

Regaining the Initiative for Public Service Media

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Even in its heartland, the institution of public service broadcasting [PSB] is in trouble. That has long been the case in countries where the institution wasn't strong to begin with. In the United States PSB only really started after 1967 and has been under increasing attack by the political right ever since. In Central, Southern and Eastern Europe, where democracy is more recent, popular support has typically been weak and political meddling high because of historic associations with state broadcasting. But the realities are most striking when looking at northwest Europe – the historic heartland of PSB. The situation has become more precarious in the context of efforts to develop beyond traditional radio and television to become public service media providers [PSM] with robust online services.

In Germany PSM providers have been forced to draw down in online services and to embrace a German version of Britain's public values test. The BBC in Britain has been radically challenged since the election of the Conservative-led coalition in 2010. Under the pretext of economic austerity and within a mere 48-hours the Government imposed a licence fee freeze until 2017, along with additional responsibilities for funding the BBC World Service, S4C and BBC Monitoring. This was done without public consultation or Parliamentary involvement. In Finland a challenge to the licence fee has been percolating since 2009 and may result in a switch to funding from the state budget. Right across Europe PSB is caught up in 'a perfect storm'. Although dark clouds are nothing new, the magnitude of this storm is stronger and more threatening.

The public media sector is being challenged on nearly every front at the same time. Publics and politicians alike have come to see the commercial approach as the 'normal' way of organising broadcasting. There are strong pressures for downsizing PSM organisations, limiting investment options, restricting online and digital opportunities, narrowing remits to genres and audiences that are not commercially attractive, and for implementing increasingly intrusive assessment procedures. The principles of public service in media no longer seem to resonate very widely, and there is growing criticism about a decline in PSM distinctiveness as these organisations compete aggressively with commercial rivals. Even among traditional allies such as academicians and proponents from non-governmental organisations who have 'fought in its corner', support is flagging and scepticism is growing.

Although there is nothing yet to suggest this storm is catastrophic, the situation could be construed as a crisis because so many tangents have come together simultaneously and in the context of a genuine economic crisis that is challenging the public sector everywhere in the West. A potent combination of regulatory, financial, commercial and technological challenges are encouraging the thought that, as an institution, PSM is in serious decline and past its sell-by date.

And yet one must be careful about reaching definitive conclusions on what amounts to a select category of diverse cases. Although it's obvious that PSM is in trouble in much of Western Europe, the situation is different in countries that are experiencing rapid development. That is certainly true of

China and India. In several parts of the world we see marked growth in newspaper publishing and readership, and different formulations of PSB beginning to bubble up. As reported in various contributions, this is the case in China, certain countries in eastern and central Europe, and in the Middle East. Even where a PSB presence has not yet clearly emerged, there is interest among a constituency that might see this through to beneficial ends.

One key question that is considered in the contributions is how PSM will develop in places where there is no history of PSB, in countries that are in fact drawing on concepts, arrangements and experiences from PSB's heartland in Western Europe – precisely when PSM institutions there are so challenged with the need to revitalise their remit and systems. Although one size can never fit all, every case has something important to contribute in realising amendments to or alternatives for a viable public service sector in media today. That is a shared concern in countries with long histories of PSB as well as in countries without much or any history of PSB. And it is a concern that reflects the complexity and global interconnectedness of media-society relations today.

Wherever humans live, global influences and local differentiation constitute one characteristic tension. Commonly shared interests include issues related to managing the balance between individual rights and collective responsibilities, between pluralistic values and the common interest, between diversity across different societies and cohesion within increasingly fragmented marketplaces. All of this speaks to the significance of developing media systems that are not uniform, but are in each case of fundamental importance to common purposes related to high quality journalism, ambitious home-grown content that inspires knowledge and culture, and activities that bring people together as well as reflect the diversity of audience backgrounds and experiences.

That is why this fifth RIPE Reader incorporates a wider purview than the Eurocentric view that has characterised its development since the first RIPE volume published in 2003. This volume is grounded in proceedings from the RIPE@2010 conference that convened in London 8-11 September. The conference theme suggested by our sponsors, the BBC and Ofcom, the UK regulatory authority for broadcasting and communications was *Public Service Media After the Recession*. The conference was hosted by the Communication and Media Research Institute [CAMRI] at the University of Westminster, a faculty with a long history of policy and industry research. Conference discourse was framed by a 'steering question':

Is the economic recession the cause of anything new in media policies and attitudes towards public service media, or rather an environmental circumstance that has strengthened already pre-existent trends? Related to this, do the trends we see in media policy affecting PSM reflect changes that are likely to be permanent?

Based on the substantive focus of their research papers, participants were assigned to workgroups. Each broad topic was applied to investigate the theme: the future of journalism, opportunities for public participation, analysis of existing and emergent business models, assessment of PSB / PSM

performance measures, and developments in media policy. The summary conclusion was two-fold. First, participants agreed that economic recession had not created anything new, but it has fuelled pressures by private interests to roll back PSB incumbents.

Detractors of public service media have seized on the economic crisis as an opportunity that should not be 'wasted'. This position is understandable in key respects and we don't embrace the notion that all of its critics and opponents are 'bad guys'. Attacks on PSM have been fuelled by legitimate concerns caused by economic turmoil within media industries following sharp declines in advertising revenue and consumer spending. Moreover, PSM has been justly criticised for sacrificing distinctiveness, which is core for its legitimacy as a public institution, in the pursuit of competitive success. The move to become PSM corporations has landed the institution of PSB in a more exposed position where its opponents are no longer only those rivals operating in television and radio, but also powerful commercial players involved in publishing and new media businesses. In Europe these commercial rivals have been encouraged by the election of governments that are more sharply to the right of the political spectrum.

Parallel to this the institution of PSB in its heartland has been more reactive than proactive in setting out a coherent strategy. Across Europe and North America it is fair to say that many PSBs have lost the initiative – that they have been overtaken by events that have created conditions, which work against PSB's strategic interests. That brings us to the second conference conclusion, which explains the title and intentions of this volume: *Regaining the Initiative for Public Service Media*.

The book will feature contributions from an impressive group of internationally respected media researchers and scholars (in alphabetical order by last name).

*Expectations, Experiences & Exceptions:
Promises and Realities of Participation on Websites*

Piet Bakker

*Broadcast Journalism and Impartiality in the Digital Age:
Six Fallacies and a Counter-Factual*

Steven Barnett

*A 360° Public Service Sector? The Role of Independent Production in the
UK's Public Service Broadcasting Landscape*

James Bennett & Paul Kerr

Born into Crisis: Public Service Broadcasters in South East Europe

Sally Broughton Micova

*Public Cultural Service: New Paradigms of Broadcasting Policy and Reform in
the People's Republic China*

Yik Chan Chin & Matthew D. Johnson

Ex ante Tests: A Means to an End or the End for Public Service Media?
Karen Donders & Caroline Pauwels

High Noon: The BBC Meets the 'West's most daring government'
Peter Goodwin

*Breaking the Mold with New Media:
Making Way for a Public Service Provider in Mexico?*
Julio Juárez-Gámiz & Gregory Ferrell Lowe

*PSB Policymaking in Comparative Perspective:
The BBC and France Télévisions*
David A.L. Levy

*Changing Regimes of Regulation:
Implications For Public Service Broadcasting*
Peter Lunt, Sonia Livingstone & Benedetta Brevini

*Losing the Battle, Winning the War:
Public Service Media Debate in Scandinavia 2000-2010*
Lars Nord

*The Changing Nature of Political Case-Making for Public Service
Broadcasters*
Robert G. Picard

Public Service Initiatives in Arab Media Today
Naomi Sakr