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Growing PSM Organically: International Initiatives to Support National Conversations in New Contexts

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Abstract

With an international debate under way about how to resolve the financial and political crisis affecting independent media everywhere, can international efforts enhance the prospects for promoting the principles of public service media (PSM) in national contexts where they have never been applied? Informed by discussions that contributed to a *CAMRI Policy Brief* published in March 2020, recommending incremental, non-media-centric approaches to laying the groundwork for PSM in challenging environments, this article considers how internal and external interests mesh in underpinning mechanisms to foster PSM values. It shows how regional and international mechanisms, including for example the UN's Sustainable Development Goal 16, along with proposals for an International Fund for Public Interest Media and Social Media Councils, rely for their credibility and effectiveness on national institutions and national representatives working with them towards the principles that underlie PSM.

Keywords: independent media, public service, media regulators, journalist unions, SDG 16, digital platforms, social media, audiences

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Arab countries to Europe for children's content on European screens. She is the author of *Transformations in Egyptian Journalism* (2013), *Arab Television Today* (2007) and *Satellite Realms: Transnational Television, Globalization and the Middle East* (2001), co-author (with Jeanette Steemers) of *Screen Media for Arab and European Children: Policy and Production Encounters in the Multiplatform Era* (2019), editor of *Women and Media in the Middle East* (2004) and *Arab Media and Political Renewal* (2007), and co-editor of *Arab Media Moguls* (2015) and *Children's TV and Digital Media in the Arab World* (2017). She has been commissioned to write reports for UNESCO, the UN Development Programme (UNDP), International Media Support, Anna Lindh Foundation and the European Parliament.

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Article

If, according to 2019 data, only 9 per cent of the world's population live in countries with a 'good' or 'satisfactory' level of media freedom (RSF 2019), what are the prospects for improving the situation for the remaining 91 per cent? At a time when the US, home of the First Amendment that was intended to guarantee free speech, ranks 48th out of 180 countries in the Reporters Without Borders *World Press Freedom Index*, and when the downturn in scope of independent media everywhere has come to be viewed as a crisis (Benequista 2019), can it be realistic to try to promote the principles of public service media (PSM) in settings where this model of media independence is historically unfamiliar or politically unwelcome?

Prompted by research findings showing the urgency of securing core elements of PSM in both the Global North (e.g. Barnett 2015) and Global South (e.g. Mano 2016; Sakr 2012a, 2012b, 2015), the University of Westminster's Communication and Media Research Institute (CAMRI) convened a workshop in June 2019 as part of the CAMRI Policy Observatory programme, which aims to engage policymakers and stakeholders in government, media organisations and civil society in a policy dialogue informed by CAMRI research. When it became clear from workshop contributions that specialists from the London-based non-governmental organisations BBC Media Action and ARTICLE 19 and CAMRI researchers shared similar ideas about incremental, non-media-centric approaches to securing elements of PSM in difficult environments, these contributions were edited into a CAMRI Policy Brief entitled *Achieving Viability for Public Service Media in Challenging Settings: A Holistic Approach*, published in March 2020 by University of Westminster Press (Deane et al 2020).

As its name suggests, the Policy Brief sets out policy experience, options and recommendations in concise terms. This article instead picks up on some underlying conundrums of any push for PSM in inhospitable circumstances, which arise from the fact that PSM are intended to serve essentially as part of the national social fabric but exist in a transnational media landscape. People wanting to exercise their rights as citizens in the same jurisdictional space need a medium through which to conduct national conversations about the tax, education, health, transport, housing, energy supply and numerous other systems they jointly rely on. Yet in those countries where such conversations have never been held freely in public, advocacy for facilitating them is mostly likely to either originate or be supported through transnational networks and contacts, giving credence to allegations of foreign interference. In an era when subscription video-on-demand (SVOD) providers like Netflix and Amazon and social media giants like Facebook and YouTube are often seen as rendering

PSM obsolete, national and transnational rationales are also potentially at odds. What does evidence from the frontline of advocacy for public interest media show about the possibilities of overcoming perceived dichotomies between the internal and external in achieving the incremental, non-media-centric, holistic approach identified in the Policy Brief? The evidence set out below addresses this question as it relates to institutions, finance and audiences.

First, national institutions of the kind called upon to help embed and operationalise PSM values are not necessarily media producers themselves. But they are often already part of international networks and monitoring systems that set standards in this regard, which tend to get less media or academic attention than they should. Media and communications regulators are one example. Working towards a licensing and regulatory environment that gives PSM a fair chance against media outlets owned by oligarchs and government cronies (Dragomir 2019: 99) is an obligation of membership of several regional groups of regulatory bodies. The 35-member African Communication Regulatory Authorities Network (ACRAN, or RIARC in its French acronym), launched in 1998, declares itself to be ‘fully engaged in the promotion and sustainable anchoring of a pluralistic audiovisual landscape based on freedom of expression and the independence of the media in Africa’, while the Francophone Network of Media Regulators (REFRAM), set up in 2007, brings together 30 regulatory authorities from Europe, Africa and North America with the ‘main purpose’ of working for the ‘consolidation of the rule of law, democracy and human rights’ (HACA 2020: 9-10). Members of the Mediterranean Network of Regulatory Authorities (RIRM in its French acronym), set up in 1997 and now with 26 members, signed a Declaration on Content Regulation in 2008 which pledged to respect the fundamental values, principles and rights associated with human dignity, uphold pluralism, protect the rule of law and combat hatred and violence (MNRA 2008). When the Moroccan audiovisual regulator, HACA, which

belongs to all three groups, convened an international conference in January 2020 to consider the demands of regulation in what it called a ‘digital, mobile and social environment’, the conference Concept Note stated that

media regulators are more than ever expected to enhance the democratic values of pluralism and fair expression of thoughts and opinions. They remain also required to guarantee the representation of cultural diversity and the promotion of the social responsibility of audio-visual media (HACA 2020).

National unions representing journalists and media practitioners are another example of institutions with an international mandate to support a media ecosystem hospitable to PSM, now that the UN’s programme of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), introduced in 2016, refers specifically, under Goal 16, to promoting ‘peaceful and inclusive societies’ building ‘effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels’ (UN 2016). Target 10 of Goal 16 seeks to ‘ensure public access to information’ and one of its indicators for achieving the target is the number of verified cases of ‘killing, kidnapping, enforced disappearance, arbitrary detention and torture of journalists, associated media personnel, trade unionists and human rights advocates in the previous 12 months’. (UN 2016). If journalists’ unions do not monitor and respond to the way their members are treated in their work of ensuring public access to information, who will?

As for sources of finance for PSM, accusations that ‘foreign’ funding for media constitutes unacceptable interference in a country’s internal affairs are becoming unconvincing and untenable now that sustainable financing models for public interest media institutions are a universal challenge because of seismic shifts in the way members of the public access information across the globe. As James Deane, Director of Policy and Research

at BBC Media Action, told the CAMRI workshop in 2019, the challenge of how public interest media institutions everywhere are going to survive is ‘increasingly profound’ as ‘successful sustainable examples’ of business models are scarce. Victor Pickard (2019: n.pag) has noted that the current moment offers a ‘rare – and most likely fleeting – opportunity to hold an international debate’ about the non-market interventions that are best suited to address ‘information deficits and social harms’ resulting from the systemic non-viability of for-profit news institutions. In these circumstances funding experiments are required both nationally and internationally. One possible large-scale innovation could be an International Fund for Public Interest Media, a detailed feasibility study for which was due to be published in April 2020 (GFMD 2020). Proposed by BBC Media Action and supported by Luminate, a philanthropic body backed by eBay founder Pierre Omidyar and set up in 2018 to support advocacy for progressive policies, preliminary work on the fund has sought to pre-empt concerns about foreign interference through the design of its governance structure. The aim is for spending priorities to be principally determined not by donors but by a nine-person board that includes media professionals and researchers, at least three and preferably four of whom ‘come from countries reflective of the kind focused on by the Fund’ (GFMD 2020: 5). The work of the Fund is envisaged as connecting the national and international through regional bases. Its support to national and local level media will be managed out of a series of regional offices, while it will also support media assistance organisations operating at the international and regional levels.

Finally, media audiences breach any notional domestic-foreign divide when they use the main global social media platforms. These platforms are now so dominant that established PSM entities have been urged to acknowledge that social media play a central role in how people access news and other content and that PSM providers need to ‘reinvent’ public service news delivery to make it ‘fit for a digital environment’ and better able to ‘serve

younger audiences and audiences with limited formal education’ (Schulz et al 2019: 14, 30). However, when it comes to incremental steps towards creating fertile ground for PSM in challenging settings, a promising corollary to young people’s extensive social media use is the potential for new media platforms that are ‘digital first’ or ‘digital only’. Experience has shown that these can build a strong relationship with their audience, engaging people across societal divides in national public conversations even where the media platform in question is forced by draconian censorship or political turmoil to operate from outside the nation’s borders (Deane et al 2020: 12). Where new nationally-oriented digital platforms are based on aspirations of inclusiveness, trust and relevance that are intended to contribute to the organic growth of progressive-minded constituencies (Atallah 2019: 14) they could help to promote an awareness and appreciation of PSM values that builds from the grassroots up. Such initiatives may achieve increasing levels of cost recovery but the financial assistance they require to build sustainability means they depend on sources that straddle national borders (Deane et al 2020: 13). In some instances, independent digital media outlets invite subscriptions from nationals abroad who are part of diasporic audiences from the country concerned.

Meanwhile, it is recognised that PSM seeking to reach people online will have to do so in an environment where ‘search engines, social media and messaging applications’ play a key role in how people ‘access and use news’ (Schulz et al 2019: 29). Noting that the impact of online content distribution on the public sphere is not yet fully understood, Pierre François Docquir, Head of Media Freedom at ARTICLE 19, told the CAMRI Policy Observatory workshop of his organisation’s concern that current social media content moderation practices allow certain companies to decide what is posted and viewed online, based on rules that they determine and implement, with limited oversight (see ARTICLE 19 2020: n.pag). ARTICLE 19, having met with social media actors including Facebook, YouTube and

Twitter in February 2019, has proposed the creation of Social Media Councils (SMCs) as a multi-stakeholder mechanism to ensure content moderation based on international human rights standards, to ensure elements of public service responsibility, such as pluralism, diversity and fair coverage of political parties. Docquir (2019) sees the proposal as timely, coming at a point where social media platforms themselves are anxious to avoid harsh legislation and want to evolve in a way that retains users' trust through transparency and accountability, as demonstrated by Facebook's own creation of an Oversight Board, due to begin operations in 2020 under former ARTICLE 19 executive director Thomas Hughes and with a promise of funding for at least six years (Shead 2020: n.pag). Meanwhile SMCs, as envisaged by ARTICLE 19, could operate at both the global and national levels, with local SMCs bringing 'increased credibility to the whole system' by providing local knowledge and solutions (Docquir 2019).

It is that critical ingredient of credibility that provides the essential link between the initiatives considered in this article, which are primarily international in origin or operation, and the application of their principles or function at the national level. The relationship between each international mechanism or network and its individual national members, representatives or counterparts is perhaps more realistically described as one of shared purpose rather than interdependence. Yet that shared purpose ultimately helps to lay the groundwork for PSM, step by step, in difficult national settings, and achievements in promoting free national public conversations that are open to all will be a key test of the initiatives' credibility.

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