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Editorial: Public service objectives: Contestability and Renegotiation

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This special issue comes at a time when debates about the legitimacy of public service media gather momentum in different national and supranational contexts. It seeks to contribute to ongoing renegotiations about the present and future of delivering public service objectives in the media. The seven articles featured bring together case studies, comparative perspectives and policy analysis looking at different aspects of public service provision in a range of countries.

In the analogue broadcasting era, integrated national broadcasting institutions around the world were intrinsically associated with performing important political, cultural and economic functions – ultimately catering to constructed mass audiences in line with normatively defined public service purposes. Prior to digitalisation, scarcity of the electromagnetic spectrum severely constrained terrestrial over-the-air broadcasting capacity to a handful of entities which were state-administered or operated within the parameters of serving the public interest. Often enjoying widespread public and political support for much of the 20th century, PSBs in a number of national contexts had remits centred on shifting definitions of diversities, access and entitlements. Embedded in systems that guaranteed their place and access to significant resources, PSBs were seen as important cultural institutions that addressed inevitably large audiences. Arguments about commercial broadcasting market failures that needed addressing, and economies of scale/scope that the sheer size of PSBs could enable entrenched them further.

Globalising markets, shifting political and economic paradigms, and the obsolescence of scarcity in the technical capacity of information and communication technologies have been progressively eroding the rationale backing the privileged position of public service media (PSM). Neoliberal narratives favour indiscriminate competition policies against what is then defined as unhealthy protectionism that can distort the market (Freedman 2008, p.24ff). Digital convergence, particularly when coupled with the internet, made media markets more porous than ever before, both in geographical and sectoral terms, and increased offerings considerably across all electronic media platforms, relentlessly intensifying competition for users' attention and leisure time. The legitimacy and relevance of PSM are questioned as audiences/users, revenues and investment fragment, while intense lobbying from commercial players supports public policies that seek to contain publicly funded operations. In this context, PSM institutions are under constant scrutiny as evidenced by the public value criteria applied to current and proposed PSM provision in different countries. The overarching principle is that the delivery of a media service should be left to the market by default. The precarious and tentative position of PSM in the competition framework of the European Union and the WTO negotiations are indicative of this transition.

Diverting resources away from longstanding, relatively integrated organisations with explicit public service remits is increasingly seen as the way to open up public service provision, often to market

competition in on-demand environments, supporting a transition from ‘internal pluralism’ (within a specific broadcaster) to ‘external pluralism’ (across the media system as a whole) (Iosifidis 2010).

Sharing out resources typically involves top-slicing of funding previously ring-fenced for public service media, and making their output and production facilities available to third-parties.

Contestable funding has also been proposed to stimulate desirable content and services in line with prescribed criteria. This model is seen as capable of breaking up powerful and potentially inefficient monopolies, reflecting prevailing public policy narratives. It could energize a wider media ecosystem, but it could be argued that PSM institutions may be equally well or better positioned to achieve that with their considerable resources, experience, expertise, scale, networks, gravity, nationally and internationally recognised brand, and public support and trust.

This contestability is driven by shifting paradigms, the changing shape of media landscapes and technological innovation. Monolithic PSM structures built around one-way communication models appear now inconsistent with new patterns of consumption, particularly among younger users. Re-distributing resources and funding may pose a challenge to PSM, but at the same time it affirms that it remains necessary to provide public funding for public service purposes, particularly ‘exposure diversity’ (Napoli 2011). PSM respond by calling on their often considerable public support, innovating, and reframing their public service mission. A review of the purpose of PSM in the digital era seems necessary (Tambini 2015). A very significant asset of PSM is the public trust they enjoy. This is paramount to news and current affairs programming, but it can also help promote digital media and information literacy with PSM acting as ‘public service navigators’ through complex digital spaces (Burri 2015), or as guarantors of a universally accessible ‘digital public space’ shielded from the transgressions of major commercial interests on the internet (Ageh 2012; Ageh 2015).

Tim Raats and Karen Donders point out that contestability in PSB is not a new phenomenon. The early introduction of plurality into systems dominated by a single PSB challenged their privileged status. Contestability is a recurring theme in policy discourse too. By conducting qualitative analysis of documents from Flanders (Belgium), the UK, New Zealand and the Netherlands, the authors identify and categorize arguments for and against the decentralization and de-institutionalization in PSB. Exposing the ideological foundations of these arguments, they speak in favour of an ecosystem approach to PSM, a ‘holistic public media project’ which the short-termism and programme-based perspective of contestability projects seem to neglect.

Roddy Flynn argues that as the distinction between PSB and commercial broadcasting becomes blurred, it is increasingly difficult for PSBs to claim their legitimacy and ‘privileged status’, and at the same time easier for commercial broadcasters to bid for public funds for public service content. Flynn proposes a comparative framework applied to New Zealand, Ireland, Croatia and Austria for the analysis of schemes which redistribute public funding away from PSBs in order to create funds for the production of public service content. The common feature of these schemes is their reliance on competition for the allocation of scarce funds. Media policymakers seem to be increasingly aware of the potential of diffused public funding to stimulate competition in the delivery of public service content, but there is no evidence of public subsidies being removed towards a fully marketized system.

Yuwei Lin’s investigation into BBC Backstage showcases how PSM can achieve significant impact by making their datasets available to the public in line with the ‘open data’ movement philosophy to

encourage remixing, mashups and data mining. This case study demonstrates that the BBC transparentizing and sharing its informational resources (e.g. news, weather, traffic, subtitles etc.) with stakeholders, rather than transferring resources away from the broadcaster to third-parties, can stimulate distributed creativity and co-production of public value. Such initiatives can also foster learning skills for algorithmically handling data, although Lin's analysis reveals that BBC Backstage targeted a specific group of elite audience – the techno-elites – rather than the general public.

Kerry Traynor looks at the 2011 launch of the first digital terrestrial network of local public service broadcasters in the UK. The completion of the digital switchover freeing up portions of the electromagnetic spectrum and its restructuring enabled local digital terrestrial television (DTT), but the public policy initiative was really driven by the belief that local PSBs were viable and essential components in a PSB system, particularly as existing commercial PSBs were allowed to scale back their local public service provision on sustainability grounds. Local DTT offers an example of how public service provision can be re-framed and de-centralized. Traynor's sector analysis and ethnographic study suggest that the fledgling sector has potential but suffers from inadequate funding and heightened vulnerability to bias.

Jo Smith examines Māori Television, New Zealand's Indigenous media organization with the remit to revitalize the Māori language and culture, and at the same time appeal to a broader audience. While mainstream PSB is driven by commercialization, Māori Television, committed with its limited funds to delivering public service content, becomes a 'default public broadcaster' with more than three quarters of its small audience being non-Māori ten years after launch. Mainstream PSB stated to be further assuming the role of content curators, withdrawing from content production, may stimulate an independent production sector, but transfers at least part of the public service burden to Māori Television at the expense of its prime mandate.

Stuart Cunningham approaches the evolution of PSB from the perspective of innovation. PSBs can set high content and services standards for their competitors, or stimulate innovation in the independent production sector through procurement and commissioning. Structured around product, process and organisational innovation, this article examines the performance of the two Australian PSBs, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS). Cunningham suggests that in their transition from PSBs to PSM, the innovation rationale for PSM will have to be repositioned to recognise that they can perform experimental R&D. He goes on to argue that the public value discourse and related tests applied in the European media context can constrain the evolution of PSB and inhibit innovation.

Adding trust to Born and Prosser's normative criteria of citizenship, universality and quality, Benedetta Brevini proposes a new normative framework for PSB online, what she calls 'PSB 2.0'. With references to media literacy, trust and universality featuring prominently in this article, there are obvious parallels to be drawn with discussions about PSM reinventing themselves as 'public service navigators' or guarantors of protected 'digital public spaces', addressed above. Brevini then applies the framework to the UK, Spain, Italy, Denmark and France, and argues that the PSB 2.0 principles should inform policy design.

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