

What place for public service media in a converged digital communication arena?

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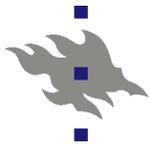
Summary

Question

What – if any – can be the place of public service broadcasters (psb) in a converged digital communication arena?

10 popular reasons, why there is no such place:

- Public service broadcasters are just broadcasters, their remit is limited to radio and television and the new communication arena is built around different diffusion technologies. There remains a niche for psb for a while, but technology will diminish psb.
- In the digital communication arena there are no scarcities of frequencies any more. Digital television is platform neutral and any privilege (public finance) is a distortion of market competition and should be abolished.
- Abundance of platforms and channels make psb obsolete. Thousands of internet radio stations provide much more choice than any national psb can ever deliver.
- Psb addresses mass audiences with program that should satisfy all but does not satisfy anybody. Digital communication is about one-to-one and group-to-group communication. Segmented audiences do not need one-to-many communication any more.
- European integration moves on. Public companies are not welcome and privatized as soon as the economic crisis requires sacrifices. Public utility and public broadcasting is subject to privatization any time soon.
- Product and service innovation happens outside public service broadcasting. Psb is slow in innovation take-up because it is too big and will be subject to Schumpeter's creative destruction any time soon.
- Innovative communication technology is warmly welcome by the digital natives (born after 1990). This generation communicates, receives information and entertainment via social networks and does not watch television any more. Not public television, in particular.
- Communication innovation fails, if public service broadcasters are involved. DAB and HD-MAC are telling examples. Innovation succeeds if private companies are in the driving seat. In particular, if these innovators are called Steve Jobs.
- HD television is a nail in public service broadcasters' coffins. HD television does not understand why people change their communication behavior and holds that all they wish is a better screen. This is fundamentally wrong.
- There are public spheres created by non-media companies. Psb is legally excluded from these new platforms and will continue to gradually lose its relevance.



5 good reasons, why there is such place:

- Psb is an essential driver of innovation. Since the 1950s psb have introduced or accompanied all technology milestones in the development of radio and television – at high cost. Psb had the means and the mission to experiment and to deliver innovation. Market forces are likely to deliver innovative solutions that deliver individual and private value, rather than public and social value.
- Psb are quality benchmarks, irrespective of what technology is applied. When private commercial television was introduced in Europe (mainly in the 1980s) psb was the benchmark for private competitors. Still today, psb is highly popular on the internet, in some countries psb website are among the top ten websites and news and current affairs programs are popular both on the TV screen and on the computer or smartphone screen.
- Social networks do not deliver content suitable for public deliberation. Actually, social networks do not deliver any content at all. Users provide content. When issues of public relevance are discussed in social networks, users often discuss news items from traditional media and psb. Social network communication therefore needs high quality news, often delivered by psb.
- Internet and world wide web prepare for instant cultural exchange beyond all national and cultural borders. Hybrid cultures and super cultures (according to Lull) are based on the premise that hybrid is the essence of contemporary cultural exchange. Psb are less exposed to this hybrid as they are bound by their remit, contrary to their commercial competitors who promote hybrid cultural artefacts which are traded cheaply on world content markets.
- The age of mass audiences is not over. Television still has very high reach in all European countries, even among the digital natives (although lower than the previous cohort, however). Psb is still a powerful medium to focus public attention and to provide entertainment. The third screen would be largely devalued if there was no first screen.

Conclusions

All ten popular reasons why there is no place for psb in the converged digital arena are either ideological, or wrong, or both. Pbs has proved in most European countries to play an essential role in promoting new communication technologies, even if others obtained more benefits than psb. The ongoing transformation of the architecture of public spheres cannot be conceptualized without psb as their public remit guarantees social value amidst hyper-commercialization and hyper cultures. As such, psb does not only deliver high quality content but sets quality standards for all other media and communication services.

There is no alternative to extending the remit and mission of psb to become psm (public service media) any time soon. The internet and all related platforms and applications should be freely available to all – including in particular to psm.