

Public Service Media in 2012: A European Perspective

Prof. Jo Bardoel, Radboud University Nijmegen / Universiteit van Amsterdam

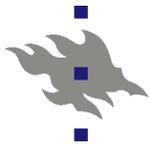
Summary

Shortly before I changed jobs in 1993, from public broadcasting to academia, I attended a lecture in Brussels by Michael Tracey, that later came out as a book with the telling title "The Decline and Fall of Public Service Broadcasting". Tracey's diagnosis mirrored the dominant feeling of those days, shortly after the end of the monopoly of public broadcasting in most European countries: public broadcasting is at the verge of collapse.

Twenty years later we see that despite the pessimistic forecasts public broadcasting in Europe has survived the advent of dual broadcasting pretty well. PSB has succeeded in maintaining a broad, comprehensive remit. Despite the expectations of a convergence between public and commercial programming public broadcasting has managed to find a middle way between accommodation and compensation and remain quite distinctive. In this way PSB in most countries has kept both a major market share and considerable trust among its population. Public broadcasters have also managed to make their organization meaner and leaner and to maintain a system of mixed financing. Last but not last, public broadcasters have also gained access to the relevant new distribution platforms.

Despite all the good news I am very not optimistic about the future of public broadcasting in Europe. This has to do both with the changing political consensus on the national scale and the growing role of the European Union vis-à-vis PSB and PSM. Looking at the condition of PSM from a European perspective a first question is if there is such a thing as European public service broadcasting. Referring to recent research and typologies of media systems we see that really independent public broadcast media mainly exist in the most wealthy countries of Northern and Western Europe, while most countries in Southern and Eastern Europe still struggle with high levels of political parallelism and clientelism and a modest tradition of independent media and professional journalism. Both in the European Union (EU) and the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) only a minority of the member-states has a solid tradition of independent broadcasting. Moreover, over time the supporters of PSB and PSM have become weaker and their challengers stronger.

What happened to the overall position of PSB/PSM certainly applies to its main pillars: comprehensive programming, adequate and independent funding and broad presence on all media platforms. Firstly the legitimization of public broadcasting – previously taken for granted – is now threatened by an unholy coalition of populism and post-modernism. Politicians already tend to mix up public and state broadcasting and treat public broadcasting in an ever more instrumental way, expecting it to serve political purposes rather than the public sphere. Concerning the program mandate public broadcasting is increasingly considered as a mere compensation for market failure that consequently can suffice with a more limited and targeted service, concentrating on nuclear tasks like information and culture, leaving entertainment



and sports to its commercial competitors. In relation to the organization of public intervention in the media domain we see a trend to question the exclusive relationship between public mission and public institution. Although the first experiments with 'distributed public service' were not very successful the notion comes back on the table over and over again, in Britain, the Netherlands and also in the EU. On the position of public broadcasting on new platforms, especially the internet, European PSB/PSM has won the first battle, but not the war. The Amsterdam Test is now being implemented in most EU member-states, but the implications are not clear yet. At best it creates a fair balance between the interests of public and private partners on the internet, but a more likely scenario is that in the long run it will squeeze the position of public service media on the internet, and replace old-style cultural policy by new-style competition policy. All in all, European integration policies have brought more pain than pleasure for public service media.

Where do we stand now with PSB/PSM, and which way should we go? As already mentioned, there is no single public service media model in Europe, so also the solutions cannot be the same all over our continent. But I think that tough choices have to be made. PSB's all too often behave like incumbent institutions that cannot accept the paradise lost, and still want to do everything for everybody avoiding real choices. If they cease certain activities it is not because they have made that choice deliberately, but because they have lost the rights or the mandate. Public broadcasters must become the subject, and not the object, of their future fate. European public broadcasters deserve full support from the main European political actors, in return for a clear vision and profile of a new PSM European-style, which is more than legitimizing words on paper. At the level of program production PSB/PSM clearly must become more distinctive by investing heavily in journalism and culture, at the expense of sports and entertainment. I still believe in a comprehensive program with a broad appeal, but the distinction must become much clearer. In relation to funding public broadcasters should seriously consider to refrain from advertising and other commercial income, but on the other hand should be given the opportunity to accept individual contributions like pay-per-view. Public broadcasting should also be allowed to follow the public and be present on all relevant platforms, but at the same time accept that there are many other – corporate and civil society – players who all have their legitimate interests.