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Citation: Iosifidis, P. (2011). Review: M. Debrett, Reinventing Public Service Television for Digital Future. *International Journal of Digital Television*, 2(1), pp. 123-131. doi: 10.1386/jdtv.2.1.123_5

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Link to published version: https://doi.org/10.1386/jdtv.2.1.123_5

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**REINVENTING PUBLIC SERVICE TELEVISION FOR THE DIGITAL FUTURE,
BY MARY DEBRETT (2010)**

INTELLECT, UK 256 pp.

ISBN 978-1841503219, Hardback £ 29.00

Reviewed by **Petros Iosifidis**

This volume examines the repositioning of a small number of public television systems as media content providers and assesses how these networks deliver and fund the public interest mission in the rapidly evolving media ecology. It forms part of an increasingly growing body of literature on the transition of the traditional Public Service Broadcasters (PSBs) into Public Service Media (PSM) - that is, widening their remit to be available in more delivery platforms for producing and distributing public service content. Other recent titles that deal with this theme include Lowe and Bardoel's 2008 edited collection *From Public Service Broadcasting to Public Service Media*, but this was mostly Europe-centred with particular emphasis on the North. A Council of Europe report prepared by Lowe (2007) and a special issue in the journal *Convergence* edited by D'Haenens, Sousa, Meier and Trappel (2008) also contributed to the debate on the role of PSM, the former tackling issues of citizen participation and the latter media policy matters. An edited book by Tambini and Cowling (2004) refers to public service communications and their place in a highly competitive digital marketplaces. My own work *Public Television in the Digital Era* (2007) discussed PSB in six EU countries and my 2010 edited collection *Reinventing Public Service Communication: European Broadcasters and Beyond* reflected how social change and new technologies require public institutions in a wide range of European and other countries to evolve from basic broadcasting services into an engine that provides information and useful content to all citizens using various platforms.

Debrett's book addresses the issue of public broadcasting institutions through the lens of two conflicting visions of democracy – interventionist and libertarian -, but also through wider concerns relating to the PSM position within highly competitive national marketplaces. The six broadcasters under review are Britain's BBC and Channel Four, Australia's Broadcasting Corporation ABC and the Australian special broadcasting service SBS, Television New Zealand and the Public Television System in the USA. Each of the systems represented in the book has special characteristics. The UK system, through the public corporation of the BBC, has provided a set of principles for PSB that has been adapted in most other countries: universality of coverage; programming diversity; reflection of national identity and culture; meeting minority interests; provision of impartial news; delivery of innovative, quality programming designed to inform, educate and entertain. The BBC has been allowed to expand in the digital era and launch a portfolio of digital services alongside a web service. Channel Four also operates as a successful broadcaster that is expected to deliver public service goals especially in the provision of innovative, risky programming originated from independent producers. Channel Four is funded by advertising but it reinvests all commercial revenue in station operations and production. The Digital Britain report (DCMS/BIS, 2009)

envisages Channel Four as complementary to the BBC for the continued provision of public service output after digital switchover occurs in 2012.

Channel Four resembles SBS in Australia, not only in that both channels were launched in the early 1980s, but also in that both networks have an explicit remit to offer an alternative service to that of mainstream PSB, a service intended to offer greater representation of minority cultures and greater diversity in TV output in a multicultural society. Australia's ABC is the main public service network funded solely by the licence fee, but in contrast to its well-funded UK counterpart BBC, the ABC has suffered from legislative restrictions and limited funding that had a negative impact on its digital and online activities and also on the quality of its programming.

The UK system is preoccupied by public service ideals and differs substantially from the American commercial model with its minimal regulation of broadcasters. In the USA, strong traditions of the freedom of the individual enshrined in the First Amendment to the US constitution have acted against any form of government involvement in broadcasting matters and have instead encouraged the development of a free market mechanism facilitating popular culture and commercial entertainment. As a result, public broadcasting in the USA functions as a 'market failure' project and has negligible impact on people. The perils of market pressures are notable when one refers to New Zealand, where institutional reinvention was undertaken in the early 1980s as part of industry deregulation. The state-owned broadcaster's adoption of the business/corporatist logic has led to the revival of PSB. New Zealand on Air (NZoA) was set up in 1989 as a Broadcasting Commission, a sort of an 'Arts Council of the Air', to represent a new approach to PSB and a radical alternative to the tradition of a single PSB network. Its establishment was a response to the state-owned but corporatized TVNZ which was largely unaccountable to its public. Yet NZoA has been criticized of interpreting the concept of PSB in a rather narrow sense and of not setting standards in a broad range of TV programming (Bardoel and d'Haenens, 2008).

The main advantages of the book are firstly that it provides valuable, insightful, comparative and updated information on the status and performance of public TV in individual countries, based both on desk-based research and interviews undertaken with experts in the field. Secondly, the work presents in a comprehensive manner the main universal challenges facing contemporary PSB: cultural fragmentation that challenges the efficacy of a comprehensive PSB remit, new media technologies that facilitate multiple channels and allow niche services that might erode social consensus, and the widespread endorsement of neoliberal policies prioritising market forces. Thirdly, the book explores the process of reinvention of television across countries, ranging from a fair investment in digital technologies and particularly digital terrestrial television which allows the delivery of public service content across multiple channels and platforms, to revolutionising the distribution of audiovisual content online which may provide more substantial social frameworks for social networking and user-generated content, to promoting national cultural product in the global marketplace.

The central argument of the book is that the reinvention of public institutions is visible both where they launch digital services that expose citizens to mainstream and niche viewpoints, and where their portal sites serve as grand central point addressing the social risks of fragmentation. The main drawback of the volume is that it attempts to analyse the reinvention of television through a limited number of case studies (six in total) from across just four English speaking counties, which certainly limits the geographical scope of the market. As the author notes, ‘the broadcasters selected represent variously unique qualities that stem from distinctiveness in governance, structure, programming, funding and socio-cultural context’ (p. 4). True, each of the systems represented in the book has special characteristics, but the limited number of cases alongside the Anglo-Saxon bias may not allow the drawing of representative conclusions. Are the challenges facing broadcasters from large countries similar to those facing broadcasters in small territories? Do the characteristics of Eastern/Central EU countries impose specific difficulties to the development of PSM in these contexts? These are some of the questions that are not addressed in this volume, although to be fair to the author, one cannot expect a single volume to cover all aspects of a particular topic. After all, my 2007 monograph covered no more than six countries.

The other point is that the work is primarily concerned with an exploration of empirical national case studies and meanwhile makes little effort to blend theoretical critical analysis with empiricism. While the book provides comprehensive coverage of a small range of national cases, it largely lacks well-argued, independent and critical perspectives on the issue of PSM, despite promising remarks in the introductory part. True, chapters 8 and 9 attempt to analyse the themes of diversity, trust and accountability of PSM, but only to a limited extent. In addition, these chapters do not contribute much to originality as they largely draw on earlier articles written by the author, as it is stated by the author herself.

Having said that, the book is well-structured, well-written and provides a comprehensive bibliography in the end. Drawing on fifty interviews with media industry and academic specialists it offers superior insights into the constraints and possibilities of the public service system and its prospects for survival in the age of on-demand media in the countries under scrutiny. It is therefore envisaged to make a valuable contribution and nicely complement the existing relevant literature in the field.

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