

A strategic approach to the new threats and opportunities for Public Service Media

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Public Service Media like the rest of the industry is facing a tough time across Europe. In the Netherlands the government has ordered a wholesale restructuring as well as deep budget reductions. It's a moment for the NPO to think again about what it is for. These are some notes from my talk to a symposium in Hilversum for Dutch public service media executives. I think the points I make about trying to turn threats into opportunities will apply to most public service media. [See the [slides for this talk here](#)]

In this talk I am not going to give you a solution.

Instead I am going to give some ideas and a 'narrative' that might help us all to shape a debate within our organisations, but also with policy-makers and most important of all, with the public.

The narrative until recently was that we in public service media think we do a good job and that we deserve to get funding as well as other privileges such as spectrum and legal protections for quality.

Recently that has been shown not to be working. Across Europe we see cuts, compromise and confusion.

Let's look at what the problem really is, what has really changed and what ideas might move things forward. The two ideas that dominate my narrative are austerity – the unprecedented reduction of resources for public services – and complexity, in terms of the real world but also the media world.

This is my working definition of public service media for today:

It is media production that society chooses to fund because it adds value to our lives individually and collectively and we want institutions that will sustain and safeguard that value. Its value includes diversity, quality, accessibility and independence. As democracies, as states we make it policy to provide this public good.

Historically, the modern idea of public service broadcasting dates back nearly a century. But the idea of state or elite subsidies of media and news media is as old as art, culture and communications. Think of those 18th century London coffee shop pamphleteers who famously invented political journalism and filled Habermas' Public Sphere.

They were paid by aristocratic politicians. And before that Royalty commissioned musicians and artists. So don't be surprised if the nature of public service media changes again in the 21st century.

Change Is Coming

The key idea I want to get across is that public service media is what we as a society decide it should be. It is not a force of nature, there is no completely free media market nor is it an immutable given of a civilised society. In the age of Twitter, YouTube, Google, Facebook and Spotify it will change. In the age of Al Jazeera, Russia Today, CCTV, Fox and HBO it will change.

What should worry us is that the debate about the change is not happening even in the places where public service is most threatened.





Which way for public service media?

Instead, negative policy changes are being forced through. It might even be that those of you who are on the receiving end don't want to have that debate because either it feels like a tacit admission of defeat – or a waste of precious time. But it's a debate we need to have. Not because public service media is doomed, but because it is facing serious threats that we need to redefine as opportunities.

Great Job

First, though, I want to say that you are doing a great job. TV and radio is still incredibly popular and PSM (Public Service Media) online is often seen as a benchmark of quality. Here in the Netherlands, Dutch PSM has particularly interesting strengths. You have distinctive brands and ways of working. The networked nature of your organisation offers flexibility and diversity, although I recognise it is not always the most

efficient. However, those working in commercial media would point to falling advertising revenues and increased competition and might think that subsidised public service media is highly privileged and often complacent.

Be grateful you are not George [Entwistle]. But the BBC's long-term problem is not Jimmy Savile. It is not the mistakes it made when Entwistle took over and the scandal blew up around the two Newsnight films. That storm will pass but the deeper threats remain.

There are serious structural reasons why you are in trouble and in some ways it's much worse than you think.

Internet Threat

The Internet was and will continue to be a threat. It distracted and then took away your audiences. It will continue to do that as it increases its pervasiveness in people's lives. These are trends that will be accelerated by factors such as increasingly competitive consumerism combined with more government open data. Even developments like more online education content produced by people like the LSE. There will be the development of new software and devices such as social search, greater personalisation through interactive screens, and the increase in mobility with phones and tablets. All this means that public service media that stands still will be ignored and citizens will turn to other providers.

Economic Threat

The recession is a threat because it's taking away your tax euros and because it increases pressure from the private sector to reduce your subsidised advantage.

But it's also undermining the very idea of authority that public service media relies upon. Private market organisations like banks may have taken the biggest reputational hit, but so has the idea that the state is reliable and trustworthy and the best source of public goods. The crash might have undermined the credibility of free market forces but the drive towards economic liberalisation remains strong.

Disintermediation Threat

And it gets worse in other ways, too. While PSM journalism faces deep cuts, the efficiencies of digital communications are working in favour of other organisations. The flows of information are increasingly subject to public relations. By this I mean the ability to shape messages direct to the public or the power to influence

mainstream media by governments, NGOs as well as business and political parties.

Yes, WikiLeaks and related phenomena offer new ways for citizens or civil society or new media organisations to disrupt or critique those in power but the real problem is time. The news cycle is much more rapid and the sources of information much more numerous. Yet, are the resources to interpret and filter this fast-flowing flood of instant information increasing?

Opportunities For New Growth

Now some sort of good news for you. Public service media is still all around us. Indeed, there are new forms. Here's three from the UK and US.

Mumsnet: a massively popular online forum for parents that provides information, debate and entertainment. The two founders have just been voted among the top ten most powerful women in Britain.

BSkyB provides an outstanding global breaking news channel as well as Sky Arts and a huge spend on original drama. Sky rejects the PSM tag, but it is undeniably producing what anyone would call public value content – and it's making a fortune.

Thirdly, the mixed income investigative journalism non-profit ProPublica provides a steady stream of serious news stories for a range of US media, a kind of foundation-funded news agency.

The question for traditional PSM is not whether these organisations are going to replace everything you do – they are not. But even on your own public service terms you should ask: are you doing as well as them? Are you as efficient, innovative, and attractive?

Opportunities of Demand Growth

These new kind of public service providers show there is no lack of demand, but it's in different places. People need public service media more than ever because they are swamped by information. They desperately need filters to sift out bad information. In an age of subscriptions and pay-walls, they need accessibility. They also need public service for the big things like the Olympics or bad weather where a nation wants to come together.

Opportunity to Connect

But you must be there for the public, not your staff – or your members. If you want public support you need public attention. To get public attention you need to be relevant and trusted. In the digital age this means more than the old universal provision of the past. It means you must be networked into the social media that connects people to media and each other. The second – and third – screens are as important as the first.

Opportunity for Open Production

And you will get trust by doing all the right things that you have always done. The BBC will get over Savile but what's it doing on Twitter? Trust is the key currency in the online information economy but it is a constant process, not an annual report. It is made up of openness and transparency. Public service media should be good at that, but is too often held up by institutional inertia and cultural conservatism.

A more open journalism is not just a production trick it's a way of life.

There are fantastic new tools for data journalism and for networking into people's lives. Just think of the extraordinary way that Twitter acts as a news source for people but also a way of sharing information or images as well as views. You can know much more about your audience and connect with them directly. You can add value for them through recycling of material. In this sense I think iPlayer in the UK (and its radio equivalent) will be as important as a new platform like tablets.

Opportunities For New Public Roles

Your journalists and other creatives now have new roles. They don't just produce content, they are also educators, archivists, curators, connectors, enablers, and trainers. Media is now a service industry and yours is a public service.

In that sense, perhaps having to cut back on some production is good if it makes you question what you need to do and make space for new things.

There is a political battle here that you are going to find difficult to win in a world where the public priorities are health, jobs, schools and transport – not media. To win that battle involves building coalitions between different media as well as with civil society. But it also means adapting to survive.

The BBC is not going to be privatised, but it may be that the licence fee is not tenable beyond the end of the next Charter Renewal period. This is not because of ideology or even recession but because in a world of convergence, where channels matter less and citizens find content in new ways on new platforms it does not make sense to tax TVs. But this might in turn allow the BBC to perform a conjuring trick. It is centralising its journalism capacity with a huge new multi-media newsroom, but at the same time it must also become more open, sharing, and diffuse as an institution.

Strategic Principles

You need a strategy and I would suggest it needs to be informed by these principles:

You really have to work out what you mean by public value and what you do to produce it. It might well be something that you are not doing now.

You need to think about how you deliver that value, not as a product, but as a process, a service that is a relationship with the public based on trust and participation – not just formal accountability.

And that means changing the production and publication processes – instead of a fortress protecting your value, but must be part of a network that shares it.

In the age of austerity we can use this as an opportunity to remake a more efficient and responsive PSM that bases its authority on engagement with the public rather than a charter or law.

And in an age of complexity we can stop being frightened by choice and instead celebrate the virtues of our skills, values, and integrity.

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