

European Broadcasting Union: Seeking an alternative to licence fee funding?

Is the **European Broadcasting Union** defending the public service licence fee or searching for an alternative to it?

At the **EBU Radio Assembly in Tenerife** this week Roberto Suarez-Candel and Richard Burnley of the EBU gave a glimpse into an organisation that is gearing up for some serious battles to protect Public Service Media in the face of declining audiences and revenues, and is apparently ready to be more radical and more proactive than it has been in the past.

The big take home message from Suarez-Candel's research – that the EBU will be publishing in the coming months – is that due to the decline in ad revenue and redefinition of licence fees, PSM revenue is becoming more dependent on income from direct taxation.

Burnley outlined the legal and regulatory backdrop to this shift. In many EBU member countries, reforms have redefined the license fee. Perhaps the most interesting case is Finland, where the license fee has become a means tested income tax, similar in some ways to the French system for funding PSB. Whilst the EBU seem to be proposing this as a potential model for other countries, there was some scepticism in the audience about whether such a shift would open the fee up to political tinkering and whether it would be vulnerable to future reduction.

Burnley also chose to highlight changes in the German and Dutch approaches to PSM funding: following a constitutional court decision in Germany the licence fee was found to have lost its constitutional legitimacy and has been transformed into a household tax. In the Netherlands the license fee was shifted to taxation some years ago.

I presented some **preliminary thoughts** on Public Service Media: commenting on the EBU research and drawing on the insights of the **Mapping Digital Media** reports. The perennial challenge for Public Service Media is independence, and the shifts in funding due to the digital transition will continue to present challenges, not least in the need for a constant negotiation with governments about the role and remit of Public Service Media.

It might be surprising that an organisation representing public broadcasters should be discussing such radical reforms as the end of the licence fee. But the EBU performs a variety of functions. It acts as a lobby group for the collective interests of European public broadcasters, and at the same time is a body organising collective bidding for sports and other rights. It also assists members with technical problems and in the development of technical standards and is a co-production unit: coordinating such events as the Eurovision song contest. But this meeting mainly served in the EBU role as a PSB 'Think Tank' providing a forum for common discussions of common challenges. The truth is that a large organisation like the EBU – which has around 400 staff in its Geneva HQ – can both look alternatives in the long term and defend the licence fee in the short term.

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