Editorial

Turmoil as Part of the Institution: Public Service Media and their Tradition

Leen d'Haenens, Helena Sousa, Werner A. Meier and Josef Trappel
Euromedia Research Group

When media professionals talk about digitization, they talk about digital switch off, technical convergence, digital editing, internet-based applications and – first of all – about investment in digital equipment and software solutions. When social scientists talk about digital media the approach is less technocentrist. To them, digital technologies might enable the creation of additional space in the public sphere, the internet is perceived as an additional means to exchange messages, to foster public deliberation and to extend the meaning of mass communication. Digital media might help to revitalize democracy by involving more and younger people in the public debate. Some argue that the power of large media corporations might find its limits in user-generated content, produced and consumed outside mainstream mass media. For social science, the promise of digital media goes far beyond technological innovation. It is about new forms of social discourse, public deliberation and a redistribution of communication power from corporations to the civil society.

As this wide gap in the perception and understanding of digital media illustrates, there is no clear and shared vision of what digital media are expected to deliver to society. To media professionals, digitization delivers new means for creativity, higher productivity and more immediacy. To the hardware industry, digitization holds the promise of sustainable growth in the replacement markets for TV sets, HD-DVD/blu-ray recording machines and eventually for digital radio sets in all households. To the consuming public, digitization requires investment to upgrade receiving equipment with considerable gains in reception quality and access to broader programme offers.

To media companies, digitization is both a threat and an opportunity. New industrial actors with deep pockets might penetrate media markets, originating, for instance, in the telecommunications or software industries. Such additional competition is not always welcome and represents a considerable threat to existing media companies. Nevertheless, digital media offer new opportunities to better reach young audiences and to develop customized products at lower cost. Social science, finally, expects major shifts in the delicate balance of communication power with implications for the public sphere.

In the light of such antagonistic expectations, it is not surprising that media policy has no clear concept of how to proceed with digital media. In particular, the role and

remit of public service broadcasters is broadly discussed and challenged in the current period of change from analogue broadcasting to digital media. The debate is heating up both at the national and at the supra-national level of the European Union. Although some of the issues at stake are new – such as user-generated content, Web 2.0 and social communication networks – the core arguments of the policy debate on the future of public service have remained remarkably stable over the last 25 years at least.

This stability has been experienced by the Euromedia Research Group, celebrating its 25th anniversary at its meeting in Copenhagen 2007. During this quarter of a century the members of the Group have published four volumes of media policy books (and another four volumes of country reports). The Group's membership has changed over the years but at least one issue has remained prominently on the agenda: the future of public service.

In 1986, at a time when private commercial television and the later labelled 'dual system' was initiated in many European countries, Asle Rolland and Helge Ostbye analysed the break-up of monopolies and expressed their surprise regarding the stability and survival of the public service broadcasters.

> *The old broadcasting institutions have, in most countries, remained surprisingly unchanged in their goals and structure . . . The ex-monopolies may well be vitalized by competition in the audience market and are likely to undergo an adaptation of goals, so that commercialism in some guises will show itself even in the socially responsible public service institutions. (Rolland and Ostbye, 1986: 128)*

Six years later, Kees Brants and Karen Siune looked at the development of public service again and found that media policy and its intrinsic administrative logic was characterized by 'a policy of "muddling through" with its often unplanned effects' (1992: 111). However, media policy positions were closer to reregulation than to deregulation. Media policy was not prepared to sacrifice public service to market forces.

Another six years later, the Euromedia Research Group published its subsequent media policy volume. Karen Siune and Olof Hultén revisited the concept of public service and the media policy propositions. By then, the duality between public and private commercial broadcasters was well established and market competition had emerged all over western Europe. Nonetheless, the authors emphasized that the process of convergence, that is, that competition would gradually make public and commercial channels more and more alike, was not supported by empirical evidence (Siune and Hultén, 1998: 29). To them, there was room for public service amidst commercial broadcasters. The future of public service broadcasting, they argued, lies in 'a special form of adaptation to the new media structure dominated by private corporations, commercialization and internationalization' (Siune and Hultén, 1998: 35). Its survival depends as much on support by the audience as on the support from the political system.

In the latest edition of the Euromedia Research Group's media policy books in 2007 Olof Hultén repeats the importance of media policy support for the survival of public broadcasting and identifies digitization as a major issue for the future of public service. He envisaged two directions: the wide-spectrum option suggests accepting that traditional public service goals remain important within the on-demand broadband environment. In contrast, the limiting option restricts the public service broadcasters' remit 'to what the private sector does not provide' (Hultén, 2007: 220).

This brief retrospect of the work of the Euromedia Research Group illustrates that political turmoil is part of the institution of public service broadcasting all over Europe. The new challenges resulting from the acceleration of technological innovation and the radicalization of economic and political risk and uncertainty need to be seen in this tradition. Again, both the erosion and the necessity of public interest-oriented media, especially broadcasting, have been brought to light. Once again, the traditional role of public service broadcasting as a system regulator and as a guardian of public debate and quality programming is being undermined: this time by the explosion of new media applications and platforms and by the interconnected commoditization of content and services. The competitive environment public service broadcasting has had to face over the last two decades is escalating with the steady introduction of new digital platforms which provide additional means for distributing electronic media serving both individual and collective needs. In addition to more channels, digital technology provides opportunities for the public to create new forms of communication and participate in new forms of social interaction. In this new digital context, which allows greater public participation, public service media need to redefine their role as standard-setting institutions in increasingly volatile social and political contexts.

The question arises whether new forms of public digital communication in conjunction with private commercial media might satisfy all communication needs of democratic societies. Can new digital means of communication be a substitute in the role and function of traditional public service broadcasting? Can open access user-generated content displayed in internet platforms and other digital forums replace services provided by public service institutions? Is there a new quality arising from digitization?

Or do we have to conceptualize digitization as the natural extension of production and distribution of existing media? Is the consequent and visionary media policy answer to blurring technological boundaries the extension of the public service concept from *broadcasting* to public service *media*?

In this special issue of *Convergence* our intention was to re-equate and redefine the place and the role of public service institutions and media in a digital context. We were looking for contributions addressing the following questions and issues:

- How should public service media redefine their social and cultural role in the light of the proliferation of online content and service providers (both professional and user-generated)?
- What are the consequences of the explosion of news sources and new production sites for conventional public service journalism? What does that mean for the maintenance of a European public sphere(s)?
- In what meaningful ways can public service media companies arrange social responsibility and accountability with market pressures?
- Given the reorganization of interests and the growth in the number of new media actors, what are the most efficient regulatory/governance frameworks?
- What lessons can be learnt from preceding and present-day hetero-regulation, co-regulation and self-regulation mechanisms?
- Can public service media still manage to cater for the diversity of all sections of society (by gender, age, ethnic background, taste and so on)?
- Is the erosion of public service media an inevitable consequence of digitalization? Or

are these companies in a unique position to revitalize richer conceptions of public good and citizen participation?

• Will the BBC continue to play a leading role within Europe in redesigning public service philosophy and action or are others generating alternative models?

Most members of the Euromedia Research Group, together with other academic colleagues, have contributed to the process of manuscript reviews. We finally made a choice of articles based on criteria such as importance of the subject, originality of the approach, clarity and strength of the argument and also, to some extent, geographical balance of examples taken up by the authors.

This issue provides a range of research that examines public broadcasters' initiatives in the digital domain. Peter Lee-Wright focuses on the strategies of BBC News as it repositions itself for the digital future, evaluating the impact of technology-driven strategies on newsgathering. Hallvard Moe analyses three cases representing services seemingly far removed from redistribution of radio and television: an internet discussion forum from ZDF, a web-based game designed by NRK, and a virtual online world activity by the BBC. James Bennett evaluates the BBC's 2004 commemorative programming as particularly successful in articulating its role as 'trusted guide'. In the Donders and Pauwels article, the authors assess the impact of the European Commission's state aid policy on the public service remit of public broadcasting organizations in the digital era. While comparing online media provided by public service broadcasters and print publishers in Switzerland, Germany and Austria, Josef Trappel examines the question of whether the competition in the online field has resulted in more diversity and higher output quality better serving the public interest. Drawing upon her experience with the Special Broadcasting Service Australia (SBS), Aneta Podkalicka investigates a redefined sociocultural role of European public service broadcasting as an 'infrastructure of translation' in times of globalization. Hilde Van den Bulck pays attention to the positions of technology and culture in the discourse on what constitutes a 'legitimate' future for PSB, taking the renewal of the management contract of the Flemish PSB as a case in point, while positioning it within a wider European discussion on the core activities of PSB in a media world dominated by digital convergence. Johannes Bardoel and Leen d'Haenens describe the Dutch public broadcaster, which seems to adopt an active strategy in the digital domain. However, its strategy is still expressed in mainly technological and economic terms and takes insufficient account of the viewers' present and future media use. Marc Raboy ends with a plea in favour of a public broadcaster that reinvents itself into a 'full-service public communicator' as we move towards a post-broadcasting environment.

We hope to contribute to the debate on the future of public service media, extending this prominent scientific discourse that has recently been taken up by, among others, a panel on 'PSB Accountability in a Dual Media Market: Changing Arrangements in Media Governance' at the IAMCR Conference in Paris in June 2007 and by the RIPE Conference in 2006 in Amsterdam and Hilversum, published by Greg Lowe and Johannes Bardoel (2008).

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Leen d'Haenens, **Helena Sousa**, **Werner A. Meier** *and* **Josef Trappel** *are members of the Euromedia Research Group and edit this special edition as its representatives. The Group decided in its meeting in Spring 2006 in Jönköping, Sweden, hosted by the Jönköping International Business School, to engage as guest editor for* Convergence. *Since 1986, the Group has published four volumes on media policy issues, the latest in 2007 entitled* Power, Performance and Politics. Media Policy in Europe *(Baden-Baden: Nomos). For more information about the Group, please go to: www.euromediagroup.org*