

Dividends of change: Can deregulation, commercialisation and media concentration strengthen public service media?

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Paper presented at the RIPE Conference 2008

Mainz, 10 October 2008

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Abstract:

The concept of public service broadcasting has lately been framed in the public and scientific debate as eroding, vanishing and almost collapsing. Despite the fact that public service media are still performing quite strongly in audience markets, public support for this well established institution has indeed weakened. License fee payments require permanent legitimacy and the massive influx of so called “free media” (private commercial television, corporate online media, free sheets) in many European countries is questioning the license fees anew.

Despite these challenges to defend the legitimacy of public service media, the international meta trends in public communication development might result in a growing need to maintain the concept of public service media.

The paper argues that the most important mass media trends might eventually strengthen the position of public service media. Commercialisation, deregulation, internationalisation, media concentration, convergence and other meta trends are likely to widen the gap between what can be called the political logic and the media logic. All these trends contribute to the strengthening of the power of big corporate media and enable them to distance themselves from democratic power structures. It is most likely that those trend-setting mass media become less interested in comprehensive information on policy processes and democracy. By this development private commercial and internationalised mass media erode their relevance to national and transnational policy institutions and policy processes. Thereby, a window of opportunity opens for public service media that are less exposed to these trends than private commercial mass media. Consequently, the relevance of public service media for the democratic process and the policy discourse increases.

There seems to be a trade off between the on-going and irreversible trends towards larger and more commercial media conglomerates with increasing economic power and the need for distinct and profound public discourse on policy issues. Contemporary democracies require information, interest mediation and control. Mass media are requested to contribute to these fundamental principles of democracy.

However, the larger and more commercial corporate media become, the less they are interested to enable and fulfil these essential democratic requirements. Public service media with their remit gain strength and relevance in return. Democratic policy making requires specific forms of media coverage that is not offered by commercial transnational corporate media. Public service media are well placed to fill this important vacancy.

The author thanks Tanja Maniglio for her valuable contributions.

Meta trends and social change

A quick look at the ongoing changes in public communication does not suggest a brilliant future of public service media (PSM). Three meta trends can be identified that impact strongly on PSM:

Governance trends: Since the 1980s most European countries have liberalized their broadcasting market to the extent that private operators have been provided with increasing freedoms to run mass media as private business and public service broadcasters were facing rather more than less restrictions, such as limits in advertising time, budget restrictions and limits to their expansion into new fields of public communication such as the Internet space. Media organizations are today much more governed by commercial imperatives than two decades ago and thus less accountable to the society at large than to their shareholders and owners. Strict application of media concentration rules have been the exception rather than the rule over the last years and many European media companies extended their business across borders, in particular towards Central- and Eastern Europe. Media concerns from Western Europe became market leaders in Bulgaria, Poland, Slovenia, the Czech Republic and Hungary (Trappel 2008: 143). The public interest as guiding principle of media policy and development has vanished in favour of private corporate interests. The space of reference has increasingly become transnational for these corporations although media products still are strongly rooted in national, regional and local cultures (Tunstall 2008).

PSM find themselves rather uncomfortable within this setting of liberalization, de- and re-regulation as well as de-nationalization. National by their nature and non-profit by principle, PSM cannot follow these development paths easily. While their commercial competitors proceed, PSM often lack options to re-invent themselves in response to these broad governance trends.

Technology trends: The transition from analogue media to digital media has dominated the debate over the last decade. Currently, it seems that this change has by majority been mastered by media companies – although the occurring effects are far from visible in their entirety. What has been expected was a fundamental re-organisation of internal production processes along the value chain of each mass medium. Print media as well as broadcast media have digitalized their processes over the last decade and are confronted with ever growing demands for hard- and software upgrades and a whole new range of logistic challenges.

What has less been expected was the emergence of new mass media based entirely on Internet distribution. As has been observed frequently in scholarly work, the Internet as an infrastructure enables actors to blur traditional boundaries between mass communication and inter personal communication (e.g. van Dijk 2004). What intrigues most is the emergence of new public, semi-public and private spaces for communication with little reference to limits of time and space. Social networks, the whole blogosphere, Internet fora, second life, and other forms of computer-aided communication enable citizens to exchange opinions bypassing traditional mass media. One of the main functions of mass media is at stake: Groups of citizens can communicate to one another without the interpretation of journalism provided by corporate media. Without over-emphasizing this change, digital technology and smart online applications have opened new communication spaces.

This, again, runs counter to much of the PSM traditions. PSM was invented to underpin collective information transformed into collective knowledge. Public service broadcasting has been the major

force of social interpretation of news and events. Together with the press PSM created the authoritative public space for deliberations. Internet-based online media produced by corporate media organisations replicate this communication model into this new public arena. PSM finally became part of this expansion despite unintelligible political and competition related efforts to keep them out of the Internet (Trappel 2008b). Much more challenging than expanding the mass communication model into the Internet age is the creation of links between corporate media and Internet based participatory social networks. While private media business has set up (or bought up) their own brands (such as MySpace by News Corp. in 2005 and Germany's StudiVZ by the publisher Holtzbrinck in 2007) PSM lack this entrepreneurial flexibility.

Media consumption trends: The shift in media consumption from PSM programmes to other forms of mass communication including the growing media abstinence of some parts of the society becomes the most important challenge. Although the press as well as private commercial television is faced with similar trends their business models allows for the full range of managerial instruments to apply. In contrast, PSM has to maintain a high level of quality in order to justify public finance. To take an example from Switzerland: The country's second largest publishing company Tamedia in Zurich suffers – like all other paid newspapers – from a continuous erosion of the number of copies printed of their flagship Tages-Anzeiger. In parallel, the daily free-sheet 20 Minuten increased its circulation and advertising generated turn-over spectacularly. Tamedia reacted by acquiring this successful rival in 2003. Since then, Tamedia profits from growing cash flows generated by 20 Minuten to compensate ongoing circulation losses in the paid newspaper. If necessary, Tamedia is free to lower the quality level of its paid newspaper by cutting costs in the newsrooms and to search for other potentially profitable markets, such as online media. In August 2008, Tamedia launched its online news portal by creating Switzerland's largest online newsroom ("Newsnetz"). The Swiss public service broadcaster, in contrast, has no such opportunities to compensate for its audience losses in the segment of younger viewers. As elsewhere in Europe, expansion towards online media is limited by regulation and meets strong resistance by publishers. Purchase of competing television channels is equally impossible. Thus, PSM's room to manoeuvre is much more constraint than their competitors'.

What arises from these reflexions is the fundamental question whether PSM as a model for organising public communication – or as Trine Syvertsen puts it as "communication structures that are accountable to neither the market nor the state but to the public at large" (2003: 158) – is still future-proof. Do the meta trends in society and in the mass media work against the concept of public service media? Is there still room for PSM within the multiplicity of new communication cultures arising from the emergence of the Internet?

In this essay I argue that there is little reason for a "chorus intoning the last rites for public broadcasting" as Graham Murdock put it (2005: 213). I share Murdock's argument that "pessimism is misplaced and that Public Service Broadcasting is a project whose time has finally come both philosophically and practically. (...) in an age of increasing individualisation and commercialism we need more than ever to reinvent the public domain. Because broadcasting is central to contemporary cultural life, and is likely to remain so for the foreseeable future, rethinking public service is the key to this project." (ibid.)

My argument is based on a comparative view on the performance of three dominant types of public communication means and their possibility to deliver what contemporary democracies require. I will

show that among these media types only PSM manage to fulfil these requirements. Given the stable and uncompromised importance of democracy as the shared modality to organise public life, PSM is clearly well placed to remain one of the backbones of public communication.

What contemporary democracies require

Modern democracy and the mass media are intrinsically related. In modern democracies the mass media are the link between those who govern and those who are governed. Mass media need democracy because it is the only form of government which respects freedom of speech, expression and information, and the independence of the media from the state (Strömbäck 2005: 332). Political ideas and initiatives, in turn, are disseminated among citizens by the mass media, and individual opinion making and voting are largely based on political information provided by mass media.

From a normative perspective, the media have three specific democratic functions to meet: (a) safeguarding the flow of information; (b) providing a forum for public discussion about diverse, often conflicting political ideas; (c) acting as a public watchdog against the abuse of power (Strömbäck 2005: 332).

Mass media and democracy are obviously closely related. “At a time when most people rely on media for information, and when political actors have to adapt to media logic it is reasonable to expect that they [democratic concepts] also pose different normative obligations upon media” (Strömbäck 2005: 333). However, democracy is not one-dimensional. In principle, there are as many concepts of democracy as there are democratic countries. Several views about what characterizes democracy give way to a multitude of concepts of democracy. Although, drawings on recent overviews of democratic theory (Strömbäck 2005; Held 2006) make a difference between a few basic concepts of democracy, which can be classified on a continuum from minimalist to maximalist variants. The ‘elitist democracy’, is based on a minimalist conception, the ‘participatory democracy’ is based on a mid-range concept, while the ‘deliberative democracy’ stands on a broader understanding of democracy.

The *minimalist perspective* assumes, that every political system is ruled by political elites capable of making public decisions and protecting individual liberty. The broader public has neither the adequate ability nor the interest to govern itself. However, citizens are nevertheless seen as the final instance which chooses by election the representatives that will govern for a predefined period of time. This view assumes thus active political elites on the one hand and reacting citizens on the other hand. According to the elitist democracy, the basic requirement to the media is the provision of citizen with reliable information. In order to choose between competing political elites, people need information and knowledge about political issues and actors.

Participatory democracy understands democracy as a value-laden system where a strong ethos, political equality and tolerance play a crucial role. Democracy is sustained by dedicated citizens: “The more people are politically interested, the more they engage in associations and civic organisations, the more they vote, the more they develop attitudes and norms of generalized reciprocity, the better” (Strömbäck 2005: 336). Therefore, democracy can never be built or sustained from elected skilled elites, it has to be built and sustained by the actions of a large number of people. Citizen act

directly as a collective and aim for the common good. This concept of democracy can be traced back to the classical Athenian democracy (Held 2006: 11-28), to the developmental form of classical republicanism (ibid.: 43-55), and implies ideas of direct democracy (ibid.: 96-122; Schmidt 2000: 165-174). The participatory view stipulates that media let the citizen set the agenda for their news coverage. Moreover, media should frame politics as open for everyone, in order to mobilize people's interest, engagement and participation in public life.

The third concept of democracy, *deliberative democracy*, can be understood as an extension of participatory democracy. The core idea of the deliberative concept of democracy is "[t]hat the notion includes collective decision making with the participation of all who will be affected by the decision or their representatives: this is the democratic part. Also, all agree that it includes decision making by means of arguments offered by and to participants who are committed to the values of rationality and impartiality: this is the deliberative part" (Elster 1998: 8). Citizens need opportunities to deal more profoundly with political issues in deliberative ways. Ideally, deliberative discussions should be a part of daily life and decision making on all levels in society. Like the participatory, the deliberative democracy asks the media to mobilize people in the political process. What this concept adds is an emphasis on political discussions and the importance of them being deliberative. The active participation of the media is therefore an essential element. In other words: mass media have to provide factual information, as well as frames for interpretation.

Three fundamental principles correspond to these three prototypes of democracy: *freedom, equality* and *control*. These principles originate from the 'Age of Enlightenment' and the great democratic revolutions of the 18th and 19th century. They are the principles that democrats in all time and places have struggled for and which accompanied the development of modern states (Schulz 2000: 1).

Freedom can be understood as consisting of three types of rights: political, civil, and social (or socioeconomic) rights. Freedom rights are based on the idea of people's freedom to act (e.g. freedom of opinion, freedom of association, freedom of information). In their widest sense, freedom rights should thus be viewed as protecting people's ability to act independently and with self-determination, in political, economic, social and cultural terms. Of central importance for people's freedom is the protection against infringements by the state. "Over time, the list of negative freedom rights has grown and the protection and guarantee of these rights have become one of the minimal conditions for democratic regimes." (Bühlmann / Merkel / Wessels 2007: 8). Beyond this protection, conditions must be created to ensure that people are able to develop freely and live a self-determined life. From this perspective, political liberties are seen as preconditions for citizens to actively influence political decisions. This implies that the state must protect freedom rights (Lauth 2004: 77).

Freedom as a principle in civil society has often been defined in terms of communication rights to hold opinions and to receive and impart information: "Political communication in democracy is connected with the idea of freedom. Freedom of expression and opinion building as individual basic rights, and as institutional guarantees for an independent media system, are part of very core of democracy, and they are constitute for a democratic order «per se»" (Sarcinelli 1995: 241; translation by the author). In this view, freedom of expression is both, a crucial individual right and an indispensable social good. Freedom, according to McQuail (1992: 67) and Schulz (2000: 3) also

entail economic freedom for media to operate in their public role and in their private business capacity.

The media's communication function which derives from freedom is the *information function*. Media can meet this function due to their specific capabilities to collect and process large amounts of information and to distribute it to all participants of the political process (Voltmer 1999: 13).

Equality, understood as political equality proclaims the equality of all citizens in and before the law and in the political process. Thus, equality means equal treatment of all citizens by the state, and equal rights to participate in politics - i.e. citizens' preferences have the same weight in political decisions (Dahl 2006: 4).

When applied to mass media equality as a principle has to be translated into more specific terms: "[Equality], too, is connected with public communication in less direct, but no less crucial ways" (McQuail 1992: 67). In relation to communication and political power, it is equality which demands that no special favour is given to power-holders and that access to media should be provided on a fair basis to oppositional or deviant opinions, perspectives or claims. Equality calls for an absence of discrimination or bias in the amount and kind of access available to channels, on equivalent terms, for all alternative voices, as far as its practicable. "If we suppose there to be a 'right to communicate', then we also suppose an equal claim for all to hear and be heard." (Mc Quail 1992: 67f).

The media's communication function which follows from equality is what might be called public opinion making, the forum function or public mediation. Mass media as a forum are expected to represent the whole range of political standpoints and to give access to all political actors who aim at addressing the public (Voltmer 2000: 3). This public mediation function between different opinions, social groups and vested interests increases in importance when the model of democracy comes closer to the deliberative prototype. When collectively binding decisions are negotiated rather than imposed, then the mass media contribute substantially to this process.

Control is essential for democracy and its political institutions. This principle demands that citizens control their representatives in the government in order to secure their own freedom and equality: "[I]n a good democracy the citizens themselves have the sovereign power to evaluate whether the government provides liberty and equality according to the rule of law" (Diamond / Morlino 2004: 4). This also implies that citizens, their organizations and parties participate and compete to hold elected officials accountable for their policies and actions. Moreover, they monitor the efficiency and fairness of the application of the laws as well as the efficacy of government decisions.

Control as a principle in relation to communication and power assumes that the mass media should act on behalf of the public as a watchdog holding government officials accountable (Norris 2000: 28). In order to preserve the conditions for the enjoyment of civil rights and political liberties, the mass media should act as an independent, fair and impartial critic of powerful interests and inform about abuses of political and economic power. This implies that mass media should not just be informing in an unfiltered way and without critical analysis of political messages. Some liberal authors consider the watchdog function as even more important than the information function. Kelley / Donway (1990: 70) argue: "We have distinguished two political roles of free press in classical liberalism: the watchdog and the democratic [i.e. information] functions. And we noted that for advocates of limited government, the first is by far the more important [...]. The implication of this priority is that even if, contrary to all the evidence we have cited, the government could use its power effectively to

strengthen the democratic [i.e. information] function, it would not be justified in doing so at the cost of the watchdog function” (quoted from Voltmer 1999: 30).

The media’s communication function which follows from control is a watchdog function against the abuse of all sorts of power.

To sum up: The functions the media and communication processes must meet in order to promote the three fundamental democratic principles are (1) a guardian of the flow of information, (2) a public forum for public discussion of diverse, often conflicting political ideas, (3) a public watchdog against the abuse of all sorts of power. These functions have been identified separately, but they are nevertheless interconnected and overlapping.

Who, then, is best placed to deliver?

Which media, then, is best placed to deliver information (freedom), interest mediation (equality) and control (watchdog)? In order to answer this question, the media need to be classified. In his normative model Splichal suggested several criteria to distinguish authoritarian from commercial and public service media (2007: 252). He classifies commercial media as subordinated to property rights, while public service media are related to civil (natural) rights. The dominant form of social relationship of commercial media is competition, and of public service media co-operation. Access to public communication is property-restricted in the case of commercial media and open in the case of public service media. While Splichal includes several other models in his analysis, he does not refer to the latest addition to the media field, the participatory and interactive online media such as weblogs and other forms of Internet-based communication.

These media are not necessarily public by nature, but they may become public occasionally and they may impact both commercial media and PSM. Boundaries between public and interpersonal communication are blurred. From the perspective of radical democrats these new forms of communication hold important promises. Non-corporate online media enable citizens to exchange views, opinions and news without interference by capital related agents. Counter-publics can establish themselves. “Clearly the universe of counter-publics has changed considerably as a consequence of the Internet as it provides a relatively low-cost means of disseminating counter-publicity and of making contacts and alliances between geographically dispersed groups.” (Downey 2007: 117f)

Applying Splichal’s classification to these participatory online media they equally are subordinated to civil (natural) rights, their dominant form of social relationship is egalitarian and access is limited only by ways of computer literacy and Internet connection.

The three democratic requirements and the three types of communication may be matched as shown in table 1. Commercial media as well as PSM can be expected from their characteristics to fully exploit their possibilities to provide information to the public. Both media types have full access to information, professional journalism can be expected to research, select and present relevant information to their audience. Participatory media, in contrast, are gradually excluded for news sources as most of them are amateurs and only very few can devote their full work time and

attention to information gathering and presentation. The public value of participatory media rather lies in complementing news pieces from the “wisdom of the crowds” to mainstream news provision. In this respect, participatory media cannot compete with corporate media, but can provide valuable input in the news flow. Anecdotal evidences show that corporate journalists inform themselves in the blogosphere and include such information into their coverage.

Table 1. Media types and their democratic performance

characterised by ... performance influenced by ...		type of mass media		
		commercial media	public service media	participatory media
democratic requirements	information / freedom	full access to information; high level of professionalism	full access to information; high level of professionalism	restricted access to information; low level of professionalism
	interest mediation / equality	self-interest as profit-oriented companies; ownership, advertising	no profit self-interest; less dependent on advertising income;	no profit self-interest, little sustainability, self-exploitation
	watchdog / control	high alert towards public power; lower alert towards private corporate power	high alert towards public power; high alert towards private corporate power	high alert towards public power; high alert towards private corporate power

The dimension of *interest mediation (equality)* shows again some differences: Interest mediation requires a high degree of independence of the mediating agent. Mass media are well placed to provide fora to different interest groups but should themselves not be part of them. Participatory media have little to no profit related self-interest, while commercial media are always part of the economic setting with a varying degree of dependency on advertising income. Public commercial television and free sheets (commuter press) is fully advertising financed and thus less credible as interest mediators. PSM, in contrast, can exploit their most significant strength in this dimension. Typically institutionalised by law and independent from the state, their level of advertising dependency is much lower than in commercial media. They are publicly controlled and non-profit-oriented. Their credibility as interest mediators can be expected to be higher than both other media types. Participatory media, although normally free from commercial and profit interest, consist of a variety of radical subjective perspectives. Individuals and groups express themselves without any editorial control. They contribute in their entirety to public deliberations but their actors cannot claim any status as interest mediator.

The dimension of *watchdog (control)* shows that commercial media can be expected to exert high alert towards public institutions and public holders of power, but they cannot be expected to exert the same alert toward private corporate power. Both other media types are expected to keep the same critical distance from centres of public and private corporate power.

Taken together, PSM score highest in these three democratic requirements. Combined, they are least dependent on commercial income, their distance from public and private centres of power is largest and their status regarding professional journalism is highest. Commercial media show deficits in the

dimension of equality / interest mediation, participatory online media show weaknesses in the dimension of information / freedom.

Of course, all these classifications assume that PSM are institutionalised in adequate distance from the state and from Government, has sufficiently independent sources of income and are established in permanence. If these conditions are not met, PSM might come close to commercial media or even participatory online media. Similarly, commercial media might enjoy high independence, provided by liberal owners and a high degree of income from product sales and a corresponding low degree of advertising income. Even participatory media might improve their performance by building up journalism capacity and professional skills. Therefore and once again, boundaries blur and the model has to be seen as prototypical.

Are citizens interested?

All these reflexions are based on the assumption that citizens are interested in public life and in participating in politics. But there are good reasons for citizens not to be interested. In Dahlgren's view the reasons for civic disengagement range from "a sense of personal powerlessness and despair over one's life circumstances, to a sense of bitterness of having been abandoned or betrayed by political elites. (...) Many people simply do not have enough time and energy as a result of stressful life circumstances; people can find it difficult to manage work life (or unemployment), leisure, and the role of citizen. Moreover, these factors interplay with a dominant culture that emphasizes consumption and promote in various ways a retreat from the public sphere into depoliticized enclaves." (2007: 56)

But there are equally good reasons to argue that at least a considerable portion of society is interested in public life and requires services from the mass media to participate as informed citizens. Personal and occupational objectives might only be reached when people defend their causes; political issues might be physically close or might affect one's personal life (e.g. public vs. private transportation). Civil society groups are built around issues that affect many people (such as e.g. environment, health care, education). Whenever people get involved in civic engagement, a higher level of information is needed to participate in deliberations.

However, large parts of Europe experienced over the last decade quite the opposite – an erosion of quality news and the rise of ever short news-bite provided by corporate online media and free-sheets, distributed in metropolitan areas in many major cities in Europe. Corporate online media and free sheets cultivate journalism that is short, immediate, less researched, under-resourced, and with little emphasize on comments and opinion making. Brants lists the most obvious threats and problems: "the indolence of 'copying and pasting', the difficulties with checking reliability of sources and posts, copyright issues in hyperlinks, the lack of an online culture of correcting mistakes, the lack of a professional sense of social responsibility and accompanying values and codes, and regular updating running the risk of hyping and diminished accuracy." (Brants 2007: 117)

Informed citizens who want to participate in democratic deliberations require different news. This represents a fair chance for PSM who are best placed to deliver what contemporary democracy requires. Many PSM organisations have strong links with the civil society. Some entertain viewers'

and listeners' councils (e.g. German and British PSM), others are organized as trusts with members of the civil society as trustees (e.g. Austria). The Swiss public service broadcaster is even owned by associations, built up by members from the civil society. Each association recruits members from all layers of society who then elect among themselves their regional board members who finally represent the Swiss people in the national Board. Thus, PSM are well placed both at the professional journalistic level to fulfil democratic requirements and also at the organisational level, which is closer to the people than corporate media.

Conclusions

Changes in society and in the media landscape do not favour PSM at first sight. Commercialisation, media concentration and deregulation have weakened their position in most European countries and probably world-wide. They do not fit well in an information world where speed succeeds over accuracy and where corporate interests prevail over the public interest. News and information changes originate in the personalized Internet realm rather than in large and sometimes inflexible public institutions.

Nonetheless, democratic societies depend on active citizenry who participate in public life. Public issues concern people, interested in reaching their personal objectives or common goals. These active groups of democratic societies require media services that go beyond what commercial and participatory online media are able to deliver. PSM are best placed to respond to this demand. Information, interest mediation and watchdog control are public service virtues that are more and more neglected by other types of mass media. Internet related forms of public communication can only partially fulfil democratic requirements.

Clearly, this perspective does not embrace societies at large. Not all citizens are motivated to participate in public life. But well researched and presented news and other forms of information that correspond with democratic requirements might attract attention beyond the politically savvy part of society. In stark contrast to new forms of journalism PSM might experience the revival as providers of information relevant for contemporary democracies. PSM gain importance as alternative to both concentrated and commercial corporate media as well as semi-professional participatory online media.

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