



# The transformation of society and public service broadcasting

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## The transformation of society and public service broadcasting

*Philip Schlesinger and Michele Sorice<sup>1</sup>*

**T**his paper comes from the introductory work of the “Gruppo di Torino”, initiated by Infocivica, which has involved the participation of scholars from academic institutions in nine European countries. The aim of the Turin Group is to create debate about and interest in public service media and their future place in European societies.

### 1.

We think that there is an opportunity to influence the terms of debate and certainly that there is an opportunity to create a small space of expert interchange in the public interest with a European focus.

It is clear that now is the right time to think about a shift from public service (PS) broadcasting to PS media or indeed “cross-media” as the new phrase has it. Indeed, increasingly it is

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<sup>1</sup> The authors have jointly discussed and written this article. Philip Schlesinger (University of Glasgow) drafted sections 1,2 and 5, whereas Michele Sorice (LUISS University of Rome) drafted sections 3 and 4.

a matter of thinking about PS within the general framework of communications.

As soon as we shift the focus from media to communications, to the relations between mediated cultural content and the means of distribution, we inevitably address questions of infrastructure.

Several contributors to our discussion have signalled the existence of a digital divide. Its extent varies across EU member states and its causes are complex.

Certainly, for those concerned with PS and its relationship to equipping people for citizenship, access to communications is fundamental. One-third of the UK population does not presently take up broadband; there is a similar situation in Italy and many other European countries, with few noteworthy exceptions. We have to ask questions not only about the causes of exclusion but also those of self-exclusion, which takes us into an analysis of household dynamics as well as affordability.

Investment in infrastructure and equitable access are fundamental to the possibility of making choices - and increasingly the use of services and the exercise of influence.

So, perhaps the issue is best framed in terms of PS *media and communications*, or the *reshaping of media and communications in the public interest*.

We should now like to consider two themes.

First, we wish to offer some thoughts about the European context, which strikes us as far from stable.

Second, we wish to set out what from a first reading of our colleagues' contributions strike us as key themes that we shall need to address.

## 2.

We seem to be broadly agreed that scheduled broadcast TV is no longer a unitary object or source of building a collective identity. Mobile devices, on-demand services, digital expansion of choice have led to fragmentation. And yet... In the UK, network TV was the dominant agenda-setting medium in the May 2010 general elections and the same happened across the continent for the 2009 European elections. And TV is by far the preferred news medium.

So, we need a sense of proportion about the digital revolution, its speed and impact.

That said public service everywhere - as is amply testified by our colleagues - is on the defensive. The metaphor of the ideological battlefield is useful for our discussion.

In 2008, the neoliberal model of capitalism went into crisis. Now, at the start of 2011, it is clear that fundamental reform of financial structures has not taken place. Politics in Europe is still shaped substantially by neo-liberal considerations - entrepreneurial freedoms and skills guaranteed by an institutional framework underpinned by the state that emphasizes strong private property rights, free markets and free trade (Harvey 2005: 2). In fact, across Europe, we face a politics of austerity in which public sector cuts are coupled with rampantly increased income differentials. Public service broadcasting is - whatever the constitutional arrangements - in the public sector. It has to face the rolling back of the state and the public domain and the cuts that accompany this.

It is also true to say that the European project is in crisis.

There are different views about how to address the financial crisis - and huge strains on EU-wide solidarity are being experienced, not least over the euro.

There is a rising tide of nationalism, with many manifestations of xenophobia: think of the current debate over the expulsion of Roma, the electoral consequences of fears about the place of Islam in Europe, post Cold War historical revisionism, Holocaust denial. The existence of cultural differences throughout the continent poses deep challenges to

those who believe in a civic, civil and democratic politics. There is no common narrative of what it is to be European; there is very contested evidence as to whether or not a European PS is possible.

That said, Europeanization offers a modest possibility of cosmopolitanism (albeit within the limited geographic frame of the Euro cosmos) and that is potentially an important counterweight to the dark, antidemocratic side of nationalism.

But the challenge of how to deal with multiculturalism is one for which our states are very differently equipped and the EU is still basically the sum total of our states. The question of a common culture, of the role of faiths within the polity and the public sphere, was a live issue during Pope Benedict's visit to the UK in August 2010 - and of course this is a European issue.

The idea that shared communication is a prerequisite for the formation of a European democracy has been central to recurrent debate, both political and academic. We have gone through a number of attempts to engineer this aspect of a "public sphere" into existence: from television co-productions supported by EU programmes such as MEDIA to the recent development of a so-called communication policy by the European Commission, intended to redress the "democratic deficit".

This development has been paralleled by the related aspirations that began more than two decades ago as a “European information space” and has evolved into seeking to install a “knowledge society” in line with the Lisbon agenda. Here, the driving forces have been those of global economic competitiveness and technological change, not least advances in the so-called digital economy. Alongside this, the European Union context is also marked by the uncertain growth of a European cultural space, with increasing prominence given to the Culture Programmes of the European Commission since 2000. While these might justly be seen as “Europeanizing” trends, it remains the case the real driving force of a communicative space would be the creation of a common political space. At present, this is stalled.

Television’s relationships with its audiences - especially as the digital revolution unfolds and introduces greater complexity to the modes of distribution - raises questions about the role of consumption in the putative process of Europe building. Which are the contents that might be thought most important for common consumption? News, though typically cited, is really most successful in its national mode of address. The UEFA Champions League and Eurovision produce large-scale, event-based transnational audiences but divergent loyalties still

divide Europeans on tribal lines during these cultural competitions (which is far better than war, of course).

To date, there seems little evidence that there is strong cross-national demand for others' programming within the EU. Of course, television programmes circulate; so do formats, which may be more important in bringing about a kind of cultural uniformity in games shows, talent competitions and reality TV. Nevertheless, the prevalent mode of consumption seems to be framed by national frameworks of supply and modes of address. The European space remains linguistically and culturally divided, irrespective of the rise of English as a *lingua franca*.

Citizen-building and social integration are top-down aspirations. That does not make them bad or wrong. And many citizens might share them, although across all the member states the Eurobarometer's surveys suggest that there is no consistency over time about how much citizens might imagine themselves as "Europeans".

It is also the case that a European dimension to television could take many possible forms. Thus, in the course of citizen-building and seeking social solidarity, there are normative questions as well as practical ones to address, which have much to do with the vision of Europe that is espoused - welfare state or market; nations or federation; elite-led or democratic? And

then there is the delicate question of the limits of that Europe: who belongs, who doesn't? Who do the frontiers hold at bay? Why and on what criteria? Is it *Realpolitik* that decides membership or cultural affinity or religion - or a combination of these, depending on circumstance? Who, once resident in the EU, is allowed to become a European, irrespective of colour, creed or culture?

### 3.

We have considered the relationships between PS in the age of so-called social media and particularly what might be the PS mission in enabling public to understand social complexity and - maybe - in contributing to re-shaping a new model of social cohesion.

There are two tendencies that we have to consider:

a) the deep transformation of the public sphere into a fragmented and complex *mediated public space*, in which the media play an important role in social legitimisation and identity building;

b) the wider transformation of European societies (see also Fossum, Schlesinger 2007) and of its media audiences.

The transformation of audience dynamics is closely linked to the commercialization and marketization of cultural production. It is evident even in political communication, where an “emotional public” has replaced the old television public. The PS model has offered the great advantage of a broadened political engagement that derives from politically-based public participation programming (McNair, Hibberd, Schlesinger 2003). The first advantage is that “such programmes present a means by which the public can have first-hand ‘representation’ in mass media in a tangible manifestation of a mediated public sphere” (McNair, Hibberd, Schlesinger 2003, 31). Through television and radio - and latterly through the Internet - members of the public can engage with media to attend to their peers and offer political arguments on the basis of a shared concern in the democratic process. The second advantage stems from the opportunities of public access to those in political influence, where members of the public have the chance to submit policy makers and members of the political élite to scrutiny and questioning (Ibid, 57). A third advantage is that this form of programming might prompt what McNair et al. call the “mobilization” of political publics - the possibility, that is to say, that viewers and participants will be impelled to “act on, or at least think about, the issue under discussion” (Ibid, 64).

Thus, “at the level at which media make a normative assessment of their own contribution to public service, giving the public a participatory role in political television both actualizes the mediated public sphere (...) and potentially contributes to solving the problem of public disengagement from formal politics” (Higgins 2008, 53-54).

If broadcast programming offer some advantages and, up to a point, some critical frameworks of interpretation, social networks (and even many forms of media consumption such as, at least potentially, Twitter, Facebook and YouTube) create new segmented, collective subjects, that may sometimes be involved in social and political engagement. Different considerations arise in respect of IPTV, which is a potentially important tool for improving interactivity and, conceivably, the creation of consumers’ networks. The growth of IPTV, whose services are delivered using the architecture and networking methods of Internet Protocol, is interlinked with high broadband availability. In many countries there are still slow Internet connections, which represent an obstacle to the development of IPTV as well as the absence of a so-called “open source” culture. In other words, the potential of IPTV for PS uses may increase proportionately to the widening of Internet access.

Can the public service broadcasting transform now itself into public service media? Can access to new forms of communication transform the public service mission? Or is *disintermediation* to become the new prevalent logic of public service? What we mean by this is whether new relations of connectivity may develop between political actors and the generality of citizens. Is it possible to by-pass parties and formal institutions and undertake political practice to which the media are central? Clearly it is, as “social media” such as Facebook and Twitter have been turned to political purposes and YouTube is a repository of political moments, whether tragic, comic or otherwise significant. Certain blogs too can carry non-institutional weight of a kind to make the political and journalistic classes jump. Such transformative uses, however, are far from central to political processes and the jury is out as to whether such uses and their consequent reshaping of political relations are of general import or whether, on the other hand, they create particular publics for the most part (De Blasio, Sorice 2010; Sorice 2011). We would caution against an over-enthusiastic view of the possibilities offered by the new media technologies to improve public participation. Do social networking or web-based cultural consumption always represent

a form of participatory action simply because they are based on disintermediated frames?

#### 4.

When we currently discuss public service, we usually mean broadcast media and the possibilities they afford publics to access cultural products. Many scholars are implicitly governed by the Reithian formula of what broadcasting ought to be about (namely, “to inform, to entertain, and to educate”). Some make this an article of faith, whereas others reject it in line with their own adherence to the deification of the market. Both are, in effect, dogmatic perspectives.

Of course, PS media can still inform and entertain and, in some respects, may even educate. A primary aim today must be that of offering a democratic space for European civil society. At the same time, the public service media must become a vehicle for the distribution of public service content.

But what do we mean when we speak of “participation” and “access”?

There is a difference between *access* and *participation* (Carpentier 2007; Sorice 2007). There is also an intermediate level, that of *interaction*.

We can subdivide “access” into three forms:

- a) Access 1.0, in which the use of the media for public service represents a typical example. In Servaes’ words (1999: 85), “It may be defined in terms of the opportunities available to the public to choose varied and relevant programs and to have a means of feedback to transmit its reactions and demands to production organizations”. This accords, for example, with the UK Government’s Green Paper of 2005 on the BBC and public service. Despite its limitations, the BBC remains one of the most important examples globally of open access to TV and media.
- b) Access 1.1. This can be defined from a community media perspective, as “the processes that permit users to provide relatively open and unedited input to the mass media” (Lewis 1993: 12). This accords with the logic of non-mainstream and alternative media.
- c) Access 2.0. This is based on the opportunity to have content published and/or broadcast and, at the same time, to have the necessary skills to receive content and provide feedback (Carpentier 2007). This concerns some “quasi-participatory” experiences of television (such as, for example, Current Tv).

Access according to all three of these definitions does not constitute “interaction”. A simple definition of interaction directs us to the technical (but also political) topic of the “pull-technologies” (namely, where the requests for data, news or - very often - audio-visual products - come from the consumer). But do “pull-technologies” really cancel out the power of old style “push-technologies” such as broadcasting? Can we really control the “symbolic goods” - as John B. Thompson once described them - distributed by the media or do we have only the illusion of control? “Our control - as Rokeby has stated (1995: 154) - may appear absolute, but the domain of that control is externally defined. We are engaged, but exercise no power over the filtering language of interaction embedded in the interface”.

Some authors have counterposed “interaction” and “involvement” (De Blasio, Sorice 2008). Involvement is one of the concepts commonly used in reception studies and in the analysis of the “consumption” process. It particularly emphasizes the relational and affective aspect implied in the reception process and is connected to the achievement of *balanced power*. There is no co-decision making in interaction, whereas involvement opens the gate towards the concept (and practice) of a relational community.

Participation, by contrast, can be considered in three respects: a) participation in the produced content; b) participation in the content-producing organization; c) participation in the technology-producing organization, which means having the technical and political skills to co-decide on the uses of technology and the making of policy. In other words, participation assumes a fully realized movement from the conceptual couple “creativity/reproduction” to that of “performativity/involvement”.

It is evident that the full participation would involve a deep transformation in our societies. One initial obstacle to this at the supranational level is represented by the unresolved tensions between the European Union and the Member States. The social logic of “creativity/reproduction” belongs to the first era of public service, still anchored to the romantic ideal of artists who can lead and educate the people. Unpacking the relationships between creativity and reproduction therefore makes us rethink the idea of how a social community is constituted and what shapes its underlying social contract of citizenship. The contemporary idea of participation is linked to the idea of the “creative industries” and the proclaimed centrality of the “creative economy”. This involves the displacement of the concept of the earlier concept of the

cultural industries. Underlying the contemporary embrace of creativity is a highly individualistic approach to social cohesion (Schlesinger 2007; 2009).

Such shifts go well beyond the relationships between media and public institutions to engage with the constitutive relations of contemporary societies - and have profound consequences for how we think about the nature and value of cultural labour.

## 5.

In conclusion, let us note that Infocivica has set out some principles to inform our discussion. We may or may not agree with every detail but there are certainly matters for a common agenda.

We would like to underline six key points:

I. Arguments about recalibrating the place of public service take place within a highly charged ideological field and social transformations that are difficult to influence. We are in a new phase of neoliberalism in which there is - as yet - no fully articulated and convincing alternative political project. While public service is still appreciated in the society of celebrity and consumerism, a “nextopia”, there is a need to think afresh about how the case is made. This varies from state to state,

according to the institutions and historical trajectory of public service broadcasting to date. Ultimately, this is about rephrasing enlightenment ideals about the constitutive nature of public communication in a way that captures public support.

II. How public service is to be financed is a crucial question. No doubt, in the age of subscriptions and changing habits in buying communications services, the classic defence of licence fees is increasingly unconvincing. The issue is how to secure equitable and sustainable finance in a fragmenting market place. Equitable - as a common good needs common support. Sustainable - as a measure of certainty is required for a public service to work without capricious revision according to political circumstance.

III. We are in the age of competition, in which major private market concentrations lay siege to the institutions of public service. This is not going change. So the challenge is to recognise that legitimate (as well as illegitimate) questions of scope and scale are going to be raised by PS's critics. A robust new intellectual defence is needed to meet these conditions. If quality is the watchword, then that carries implications for commissioning, production and distribution. Are there other key criteria with which to make a distinctive case? Much of the current debate concerns the place taken by PS within the

digital offer. What are the services that should be offered and how can these win public support? What is the first line of defence?

IV. We cannot discuss the future of public service without considering regimes of regulation. These obviously vary greatly. In the prevailing neo-liberal mood, de-regulation is likely to prevail. Regulatory institutions are therefore an important battle ground over principles and scope and scale - both of the regulatory bodies and those that they regulate. This is a question that has a European dimension but in practice is fundamentally about institutions at the level of the state. Does the creation of a level playing field that jointly regulates public service and commercial players have a compelling claim? Certainly, hyper-regulation of the public sector and de-regulation of the private is open to question and a key terrain of struggle.

V. Our previous point relates to this one. Namely the question of political autonomy. Politics is at the heart of media everywhere. Broadcasting has had a relative, conditional autonomy but this has still been an important space, where it has existed, for opening spaces of debate, explorations of alternatives, new expressions. Regulation needs to support autonomy and the European level needs to act as a

counterweight to that of any state where there are infractions. Media politics is deeply shaped by concentrations of power in the media marketplace (Sorice 2011). So the argument is always going to be about how to restrain tendencies to interfere for party-political ends.

VI. Finally, one of the key things we can learn from is the value of comparison. How do the EC's interventions over state aid affect broadcasting in different member states? Comparison allows at least: identification of best practice; solutions to common problems - such as convincing methods for market assessments of new PS initiatives; analytical understanding of the unevenness of PS according to different national particularities.

As we try to imagine new forms of public service within the European space, we have to be aware of the objective obstacles represented by the rise of anti-European sentiment on the continent, national economic and political crises, and the strength of the various interests mustered against the idea of public service itself. Our optimism of the will, therefore, must certainly be tempered by pessimism of the intellect.



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