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Long and Winding Road:

The Quest for Partnership from the Perspective of “Audience”

1. Introduction

Due to their unique position in the midst of turbulent and changing political, economic and technological environment, “public service media people” have delved into serious self-reflexivity. This sense of urgency comes across strongly in ways how public service broadcasters and their supporters have set themselves a task to transform public service broadcasting (PSB) into public service media (PSM). A number of thoughtful analysis and discussions have already followed this plea (see, RIPE@2007, RIPE@2009).

At the core of this bid for transformation is a relative consensus among media managers, practitioners and researchers that the development from PSB to PSM marks a farewell to the reality of one-size-fits-all programming and the traditions of paternalism that used to inform public broadcasters and remit of public service in general (Jakubowicz 2008). More broadly, public service broadcasting has faced the need to readjust itself in relation to a paradigm shift marked by the idea of participation that is manifested broadly in economy, politics and technology.

In PSB and media organisations in general, this paradigm shift has invoked a special interest in embracing the possibilities of new information and communication technologies. The objective is set on how to best tap into new user cultures emerging in the internet. On the level of strategic action, this has resulted in increasing co-operation with commercial broadcasters, independent producers and policy-makers on the national and supranational level to win support for this new public service remit.

While these developments prove that the transition towards PSM is indeed under way, it remains vague why this partnership is in public interest. In response to this, especially in the academic discussion related to PSM it has been argued that a partnership needs to be drawn not merely with “key players” but with civil society more generally. In this context, two equally inspiring but at least potentially problematic lines of thought have been proposed. On the one hand, partnership with civil society is made sense of with the vocabulary of democratic theories. In this framework, it is argued that PSM needs to be based on a radical understanding of participatory democracy that goes beyond relationships drawn with administrative democracy, i.e. elected politicians and corporatist organisations (Jakubowicz 2008).

The problem – or rather a challenge – with this view is that it stands in stark contrast with economic and political interests than aim to shape the future of PSB. One risk of this may be that partnership with civil society begins to be seen as a utopian aspect of PSM, which may be gladly left for academics to elaborate and to be used merely for rhetorical purposes at the level of policy-making and strategic action.

On the other hand, ideas about partnership with civil society rest upon a premise that PSM should forge a partnership with audience as active agents and connect with citizens as users and producers (Bardoel & Lowe 2007, 10, 14). This idea is vaguely related to discourses of participatory democracy, but on top of that, it is

associated with immensely prolific discussions geared around networks and concepts like convergence culture (Jenkins 2006), wkinomics (Tapscott & Williams 2006) and we-think (Leadbeater 2008). All these concepts aim to explain how fundamental cultural dynamics are increasingly shaped by collaborative efforts of people who have turned from audiences into producers in the digital environment. In this story, at first, small dedicated and savvy groups of users (fans, video artists, software developers etc.) become pioneers in creating new things, then, these gradually gain more popularity, their modes of action attract more and more successors and finally these products and ways of producing them become mainstream or a cultural norm.

The problem with connecting PSM to the vocabulary of participatory digital futures is that their connection remains unclear. Does the idea of PSM's partnership with users subscribe to the suggested narrative that regards the leap from audiences to active producers rather natural? It can be assumed that in scenarios for PSM the pace of change is regarded much slower and its direction less straightforward. Consider, for instance, Bardoel's and Lowe's (2007, 18) caution: "It is easy to get carried away by the spice of newness [Internet] and forget that plain vanilla radio and television broadcasting are popular media of everyday life for quite practical reasons."

A further problem with both bids for partnership is that they endorse partnership from a rather generalised point of view. Relatively little is said so far about how recipients of PSM would relate to the role of producers designated for them. A necessary first step into this direction is to analyse patterns of media use and their possible changes. In this regard, Leurdijk and Mathis (2009), find modest evidence of the premises that users in four European countries are taking on the available opportunities for audience interaction and peer production. As a token of this, SMS-interactivity has become a popular but it tends to focus on few global program formats, such as *Big Brother* and *Idols*. Peer production, on the other hand, tends to be blooming mainly outside professional media: in online

video sharing platforms (Youtube) and social networking sites (Facebook etc.). Their findings also point out to a structural imbalance in the user profiles, known as *the 1 % rule*: One per cent of total users are producers, nine per cent occasional contributors and 90 per cent audiences (see, Nielsen 2006; Arthur 2006).

Rather than drawing hasty conclusions about seemingly scant evidence of convergence cultures, we should note that neither the technological infrastructure nor cultural practices sustaining interactivity and peer production are fully developed as yet. It seems that in their development, the two levels of action involved – media institutions (PSM etc.) and user cultures – are not necessarily intimately connected. Given these uncertainties, we agree with Couldry (2010) in that our task in communication research is to identify not just the possible (or desirable), but the *likely* dynamics of change. This objective clearly calls for audience research, which is our point of departure in this paper. How is it – or how could it be – helpful in identifying what is at stake?

2. Towards discursive approach to audience research

Discussion about audience is always loaded with conceptual and methodological problems. For example, what is meant by “audience” that is seen as an object of transformation in the new PSM ethos? Is it a *social being*; an unknown, but knowable set of people (Ang 1991, 2)? Or, is it a *discursive construct* produced by a(ny) particular analytic gaze (Alasuutari 1999, 5)?

And what is the bearing of this theoretical choice on our ways to understand the transformation from audience to partners? We argue that “audience as social being” seems commonsensical and empirically justifiable but that it runs into problems when it is acknowledged that there may be a number of different social beings out there. This locks audience researchers in a situation where they have

to defend their particular segment against other views that may claim to be equally valid. Discursive approach, on the other hand, seems more abstract and difficult to begin with, and complicated to maintain, but it may still provide ways to bypass some problems inherent in the “audience as social being” approach.

Costera Meijer’s (2009) thought-provoking study (Quest for Quality) about recipients in the Netherlands heuristically classified as “quality audience” (“future leaders, managers and members of the creative class”) demonstrates the merits and pitfalls of treating audience as a social being. In empirical terms, that study provides a number of useful elaborations regarding public service broadcasting. For example, the “quality audience” expects to be addressed as citizens, but that citizenship needs to be understood in a global rather than national framework. Given that recipients constituting the sample of a quality audience in the Netherlands live in distinctively multicultural environments, they expect public broadcasters to draw a compassionate rather than a merely critical approach to social reality. Moreover, interviewees signaled that there is indeed a community of producers eager to be engaged in developing media concepts, designing formats, repurposing existing content and contributing new content (ibid. 205).

With regard to the new remit for PSM and its search for partnership with users, Quest for Quality project provides insights as well as positive news. But both of these tend to be valid merely in the confines of the framework of this particular audience segment. Whether these ideas would resonate with media routines, lifestyles and expectations more generally in the Netherlands or elsewhere, can always be contested by calls for further empirical evidence. This would require tracking down other audience segments and presenting their cases in a similar vein. Assuming that audiences as social beings are to a great extent unknown and that they are constantly reproducing themselves, this would be a laborious way to find out whether the project towards partnership is moving forward.

An alternative strategy for audience research would begin with treating audience not as social being but as a discursive construction. With this we mean that audience is merely one analytical category among many with which to make sense of mediated communication. If this is true, it is problematic to study audience as an actually existing formation. In order not to take audience ontologically given, we draw inspiration from a group of early modern sociologists associated with the so-called Chicago School and their contemporary reinterpretations (e.g. Pietilä et al. 2010; Ridell 2006). A brief historical account of this background may be helpful.

In the early 20th century, social scientists and communication researchers, particularly in the USA, became concerned about negative implications of modern society. It was seen that modernity did not merely bring about prosperity and industrial innovations but it also broke people off from their social ties and exposed them to more and more pervasive powers of manipulation. New types of crowds constituted by individuals were considered to be easily influenced and controlled by their emotions rather than their sense. This anxiety was partly triggered by the advent of radio and its presumed effects. (Pietilä 2005.)

An alternative understanding of communication was introduced by a group of sociologists that became to be known as the Chicago School. Theorists like Park, Dewey and Blumer focused on abstract frameworks that would enable the analysis of social exchange independently from actual events. This led them, for instance, to think about communication as a constitutive force in society. In this line of thought, society exists not *by* transmission or *by* communication, but *in* transmission and *in* communication (Dewey, quoted in Pietilä 2005). This focus on varying forms of interactions in turn helped distinguishing analytical categories of social formations, such as *mass*, *crowd*, *audience* and *public* (Blumer [1946], 1961). Against this framework, the audience does not refer to a social being but rather to a social role.

These analytical categories have undergone a dramatic change since those days. In contemporary usage, mass has practically ceased to exist as an analytical concept. This is related to the erosion of *mass communication* as dominant framework of communication (Livingstone 2004). The “public” in turn, is predominantly used as a normative concept: something that media industry should reach for and reinvigorate. Within audience research, this framework is, however, marginalised since “the audience” has become an all-encompassing category in making sense of what takes place at the receiving end of (mass) communication.

While crowd seems to fall outside the scope of communication studies, we argue that all three remaining are still valid and useful as a point of departure for empirical audience research. We also think that “partnership” can be fruitfully made sense of separately in relation to each of these concepts. This may provide useful insights not merely for conceptualising patterns of media use, but also for developing PSM and journalism.

Our argumentation draws inspiration from an ongoing audience research project *Towards Engaging Journalism*¹. It aims to analyse how relevance of journalism (or its absence) is defined by people (N=76) involved in particular social networks based in Finland. While our key concept and object of study are social networks (Heikkilä et al. 2010a), it also enables us to focus on different positions related to media use. In the remainder of this paper our aim is to reflect upon our empirical data against the concepts of mass, audience and public and discuss whether a transmission to active partners is possible.

3. *The mass*

As noted above, “mass” as a concept of communications studies dates back to studies of propaganda and influence. In the history of audience research, it is emphasised that this tradition regarded recipients of mass communication as

passive. The dominant model of understanding communication was that of one-directional transmission. Later, this figure of thought has been eschewed for a number of well-established reasons. It was noted, for instance, that communication process was more complicated both in theoretical and empirical terms, the scope of relevant research questions related to uses of media reached way beyond the question of influence etc. (Jensen & Rosengren 1990).

In addition to theoretical and methodological reassessments within audience research, the concept of mass was shunned by political reasons. It is hard to find anyone within audience research who – ironic uses notwithstanding – dares to refer to “ordinary people” as mass and expose oneself to plausible accusations of being undemocratic and elitist. Yet, if we maintain that mass is an analytical category only, we may see that many features associated with the concept are still relevant. According to Blumer (1961), people act like a mass as, for instance, when watching a national or global event on television. In that role, they may be utterly aware of what they are doing and feeling at the moment, but they have little, or no interaction at all, with others. Thus, the members of the mass are anonymous to each other. They also lack social organisation, hierarchies and leadership.

Blumer (1961) also argues that the mass does not have established rules or routines, but with regard to media use, this aspect may need to be redefined. In our view, it seems useful to think that the mass is precisely constituted in the most basic routines of connecting to the media: leafing the morning newspaper on the breakfast table, or switching on the radio on the way to work. In these occasions, a “mass position” appears, as people’s media use is mostly defined by the mere presence of the media outlet, not necessary the content of the media. Anyhow, the media is used as a means to turn one’s focus away from the immediate surroundings.

Our interviewees often described these routines as introverted. Instead of talking about what contents were there in the media, they described the media as a material object. The respondents described for example the nice rustle the paper makes when turning pages. In those moments, other people – or the social world for that matter – remain at a distance. The only social aspect referred to was the act of dividing the paper into sections and sharing them with other members of the household. Resulting from the everyday routines it also seems that using media from the mass position was very common. For example, a newspaper is read every day, but thought-provoking discussions (characteristic to the position of the public, see chapter 5) of media contents with others do not apply to this role.

In the role of the mass, otherwise separate individuals tend to share an orientation to the myth of the centre of society (Couldry 2003). It means that on the one hand, the media provide a privileged access-point to “what is going on”. On the other hand, the media enfold another myth about social order; the idea that societies and nations have not just a physical or organisational centre – a place that allocates resources – but a generative centre that explains the social world’s functioning and is the source of its values (Couldry 2010). Thus, in the role of a mass, recipients recognise public figures displayed in the media: prime ministers, sports heroes and celebrities and make sense of domains and institutions these people are related to.

In this position it is enough to know them very generally “to stay tuned”, people’s media use in this position is not very selective. People in our data described the listening to the radio during the work day “with just one ear”, or setting a news site as the home page of the browser. These findings point out that a mass position may be assumed in relation to various media outlets: even the internet may be used in an undifferentiated and unselective manner.

The notion of the myth of the society's centre perhaps explains why elementary routines of media use are so persistent. A female interviewee at the age of 55 explained that she had subscribed the local paper for twenty years. Descriptions of these habits were often coupled with a sense of duty or even a compulsion. It may be argued that this obligation marks that recipients are, or want to become, informed citizens. This may be true, but then citizenship remains at a very elementary level. If we assume that citizenship can be much more than this, it would mean that the concept needs to be stretched accordingly. At some point, concepts run at risk of losing their analytic grip. This problem may be avoided by assuming that there may be some elementary forms of orientation that are necessary for citizenship, publics or producers, but they are not that yet in their own right.

As described above, the category of mass may well be rehabilitated at least for two grounds. Firstly, it seems valid to read out that role from our empirical data. Secondly, our analysis suggests that the role of mass is far from pathological. People are not ashamed to admit that their media use may be unfocused or unselective at times. In fact, living in a mediated world may well require escaping and ignoring the media at times. The role of mass also seems to be a crucial foundation for other roles. A theoretical as well empirical challenge triggered from this is, whether it is feasible to think that changing roles is possible. One way to think about this is to ask, are there any conceivable ways to think that people in the role of mass may be taken as partners to PSM?

It is easy to note that on the internet there are a number of attempts to give the "voice of the mass" a chance to be heard. For instance, online discussion boards (often minimally moderated) and online polling questions provide possibilities for this. In both cases however, the final results of the mass response are often treated with suspicion. This may be due to the conceptual mismatch with the assignment and presumed outcome: How viable is to expect "rational" political opinions to emerge from anonymous people communicating among themselves?

But what if “voice of the mass” would be better attuned with what the role of mass is really about? Consider, for instance, that a news organisation wants to learn how many households had faced damages in a recent storm or what distances people were travelling to attend the U2 concert held in the capital of Finland. Simple ways of interaction and feedback via new technology would enable people concerned with the topic to participate anonymously in the generation of aggregated information that may be fresh, interesting and entertaining. Within these confines, at least, a partnership in the role of mass seems theoretically possible.

4. The audience

Contrary to the historical roots of understanding mass, the recipients of media may be seen as audience(s) and in this position they are regarded active, not passive. This line of thought dates back to uses and gratifications studies in the 1940s, but more vibrantly the notion of active audience is related to cultural studies.

Alasuutari (1999) distinguishes three generations that have shaped the idea of “active audience”. The first generation of cultural studies marked a shift from technical to semiotic approach to messages, as formulated in Hall’s famous encoding/decoding model. This enabled cultural audience researchers to analyse cultural repertoires and symbolic resources used in the act of interpretation and their relations to social (for instance, class-based) structures (cf. Morley 1992). In the second and third generation, the attention has moved from the “determinate

moments” of reception to everyday life as a much broader context of interpretation, sense-making and variety of social uses of mediated messages. In this framework, “to live” and being audience have become to be seen more and more inextricable. In here, questions about what is “audiencehood” (Ang 1991, 2–14) have become less and less important.

Regardless of interpretative resources ascribed for active audience, it maintains to be structurally locked at the receiving end of mass communication (Ridell 2006, 241). In analytical terms, “audience” exists only in relation to representations that are produced by other actors. Given that the internet has already blurred this distinction, it is not clear, whether or not it is valid to talk about audiences anymore (Livingstone 2004). Other “traditional” features of audience, however, tend to hold their previous meanings better. For instance, unlike mass attending to same event, audience with regard to mass communication is *dispersed*: The individual members of an audience are spatially separated from each other or, at the most, assembled only in small groups. In spite of their separateness, members of audience are aware of their position with regard to a potential co-audience and the mediated text (print, audio/visual etc.) they choose to receive.

It can be easily deduced from our study that the role of an audience is the predominant and most flexible one that the respondents are taking. Also, the competencies absent (or unnecessary) in the role of mass become apparent. Given the abundant media offerings available, the first deed in the role of audience tends to be that of *selection*. Outside of the acts of merely connecting to the mediated centre of society, recipients in the role of audience tune in or out depending on their own choice. They may still be somewhat reluctant audiences: they may be watching or listening to something they do not really like because other ways of spending time appear even less pleasing for them.

Modes of selection tend to be instrumental in how respondents perceive themselves as audiences. Our groups described themselves, for instance, as active, critical, selective and fact-oriented media users. In there we can see a lot of kinship with Costera Meijer's (2009) "quality audience" in the Netherlands. This epitomises that the role of audience – unlike to role of mass – is an important aspect in identity work. Questions what are we like and how do we differ from others seem important with regard to audiencehood. It should be noted that in this type of identity work conceptual figures of audiences are often understood as social beings, even if they are not. They are discursive constructions that help projecting one's own role as audience to the roles of others. It seems clear that the ways how recipients see themselves and others as audiences are heavily influenced by ways how media organisations and audience researchers perceive them (Heikkilä et al. 2010b).

In addition to being capable of selection and imagining oneself in relation to co-audiences, the role of audience assumes a set of interpretative skills, not used or necessary in the role of mass. In order to take the role of audience a certain amount of focus and concentration are presumed. In this mode, recipients tend to pay attention to genres of the media input and intertextual references within a particular genre and across a set of genres.

In the course of total of eight rounds of focus group discussions with nine networks, our respondents were repeatedly asked to reflect upon news: something they had read or seen earlier that week, or something that touched upon issues they had shown interest in their previous discussions. These approaches resulted in a number of discussions where the respondents put forward varying ideas about news values and contrasting these with the assumed news values adopted by news organisations. In the same vein, recipients in the role of audiences tend to provide varying readings about entertainment genres; sitcoms, soap operas, reality TV etc.

What is characteristic for these moments of self-reflexivity is that there is strong awareness of the structural distance between the realms of reception and production involved. From this follows that a reasonably well-functioning division of labor tends to prevail. In this framework, media organisations are assigned for doing their share of the deal by distributing facts and entertainment, whilst recipients in the role audience use the output as they please. They may not be entirely happy with the media supply, but in many cases there were few signs of that respondents in the role of audience expected anything more from the media or themselves.

Interestingly, the structural gap between receivers and producers tend to stretch out to internet even if the roles of users and producers seem less rigid. Be it as it may, the respondents described their uses of the internet predominantly from the position of audience: They read online news services, watch clips from YouTube, scan blogs and discussion boards, but not contribute to them. From the role of audience, some respondents saw no point in ways the media industry attempts to encourage user-generated-content in the form of SMS-messages or photos send by mobile phones. This suspicion may partly result from the fact that experiments with user-generated-content have not been quite clear for producers either (see, Wardle & Williams, forthcoming). The evidence drawn from our study may also suggest that the intersections of the roles of audience and producers are simply difficult to grasp conceptually. Indeed, if recipients in the role of audience are relatively happy with their subordinate role with regard to producers, why would they want to change the roles just because it is technically feasible? In other roles though, for instance, that of public this may seem more relevant (see, chapter 5).

If we are to think about motivations for the transition from audience to partners, the strongest case in our study points out to the respondents' interest and competence in media criticism. This was realised as the participants reflected upon specific journalistic practices recurringly applied in newspapers. It was

noted in the focus groups, for instance, that in the news stories “ordinary people” are often used as entry points or illustration. In the role of audiences, the respondents told they can understand the hidden agenda here: ordinary citizens enhance authenticity of news and diminish the bureaucratic top-down mode of address typical for standard news items. At the same time, the groups pointed out particular news items wherein ordinary citizens had little to contribute to the news story, or that contribution could have been made significantly bigger.

They also criticized some patterns of layout of newspapers for being uninformative and alienating. They, for instance, claimed for solid, logical and contextual grounds for cutting big thematic issues into smaller stories. According to the groups, the predominant rationale of packaging stories is to ease the division of labour in the editorial office, rather than to deepen or elucidate the content of information.

In the project, the focus groups have the opportunity present their specific criticism about news practices to journalists. The first round of these events provide a preliminary example of how audiences may be turned into partners. The example is preliminary because no attempts were made to arrange these critique sessions more regularly. On the other hand, the fact that criticism springing from readers does not reach producers in the newsrooms underlines that this potential operates on a level of audience, where the roles of producers and recipients are mutually exclusive. In case this relationship would be different, we would soon move away from the audience concept.

5. The public

Historically, “the public” denotes to a set of qualities that elevate it above other social formations, such as mass and audience. In the normative and functionalist sense the public is taken to refer to well-informed, responsible and interested

citizens who are expected to form public opinion and enabling a society to observe itself (Jackob 2006). Throughout its conceptual history, the question of who qualifies to be called public has been a contested issue. In line with liberal and progressive ideas about liberal democracy, the exclusiveness of the concept has diminished radically. Noelle-Neumann (1993) for one, argues that the public includes not only the intellectual elite but every single individual within a social collective.

As a token of this increasing inclusiveness it has been noted that public is often used as a synonym for audience (Pietilä et al. 2010). Thus, if there is an analytically relevant distinction between these two, it has either disappeared or been ignored. We argue that the latter premise is more correct. In order to see the relevance of this distinction, we should bear in mind the basic dynamics of publics as described by Dewey (1991 [1927], 12–16): “When a problem and its indirect consequences are recognised, the public is called into existence.” The public becomes aware of itself through identifying problems. Thus, the public consists of all those who are affected by the problem and deem it necessary that the problem will be systematically cared for. Also Blumer (1961) suggests that publics are formed when problems or questions emerge and require public discussion. Therefore he emphasises the fact that a public is not a fixed group of people, it emerges as a reaction to problems. Publics are spontaneous: they are constantly arising and dissolving (*ibid.*).

These notions help us to separate the public from both of its extreme meanings. It is neither exclusive in terms of socio-economic status, nor is it all-inclusive in a sense that everyone were included in the public all the time. Instead, the public begins to be seen as a role that actual people choose depending on the issue at hand. Insofar as they see themselves stakeholders in a problem and take an interest in that it would be regulated, they begin to see themselves as a part of the public. In case they do not, they refuse the role of the public and maintain in those of audience, mass or something else.

In the Deweyan understanding of the public it is often assumed that publics emerge independently and outside of institutions and the media. Thus, public as an analytical concept is deemed independent on media and its representations. However, in a current “mediatised” environment, it is increasingly difficult to identify whether issues arise from people’s everyday surroundings outside the institutions, or in connection to the media. Therefore, we suggest that publics may also emerge as a result of media coverage. In fact, in theoretical terms a transition from the position of audience to public and back does not seem complicated at all: “Audiences most of the time, publics only sporadically by choice or necessity” would sound as an appropriate description of people who use the media regularly and extensively and converse about them in their social networks.

In our study, a transition process towards the role of public was detected when discussing the everyday uses of news media. Soon after orientating towards the centre of society (as mass) and situating media output to corresponding genres (as audience), the respondents said they seek for news items about topics they have a stake in. These topics may have to do with their immediate social environment (neighbourhood or town), or public or commercial services they use (roads, schools, or health care). Quite often news about these topics were regarded important but participants were not able to explain what is their stake or interest in the given issue, or whether it is – or could be – articulated in the piece of news. This observation suggests in empirical terms forming a public is less simple as was assumed above. In addition, it indicates that the daily news agenda that media organisations diligently produce every day does not automatically create publics.

The emergence of elementary forms of publics was not always intimately connected to media consumption. This is simply due to the fact that it is typical for people to identify and discuss problems with each other. Almost all of our

participants were members of at least one registered organisation even if the level of their activity varied. For some, the associations offered important opportunities for conversation and action that aimed at making an impact, e.g. being part of the local Red Cross or a political group. In principle, less institutionalised forms of social interaction may help forming publics as well. In our study, it appeared, however, interpersonal relationships are to a great extent routinised; they are constantly available, but not actively used for talk or conversation (Heikkilä et al. 2010b). Our respondents often complained that the time and opportunities for them to “get public” are normally very limited. Thus, they took our study as an exceptional chance to delve into profound discussions.

A systematic attempt was made in our study to find out what sort of issues the respondents would like to introduce to public discussion. All nine groups were encouraged to work through a list of topics they would like to be publicly addressed. All groups tended to express their views in the form of worries, anxieties and morally loaded questions, especially about social values: the loss of sense of “community”, the wellbeing of the natural environment etc. Quite typically, these concerns tended to go beyond the groups’ immediate social networks and their presumed self-interest. The issues were formulated as concerns about “someone else”, usually to some extent undifferentiated aggregation of citizens, such as the elderly people or groups at risk of social or political marginalisation.

The lists of issues the groups devised as ‘publics’ tend to focus on problems on which everyone basically agrees. A number of difficulties follow from this. Firstly, it is difficult to construe which actors or interests are included in, or excluded from, the proposed public. From this follows that it is not clear how different interests relate to each other. This is problematic with regard to, for instance, Blumer’s (1961) idea that interaction of the public is characterised by oppositions, not consensus. Given that the discussions of our groups as publics were informed by problems but not directed at either political confrontations or

solutions makes it hard to see an appropriate context for action. Due to their predilection to provide audiences “news that you can use”, the news media may have problems in adapting to the agendas proposed by the groups. On the other hand, our respondents showed no interest in taking the role of producers as independent bloggers or citizen journalists.

What, then, could be partnership building on people’s position as a public like? First of this would call for an incremental approach suggested by Rosen (1991, 269–270) already some twenty years ago. This would require that media organisations learn to become more equipped with detecting social problems and listening to publics affected by them and interested in having those problems solved. In addition, news media may develop tools with which the flow of social intelligence would circulate in (physical or virtual) communities through interpersonal communication.

This sort of partnership cannot be forged, however, with the whole civil society or people at large. This is due to the fact that no-one is part of all publics all the time. Instead, to enter a public is an option only. Whether one takes it or not depends on the issue at hand and the resources available (time, interest and an action context). Clearly, these conditions cannot be managed or facilitated by PSM only.

6. Conclusion

The current atmosphere around media and communications is electrified with notions of participation and peer production. These ideas stem from the rapid development of new user cultures in the internet and particularly in the so-called social media. Their development coincides with the reform aimed at upgrading public service broadcasting (PSB) into public service media (PSM). A powerful theoretical idea pointing out the direction for the reform is to claim that PSM

needs to forge a partnership with its recipients understood not merely as audiences but as users and producers. As noted above, there is indicative evidence to corroborate such developments.

At this point, it is important to critically scrutinize the evolutionary narrative available. Instead of taking the leap from audiences to producers as natural, we need to ask what is our understanding of concepts that are said to be under transformation: What is the position of “audience” that recipients of media are about to leave behind? From the vantage point of discursive audience research, we argue that it is useful to consider recipients of the media, loosely referred to as audience or a set of audience segments, into three analytical categories: mass, audience and public.

Furthermore, we suggest that the idea of partnership should be evaluated against these concepts respectively. From this follows that there may not be any overarching idea about partnership for PSM but rather various modes of partnership that are connected to particular conceptions of recipients either in the role of “mass”, “audience” or “public”. Partnerships that may be formed in the future are not partnerships with audience as social beings but partnerships with distinct positions that are connected to broader cultural and social roles. Therefore all positions should be considered, not merely the new and innovative ones. Partnership will hardly spring entirely outside of the already existing positions.

Our theoretical discussion draws empirical evidence from a research that aims to analyse how relevance of journalism (or its absence) is defined by people. Our study does not focus on how “audiences” use and evaluate public service media, but more specifically on news and newspapers. In this paper we have attempted to situate our empirical and theoretical observations to a framework that is hopefully useful for research on PSM as well.

Our analysis suggests that the role of audience as defined in the paper, is indeed a predominant one; at least for participants in our study. Respondents are generally rather content with the audience role ascribed for them. It may sound gratifying for media educators and cultural audience researchers to note that in the role of audience, respondents seemed relatively competent and critical readers. However, the position of audience remains clearly separated from media production. For example, very little of critical audience input normally reaches media producers. One practical advice for partnership with the audience can be derived from this observation: The means of feedback and opportunities for constructive interaction between producers and recipients need to be improved.

Even if “audience” may be the dominant figure of recipients to draw partnership with, it is not the only one. It is argued in the paper that many daily routines of media use can be described and made sense of with the category of mass. In this context, this concept is purely analytical and not derogatory. This concept can be useful in understanding the most elementary aspects of media use. This position as “mass” could be even transformed into acts of partnership by exploiting simple forms of interactivity or feedback – it could be for instance possible to collect information about moves of the masses on collectively recognized “important moments” anonymously and efficiently and this information could be utilized by the media organisations.

Our third category, the public is often elevated above other concepts. In this paper we argue that this may not be the most appropriate way to use the concept. Instead of putting it on the normative pedestal, we should think it as an optional role that recipients may take when necessary. In any case, it is a temporal role only. The partnership thought in the lines of the public resonates with ideas and practices developed earlier within the public journalism movement. In that context, the public is often regarded as the most desirable

conceptual figure of a recipient. However, it may be more relieving for recipients and producers alike to think that it is just one of three (or more?) options available. Partnerships that are connected to either mass, audience or public positions need to be recognized since they are different from each other and therefore also require different tools, practices and mentalities from media professionals and institutions.

The challenge for PSM or any other social actor for that matter is to ensure that parallel partnerships exist. At the same time it is also good to remember that from the audiences point of view the road from audiences to partners might be a winding one and not for everyone to follow.

ⁱ *Towards Engaging Journalism* is a three-year project funded by the Sanoma Foundation. Its main component is an audience research focusing on nine social networks based in different parts of Finland. Three of the networks are *work-based* (a group of high school teachers, employees of a multicultural centre and civil servants working in a state-run bureau), two *interest-based* (an association for home owners and a local association for the unemployed) and four *leisure-based* networks (a book club, members of a student theatre, members of a chamber choir and a network of friends). Eight out of nine groups live in urban areas (Helsinki, Tampere, Jyväskylä and Oulu). One group comes from a small provincial town (Sastamala). Demographically, our sample is overrepresented by females (67% women/33% men), and the middle-aged ranging from 35–50 years (50%). Socioeconomically, they are more educated than the average. The level of income of participants tends to vary within and across our sample but our participants in general would situate above the median of whole the population. In the beginning of the study (August 2009), all participants were interviewed individually about their social networks and media use. Between September 2009 and May 2010 members of each network participated eight times in thematised focus group sessions wherein relevance of journalism and the ways they use media – individually and socially – were discussed. All focus group discussions were videotaped and analysed collectively by the authors of this paper. At the moment, a more detailed analysis of the data is under way. For a previous analysis produced in the project (see, Heikkilä et al. 2010a, 2010b).

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