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organizations for media development**

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Why Advocate for Public Service Media? Perspectives from Organizations for Media Development

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Abstract

In this commentary we discuss how five prominent media development organizations (BBC Media Action, Council of Europe, DWA, PMA and Unesco) define public service broadcasting (PSB)/public service media (PSM) and how they envisage its role and functions in their recent projects and reports. In view of the increasing challenges of the current media landscape, international donors are looking at models to provide a path to independent media and journalism and several international organizations support projects and institutional arrangements they label PSB/PSM. However, given the fundamental questions that existing PSBs face, is PSB a meaningful tool for media development? And how do these various advocates for PSB/PSM understand the concept and why do they feel that it is worth supporting? We find that there seems to have been a shift, common to all five organizations, towards defining PSB/PSM in terms of public service ethos, and we explain why this should be seen as a welcome development.

Keywords

fragile states; media development; Public Service Broadcasting (PSB); public service ethos;
Public Service Media (PSM)

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Public service broadcasting (PSB) organizations have for almost a century been key national institutions in most European countries. They have a strong presence also elsewhere, especially in the former Commonwealth countries. The BBC and other Western public service broadcasters (PSBs) have served as prototypes for many media development projects in emerging democracies, but not without challenges. There are not too many successful examples, especially where ‘imitative transformation’ (Splichal 2001; see also Horowitz and Marko 2019) was the key strategy and not enough consideration was given to the local context. Indeed, a global overview of ‘public media’ (Tambini 2015) indicated that many different configurations of media that fulfill public service functions exist, and that even in Europe national PSB organizations differ significantly in terms of their remits and institutional settings. A specific challenge of using a public service framework in media development today is that public service media (PSM) as a multimedia version of PSB has not been defined and institutionalized as a model, though the term has been used in Council of Europe (CoE) and European Commission documents (for a discussion see Sakr 2015, p. 1) and various ideas to broaden public service media to include configurations beyond institutional PSBs have begun to emerge (e.g., Horowitz 2015).

Yet, different manifestations of public media are being challenged on multiple fronts. While research shows that PSM do not crowd out other TV or online news organizations (Sehl et al. 2020), commercial competitors in mature markets keep challenging the role of PSB and PSM by claiming that they have an unfair competitive advantage in news production and other genres, thus questioning their role in a digital media ecosystem of seemingly endless diversity. Public media have also fallen into political disfavor and in national contexts with a tradition of political

interference, PSBs are being subjected to even stricter ‘media capture’ by the state (e.g., Dragomir 2019). As Sally-Ann Wilson from the Public Media Alliance (PMA) highlights in this issue, the independence and integrity of PSB organizations are in danger, in mature PSB countries like Australia and the UK as well as in countries-in-transition like Hungary and Poland.

In view of the increasing challenges of the current media landscape, international donors are looking at models to provide a path to independent media and journalism and several international organizations support projects and institutional arrangements they label PSB or PSM (Abbott 2016). But in the context of the fundamental questions that existing PSBs face, is PSB a meaningful tool for media development? Public service broadcasting in an institutional sense is in the toolkits of several organizations working on the field of media development while others use more inclusive ideals and models that could be labeled as different forms of public service media *de jure* and *de facto* (Bajomi-Lazar et al. 2012). Such organizations formulate policy recommendations and provide funding and professional development as part of their normative guidelines and practical projects. How, then, do these different advocates for what can broadly be called public service media, inclusive broadcasting, understand the concept and why do they feel that it is worth supporting?

A look at five distinctly different organizations highlights some core similarities but also significant differences in what public service media means for media development actors. *UNESCO* as an organization of the United Nations provides global benchmarks for media development with its numerous projects and Media Development Indicators. The *Council of Europe* (CoE) offers regional support for democracy via country and regional support for media.

The *Public Media Alliance* (PMA, see also Wilson in this issue) is a global advocacy organization for public media. It supports organizational and journalistic innovation, specifically in those media organizations that self-identify as public service media. The *BBC Media Action*, independent from the BBC and working with numerous development organizations, fosters media development via development collaborations in what it calls ‘fragile states’. Finally, *Deutsche Welle Akademi* (DWA) engages in media development as a part of Germany’s national development aid policy.

As James Harding (2015) notes in a BBC Media Action report, even the institutional public service broadcasting is easier to recognize than to describe. Still, the normative characteristics assigned to public service media in a broad sense, by key stakeholders, seem quite uniform. While the definition of public service broadcasting by UNESCOⁱ is often considered the standard, it shares the same core elements with the definitions by PMA, as well as the Council of Europeⁱⁱ. According to these organizations,

1. PSB and PSM refer to broadcasting and related services made, financed and controlled by the public, for the public.
2. They are often established by law but are nonpartisan, independent and run for the benefit of society as a whole.
3. They are neither commercial nor state-owned, free from political interference and pressure from commercial forces.
4. Their output is designed to inform, educate, and entertain all audiences.
5. They offer universality in terms of content and access.
6. They maintain accuracy and high standards of journalism, and excellence in broadcasting.

7. They enhance social, political and cultural citizenship and promote diversity as well as social cohesion, and ultimately, support an informed democracy.

Examining the definitions of PSB in several recent policy statements and documents of these organizations,ⁱⁱⁱ it is obvious that the traditional tasks of informing, educating and entertaining are considered as the cornerstones of full-service mission by PSB. UNESCO, the Council of Europe and BBC Media Action make direct references to this Reithian legacy. State broadcasting is often used as a comparison, something that PSB is not. In contrast, both DWA and PMA are less normative and more institutionally agnostic in their understanding of the concept of public service in the media (see also Wilson's contribution in this issue).

DWA goes as far as offering a model that entails different configurations of public service media in the context of media development. Some media outlets may remain state media, yet offer at least some functions of public service (see, e.g., Anis Rahman's contribution in this issue). A media organization can be in various stages in its transition towards a public service model (see, e.g., Masduki's article in this issue). In addition, there exists the possibility for what DWA calls Alternative Public Service Media (APSM). Community media has typically been considered to feature a public service ethos (see Michael Huntsberger's contribution in this issue) but APSM can also be privately-owned and commercially-run, such as the Deutsche Welle partner and Public Media Alliance member Channels TV, an independent news channel in Nigeria. Both types of APSM are institutionally different from PSB organizations but have developed and expanded their services to fulfill broader public service functions.

PMA provides an even more explicit definition of public service *media*: It is not bound by the institutional model but by specific type of mission and features. For PMA, public media is about a shared multi-platform space that is relevant, credible, and impartial. PSM is accountable to, and engages with, its audiences. PSM features content that ranges from news and investigative journalism to children's programming, science, environment, climate change, as well as health and wellbeing. PSM offers viewpoints in the context of the globalized world and provides evidence of audience reach and impact. For PMA, these features serve as benchmarks for any organization that aspires to fulfill public service functions.

These five organizations may differ in terms of how they operationalize the core concept of PSB but they agree on the justification of why media development should support it. The reason, they claim, is that no other model guarantees independent and accessible media, and such media is needed as a cornerstone of a democratic society. For all these organizations, the role of public media includes, but goes beyond, providing trustworthy information. Equally important, especially in so-called 'fragile states' (Deane 2013), is PSB's social cohesion role. What is often unique to PSB in such divided societies is its potential to be a national unifier in contexts where increasingly fragmented media environments result in highly polarised political discourse, and where citizens face unequal internet penetration, private media tends to be politically co-opted, and hence regulation that places public service obligations on private media is ineffective.

In her report on PSB and media development, Susan Abbott (2016) asked: Are there alternative visions of PSB that would make sense in light of the twenty-first-century challenges to the goals of supporting democratic media? If so, what do they look like? As Guy Berger (2010) argued

some years earlier, the conceptualization of ‘media development’ lacks a solid definition, often focusing on old media in national media systems and promoting a particular normative agenda. For Berger, the inclusion of PSB in the UNESCO’s Media Development Indicators, which include detailed benchmarks for PSBs, is an example of such approach. He opines: ‘As a result [of such an approach], only a country with a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation style of broadcaster would probably count as close to being developed on this particular indicator’ (Berger 2010: 552). Media development, he posits, would be better served by such concepts as ‘media density’ (diversity in contents, forms and organizations) and ‘media mobilization’ (development of legal frameworks, as well as professional practices, to deepen media density):

The point in defining ‘media density’ is not to fetishize particular kinds of sociolegal and institutional characteristics, and/or media technologies, but to operate at a more abstract (albeit related) level that strives for minimal definition that can achieve maximum normative commonality such as around the desirability of journalism made possible by media platforms (Berger 2010: 554).

This type of rethinking about what media development is may be the answer to the question of why public service media should be supported by media development organizations and projects. The five organizations discussed in this commentary agree on the core ethos and two (DWA and PMA) decidedly argue that institutional arrangements should not matter.

This line of thinking can indeed open up new possibilities of the role of the public service ideal in media development allowing different configurations that can better and more flexibly

respond to contextually-specific infrastructure-related challenges, political, cultural and economic factors, as well as opportunities for multi-stakeholder collaborations:

Overall Public Service Media should be given more attention in media development.

International partnerships can rise to the challenge by further building their own capacity in the face of complex media landscapes. The places and times, strategies and processes need to be well chosen (Lublinski et al. 2014: 5).

Perhaps the idea of a core ethos behind PSM is a useful framework that reminds us of the need for continuous media development in all contexts, including ‘mature’ PSB systems. Such an approach to understanding public service in the media transpires, for instance, in current discussions and policy declarations, such as Resolution 2255 of the Council of Europe (CoE 2019), that highlight the role of PSB and PSM in combating disinformation.

All the policy and strategic challenges that most (if not all) public service media face call for new solutions. As articulated in a recent multi-stakeholder workshop on the challenges of PSM^{iv}, the most urgent policy problems include ever-more complex questions, many arising in the context of today’s digital environment, ranging from vulnerability of public service media to government capture to infrastructural/distribution issues in the context of the platformisation of media content provision. Use of personal data in today’s algorithmic-driven environment, as well as audience engagement, especially in relation to the issue of reaching and engaging young people, are also strategic issues that may determine the future of PSM as an institution.

Most importantly, the media development organizations highlighted here, while different in focus and scope, all connect the idea of PSB/PSM with the notions of free expression and informed citizens, two core pillars of democracy. According to some, the current global health crisis of COVID-19 is not only a pandemic but also an ‘infodemic’ (Thomas 2020) due to conflicting news and even purposeful misinformation, coupled with numerous attempts to curb journalistic freedom around the world. Against this backdrop, most societies could be described at the time of writing as ‘fragile states’. Independent, trustworthy information has become one of the key weapons against the pandemic.

It should be clear that none of the media development organizations discussed here suggest that the way forward is the creation or support of massive, monolith and monopolistic PSM organizations. The need to envision new articulations of PSM contributions to the society, and new forms of collaborations with other stakeholders, is obvious. In today’s world, every media landscape is complex in its own way. Perhaps the way to view media development could be analogous to the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations: shared principles and general targets that are specific and operationalizable for each region and country, equally in the Global North and South (see also Naomi Sakr’s contribution in this issue). The approach common to the five organizations discussed in this commentary may be the common denominator for all PSB/PSM – focus on your ethos.

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Notes

ⁱ <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/media-development/public-service-broadcasting/>; <https://www.ebu.ch/about/public-service-media>. Accessed 15 April 2020.

ⁱⁱ <http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-en.asp?fileid=17177&lang=en>.

ⁱⁱⁱ We considered the following documents, in particular: for Unesco - Unesco (2008); for the Council of Europe - CoE (n.d.), CoE (1994); for the PMA - Smith (2012) and Warner (2019); for BBC Media Action - Deane (2013), Buccianti and el-Richani (2015) and Harding (2015); for DWA: Lublinski et al. (2014).

^{iv} <https://innopsm.net/2019/12/17/workshop-1-report/>. Accessed 15 April 2020.

^v <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/?menu=1300>. Accessed 15 April 2020.