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Paper title: The Public Sphere, Social networks and Public Service Media

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The concept of the public sphere, although having its historical roots in Ancient Greece (see Dewey 1954), remains a central analytical tool in modern society to help us make sense of the relationship between the media and democracy (civic engagement). In his *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, originally written in 1962, German philosopher and sociologist Habermas (who was a member of the Frankfurt School, a leftish think-tank) explained that in the late eighteenth century a new political class, the bourgeoisie, came to the fore in Britain in particular and formed a public body which, in sharp contrast to the old authorities, notably the state and the church, provided the conditions for reason-based, public opinion. The creation of a network of institutions by the bourgeoisie within the civil society, and the launch of a number of newspapers more specifically, provided the means through which private thoughts could become public. Libraries and universities became the places for public debate, while publishing enterprises formed the means by which government was criticized. That new public sphere was in principle open to all and protected from the power of both the church and the state.

However, Habermas pointed out that this space for rational and universalistic politics created by the capitalist market was historically damaged by both the extension of the state and the evolution of monopoly capitalism. The formation of large private institutions (advertising agencies, public relations) and the deals they made with each other and with the state while excluding the public, led to the replacement of rational public discourse by power politics. The role of the media was central to the replacement of the ideal speech situation by conditions of 'distorted communication'. Whereas the independent press at the turn of the nineteenth century had led to the formation of rational public debate and public decision-making on political and judicial matters, it later functioned as a manipulative agency controlling public opinion. The media's role in the public debate shifted from the dissemination of rational and independent information to the formation of public opinion. Following the changing communications ecology, the public sphere is discovered as a platform for advertising and public relations.

Habermas's theory merits consideration because he carefully conceptualized the nature of the public sphere, viewing it as an achievement of the new bourgeois (or capitalist) class in Europe, and an outcome of its successful struggle against feudalism and church or state oppression. The shift from *opinion* to *public opinion* is documented with regard to the public sphere's pre-eminent institutions, the mass media (Boeder 2005). However, Habermas's thesis has been questioned on historical grounds. Many argued that he idealized the early period of history he referred to and particularly the notion of the 'independent' eighteenth century press (Mortensen 1977; Hohendahl 1979; Curran 1991a, Curran 1991b). Koss (1981, 1984), in his analysis of the British political press, pointed

out that political control by proprietary interests was exercised in a large part of the press as early as the eighteenth century. Koss's analysis showed that the early British press was not so independent as Habermas described and therefore, one would argue, did not contribute to rational discourse to the degree Habermas wanted.

The German scholar has also been criticized for his rationality argument. Curran (1991a) mentioned that the newspapers celebrated by Habermas were engines of propaganda for the bourgeoisie rather than the embodiment of disinterested rationality. In today's global multi-cultural society criticisms of Habermas's ideal public sphere could include its universalizing angle and the apparent neglect of 'difference', its emphasis on the national rather than global space, and its normative concept of a unified national space signified and constituted by the media. Nowadays there is little consensus on a common good and universal values, which are increasingly determined through exchanges between various local, national and transnational actors, including the state, corporations, civil society actors, citizens and consumers, mainstream and marginalized groups.

Although the historical status of Habermas's theory may be questionable, he nevertheless pioneered in pointing out that the public sphere - a conceptual rather than physical space - and democracy - expressed through engagement in rational discussion - are closely connected. Habermas' thinking, through the contributions and limitations of his thesis, provides valuable theoretical resources to advance important issues relating to democratic society in the contemporary era. The scholar offered a good starting point for understanding the media's role in public communication. The question about whether and

how the media conceive the public sphere impacts greatly on people's understanding of social and political issues, practices and identities. Garnham (1986), for example, although questioning Habermas's historical assumptions, adopted his central analysis and used it as a justification of public service broadcasting.

Along these lines, the media should facilitate the process of rational argumentation by providing a context of public discourse which is essential for the formation of free and reason-based public opinion. The media should tend to maximize debates over political ideas and contribute to public information and argumentation which are essential to the maintenance of democracy. Public information is essential both for expressing the common interest and for taking part in the debate about that common interest. In his *Theories of the Information Society* Webster (2006) acknowledges that the public sphere is damaged as a result of the intrusion of public relations which jeopardize the criteria of rationality which once shaped public discourse. Finally, Habermas's theory is limited to the political question, but there are countless versions of meanings for the public sphere in the context of a society. There are arguments about cultural heritage, environmental preservation, public health and universal education, to mention but a few. Over the course of time, these desirable objectives have been interpreted and characterized as 'public good' - good available to all at zero or low cost.

The Internet and the public sphere – a global sphere?

The debates surrounding the idea of the public sphere have taken a renewed interest with the emergence of the Internet and other new online media which can provide new communication spaces where debate can be conducted. While Habermas' original work published well before the digital revolution, computer-mediated communication has taken the place of coffeehouse discourse (Boeder, 2005). It is said that the Internet creates new public spheres for political intervention, thus expanding the realm for democratic participation. As was previously the case with neighborhood networks, informal associations, national organizations, as well as the traditional media of the press, radio and television, the Internet terrain and the transnational online communities have produced new spaces for information, debate and participation – as well as new possibilities for manipulation and social control (Kellner, no date). As will be shown below, the Internet is a contested terrain capable both of enlightening individuals and of manipulating them.

The new media terminology is already characterized by terms such as 'global village', 'electronic commons', 'cyber democracy', 'virtual democracy', 'virtual community', 'electronic agora', or even more recent terms which have not yet entered the dictionary: 'netsphere', 'digisphere', 'infosphere', 'blogosphere', 'twittersphere'. These online forums or social spaces of the Web 2.0 differ substantially from the traditional ones such as that of public service broadcasting in that they allow more interactivity and many-to-many communication, rather than one-to-many. They appear to be ideal spaces for initiating public debate and social change. As Stumpel (2009) argues these new digital spheres where people come together have some interesting similarities to Habermas'

concept of the public sphere, namely: MySpace (the first ever social network with strengths as a music and entertainment destination), Facebook (currently the most popular social network), the increasingly rising Twitter and other net spheres are public places that are outside of control by the state, they allow individuals to exchange views and knowledge as well as critical points of view, and finally are spaces where public-minded rational consensus can be developed. As Murru (2009: 143) put it, ‘in online contexts anyone can potentially take the role of speaker with practically no cost, thus multiplying the source of news and freeing the flux of communication and information from any sort of system control (economic or political)’.

But can the Net act as a public sphere where critical discourse can emerge and influence political action? Can the twittersphere recreate the conditions which made ideal speech and public interests a possibility during the embryonic Habermasian public sphere? Like the development of all previous new technologies the appearance of the Internet brought about a discussion of its democratic and mobilizing power. In the period that Habermas referred to (eighteenth century) the bourgeoisie were aided and mobilized by newspaper articles, later the telegraph enabled people to communicate at long distance, the invention of radio in 1895 enabled people to broadcast signals through pirate radio stations until authorities set up to control the airwaves. The Internet of course is not confined to physical constraints such as frequency bandwidth, but instead can expand to infinite length, enabling everyone to be a ‘publisher’ or ‘producer’. In theory, this open, free and decentralized space could create the conditions for ideal speech and enhance the ability to voice one’s opinion and organize collective action (the very notion of democracy).

The Internet can facilitate the spread of debate and deliberation across many parts of the population that may be spatially dispersed. In this sense, the democratic potential of the Internet can be realized through the ever larger quantity of rational critical debate that can take place in there compared to the limited capacity of traditional media that are confined within national borders. Viewed this way, the emergence of the Internet (and other new online, interactive and international media) calls for a globalization of the public sphere and public opinion. The space for public discourse and the formation of public opinion increasingly take place at a transnational context that crosses national boundaries. It has been put forward that new technologies have allowed the formation of a transnational or global public sphere as a forum for political discussion. While the traditional media in the form of the newspaper press and public television have been an integral part in the creation of a national public sphere, there is a widespread assumption that new spheres of communication networks can provide the basis for shared concerns, common tastes and cultural turns at a global level.

The Internet's contribution to politics is evidenced by the fact that since the mid-1990s most general elections in democratic countries have had official websites, whilst the main parties across the globe are trying to improve their online activities. More recently the Internet played a big part in Barack Obama's rise from upstart senator to President. Barack Obama and his team used new media and the Internet to organise activists, raise money and communicate with voters. According to *The Economist* (2010c: 33) the Internet's main function was to assist Obama's campaign do old-fashioned things, for

much of the money he raised online was spent on television advertisements, and activists recruited via websites were deployed to canvas voters face-to-face.

The Internet's democratic potential has been highlighted in such works as Rheingold (1993), Kellner (1997) and Wilhelm (1999), whose central thesis is that cyberspace provides an ideal basis for transnational dialogical exchanges. Much has been written about the democratizing and empowering implication of the Internet and the new social media and much of it can be dubbed as idealistic and representing technological determinism (Nieminen, 2009: 40). Not surprisingly, the attempt to ground theoretically and empirically the 'ideal speech situation' (at least as formulated by Habermas) on the web has met with scepticism. As Boeder (2005) argues, it is often the case that major decisions and actions concerning transnational matters occur without intense public attention. With regard to news, Hjarvard (2007) has argued that it is *national* traditional media that continue to play the most important role in public political discourse, with transnational dialogue merely involving 'cosmopolitan elites'. Corcoran's work (2010) also raised serious concerns about the result of transnational mergers between advertising, marketing, public relations and lobbying firms on a transnational public sphere. The above thinkers share the view that the Internet and other transnational media may not often receive debate or dialogue involving all people.

In fact, there are various issues that might not let the vision of electronic networks to recreate the public sphere to materialize. First, the open participation of the Internet can turn chaotic in which there might be no model rules of behavior, thereby allowing no

structured conversation. Texts and voices could result in anarchic, rather than democratic, forms of participation. In addition, blogging sites are typically dominated by white male voices and polarised opinion. But it is also the very notion of the Internet's openness that might be at stake, for as the current FCC Chairman said, there is limited competition among service providers, while there is an explosion of traffic on the Internet (Genachowski, 2009). Second, there is a problem of inclusiveness. Despite the openness of this new technology, not all people use it either because they cannot afford it or because they lack the skills to do so. As Murdock (2004) argued, access to the Internet through personal computers remains highly stratified by income, age and education with substantial numbers of poorer households, elderly people and educational drop-outs facing the prospect of permanent exclusion. Even if they achieve basic connectivity the always on /always there high speed broadband links needed to access the full range of Internet facilities will remain out of reach.

Third, censorship might be an issue since in countries like China, North Korea and Cuba the respective governments restrict their citizens' Internet access by blocking specific websites. Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are all explicitly blocked in China, whilst in March 2010 Google was about to withdraw from China owing to several attempts to hack its email system and ever stronger censorship of its searches. Domestic Chinese equivalents of these sites, such as Baidu, Taobao, Renren and QQ have been launched and flourishing. Post 9/11 brought about privacy and freedom concerns even in countries with a strong democratic tradition, as evidenced by the passing of the 2001 *Patriot Act* in the USA which expanded law enforcement's surveillance and investigative powers. As

highlighted in *The Economist* (2010) in some cases there is a new social contract: ‘do what you like online, as long as you steer clear of politics’. For instance, government-controlled Internet-access providers in Belarus provide servers full of pirated material to keep their customers happy. Fourth, the Internet has become a major arena for corporate activity, similarly to other branches of the cultural industries. Individualization of consumption has been accompanied by consolidation of media ownership producing global multi-media corporation intent on redeveloping cyberspace as retail real estate (Murdock, 2004).

Fifth, extensive dialogue and critical discussion (the very essence of the public sphere) is often absent on the Net. In the case of the Twitter, for example, dialogue is limited by the very fact that it only allows the exchange of swift, short messages. This implies that there might be an increase in the number of active participants in the communication processes, albeit leaving little space for substantive social and political dialogue involving groups and individuals. Undeniably, the democratic merit of net spheres such as Twitter and Facebook is apparent when it comes to the overturn of suppression and censorship of mass media and public opinion by authoritarian regimes. Splichal (2009, p. 392) provides the recent case of the ‘Twitter revolution’ in the former Soviet Republic of Moldova. Aided by social networking website tools like Twitter, LiveJournal and Facebook, demonstrators in Moldova organized mass protests against the April 2009 (allegedly forged) parliamentary election results. Computer-mediated communication also contributed to the 2009 struggles against the authoritarian Iranian government. Groups in Facebook can choose to support the liberalization of Tibet. Facebook and Twitter enable

Barack Obama's online campaign to activism. Twitter often has real-time updates on events like the Mumbai terrorist attacks. Social networks like the Meedan can post articles dedicated to the discussion of Middle East news, either in English or Arabic, thus contributing to the availability of a wide range of views in the region. These examples highlight the informative and mobilizing power of the Internet, but they are mainly confined to authoritarian regimes, let alone that they are the exception rather than the rule.

Sixth, it has been argued that most of the Internet's content is highly partisan (Humphreys, 2008). Take, for example, the highly partisan nature of political blogs and their user created content which makes it difficult to trace credible blogs. Dahlberg (2007) has found that the online debate is polarized and there is generally a lack of listening to others. He pointed out that the Internet fails to adequately consider the asymmetries of power through which deliberation and consensus are achieved, the inter-subjective basis of meaning, the centrality of respect for difference in democracy, and the democratic role of 'like-minded' deliberative groups. What is often absent in online deliberations is a consensus-based, justified and rational decision, let alone that not everyone affected by that decision is included. So, is it just a myth that the Internet has the ability to create a healthier public sphere? I would argue that in the end, it all depends on how one uses the Internet. We should not forget that the Internet, as all new media technologies, can provide a useful *tool* or the *basis* for a public sphere, but it cannot itself create such a space. To use Kellner's words (2007) the Internet - as all new media technologies - can either be used as instrument of empowerment or domination. New

forms of citizenship and public life are simultaneously enabled by new technology and restricted by market power and surveillance (Boeder 2005). What is certain is that the media is not the place where the public sphere resides, it is not the public sphere per se, but it is a vehicle through which such a space can be created.

Another relevant point is that the Internet can certainly facilitate ‘public spaces’ where people might ‘get a hearing’. Although these spaces are now common, they do not constitute public spheres in any rigorous sense, for they allow the public merely to feel involved rather than to advance actual participation in civic life. True, the Internet is a useful outlet for political expression for people especially in the developing world or under repressive regimes, but as shown above these regimes are likely to monitor the Internet closely. More crucially, sharing political news and joining political cause or civil movements might simply imply a wish to broadcast own activism to friends; it does not necessarily result in enhanced political awareness or more politically engaged citizenship. The vision of the electronic agora made possible by new technologies and implemented through decentralized networks is probably utopian. As Dahlgren (1995) noted, the public sphere is not just an ‘information exchange depot’, but a means for generating and disseminating culture. The free expression of culture, values and the will of the people might be hard to achieve in the marketplace of ideas where the balance between large media companies, the state and the civil society turns decidedly in favor of the first two.

Turning to Public Service Broadcasting (PSB)?

The above issues make one rethink about the role of open-platform public media in enhancing civic engagement, forming political identities and culture, and tackling the ‘democratic deficit’ in the era of commodification of the communications media, characterized by a shortage of culture and political apathy. Public service broadcasting (PSB), in more particular, has traditionally been open to all at affordable prices - usually households are required to pay an annual licence fee in exchange for high-quality content, especially in news, current affairs, education and the dissemination of culture. Of course no one likes to pay taxes and the legitimacy of public funding in the era of an unprecedented proliferation of channels of communication is gradually eroding, but the licence fee is accepted in most western European countries as the least worst option to maintain the independence of the public channel and novelty in content; it is, in other words, an ‘imperfect beauty’. This method of funding enables the public broadcasting sector to continue providing a forum for democratic debate and cultural exchange against a background of a deregulated global media system, inevitably influenced by market forces and dominated by large multinational enterprises. The broadcasting market is now opened, but major media formations of economic and political influence cannot ensure access to all voices. Public channels, independent from both capital and political interests, can function as instruments for articulating objective societal values and empowering political knowledge so people can be considered as citizens, rather than merely consumers.

Apart from being universally accessible, PSB has proved a credible source of information; its trustworthiness is evidenced by the fact that most people turn to a PSB

rather than to a commercial outlet whenever a major incident occurs in order to access independent reporting and find accurate and balanced information. The ideal of impartiality applies particularly to TV news reporting, with public television broadcasters such as the BBC often being seen as the lynchpin of fairness and neutrality. During the second Gulf war more people tuned to the BBC and its unrivalled team of correspondents in accessing news from the Gulf and reaction from around the world. Also the websites of PSB rank among the most visited non-commercial portal sites, with the BBC being the most trusted and widely used site in Europe (Council of Europe 2008, p. 14). It has achieved this position by exploring ways the Internet can extend public broadcasting's core mission of offering cultural resources for thick citizenship (Murdock 2004). The BBC's truthful news media representation of the war in Iraq enabled publics to make sense of the social, economic and political changes underlying this conflict.

Broadly speaking, I would argue that one should be skeptical in putting faith in the power of the market for producing high quality news, including hard news like finance and political issues. There are at least three compelling reasons as to why this might be so. First, driven by profits/ratings, commercial players would be inclined towards distributing the more sensationalist news and information, rather than important knowledge to the citizenship. Second, presenting the facts accurately would be difficult as priority would naturally be given to breaking news first without always double-checking the credibility of sources. Third, commercial news organizations will most certainly in time start charging customers for news consumption in order to get a return of investment, whereas PSB provides online news and other services for free. The BBC's

business editor Robert Peston took a hard line on deregulation and argued that the commercial digital market in news would distribute information in the same way as financial resources had been distributed unequally and inefficiently prior to the current financial crisis (Peston, 2009).

But it is not a secret that PSB around the world is challenged by neoliberal and postmodern sentiments, convergence, internationalisation and globalisation, privatisation and commercialisation (Syvertsen 2003). The key challenge is general social, cultural and ideological shift (Ofcom 2004), above all the ascendancy of neo-liberalism, opposed to the existence of public sector institutions where market forces should, in this view, operate without hindrance (Jakubowicz 2010). A more postmodern attitude rejects traditional taste and cultural hierarchies, a major characteristic of PSB which broadly speaking fails to follow these cultural trends. This is why PSB is losing the young audience, in any case being weaned by new technologies away from traditional media altogether. It is imperative then for PSB to reinvent itself by embarking upon new open forms of distribution and access, including archives; pod-casts; digital distribution; niche channels; local channels which would serve as hubs for community engagement. Because of individualisation and fragmentation of society, PSB must redefine its service to social integration and cohesion and go beyond collective experience (generalist channels) and cater to group and individual interests, for example by understanding better their audience; providing thematic channels; and offering online services.

In short, PSB should reinvent into Public Service Media (PSM), engaging with the possibilities of digital transmission and the web. The transition of the traditional PSB into PSM is certainly one of the most challenging debates in contemporary media studies. It basically refers to the widening of the remit of the public channels to be available in more delivery platforms for producing and distributing public service content. Cross-platform strategies help PSM retain audience share, reach new audiences and develop on-demand services, while enabling them to create a stronger partnership with civil society and serve an extended form of citizenship. Expanding into emerging digital media technologies and platforms is a difficult task and brings new challenges, but social change and new technologies require these public institutions to evolve from basic broadcasting services into an engine that provides information and useful content to all citizens using various platforms. How can this be achieved? What strategies would public service enterprise need to renew, reshape and reposition themselves as media content provides, while maintaining public service principles? How can PSB take account of the different media platforms for PSM (online, on-demand, mobile) and the changing relationship with the audience (as content generators and a community of users)? In addressing these questions the following section explains how PSB is engaging with new digital media and the online services it delivers that the social networks cannot; meanwhile the section provides some good practice examples of the process of PSB reinvention.

From PSB to PSM

There are four broad areas in which PSM can make a socio-cultural difference and contribute to the recreation of the public sphere and enhanced civic engagement: information; democratization; decentralization; and interaction with the citizens.

On the information front, PSM can offer online services which would allow Internet users to access content. The German public broadcaster ARD has an advertising-free portal (www.ard.de) from which viewers watch pre-selected regional news reports.

The main challenge for PSM is to develop more comprehensive and more inclusive social frameworks for user-generated content and social networking evident in sites like MySpace, Facebook and Twitter.

- Democratization: ARTE (Franco-German), YLE (Finland), BBC (UK) ZDF (Germany), DR (Denmark) participate in the *Why Democracy?* project, which stimulates public involvement.

Good practice examples (*see PSM Governance Report, CoE, 2008*)

- The BBC Trust works closely with the *Audience Councils* in England, N. Ireland, Scotland & Wales, which help it understand the audiences' needs, interests & concerns. These Councils were created under a BBC's agreement with DCMS with the aim to engage & consult audiences on BBC's performance in promoting public purposes.

- The BBC wants *interactive audiences*, who can change its content & create archives of content. This way offers the potential for proximity to *BBC producers*.
- *Your Story*, running from 2008, is the journalism project of the *BBC World Service*. Anyone can send in stories & news reports, photos, audio or video.

Decentralization

The above examples show a tendency to decentralization of the governance, to ensure diversity in decision-making:

- The regional Audience Councils contribute to the BBC Trust's consultations.
- The BBC 'mediation techniques' & 'citizen journalism' reinforce the participatory element

Interaction with the citizens

Broadly speaking, broadcasting tends to be more about distribution of content than interaction, interpreted as the active communication between PSM operators and the citizen. However, an increasing number of public broadcasters provide also on the internet a good amount of interactive services related to their broadcast programming.

For example, the Finish YLE has created new and interactive media services and participatory platforms on the internet, which are relatively independent

PSB has the opportunity to capitalize on the high levels of public trust it enjoys and become the portal of choice for anyone wanting not to be sold to and to know that the links listed are to organizations and movements that subscribe to the core principles underpinning the digital commons.

By allowing viewers not only to watch programmes again but to re-edit them or incorporate segments into their own productions it offers a massive stimulus to vernacular creativity (Murdock, 2004).

This intervention accelerates a shift in public broadcasting's working model of culture that has been gathering momentum for some time as increasing demands for greater participation have battered away at the doors of commissioning editors and channel heads. The result has been a move away from the privileged emphasis on a 'culture in common' whose values and priorities are framed by designated experts and artists towards a greater recognition of the democratic value of a common culture 'which is continuously remade and redefined by the collective practice of its members' (Eagleton 2000:119).

Taken together these developments point to a major redefinition of public broadcasting's role. It will remain a key centre for original production but programmes will cease to be

discrete events and become potential starting point for a variety of activities and involvements. In future the range and organization of the on line resources public broadcasters provide will be as important as the quality and diversity of its programming in evaluating its contribution to cultural citizenship.

Current patterns of exclusion from the Internet are produced not only by the costs of personal computing and connectivity but by feelings of incompetence, symbolic exclusion, and the irrelevance of what is currently on offer (Murdock and Golding 2004). Because television is a ubiquitous, familiar, and well used presence in everyday life it is less likely to bump up against these symbolic barriers to participation.

Public broadcasting also has the capacity to counter fragmentation. Employing programmes, whether watched in real -time or retrieved on line, to kick-start online activities maintains at least a minimal base of shared experience. In addition, web surfing has the capacity to counter the self enclosure of zapping and personalized video recorders. Although mixed programming now often takes second place to crafting distinctive channel identities, a user entering the broadcaster's web site to pursue a particular interest will encounter a wide range of other possibilities, some of which they may be tempted to follow up.

who see streamed audio and video services as central to their future profitability (Murdock, 2004).

However, PSM expansion has not been undisputed and faces formidable obstacles. For a start, reconstructing public broadcasters to adapt to the digital age entails substantial costs both to broadcasters and the viewers/listeners, the former having to invest heavily in upgrading the infrastructure and the latter having to purchase additional equipment, such as decoders, to access programmes and services. Meanwhile, there are increasing calls from commercial operators and leading computer corporations for limitations to be set for public media as they see their future profitability threatened by such an expansion. The size and scope of the BBC - funded by a compulsory licence fee (£142.50 per household as of April 2009) which guarantees a steady income at a time when the financial sector is forced to cut budgets – has always been an issue. While there are many supporters of the corporation who argue that the public money guarantee programming diversity and quality, there are those (commercial channels, struggling independent producers, pro-market evangelists, the political right) who take a general antipathy towards public institutions and among other things, want to see the corporation confined to its core activities and stay clear of the online world. In 1989 Rupert Murdoch, the founder of News Corporation/News International, in his landmark MacTaggart lecture argued against state regulation in the media and dismissed public service broadcasting. Twenty years later his arguments were echoed by James Murdoch, the heir to his father's media empire, who said that 'private enterprise should be allowed to go about its business unfettered by regulation'. James Murdoch Junior's attempt to present the BBC as an anti-competitive entity is both because of its new initiatives like iPlayer (catch-up TV) and

because it gives out online content for free, while commercial media struggle to gain profit out of it.

Conclusion

This article has argued that PSB functions and the value it provides are not offered in equal volume and quality by online content providers and profit-driven systems.

Universal coverage and widespread access of PSB guarantee a public space reached by mass audiences which can function as a forum for democratic public discourse. An important characteristic of the civic role related to the public sphere is the availability of impartial, accurate, non-market oriented news and current affairs that are provided by public media. Another is the provision of high-quality (innovative, risky, diverse and home-grown) programming and culture for various minority, ethnic and religious groups in a pluralist, multi-cultural society. These socially beneficial PSB functions imply that public broadcasters should be maintained in today's deregulated communications marketplace. There is a continued need for strong, well-funded public institutions, capable of delivering socially valuable content that would keep public debate alive.

But of course it does not mean that they should continue functioning as they do; they need changing in order to adopt to the technological, social, cultural and other shifts and regain audiences, especially the young, who are increasingly drifting away from traditional linear media toward online, interactive and non-linear outlets for information and entertainment. As Jakubowicz (2010) noted, a new definition of PSB distinctiveness

is needed: one that goes beyond the ‘enlightenment’ role of PSB and takes into consideration cultural change, post-modern tastes and standards, and new audience/user expectations. To regain the young audience, the PSB should adjust its content to the younger population’s needs, aesthetics tastes, forms of expression and favourite platforms. In short, PSB should embark upon the following changes: deliver distinctive output and by no means replicate services of commercial competitors; embark upon internal restructuring to make public institutions more cost efficient and effective but without sacrificing their public service values; but above all PSB need to transform into PSM

The new technologies offer PSB a chance to perform its role better and to serve the audience in more varied ways than before. This is why PSB should reinvent into PSM – multimedia institutions restructured to produce and distribute content digitally and to take full advantage of opportunities offered by the new platforms. This transformation will enable public media to provide a better and enhanced space for rational debate and culture dissemination, let alone extending the active life of online content which can be stored in an electronic archive and retrieved at any place and any time. The increased inclusiveness of public spaces as a force for democracy and civic participation offered by PSM can counterbalance any alleged benefits brought about by the (largely exaggerated) ‘mobilising’ and democratising’ power of the Internet. Last, it should not be forgotten that despite fierce criticism and challenges PSM have proved resilient as trusted media brands renowned for their political independence and are here to stay. Therefore the issue of sustainability should be taken into account as against newcomers such as social

networks whose socio-cultural role and commercial viability are yet to prove. While the multi-channel cable and satellite technologies of the late 1980s wrongly predicted the demise of public media, the digital, online and on-demand technologies of the 2000s provide a unique opportunity for renewed social relevance for these public providers by facilitating the delivery of public service content across multiple platforms.

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