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Current challenges to and for Public Service Media¹

Os desafios contemporâneos do e para o Serviço Público de Media

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Abstract:

The paper addresses a range of contemporary challenges for PSM from the external environment and for the institution internally. The author defends the continuing relevance of the public service ideal, approach and practice in media, while acknowledging a range of legitimate criticisms and agreeing on the importance of the private commercial sector – but also critiquing shortcomings in this sector. Thus, the lines of argumentation are both a defense and a critique of public service media. Aspects of particular importance include platform and channel proliferation, audience fragmentation, generational change, development in digital technology and infrastructure, the ideological premise of socio-political life, economic conditions, sustainability and accountability. The paper ends with three recommendations the author suggests as priorities for PSM development in Europe: 1) the need to articulate a clear, convincing and compelling vision for the enterprise in the 21st century, 2) the need to decide what PSM will do and be, and not do and be from its PSB heritage, and 3) invest capital and effort in developing more inclusive and collaborative organizations.

Keywords: public service media, media markets, media competition, dual broadcasting system, social cohesion, democracy, neo-liberal, citizenship, digital media.

Resumo:

Esta comunicação aborda uma variedade de desafios que se colocam aos *Media* de Serviço Público a partir do ambiente exterior e também à própria instituição. O autor defende a continuidade da relevância do ideal, da abordagem e da prática de serviço público nos *media*, enquanto reconhece uma variedade de críticas legítimas e concorda com a importância do setor comercial privado. Assim, as linhas de argumentação são, simultaneamente, uma defesa e uma crítica aos *media* de serviço público. Os aspetos mais importantes incluem a proliferação de plataformas e canais, a fragmentação de audiências, a mudança geracional, o desenvolvimento na tecnologia e na infraestrutura digitais, as premissas ideológicas da vida sociopolítica, as condições económicas, a sustentabilidade e a prestação de contas.

O texto termina com três recomendações que o autor sugere como prioridades para o desenvolvimento dos *Media* de Serviço Público na Europa: 1) a necessidade de articular uma visão clara, convincente e atraente para a empresa do século XXI, 2) a necessidade de decidir o que os *Media* de Serviço Público vão ser e fazer e não fazer e ser a partir da sua herança da era da radiodifusão e 3) investir capital e esforço

no desenvolvimento de organizações mais inclusivas e colaborativas.

Palavras-chave: *media* de serviço público, mercado dos *media*, concorrência dos *media*, sistema audiovisual misto, coesão social, democracia, neoliberalismo, cidadania, *media* digitais.

¹ The paper was delivered as keynote remarks for the Conference “Challenges of the Public Service Media”, december 2013, at the University of Coimbra, in Portugal.

Our conference theme is about challenges to and also for public service media in the 21st century. Challenges to something imply confrontation with dispute, and thus questions about authenticity, value or usefulness. Challenges for something imply efforts that are necessary to overcome difficulties in order to achieve a goal. Challenges to something therefore emphasize pressures from the environment, whereas challenges for something focus more on internal motivation.

Both perspectives are useful. Our social environment poses many challenges *to* public service media. I will discuss some of the most important later. But looking at the public media sector across Europe, the most significant challenges are for public service media because the fundamental problem is uncertainty about the validity of the approach under contemporary conditions, and the utility of its continuation. The basic question is whether the public sector in media is still needed? And if the answer is yes, then for what services and which purposes? Where has it outlived its usefulness? And is a dedicated, mandated institution

necessary for this today? At question is the legitimacy of this approach to mediation, and how public services in media should be organized. Also at issue is whether there are enough distinctions in PSM practice and performance to justify a considerable investment of scarce public money that is also needed for many other services that publics clearly value.

The very idea of public service in media doesn't connect very well today, or seem to mean much to most people. There are staunch supporters, of course, but not among large and important segments of domestic populations in Europe. The commercial sector has been arguing for twenty-five years that PSB isn't needed and that its very existence functions as a drag on growth and a damper on competition. They say we live in an era of digital plenty with abundant choice and robust opportunities for industrial development of European media, which is being hindered by the public sector because these institutions are too big and too wealthy. They say PSB distorts media markets and enjoys unfair competitive advantage

by virtue of their long histories, public sources of funding, and often also commercial revenue.

Some of this is certainly true. We live in a world of expansive and diverse media provision. Most people with a reasonable proportion of disposable income contract services and buy products that facilitate wide choice in media use. And there's no question in my mind, at least, that public organizations which operate on a commercial basis create problems, some of which are related to mixed priorities for the institutions themselves, and some that are related to complications for growth and development in the commercial sector.

But much of what is claimed by commercial opponents and other critics of PSB has not been proven and isn't convincing. European societies are better served than most because the system features a dual market structure. There is competition between media (broadcasting versus newspapers versus the internet), and between channels within media (for example, TV channels of different

types competing with each other). But neither of these are unique aspects of media competition. What is unique to Europe is the system of two parts where a public service sector competes with a private commercial sector. What makes that work is the comparable balance between the two sectors in their overall wealth, capacity and relative positions.

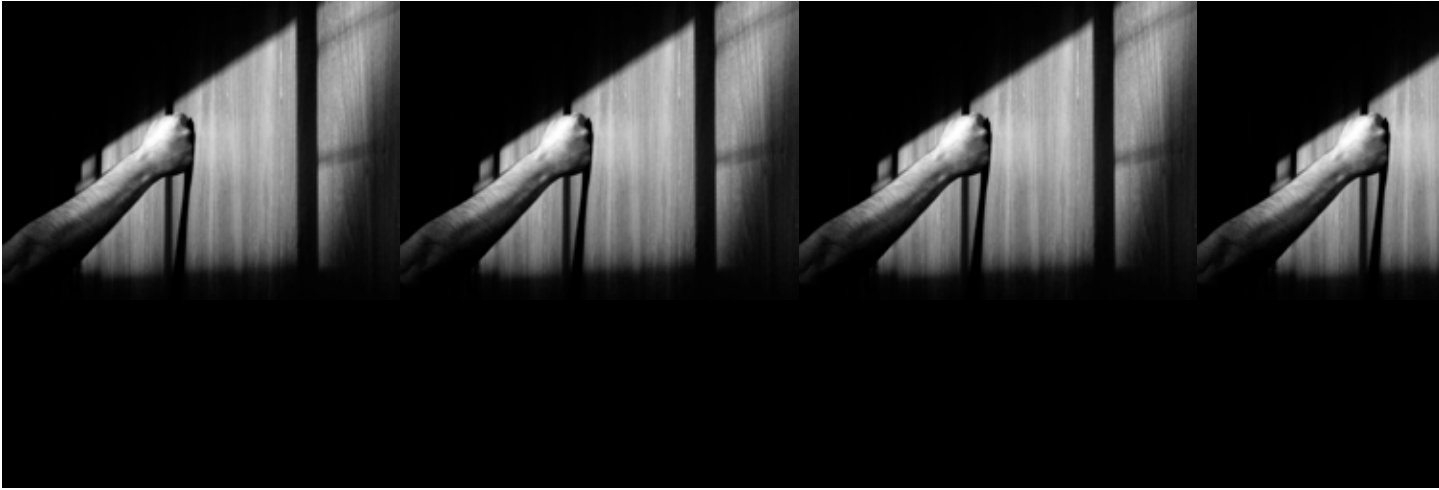
Commercial operators in many markets claim there isn't a proper balance, that the public sector is too big, too rich and too powerful. Sometimes and in some aspects that must be true. But this issue of proportionate balance matters. In the United States there is a public media sector, but it is small and not very important to the media system overall. In most of Africa, Asia and Latin America the media system is either state-run, wholly commercial or some mixture of the two. It seems ironic that while the public service sector in media is undergoing existential crisis in Europe, there is growing interest to create this sector in much of the wider world where there is recognition of the the importance this has for growth in democracy, civil society, education and

social cohesion. Is Europe really so advanced there isn't need for development in these areas; are these countries or this Union so 'mature' that it has outgrown the need for the public service sector in media?

I seriously doubt that, given political polarization, the surge of the far right in much of Europe, turmoil and hardship linked with economic decline and income disparity, growing social unrest and low confidence about the future in much of Europe, and especially evident among the young; and given uneven development in civil society institutions, media-related problems in central Europe and parts of the south that endured dictatorship and state broadcasting for decades, and with the rise of international channels with non-domestic content. We should think more carefully. The public service approach to mediation is still needed. This sector is vital not only to the health and development of the media field, but more importantly to the diverse social, cultural and democratic needs of European societies – most of which are comparatively small.

I suppose most of us here today find it easy to agree that PSB has a vital role to play in the distinctive social, cultural and democratic needs of European societies. The Amsterdam Protocol from 1997 is specific about this. But the problem is that it's not always clear how that works or if it matters as much in the daily operations of PSB institutions as it matters to theory about this sector. I will return to this near the end of my remarks. For now I want to present a few observations about the continuing validity of this essential premise because it is fundamental to the legitimacy of PSB legally, and also normatively.

Social relations are complicated affairs, as we all know. The history of human interaction is characterized by constant complication and too often destructive conflict. Much of that is caused by racism, sexism, various phobias, and suspicion if not outright hatred of other countries. Even good-natured rivalry can mutate into something mean and nasty as a consequence of mistakes, circumstances or misunderstandings. The post-war period has been a comparatively rare



moment of persistent peace and rising prosperity in the history of European relations. There are a lot of reasons and it isn't possible to untangle all of them, but I am sure that public service broadcasting has had a beneficial role.

It's true this has been a collection of national projects, and there are plenty of cases where minorities have been shamefully ignored and marginalized. It's also true that the powerful interests of political and social elites have been favored disproportionately by PSB in most societies. But the mandate to provide universal service, and an ethic that cares about social responsibilities, have produced enormous good overall. PSB has played a positive role in growing and maintaining the kind of social capital that bridges differences, and also the kind that strengthens the bonds of commonality. At heart, this enterprise is about ensuring a reasonable degree of cohesion between diverse people, a situation that is increasingly problematic in many European countries today, given the state of immigration and migration policies and the worrisome trend of rising nationalism.

Commercial media should have social responsibilities as well, and to a degree they certainly fulfill such duties. Historically these companies have been mandated to serve "the public interest, convenience and necessity", to use an historic American formulation. But the commercial enterprise functions on the basis of segmentation and it must distinguish between the value different groups have for the firm. Differentiation of customer worth is an essential principle. Some audiences are worth more than others, either because they spend more on media or spend more on things that advertisers need to sell. Undoubtedly a challenge both to and for public service media lies in the difficulty of fulfilling the remit for universal service in a period of increasing audience fragmentation in the context of platform and channel proliferation. But at the very least the public service sector is trying to support cohesion, tolerance and to grow mutual respect, and it does a very good job in guaranteeing ample provision of universal access. I don't mean to imply that PSM organizations don't differentiate on any basis, because they certainly do, but mainly in the interests

of ensuring the right match between contents and audiences, not between audiences and economic worth.

Similarly, media are fundamental to cultural life. It's not surprising that media systems have been strongly focused on domestic conditions and needs, especially in Europe. This continent features an astonishing variety of languages and cultures among very different kinds of people living in very close proximity. This reality must be acknowledged, accommodated and should be appreciated. That is essential for the preservation of cultural richness and the incredible range and depth of distinctions that make Europe one of the most diverse continents in the world. The public service sector plays a pivotal role as the source of the greatest amount of domestic production in audiovisual media across countries in Europe.

The private commercial sector also produces domestic content of various types, including news, drama and documentaries. But it's easy to see and hear how much of the programs, films and recordings are imported, largely



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The public service sector is also active in the provision of content and services that are intended to support democracy, both as a system and as a process, and the values that are required for both

from the big audiovisual production markets in the United States and the United Kingdom. There is nothing wrong with that. It costs much less to import than to produce at home, audiences like a lot of what they can watch and listen to from abroad, and the competition is good for domestic production. It inspires makers to try new things, to do familiar things better, and to protect the things they do well that are unique and special. But the fact remains that the public service sector is obligated to provide more types of content for all kinds of audiences as an everyday feature of operational practice. The commercial sector is not. PSB institutions are therefore instrumental in the production, distribution, development and preservation of media cultures and the diverse cultures that are served in and through media.

The public service sector is also active in the provision of content and services that are intended to support democracy, both as a system and as a process, and the values that are required for both. The public sphere is a complex and often conflicted arena

where decisions are taken that affect society as a whole, with implications for each individual. There are periods when most media operators are active and engaged with political process, especially during significant national elections. And local media of many kinds, including private commercial stations and newspapers, provide unique and valuable coverage. But very often the character of coverage favors sensationalism and high drama, even working to create that. This sells, as evident with the tabloid press and the popularity of conspiracy programs on themed channels like Discovery and History. Quite a few people enjoy the titillation this provides, and the rough-and-tumble that sensationalistic coverage brings to politics. But this orientation can be problematic if it is the main approach, especially given the increasing polarization of politics. And it is already a problem whenever partisan editorial positions disregard standards of accuracy, fairness, balance and objectivity in the pursuit of profits. Fox News in the United States is the poster child for this approach, and continues to profit handsomely from it.

These are large-scale issues and we need to keep them in mind because they are about persistent underlying features and the normative premise that legitimates the public service approach in media. But we also need to look more specifically at challenges to public service media. So I'll return to that discussion. Afterwards I'll address specific challenges for public service to highlight three recommendations.

Today's characteristic sociopolitical philosophy poses a general challenge to public service media that is of enormous importance. Despite push-back and unrest caused by the severity of financial difficulties and related suffering in many countries as a result of austerity measures and contraction, the general preference for defining, organizing and evaluating value remains firmly based on neo-liberal philosophy. One could even say ideology because that implies a sociopolitical program that includes not only the content of thinking, but also the objectives.

However described, the neo-liberal paradigm grounds much of what

happens in policy today. How this is understood and the degrees to which it is contested certainly vary, but the essential rhetoric is difficult to argue against because its terminology is both conceptually and emotionally attractive. Who could oppose "freedom, choice, prosperity, development and innovation"? These ideas are in the fabric of Western values – to a considerable extent they are values of Western civilization.

That fabric also includes other values such as social responsibility, citizenship, enlightenment, cultural diversity, social cohesion and so forth. But all of that feels much heavier and it isn't terribly exciting. Innovation? That's the future. Social responsibility? That's a burden. The path of duty has never been smooth and is frequently torturous to navigate. It's not an easy sell. And yet the rhetoric that legitimates the public service concept relies mainly on this set of principles. They are high-toned, moralistic and they make demands on the individual, who is called upon to sacrifice for the greater good. It's difficult to formulate a vision that captures the public

imagination in the same way as the less onerous requirements advanced by neo-liberal ideology; it's difficult to kindle the fading coals of a fire that fails to warm the imagination.

The idea of public service in media, and the ideals that legitimate the idea, isn't all that popular or as generally accepted today. I'm not sure they ever were all that popular anywhere, but at least they were generally accepted. The early advocates of public service broadcasting articulated a vision for the enterprise that resonated with people in the early 20th century, a period characterized by progressive ideals. There were also worrisome concerns about the growth of communism in the east and fascism in the west, both with imperial intentions. Radio had stronger effects in its early days than now, and there was general agreement that the dangers of adverse effects were real and needed to be guarded against. Moreover, broadcasting technology was primitive and did not use spectrum space efficiently, so there was a problem of scarcity and questions about how best to manage the resource. These

realities legitimated higher degrees of intervention in media markets than in most other industries. In fact, media weren't understood or described as 'industries' in most of Europe until the later half of the 20th century.

How much of that resonates today? Not a lot, I think. Progressive ideals still matter, but they are not as generally accepted and quite a bit of what was instituted on that basis is resisted today. This is evident in the deconstruction of public services and the social safety net in many countries. The idea that media can cause damage in a society still has some currency. Some worry about the impact of violent and pornographic content, but mainly only in relation to children or the mentally unstable. Again, it is not such a general concern and the evidence of media effects is quite mixed. Spectrum scarcity is re-emerging as a timely issue because mobile broadband and other telecommunication needs require more bandwidth and so it is again becoming scarce and therefore valuable, but there are already more TV channels than anyone can watch and more content than anyone

can consume. The idea that media or content is scarce just isn't true, although domestic shortages happen in some genres – especially in a purely or even largely commercial system. That is important and argues for the continuing relevance of the market failure thesis in broadcasting. But that notion is not yet generally accepted or convincingly argued in application to broadband and networked communications – which is crucial because that is where the growth and development of media systems mainly happens today. That is the new frontier.

This discussion points to challenges that are caused by developments in technology, or perhaps better to say to the diffusion of media technologies as a consequence of falling prices and increases in computing power. The challenge is partly in developing a suitable presence in new platforms. That is fraught with difficulty in understanding how new things work, as well as what people are choosing and how they are using media. The challenge is also related to the escalating costs for operations

at an increasing rate of development. The transition from black and white to color TV was typically funded by increasing fees or other public investments, but not so with the transition to high definition, internet protocol TV, satellite transmission, etc. The cost in technology upgrades, training, versioning of productions, leasing of transmission and other distribution facilities all continue to increase.

At the same time, the costs for popular types of content are growing as more operators in more platforms compete for programs and content. That is especially evident in bidding for rights to sports content, as well as international formats and international hit series. As audiences fragment the few properties that can still attract a mass audience, on some reasonable scale at least, become increasingly valuable. Commercial broadcasters are using such content to drive subscription service uptake, putting popular programming behind pay walls and offering less free-to-air content, or at least offering it free-to-air on a delayed basis.



Generational change is another significant challenge to public service media. Digital natives are more sophisticated in their understandings, not only about how to access content across varied platforms but also how to create content for them. They still watch TV, but how they watch is changing. They aren't loyal to channels or particular companies, and it's not about flow. Many download entire series, or buy them on DVD, and have marathon weekends, for example. They browse information from varied sources online, and quickly move on when the content is boring or access is complicated. They are very social with media but not loyal to a particular provider. The challenges that public service media are dealing with in this aspect are no different from what private commercial operators are dealing with. Simply keeping up is seriously difficult; actually getting ahead seems very often impossible. From on the air to on demand, from linear schedules to non-linear menus, from a few operators to a plethora of operations, from a stable environment to a volatile market. It's all connected – and it's all very new. We forget, perhaps, that there

was no World Wide Web in the early 1990s and that social media arrived less than ten years ago.

Developments in media policy are another challenging factor. Policy is more complicated and complex than in the past. Once upon a time there were policies for print and others for broadcasting and still others for telecommunication. These industries operated in different arenas, had different rules and methods of financing their operations, and were expected to fulfill a range of varying requirements. Today media industries are a blur. Telecom operators offer broadband TV and mobile services. Broadcasters are not only that. Newspaper companies are heavily invested in electronic media. Everyone is scrambling for market share in the broadband environment, and most commercial operators are struggling to monetize new services. Deregulation is the default position, but even when regulatory regimes are retained at domestic levels it is easy to avoid them as more channels and sources are available on platforms that make borders irrelevant. Meanwhile the policy process in Europe

requires both domestic and international consideration as EU directives and national preferences have to be reconciled, as pan-European operations and domestic circumstances collide, as international capital and local investment intersect.

In the public sector money is scarce and there are many demands for it – linked with important needs in public education, public health, public transportation and infrastructure, public pension funds and social welfare. Cutbacks are increasingly common and going ever deeper. In this context people rightly wonder if the money invested in public service media is actually an investment, or an unnecessary expense? Politicians and parties are under pressure to show that the public sector is cutting back. The lack of resources will continue to be a problem given the greying of European societies as the baby boomers enter retirement and then old age.

Thus, it isn't surprising that PSM faces mounting demands for higher accountability and greater transparency. Of course the reasons are partly

because political parties and politicians want to strike the right pose to preserve their own positions and guarantee victory in the next election. But it's not only cynicism at work here; there are legitimate needs for further improvements in efficiency, productivity, accountability and transparency in public sector institutions – especially in the media field. Ex ante evaluation is a clear response in Europe and I'm rather certain it will become the norm throughout the EU.

Aspects of this approach are problematic, of course. It tends to be a costly exercise, both in time and money, and so far it hasn't resulted in much that hasn't been approved, which begs the question of what it actually accomplishes that is worth the cost? The approach also increases the bureaucratic character of public sector practice, adding fuel to the fire of criticisms about waste and inefficiency in this sector. In that sense it can be counter-productive. The approach also limits the possibilities for acting quickly to pursue fresh opportunities and, in the long run, might lessen innovation. Moreover,

there are limits in the degrees to which transparency is appropriate. I can't imagine any private commercial company that would not fight aggressively against regulations requiring the open publication of strategic development plans in advance, or would think it appropriate for competitors to have any say in decisions about whether or not to allow a development initiative to go forward.

On the other hand, it is appropriate for public sector institutions to be held to higher standards of accountability because they use public resources. PSM organizations are not supposed to be businesses, even if required to operate in a business-like fashion. Moreover, in much of the western half of Europe these institutions are big and have strong market positions. It is possible for these corporations to dominate an area to a degree that would inhibit competition and would not be healthy for a market or the interests of pluralism in society.

I'll conclude with remarks about what I consider to be the greatest challenges for public service media today,

with three recommendations related to these challenges.

The biggest and most important challenge for public service media is articulating a clear, convincing and compelling vision for the enterprise in the 21st century. As I mentioned earlier, the essential premise that legitimated PSB was created in the early decades of the 20th century under very different conditions and in a context when the character of social philosophy was progressive. Although a lot of what has long been argued remains valid, the public service ethos must be revitalized and there is real need for a vision that both convinces and excites the popular imagination. For this to happen, it won't be nearly enough for public media managers to talk with politicians and regulators, however effectively they can do that. It's essential to develop facility and competence to engage in vigorous discussion with a broad range of interests and constituencies, including audiences, suppliers, critics, supporters and competitors. Communication is more crucial than transmission.

This is the first recommendation: focus considerable attention and prioritize efforts to envision the roles and functions of PSM in order to articulate a case that is appropriate to the ethos and resonates with varied partners. In brief, this means to engage in a dialogue of development. For strategic managers, especially, there is no job of greater importance or a task of higher priority than this.

Second, it's crucial to accept the fact that the days of wine and roses are over. It's not possible for public service media organizations to do everything on every platform in every genre for everyone. There isn't enough in-house resource for that – not in time, skills, talent or money. Difficult decisions must be made. What will PSM do that PSB did not, and what will it continue from the PSB heritage? What will it stop doing that was long characteristic? The answers will vary, of course, depending on the context, but these questions must be addressed and handled. Public value theory proposes two principles that will be useful in decision-making: 1) what does the public value, and 2) what adds value

to the public sphere? Competition matters, of course; an unpopular offer is an unsustainable situation. But just because something is popular doesn't mean that PSM ought to be providing it, and just because something is unpopular doesn't mean that PSM isn't obligated to provide that. The ethos must steer decision-making, and thus this second recommendation is tightly linked with the first.

Third and finally, a significant challenge for public service media organizations is first recognizing, then accommodating and ultimately benefitting from collaboration with a broad network of partners and alternative providers. This is in part about developing domestic arrangements to ensure that public service provision is handled on some reasonable basis by a range of operators, but not inherently or always by PSM institutions per se. That is an essential and instrumental aspect for accomplishing recommendations one and two. PSM organizations must be more inclusive and collaborative with actors of many kinds and different orientations in the environment as

a market, as a society, as a culture, and as a media system.

This challenge is also partly related to international relations and developments. PSM has opportunity to realize a degree of global interactions, collaborations and operations that have not been possible until now. I'm certain that the enterprise will continue to have a strong domestic focus. That is appropriate given the source of financing and the unique mandates and competitive advantages that are entailed. But I am equally certain that PSM will develop in parts of the world that haven't had this sector earlier and want to create it now. A more international stance is important for supporting efforts in those contexts, but also for learning how PSM can be organized, managed and operated differently from the traditions in Europe. It's time to step down from the high horse and quit the arrogance that has been a real problem for too many PSB organizations in much of Europe. There's a lot that can be learned from people and places that are only getting started, but certainly also a lot that the institution in Europe can do to help them in their efforts. The publics we

collectively seek to serve live in a global context. They deserve all the help, support and facilitation that PSM can provide as a collaborative community.

The future of public service media is uncertain. I doubt it will survive in every country. I am sure that for it to thrive in any country there must be serious, concerted and on-going effort not simply to preserve the institution but to re-invent it, to redefine the vision and to re-invigorate the practice. The degree to which there is collaboration between practitioners, publics, policymakers, researchers and critics will be a deciding factor in where PSM develops and where it disappears.

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