PSB, political and other powers-that-be have no nostalgic love to spare for such ideals. The worst scenario is that not only public broadcasting is in decline, but that broader journalistic rights are also slowly making a quiet exit through the back door.

All these broad concerns about the future of public service media are echoed in a project seeking to capture expert insights on PSM, called the Global Public Service Media Expert Roster, by the RIPE Network[1] and supported by the Open Society Foundations.[2] This pilot project (2015) was designed to create a world-wide network of PSM scholars. The project created a database of experts,[3] but also asked the participants to reflect on the most burning issues and research needs in the field. By the end of the pilot, 180 scholars from all around the world had joined the network.

What does PSM need in order to develop in the future?

The questionnaire for joining the network included an open-ended query about the three main issues relevant to PSM development in the experts' respective countries. Some recurring themes can be identified. The two most often mentioned issues, perhaps unsurprisingly, were the funding and the independence of PSM from government pressures. The urgent need to re-define and clarify the remit, mission, values and visions of what public service means today, and in various societies, was deemed important. The relationship with audiences was mentioned by less than one-third of the respondents (corresponding to the main areas of research interests of the network). The same applies to digitalization in terms of multi-platform, cross-media presence. Other notable themes were: supporting talent, innovation, professionals of PSM; and re-thinking management and organizational structures of PSM. The individual, specific issues mentioned ranged from PSM and migration to PSM and alternative media.

What should we research?

In addition, the Network members were asked: "What research questions should this global PSM network address as top priorities in the next three to five years?" The open-ended question resulted in a rich variety of responses, many of these reflecting the research interests the Network members already described.

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[1] http://ripeat.org/
[2] https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/
[3] See the database here: http://ripeat.org/get-involved/

One prominent forward-looking theme, perhaps partly prompted by the focus of the project, was today's globalizing media landscape and the opportunities and challenges this presents. Many noted the need to examine the relevance of PSM in a globalizing world, as well as related questions that include:

>A clarification of the concept of public service media, *vis-a-vis* state-administered broadcasting, and related to the variety of PSB/PSM models around the world;
>The transitioning from a legacy of state media to public service media;
>Comparative examples of successful and declining public service provision;
>The role of global conglomerates and their impact on the PSM 'ethos';
>The de-Westernization of the PSM model (the need for);
>The need to safeguard quality journalism as well as the safety of journalists;
>Freedom of expression.

Values, policies, and international vistas

The above views indicate that, at least from the perspective of scholar-experts, the main future challenges pertain to redefining public service values, understanding changing policy issues and contexts, and mapping concerns that are shared over national borders. This special issue of *Media Studies* includes articles as well as short commentaries on these themes. The opening essay, by Michael Tracey, is a passionate and poignant call to re-examine our notions of public service media values. Ivana Andrijašević gives an overview of public goods theory applied to the concept of PSM and reexamines it within the contemporary PSM digital environment. This is followed by Tuija Parikka's commentary of the question of gender and public values. Anne-Sofie Vanhaeght and Karen Donders discuss a particular European context in terms of how ideas and concepts are actually translated in policies – or are they? Vibodh Parthasarathi recounts the process of digitalization and related policies in India, in terms of the role of, and effects on, public service media. Taking an international approach, Minna Aslama Horowitz discusses the core challenges of public media institutions around the world, and assesses several models that have been proposed for realizing public media. Finally, Gregory Ferrell Lowe concludes with an account on how an international network can be built to support a re-thinking of PSM and its shared challenges.

We hope these texts will provoke more debate and thinking in this time of challenges and opportunities.

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