

Balancing between Democratic Accountability and Market Pressure: Public Service Media's Transboundary Strategies

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Abstract

Public service media is often accused of being elitist, preclusive of the ordinary people and even antidemocratic (Jacka, 2003, p. 116f.; Morley, 2000; Warner, 2002). Whether it is to defend or to criticize public service media, the concept of the public sphere is central to debates surrounding public service media's future role. Neo-Habermasian authors refer to the critical-normative concept of the public sphere and give weight to its significant contribution to democracy when legitimizing the public service broadcasting model (Dahlgren, 1995; Garnham, 1990; Scannell, 1989). Critics of the Habermasian perspective, such as Jacka (2003, p. 178), reject the use of these generally formulated and fixed "mantras—[such as] public service, public sphere, citizenship, democracy" when discussing the distinctiveness of public service media. For Jacka, entrepreneurial management and market forces have become prevalent because those highly normative, idealistic and abstract approaches fail to adapt to the challenges of a multichannel and digital media economy. She points out that regulatory and institutional contexts within which public service organizations operate have to be taken into account. By contrast, Born (2006) distances herself from this "either-or" logic and suggests to transcend normative perspectives without neglecting them. Related to its democratic accountability, this paper reviews the transformational forces of commercialization and digitization. It concentrates on how public service broadcasting's democratic accountability is both defensible and questionable in today's multichannel market-oriented media economy. Following Sassen's concept of "analytic borderlands", it is argued that strategies which align public service media's democratic accountability with a free-market economy represent, as I will call them, 'transboundary strategies' because they transcend traditional public institutional boundaries (Sassen, 2006, p. 379ff.). Based on the analysis of public service media's democratic accountability, this paper suggests that those 'transboundary strategies' can be conceived of as "part of the reconfiguration" of public service media organizations (Sassen, 2006, p. 380).

Keywords: Commercialization, Democratic Accountability, Digitization, Public Funding, Transformation

Introduction

The ABC is transforming into a taxpayer-fuelled broadcasting gorilla with a huge appetite for territory, more public money and control over public policy. And this is bad news for Australia. As the ABC adds more channels, the quality of its core programming will suffer as its resources are stretched. (Frangopoulos, 2010).

Public service institutions have undergone extensive technological, political, economic, social and cultural transformational processes. Although, they have been trying hard to reorient themselves and to reconceptualise their public service remit in a free-market economy driven by deregulation, globalization and recently digitization, their vision is still uncertain (Born, 2004). Public service media's role and remit keeps being debated lively – and not always positively as above quote demonstrates (Born, 2004; Jacka, 2003; Lowe, 2010; Lowe & Bardoel, 2007; Lowe & Jauert, 2005; Siune & Hultén, 1998; Tracey, 1998). In order to continue to meet the public interest, scholars as well as practitioners are calling for a transition of public service broadcasting (PSB) to public service media (PSM) and for the supplementation of broadcasting, a traditional linear service, with non-linear, personalized services such as podcasts, vodcasts, blogs, wikis, SMS-services or RSS feeds (EBU Digital Strategy Group., 2002; Lanz, 2009; Lowe & Bardoel, 2007; Scott, 2009b; Veo, 2009). Yet, it is agreed that to simply limit this transition to technological advancements is insufficient when defining public service media's future role. Another cause for concern is that the expansion from linear to non-linear public services so cost-intensive. The production of additional content is required in order to meet those challenges – in high quality, of course. High investments are necessary – and this with decreasing or at least stagnating public funding (not to mention the effects of the global financial crisis). Some public service organizations are based on a mixed financing model whose public funding supplements with commercial revenues (e.g., Australia Network, BBC Worldwide, Deutsche Welle, SBS, ZDF Enterprises). These companies' pursuit of commercial strategies reopens the debate about the role and the remit of public service broadcasting.

Criticism which the orientation to entrepreneurial and commercial strategies meet is as manifold as it is paradoxical. On one hand, public service broadcasters' obligation is to guarantee universally appealing and accessible services and programs. Simultaneously, they should pursue program strategies, which are not tailored to attract a mass audience but to appeal to minority audiences – which may mean those who are unattractive for commercial broadcasters. Yet, at the same time, commercial

lobbies blame public service broadcasting organizations of wasting money in targeting only a small, elite minority with their programs and services. According to such critics, this constitutes a violation of their traditional remit. Further, public service broadcasting is accused of being uncreative (Hartley, 1999). It is argued that embarking on commercial strategies makes public service broadcasting superfluous and illegitimate as it provides nothing that the market cannot provide too. Finally, public service broadcasters are asked to modernize and to substitute bureaucratic modes of operations with economic logics. Yet, they are accused of distorting competition in case they develop innovative and attractive services. Market-oriented strategies in general and multimedia strategies in particular are described as unfair. If public service media organizations perform above their private rivals, commercial lobbies ask to regulate their activities. Again, if public service broadcasters apply entrepreneurial management practices, they are blamed for increasingly neglecting public interest goals in favour of economic success. (Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2008; Bardoel & Lowe, 2007; Born, 2004; Dahlgren, 1995; Hultén, 2007; Jakubowicz, 2007b; Wessberg, 2005).

Despite such criticism, some public service broadcasters are commercially active in a national and international marketplace – and, following the example of BBC Worldwide, they try hard to develop strategies and organizational structures which guarantee an alignment of commercial with public strategies (BBC Trust, 2009; Thompson, 2009).

Public Funding in Favor of Democratic Accountability

When defending public service broadcasting's role in the context of digitization, various Neo-Habermasian authors appeal to critical-normative concepts of the public sphere, the public interest, democracy or citizenship as the basis of its legitimacy (Dahlgren, 1995; Garnham, 1990, p. 104; Gurevitch, Coleman, & Blumler, 2009; Scannell, 1989; Tracey, 1998). For them public service broadcasting lays the foundation of communicative democracy. It constitutes an indispensable platform and serves to facilitate and embody the public sphere. The public sphere represents a space where all citizens come together, exchange information and ideas as well as engage in debates about issues of public interest. In offering a variety of opinions from and to all social strata, public service broadcasting then makes a crucial

contribution to shaping public opinion. Its commitment to reinforce audiences' democratic values is tied to the principle of providing "a service of *mixed* programmes on *national* channels" (Scannell, 1989, p. 137). Nothing but a diverse set of programs of a high quality caters to a broad as well as a minority audience's needs, interests and tastes. Unlike their commercial rivals, public service broadcasters should strive after universality of appeal. Regardless of their socio-economic status, it is argued, every citizen should have access to public service broadcasting. The construction of a sense of common identity among the citizens of a geographically bounded territory, the nation-state, is referred to as a further principle. It is seen as public service broadcasting's responsibility to evoke connotations of unity and belonging to an 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1983). It also is described as reference point providing citizens with an understanding of national, regional and local events. Yet, as Habermas (2006, p. 18) stresses

Those who work in the politically relevant sectors of the media system (i.e., reporters, columnists, editors, directors, producers, and publishers) cannot but exert power, because they select and process politically relevant content, and thus intervene in both the formation of public opinions and the distribution of influential interests.

That is why public service broadcasting has to be designed as "self-regulating [...] system" autonomously of "its social environments" (Habermas, 2006, p. 18). Its independence from both the government and of profit or market pressures is argued to be imperative. For example, Garnham (1990, p. 107) describes public service broadcasting as a "space for a rational and universalistic politics distinct from both the economy and the State". In emphasizing public service broadcasting's democratic accountability, a *private* financing model is seen as serious threat (Garnham, 1990, 2003; Scannell, 1989; Tracey, 1998). Instead, the *public* financing model (either in form of a license fee or government appropriation) is referred to as safeguard for democratization. Also, historically, the form of public financing was supposed to promote public service broadcasters' accountability to the public. The citizens are public service broadcasting's financiers. Accordingly, as Scannell (1989, p. 135) describes, public service broadcasting's legitimization is based on its "service to the public".

For Dahlgren (1995, p. 13; emphasis in original) the policies and practices implemented in favor of a free market economy since the 1980s have "not enhanced the development of democracy" and misrepresent "The interest of *all* the citizenry". Instead, he ascribes homogenizing effects to these policies as, due to aggravated

competition, public service broadcasters tend to adjust their program strategies to their commercial rivals' ones.

While there is of course much variation among the different countries, it can be said that, generally, the increased commercialization of television has not augmented the diversity of programming, whether judged in terms of form or content (Dahlgren, 1995, p. 13)

Depending on advertising revenues, private channels, by contrast, compromise their content according to advertisers' requests. Content is primarily tailored to attract the highest possible quantity of audiences, and thereby customers.

Neo-Habermasian perspectives criticize market-oriented program strategies as constraining diversity and plethora of content and services. Tracey (1998, p. 31), for example, suggests the dominance of economic logics distracts public service broadcasters from their actual mission:

Where commercial sources of revenue are dominant, or even present, or where there is direct subvention from government, the programme-maker's eye is almost inevitably diverted away from what should be the main focus, the inherent quality of the programme he or she is making.

In a deregulated media landscape driven by transnationalization, prevailing program-making strategies ignore national cultural boundaries in favor of appealing to a rather global than national audience. Audiences are addressed as costumers rather than citizens with a shared national culture. According to him, this trend manifests in "the increasing importance of co-production and distribution" (Tracey, 1998, p. 30). Arguing against the "glorification of the market" (p. 38) as a severe threat to public service broadcasting's "pursuit of excellence" (p. 38), he posits "that the modern, democratic nation-state *needs* a national public broadcasting service, because it needs a quality of life, social and cultured coherence" (Tracey, 1998, p. 287; emphasis in original). He therefore advocates a public service broadcasting system which "resist[s] the full force of this temptation and thereby stand[s] against its consequences, as a voice for a public against a private good" (Tracey, 1998, p. 30). Neo-Habermasians further argue that vanishing distinctiveness carries the risk of making public funding unjustifiable in the long run. A reconsideration of the regulatory framework is required to counteract "The Decline and Fall of Public Broadcasting" (Dahlgren, 1995; Tracey, 1998). For Curran (2007, p. audio) the combination of neoliberal market logics and the decline of public service broadcasting has crucial influence on the historical television system in general. Addressing audiences as customers rather than citizens indicates for him "a global shift towards the market-

centered model of US television". Thus, from a Neo-Habermasian perspective it is essential to appeal to the audience as citizen rather than as customer and operate independently of revenue-driven measurements such as audience size and ratings. It is not desirable to merely supply 'what audiences want', since public service media should direct them to programs and fields of interest they may not have been aware of yet. The public service broadcasting model is designed to offer what the public needs, not what it demands.

Digitization – The Cause for PSM's Decline?

Critics of the Habermasian perspective argue that such an idealistic approach is unsatisfactory when defending public service broadcasting legitimization (Born, 2006; Hartley, 1999; Jacka, 2003; Keane, 1991; Morley, 2000; Nolan, 2006).

In her article "Democracy as Defeat" Jacka (2003) questions perspectives that position public service media as the embodiment of the public sphere ideal. She identifies the use of generally formulated and fixed "mantras—[such as] public service, public sphere, citizenship, democracy" as insufficient when discussing public service media's distinctiveness (Jacka, 2003, p. 178). Entrepreneurial management and market forces have become prevalent because those highly normative, idealistic and abstract approaches fail to adapt to the challenges of a multichannel and digital media economy. For Jacka, it is doubtful that public service media has a privileged role in relation to democracy. She argues that, besides their commercial objectives, private channels equally pursue cultural, social and political purposes and strive after providing services in the public interest. Further, the assumption of an "unitary" public is not stringently required (Jacka, 2003, p. 180).

The idealistic conception of an 'unitary' public arouses criticism referring to public service broadcasting as being elitist, preclusive of the ordinary people and insofar antidemocratic. Morley (2000), for example, questions that public service broadcasting has always been universally appealing to and integrative of *all* citizens regardless of class, gender or age. In analyzing politics of representation, he asks to what extent PSM promotes different citizens' inclusion within, and exclusion from the 'imagined community' of the nation. How far do citizens involve themselves and engage with the idea of this nation community symbolized by national public service broadcasting? Firstly, he argues, idealized concepts of democracy and citizenship

have often been 'gender-blind' and relate to a masculine civic society from which women are excluded. Formats such as talk shows are inherent to everyday life and may constitute "feminised counterpublics" – however much they are distained (Morley, 2000, p. 116). Secondly, for him, conceiving of the public sphere as "necessarily (or intrinsically) public service broadcasting is supposed to give access to audiences with different cultural backgrounds. Yet, according to Morley (2000), the traditional concept of the public sphere rather refers to a white mass than multicultural minority public. He proposes to cast away the idealized assumption of a singular public sphere. Instead, he refers to "the existence of cross-cutting transnational and diasporic public spheres" (Morley, 2000, p. 114). For him, a set of diverse public spheres that overlap and compete with each other is prevalent (Morley, 2000).

In the context of a pluralized and individualized society, Jacka (2003, p. 183) suggests to conceive of democracy as "fluid and evolving". Accordingly, the formulation of a universal definition of a 'common public good' solely fostered by public service media seems difficult for her. In connecting numerous industries, systems, participants, and multiple media platforms the scope of products and services audiences can consume escalates. Therefore, Jacka (2003, p. 188) lays stress on the use of "situated microanalyses". That means regulatory and institutional contexts within which public service organizations operate have to be taken into account when legitimizing public service media. Generalized assumptions drawn from the BBC are impractical and "obscured the great diversity of forms that public service broadcasting takes at different sites" (Jacka, 2003, p. 188). Instead, she proposes to "be open to the notion that ethical discourses can be present in many different kinds and genres of media texts and in many different forms of media organization" (Jacka, 2003, p. 183).

Public Service Media – what for and how then?

Similar to Jacka, Born (2006) questions if Neo-Habermasian perspectives which position public service media with the embodiment of the public sphere ideal are beneficial when defending its future role. However, contrary to Jacka, Born (2006, p. 106) distances herself from an "'either-or' logic" inherent to debates on public service media's democratic potential in a digitized media landscape. She simultaneously

questions perspectives which equate public service media with an “imperfect embodiment of the public sphere ideal” (Born, 2006, p. 106). For her imperative is:

to transcend the sterile assumptions of the ‘either-or’ polarity: either universal *or* multiple public spheres; either the old, unreconstructed PSB—charged, depending on the orientation of the critique, with being irredeemable elitist, paternalistic or hegemonic—*or* its inevitable demise (Born, 2006, p. 117f.; emphasis in original).

Latham and Sassen (2005, p. 5) challenge, along similar lines, “either/or categorizations” when analyzing zones which have traditionally been conceived as contradicting and mutually exclusive. Instead of concentrating on the mutual exclusiveness of both (pro-Habermasians and anti-Habermasians) perspectives, it is then suggested to analyze where those zones overlap and interact. Following Sassen’s concept of “analytic borderlands”, it is argued that strategies which align public service media’s democratic accountability with a free-market economy represent, as I will call them, ‘transboundary strategies’ because they transcend both national borders and public institutional boundaries (Sassen, 2006, p. 379ff.). It is suggested that those ‘transboundary strategies’ can be conceived of as “part of the reconfiguration” of public service media organizations (Sassen, 2006, p. 380). Sassen (2006, 2007), for example, undoubtedly verifies that globalization is accompanied by denationalization processes. However, she points out that the global and the national are interconnected as there exist globalization processes, which “take place deep inside territories and institutional domains that have been constructed largely in national terms” (Sassen, 2007, p. 6). Elsewhere, she states that denationalization processes

“reorient particular components of institutions and specific practices—both public and private—toward global logics and away from historically national logics ... Yet even global regimes often only become operative, or performative, when they enter the national domain. This entry is predicted on—and in turn further strengthens—particular forms of denationalization” (Sassen, 2006, p. 2)

Born (2006, p. 106) follows a similar chain of reasoning when criticizing the Neo-Habermasian perspective for ignoring the fact that in a globalized and digitized media landscape, communicative democracy supersedes traditional “geographic boundaries and structures of the nation-state”. Cable, satellite and digital technologies enable communication on a global scale and tear audiences out of the national container. To fulfill its mission, public service media has to take over its role of engaging audiences in debates of public interest and promote social cohesion. Born (2004, p. 509) therefore suggests to conceive of public service media as “a

forum for the negotiation” of national, regional and local as well as transnational and cosmopolitan cultures. Democratic accountability means therefore that public service media has to constitute both: a platform where audience share common knowledge and feel inclusive within the ‘imagined community’ of the nation while simultaneously recognizing the existence of a plural society (Born, 2006). Regardless of its cultural or socio-economic status, every citizen should have access to public service media. Only then, public service broadcasting can serve as a democratic tool.

A further point which meets Born’s criticism is that conservative analyses ignore both the attached value to traditional, linear services, and the ample opportunities digital technologies provide in developing interactive and participative, non-linear services. The Neo-Habermasian perspective, by contrast, ignores on-demand-services as being commercialized and rather aligned with consumers’ demand than citizens’ needs. Fulfilling the ‘public interest’ in a digitized media environment means convincing on multiple media platforms. In this context, Born (2006) proposes that different media platforms accomplish different normative purposes. For her, individualized, non-linear services need to be “supplemented and balanced” by universally appealing, linear services (Born, 2006, p. 116). With reference to the BBC, Born discovers five different digital strategies pursued when balancing between majority and minorities groups: firstly, the majority presents a set of differing minority perspectives within the context of a universal public sphere, such as constructed by linear services (e.g., broadcasting). Secondly, the minority communicates with both majority and minority groups by means of linear and non-linear services (e.g., broadcasting and Internet). Whereas broadcasting media provides information about a nation’s cultural diversity, web-based platforms offer the opportunity to self-express and self-represent. Thirdly, again, using a mix of linear and non-linear services, minority groups talk to each other or itself. According to Born (2006, p. 117), the aim is to enhance “intracultural self-reflection, association and solidarity”. Fourthly, besides, services which balance between majority and minorities groups, Born identifies local and regional services as part of pluralistic public services. Those services can be provided across all media platforms. Finally, by means of non-linear services, public service media enables communication between “non-territorial thematic communities of interest”.

Conclusion

Public service media institutions face intensified pressure in a competitive market. Today's media environment is highly individualized and pluralized and enables audiences to choose what services they want to use, when they want to use them and on what platform they want to use them. Consequently, public service media shares its audiences with an enormous amount of telecommunications and media players. Declining audience numbers are traced back to the provision of unattractive services and the neglect of its public service mission. In the context of debating public service media's mission, Born (2006) discovers two thematic clusters: firstly, the influence market liberalism and its political ramifications exert on public service media's alignment with a multichannel media landscape. Key terms dominating the economic discourse are according to Born (2006, p. 104): "competition, market failure and the legitimate scope and limits of public invention via PSB". Demands for assessing public service media's performance against the background of "market criteria of success, such as market share and return on investment" (Murdock, 2000, p. 39) are hardening. However, as Higgins (2008, p. 8) argues, audience measurement is a crucial feature which distinguishes between private and public broadcasting. Commercial media organizations vie for the attention of potential customers in order to increase advertisement revenue. Their "audience measurement is based on "advertisers' concerns with the numbers and demographic qualities" of audiences. Yet, as Wessberg (2005, p. 9) states, public service media institutions have to meet the obligation of building up "social capital" instead accumulating "economic capital". Their purpose is to serve the public good rather than attracting a mass audience to advertising. Nonetheless, Bardoel and Lowe (Bardoel & Lowe, 2007), for example, posit that the provision of demand-orientated services and content lies at the heart of public service media's future role. Required is therefore a reconstruction and redefinition of the public service concept, which considers more than ever before that "audiences are at the heart of everything"¹. Yet, who are those audiences public service media organizations are confronted with and whom they do want to appeal to? What services might these audiences look for? What services might they feel to need?

Secondly, Born (2006) identifies concerns about the effects that the transformation from public service broadcasting to public service media has in relation to public

¹ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/info/purpose/> [accessed December 3, 2008]

service media's democratic accountability. The contemporary reality of democratization processes are challenged by a globalized, digitized and therefore highly fragmented free-market economy. Debates circle around the influence of digital media on political participation. Of concern is if public service media's democratic potential has been undermined by the challenges constituted by market liberalism and digital advancements. When approaching such questions, Born (2006, p. 108), similar to Jacka (2003), points out that "both the different media ecologies that pertain in different national contexts, with their distinctive regulatory and funding regimes, and the particular social and political environments in which they operate" have to be taken into account. Australia, for example has always been a mixed media landscape with regulated competition between public and private broadcasters. By contrast, in Germany, public service broadcasting held a monopoly until the mid-1980s. Its national media and communication system resembled a closed system as the limited radio frequency spectrum was reserved for national public service broadcasting. For Born (2006) as well as Latham and Sassen (2005, p. 5) an 'either-or logic' has to be rejected when analyzing "the constitution of whole new sociotechnical relations and domains". When debating public service media's democratic accountability, this assumption suggests that instead of taking a pro- or anti-Habermasian perspective, it proves more useful to consider how digital media is embedded in public service media's democratic accountability and where this embeddings intersects and overlaps with the normative public sphere ideal.

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