

EDITORIAL: PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTING IN THE DIGITAL AGE

The call for this issue asked researchers and professionals to reexamine public service broadcasting (PSB) in light of recent technological, political, and economic developments. Traditional public service broadcasters, initially established to serve citizens rather than consumers, and to help service national conversations in well-informed democracies, face a multiplicity of difficult challenges today, including commercialization (since the 1980s), digitization (since the 1990s), competition from powerful global media players, the fragmentation of their audiences, and the requirement, to transition from a broadcasting mindset to a digital mindset (in the 2000s). So how have they been faring?

The authors who responded to our call adopt a less dramatic tone than the tone we heard during the debate over PSB in the late 1990s and early 2000s. It might seem that, according to our authors, the Grand Debate about justifying public service broadcasting is now behind us. And so too may be a certain radical pessimism about the very ideal of public service.¹ In 2003, Elisabeth Jacka famously questioned the very notion of public service as a dated, paternalistic institution in a new political landscape of more active citizens (a form of do-it-yourself democracy), and Nicholas Garnham came to the rescue of PBS, describing it as providing, among other things of value, quality journalism in an increasingly commercial landscape.² Today, the idea of an independent media providing quality material, trying to give universal access to relevant content which addresses audience needs and wants without manipulating them or selling their data, actually feels more urgent than outdated.

The relative optimism of this issue may be explained by the fact that the articles mainly address different solutions public service broadcasters have found to help them survive the multiple challenges they are facing. Of course, it may also be explained by the fact that we deal mostly with Northern European examples – Scandinavia, the Netherlands, Germany, Flanders – where, relatively speaking, PSB is more stable and has more defenders than in most other countries. As we know, public service broadcasting remains threatened in other political contexts. It has traditionally been more fragile in Southern Europe, and even more in countries where commercial broadcasting rose early on, for example in the United States.³

Be they researchers or professionals, our authors all believe that PSB has something specific to contribute in the new “digital eco-system.”⁴ More specifically, they concur on one crucial strategy which should be (and yet is only partially) used by PSB today to conquer some of the digital space: actively engaging audiences, no longer considered as the passive recipients of quality programming but as partners in a sort of a digital conversation (to use the most optimistic metaphor). “Engagement” is used in the titles of two of our articles, but the question of reaching out to audiences in novel ways is the thread connecting them all. Moe⁵ has suggested that PSB can use the Internet for extending, adding to, or demoting the functions of broadcasting. The broadcasters studied here mostly try to *extend* broadcasting, to work on an original combination of television (sometimes radio) and the Internet. Oranit Klein-Shagrir studies how Israeli Public Service Broadcasting has become an internet corporation with a presence in linear broadcasting. Less radical examples show up everywhere. At the Danish Broadcasting Corporation, the mission is to make the online platform the main channel together with DR1 within the next couple of years.

A specific case of engagement is the way in which archives may be used, not only as material to be incorporated in shows (including nostalgic shows), but as a resource that can appeal to audiences in new ways. This is not a new question. Over a decade ago Jakubowicz⁶ wrote that the future of PSB may lie in its past. Yet technologies have changed dramatically, and the increased presentism of the digital world, with its constant refreshing, viral content, alerts, etc., has made the question of PSB as an agent of memory increasingly relevant. For conservation, analysis, and, finally, access, digital tools have turned out to be indispensable – and not only because they are part of (digital) libraries. The authors in our issue who deal with archives share the opinion that accessibility must be part of the missions of the transformed PSB – a new way to engage, inform, and connect the audience. Of course, situations are very different between the Netherlands and Austria, rich Western PSBs, poorer Greece, and Hungary and Poland where PSB is also threatened by political change (those last four countries are compared by Olga Kolokytha et al. here). The amounts of archival materials digitized, the types of access (including pricing), and the “archives awareness” of the institutions are all very different.

Maarten Brinkerink, Gertjan Kuiper, and Jesse de Vos reflect on the diffusion of raw PSB material and footage through open licenses on the web. They analyze the case of the successful international documentary series about the evolution of knowledge, *The Mind of the Universe* (2017), which included lengthy interviews of experts and scientists. In that case, the mission of PSB overlapped that of educators and cultural institutions, as it has always done, but also, less traditionally, the aims of the Wikimedia movement, which quickly and helpfully appropriated some of the resources proposed and – with the PSB’s facilitation – embedded them into encyclopedia entries. Discussing the curating necessary for preparing the material, and the technology used for access and appropriation, the authors put forward some essential recommendations for similar projects. Louise Broch reports on a remarkable combination of very “analog” and digital resources: a travelling show of archives inviting viewers to reconsider, remember and discuss their local stories.

The rest of our authors focus on engagement through other genres (or, more broadly, categories of programs). Anne-Sofie Vanhaeght considers how the journalists of the Dutch news programme *The Monitor* engaged the audience at the stage of information gathering. She suggests that their process forced journalists to think beyond the “bubble” of their traditional broadcast mindset and created new agendas. In parallel, however, she remarks that the journalists felt the need to keep control of the production process, and some of the material needed to be contextualized and investigated further.

The question of the importance of changing a traditional broadcast mindset to a digital mindset is also addressed in Marleen te Walvaart’s article, “Translating PSM Policy into Production Practices.” She considers the way the Flemish public broadcasters have considered audience engagement in the newsroom. She makes a qualified evaluation of the translation of grand policy principles into actual practices. Engagement here has taken the rather minimal form of “offering content across different platforms with a convergent newsroom structure and (differentiating) news content on different VRT brands”. Beyond this form of “immersion”, some newsroom managers have experimented with actual interaction with the audience, “but these attempts seem very vulnerable”. Reading both Vanhaeght and te Walvaart, one gets the impression that making news an engaging genre is a rather tricky question – especially now in the shadow of fake news, trolling, and hate speech on the net.

Sven Stollfuß analyses an ambitious venture of the German public broadcasters ARD and ZDF in 2016, the establishment of a “content network” bearing the name of “funk”, with a “‘online-only’ approach to the internet, and particularly social media”. This time, young viewers were invited to participate with a wider spectrum of genres. This is illustrated by a specific show, *Die Frage* (2016-), which presented video reports and web documentaries on YouTube.

Fiction is the genre discussed by Mads Møller T. Andersen and Vilde Schanke Sundet, analyzing the production of Danish and Norwegian public television’s “signature youth series”, which started in 2015. While digitization “imposed pressure” on PSB especially regarding young content, the technology provided an opportunity to “legitimize new production models”. It also transformed the genre of traditional prime-time fiction into a different one, short-form

youth fiction online, accessed differently and offering new opportunities for, again, audience engagement. They also suggest that the different institutions (especially in the Scandinavian context) may have been catalyzed to action by each other.

In Ireland, Daithí McMahon reaches a somewhat similar conclusion for a different genre and a different medium, with a careful assessment of the effect on competition of Public Service Radio. He shows that independent, more dynamic radio stations force Public Service radio to modernize and proposes that, given his superior resources, PSB moves from the position of challenged “conservative institution” to “industry leader”.

Finally, Oranit Klein-Shagrir discusses a very specific case of engagement: in Israel, where the professionals of a newborn public broadcaster (a rather exceptional historical juncture) went online before broadcasting, and tried to build legitimacy through a massive presence on the Internet, which was also a way of addressing young audiences. It seemed that this helped very much with rejuvenating the former public broadcaster, although it still depends on a quite unstable political context, as in other countries mentioned here, especially Eastern European ones.

Are all these “success stories”, to use the title of Oranit Klein Shagrir’s conclusion? Do they allow us to generalize, and sketch a portrait of active PSBs now reconquering their young audiences in numerous countries and wining the war on a global battlefield? That would go too far. Indeed, it remains for subsequent issues of VIEW and perhaps for other fora for us to find out how PSBs are able to cope with what the American historian Jill Lepore calls our current – and global – epistemic mayhem.⁷ Will PSBs also begin to collaborate more actively with other knowledge institutions – museums, universities, libraries, archives – in co-productions and the kind of experiments that Brinkerink et al. begin to describe?

What is interesting is that all the attempts to modernize that are under review in this issue no longer use ratings as the only or main measure of success (although some of our authors mention ratings). Rather, broadcasters try to make audiences react, comment, and contribute to a variety of genres and arrangements of programs, be they locally circulated archives, raw material available online, news, fiction with specific platforms, or others.

In sum, something new is happening to PSB, and a wide spectrum of new content, platforms and new relationships with their viewers and listeners is becoming visible. But then, we also see that PSB in the transition to PSM stay connected with the years gone by. Before the rise of regular audience measurements, the services dealings with audiences in the 1950s and 1960s were often called services of *relationships* with listeners and viewers. Surveyors went from home to home to collect detailed feedback, and audience member letters, especially, were considered as crucial to understand what audiences felt⁸. Do these types of relationships continue to exist today? Of course, not in the same form. But overall, PSB organisations seem to have renewed and adapted quite well to the massive challenges they face – and stayed true to the core principles upon which they were originally based, while drawing inspiration and resources from their rich history. In that way, perhaps indeed a good part of the future for PSB/PSM might still be found in the past.

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Notes

1. Michael Tracey, *The Decline and Fall of Public Service Broadcasting*, Oxford University Press, 1998.
2. Elisabeth Jacka, ‘Democracy as defeat. The Impotence of Arguments for Public Service Broadcasting,’ *Television and New Media*, 4, 2, 2003, 177–191; Nicholas Garnham, ‘A Response to Elisabeth Jacka’s Democracy as defeat,’ *Television and New Media*, 4, 2, 2003, 193–200.
3. See for a recent analysis of the impact of populism on PSB: Martín Becerra. ‘Public Broadcasting: The Latin American Exception,’ *The Political Economy of Communication* 7, 1, 2019, 105–109.

4. Herman Rotermund, 'Digital Media Culture and Public Service Media in the Platform Era' in Gregory Ferrell Lowe, Hilde Van den Bulck and Karen Donders, eds, *Public Service Media in the Networked Society*, Nordicom, 2018, pp. 75–89.
5. Hallvard Moe, 'Defining public service beyond broadcasting: the legitimacy of different approaches,' *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 17, 1, 2011, 52–68.
6. Karl Jakubowicz, 'Public Service Broadcasting in the 21st Century. What Chance for a New Beginning?' in Gregory Ferrell Lowe and Jo Bardoel, eds, *From Public Service Broadcasting to Public Service Media*, Nordicom, 2007, pp. 29–51, http://www.nordicom.gu.se/sites/default/files/publikationer-hela-pdf/ripe_2007_from_public_service_broadcasting_to_public_service_media.pdf
7. Jill Lepore, 'Taking History Personally,' *Times Literary Supplement*, August 6, 2019, <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/public/modernity-conspiracy-theory-jill-lepore/>
8. Jerome Bourdon and Cécile Méadel, 'The monopoly that won't divide,' in Jerome Bourdon and Cécile Méadel, eds, *Television Audiences Across the World. Deconstructing the Ratings Machine*, Palgrave, 2014, pp. 88–101.