

## INTRODUCTION

### Public Service Broadcasting in the Context of Globalization<sup>1</sup>

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**T**he changing environment of broadcasting is on various agendas, from the Council of Europe to the numerous national states grappling with the challenges to their national communications systems; and from the G7 and its grand design for a global information highway to the burgeoning number of non-governmental organizations active in the field of mass communication. At the heart of these debates is the question of the present and future status of public service broadcasting.

Meeting in Prague in December 1994, the Council of Europe's Fourth European Ministerial Conference on Mass Media Policy identified the safeguarding of independent, appropriately funded public service broadcasting institutions as essential to the functioning of the media in a democratic society. The council's draft resolution on the future of public service broadcasting included a nine-point mission statement reiterating, from a particularly European perspective, the traditional objectives of public service broadcasting.<sup>2</sup>

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Such statements, for all their worth, also point to the obstacles faced by conventional public service broadcasting in the current global context. In the contemporary debates on the changing environment of mass communication, there is no shortage of earnest outlines of goals and objectives for media with aims other than business or propaganda. There is no shortage of goodwill or good ideas, but the realization of the ideals of public service broadcasting is rendered problematic by a series of political, economic, technological, ideological, and developmental constraints.

In many parts of the world, the problem is still totalitarianism and the equation of the public interest with the particular interests of the national state. Where totalitarianism has been overcome, the problems facing media in the transition to democracy are often the best example of the problems of democratization generally. In eastern Europe, in most of Africa, and in much of the rest of the "transitional" world, public service broadcasting is a distant ideal, not a working reality. In those countries where the leadership has embraced that ideal, the lack of a receptive political and professional culture is often the next hurdle. Where neo-totalitarian or neo-colonial governments seek to retain power at all cost, the lack of autonomy of national media is also a problem of political will.

In the heartland of traditional public service broadcasting, western Europe (and in countries with similar systems such as Canada, Australia, and Japan) the trend toward liberalization and market reform mixed with a lack of official faith in the continued importance of public service broadcasting leads to a syndrome where precious experience is being washed away. Problems of financing, mandate, and interpretations of purpose are all indications of a more fundamental problem of political will.

National peculiarities apart, questions concerning the structures of broadcasting are increasingly global ones. In the new broadcasting environment, the issue of public service broadcasting can be reduced to this: What social and cultural goals attributed to broadcasting require a specially mandated, non-commercially driven organization, publicly owned, publicly funded to the extent necessary, and publicly accountable?

Broadcasters, politicians, media professionals and creative people, community activists, and scholars worldwide are wrestling with this question today. While the diagnosis is global, the prescriptions are necessarily context-specific. When we put them together, however, we find in the range of models, examples, and ways of framing the issues the basis for a global portrait of the issues and a sketch of a solution.

Fifteen years ago, when the International Commission on the Study of Communication Problems chaired by the late Sean MacBride reported to UNESCO, the structure of the world's broadcasting systems was a relatively unproblematic affair. The subject occupied a mere two pages in the MacBride Report, where public service broadcasting did not even require a separate index entry (UNESCO1980).

In 1980, national broadcasting systems could be typed according to the prevailing political systems in each of the countries concerned. Most European countries had a single monopoly broadcaster – although operating according to very different sets of principles in the west and in the east. In Africa, too, national broadcasting was strictly government – owned and – operated. At the other extreme, the American free enterprise model of broadcasting was operational in most of Asia and the Americas (with notable exceptions). The number of countries with “mixed” systems was small (the MacBride report mentioned the United Kingdom (UK), Japan, Australia, Canada, and Finland). Where it existed, community broadcasting was a strictly local, marginalized phenomenon with few links to the mainstream. In 1980, the letters CNN did not have the evocative authority they do today.<sup>3</sup>

Since that time – need we say it? – the world has changed. The evolution of broadcasting has been marked by three sets of parallel developments: (1) the explosion in channel capacity and disappearance of audiovisual borders made possible by new technology; (2) the disintegration of the state broadcasting model with the collapse of the socialist bloc and the move toward democratization in various parts of the world; and (3) the upsurge in market broadcasting and the introduction of mixed broadcasting systems in the countries with former public service monopolies.

Far from distinct from one another, these phenomena are in complex interrelationship with respect to the emergence of new forms of broadcasting, locally, nationally, and internationally. The consolidation of a world broadcasting market has been abetted by the collapse of the iron curtain, just as that process was accelerated by the technological obsolescence of attempts to control access to information and the means of communication.

At the same time, the re-evaluation of welfare capitalism – spurred on by an uneasy marriage of ideological and economic considerations – coinciding with the arrival of the new generation of broadcasting technologies has further strengthened the market model and undermined the view that broadcasting is a sphere of activity analogous to education or health care – that is to say, a primarily social and cultural rather than an economic or political activity (see Servaes 1993: 327).<sup>4</sup>

Until the 1980s, television was widespread mainly in the OECD and Soviet bloc countries.<sup>5</sup> Since then, the number of sets has tripled, although it is still unevenly distributed, and the number of satellite stations has gone from zero to 300 (although there are still only two really global channels: Turner’s CNN and Viacom’s MTV).<sup>6</sup> In 1980, there were 40 channels in Europe; today there are 150.

In 1993, every American home paid \$30 per month for its “free” television, via the cost of advertising passed on to consumers; the new broadcasting industry economics will be a dog’s breakfast of advertising, subscription, and pay-per-view. However, people watch only around seven channels, so the more choice there is, the less likely it is that any particular one will be among them, which is not heartening news for broadcasters.

One of the characteristics of the current context which easily leads to confusion is the blurring of distinctions between formerly distinct activities: broadcasting and narrowcasting; broadcasting and telecommunication; and public and private broadcasting. The recent policy debates surrounding the information highway have seen a flurry of new alliances and repositioning of broadcasting industry players nationally and internationally, private and public. Broadcasting will henceforth be evolving in a more complex multimedia environment, and its previous subdivisions into distinct "domains" such as terrestrial, cable, and satellite broadcasting are quickly becoming obsolete. Questions concerning the future of public service broadcasting will be played out and resolved in a broader policy framework. This framework consists of both greater constraints as well as new possibilities, but the principal normative question will remain: What should be the public function of broadcasting in a democracy? (van Cuilenburg and Slaa 1993).

The context of technological convergence and the accompanying policy debates can help to clarify the concept of public service with respect to media generally and, hence, to develop a more appropriate conception of public service broadcasting. In telecommunication, the concept of universal public service has been much more clear and straightforward than in broadcasting. The principle of universality has been tied to the operational provision of affordable access (not an issue in broadcasting as long as the main means of transmission was over-the-air, but increasingly so with the addition of various tiers of chargeable services).

The displacement of universal service by subscriber-based and pay-per view services is the strongest factor favouring a shift toward the consumer model in broadcasting and needs to be countered by policy measures and institutional mechanisms to promote the democratic function of broadcasting. This can only come about through a rethinking of what we mean by public service broadcasting.

Broadcasting may be the quintessential cultural industry (Sinclair 1994); it is increasingly the closest thing we have to a universal cultural form (Collins 1990). Until recently, "national" broadcasting systems were seen to be the main vehicles through which the national culture was sure to be reflected and, with the obvious exception of the United States, success in this respect was tied to a national *public* broadcasting system. National broadcasting systems are now, for the most part, more broadly constituted and, at the same time, national broadcasters control a decreasing share of every country's audiovisual space (Caron and Juneau 1992). But are their messages any less prominent in national consciousness? This question is an extremely difficult one to answer with any degree of certainty.

One important aspect of this question is to recognize the problematic nature of national identity itself. Identity today is increasingly multifaceted, and national identity is a particularly contested issue in many countries, even among some of the most politically stable. This poses another challenge to broadcasting, which has traditionally been organized at the national level. Where public broadcasting has been well-established, it has almost invariably been through the presence of a strong, often highly centralized national pub-

lic broadcaster. It is not only the external pressures of globalization that challenge this model today, but also the internal pressures brought about by the fragmentation of traditional notions of nationhood (see Pietersee 1994). If public service broadcasting is to speak to the real concerns of its public, it has to rethink its approach to one of its most cherished objectives: the cementing of national unity. This task may be especially difficult for politicians to accept.

Traditionally, public service broadcasting has been expected to represent the national as opposed to the foreign. It may be time to refocus these conceptual categories in terms of the local and the global. There is a certain universal appeal to the products of Hollywood-based mass culture – that is, ultimately, the only possible explanation for their success. At the same time, specific publics will be interested in specific types of broadcasting programming. The global cultural industry recognizes this by developing products targeted to “niche markets.” Public broadcasting has a different role, principally by conceiving its audience as a public rather than a market. Some programmes may speak to a particular national public, but on any given national territory there will be less-than-national broadcasting needs to be fulfilled. National networks, publicly or privately owned, can no longer be expected to be forces of cohesion; they can, however, be highly effective distribution systems for programmes of importance to the communities they serve. For this to occur, we need a new definition of public service broadcasting suitable to a new public culture, global in scope and experienced locally.

The idea of public service broadcasting is not intrinsically tied to that of nationhood over that of the public, nor is broadcasting, as a form of communication, tied necessarily to community (see Carey 1989). Therefore, we need to take a fresh look at public service broadcasting in the context of a changing role for the still present, still formidable (for lack of a structure to replace it) nation state. As the alternative to the state becomes the market, the alternative to public service broadcasting is constructed as private sector broadcasting; this parallel is logically flawed as well as politically short-sighted. The globalization of markets is both global and local (global products are usually produced in a single place, distributed worldwide and consumed locally, everywhere). As the nation state is left marooned between the global and the particular (Ellis 1994), so is public service broadcasting, which might explain the success of specialty services and the economies of scale justified by global products in search of small local markets. It is false to assume, however, that there is no longer a social need for public service broadcasting; it rather demands redefinition, for as John Ellis (1994) has stated, only public service broadcasting “puts a social agenda before a market agenda.”

## What is Public Service Broadcasting?

In this context, the idea of public service broadcasting stands out more boldly than any of the existing structures set up to manage broadcasting in its name.

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It is rooted in the enlightenment notion of the public and of a public space in which social and political life democratically unfolds (Habermas 1989), as well as in the tradition of independent, publicly organized broadcasting organizations created to deliver radio programmes to audiences in the period between the two world wars.

In some cases, public service broadcasting refers to one or more institutions, while in others it is an ideal (Syvertsen 1992). Thus, in some countries, public service broadcasting refers to a particular organization or sector of the broadcasting system, while in others the entire system may be viewed as a public service. In some cases, public service broadcasting is seen as a developmental goal to be achieved. While in many cases public service broadcasting may indeed be in "crisis" (see Rowland and Tracey 1990), the ideal that it represents is certainly very much alive.

It is unnecessary here to review the origins of public service broadcasting, except to recall that both the institution and the ideal (or a certain conception of it) originated in the experience of the BBC and its founder Sir John Reith (see McDonnell 1991). The BBC still stands as the quintessential model of public service broadcasting worldwide, particularly in the view of national governments seeking to establish or to revitalize their broadcasting systems. It is indeed often impossible to separate the idea from the practical example of the institution, but do that we must. While the BBC is probably still the most successful example of a national public service broadcaster, and the UK among the most successful at anticipating and adapting to the new context of broadcasting, it is not necessarily an appropriate or easily transportable model for many situations. The ideal, on the other hand, is a universal one – to the extent that democratic values can be said to be universal.

There is no easy answer to the question of what public service broadcasting is, but a reasonably thorough attempt was made by the UK's now defunct Broadcasting Research Unit (BRU), in a pamphlet first published in 1985 (BRU 1985/1988. See also Barnett and Docherty 1991). The BRU document presented those elements of public service broadcasting which "should be retained within whatever systems are devised to provide broadcasting as new communications technologies come into use. It is not therefore a defence of the existing public-service (broadcasting) institutions as they are today or as they may become; it is concerned with *the whole landscape*" (p.i, emphasis added).

The BRU approach supported the view that broadcasting should be seen as a comprehensive environment. Its main principles can be summarized as follows:

- (1) universal accessibility (geographic);
- (2) universal appeal (general tastes and interests);
- (3) particular attention to minorities;
- (4) contribution to sense of national identity and community;
- (5) distance from vested interests;
- (6) direct funding and universality of payment;
- (7) competition in good programming rather than for numbers; and
- (8) guidelines that liberate rather than restrict programme makers.

As public service characteristics, this list also points to the inherent pitfalls of such an exercise. While some of the characteristics (eg., accessibility) are straightforward enough, certain others (eg., contribution to a sense of national identity) are highly problematic, insofar as in many states (including the British) the question of nationhood itself is not fully resolved. Distance from vested interests implies an ideal situation where the broadcasting institutions do not have their own vested interests. A notion such as good programming begs the question of taste: Good, according to whom?

The real problem, however, is not how to improve the list but rather how to apply any such set of principles. Indeed, the exercise points to a need to return to even more fundamental values regarding broadcasting and its role in society (see Blumler 1992). It also points to the need to associate the public to the various aspects of broadcasting activity. Robin Foster, reporting to the David Hume Institute in 1992, suggested that viewers and listeners be consulted regarding the level of resources to be put into particular types of programmes – a proposal not likely to be endearing to broadcasters or policy makers, although logical and coherent with respect to both public policy objectives for broadcasting and the prevailing discourse of consumer sovereignty. “As an input into determining the public broadcasting contract, ways should be found of establishing what the *public* wants public broadcasting to be; giving the public involvement in deciding what is provided” (Foster 1992: 31). However, what do we mean by “the public”?

Many authors have endeavoured to reproblematicize and redefine our conception of the public in light of the changing nature of late twentieth century mass media (See eg., Curran 1991; Garnham 1992; Dahlgren 1994; Venturelli 1994). If these changes are relatively straightforward for certain actors in the sphere of broadcasting – advertisers, for example, who conceive of their target as a market, or ratings-driven broadcasters who quantify it as an audience – it is not so evident for public service broadcasters and the makers of public policy. “Broadcasting takes place in the public sphere and we come to it both as consumers and as citizens,” writes Anthony Smith (1991): “Where commercial broadcasting is linked to the social world by means of markets, public service derives its legitimacy from the role its viewers play as citizens.”

The notion of citizenship has severe implications for broadcasting. Citizenship can not be passive. Citizenship is political. Citizenship evokes the image of Tom Paine and the unfinished struggle for “liberty, equality, fraternity” (Keane 1991 1994). When public service broadcasting is linked to the idea of citizenship, it must logically be decoupled from the authoritarian power of the state. At the same time, it can not be commodified. It is not a question of principle but of purpose. The main point of distinction between public service and private sector broadcasting is that the latter is *only* commercially driven, while the former, despite the various shapes and forms it assumes from time to time and place to place, is necessarily propelled by a different logic.

It is critical to understand the subtleties inherent in this distinction. Within the realm of conventional public broadcasting there are two schools of

Public broadcasting is a public good,<sup>7</sup> but what makes it so is not immediately self-evident, which is what Yves Achille (1994) means when he writes that public service broadcasting is suffering from a crisis of identity. Achille refers to a triple crisis of public service broadcasting: identity, financing, and functioning. If the identity crisis could be resolved, the financial problem – essentially a question of political will – could then be addressed. As to the functional question, in countries with an established public service broadcasting tradition, nothing less than a zero-based review of existing institutional structures can bring public service broadcasting into the twenty-first century with a hope of building public and political support for its new role (see also Atkinson 1993; Paracuellos 1993; Achille and Miège 1994). On the other hand, to many analysts, a public broadcasting system with a mixed ownership structure is still a far preferable guarantee of broadcasting pluralism and diversity than the private enterprise model that is held up as its alternative (Syvertsen 1994).

In a broadcasting environment that treats the public as a body of clients or consumers, the role of public broadcasting is to address people as citizens. Public broadcasting can do this only if it is seen as an instrument of social and cultural development, rather than as a marginal alternative service on the periphery of a vast cultural industry (see Raboy, Bernier, Sauvageau, and Atkinson 1994).<sup>8</sup> This change implies a freshly conceived role for the state, which must see itself more as architect than as engineer; that is to say, the role of the state is to design and facilitate the functioning of a multifaceted national broadcasting system, rather than as the directive patron of a dedicated national broadcaster.

“The crucial choice,” as Graham Murdock has written, “is not, as many commentators suppose, between state licensing and control on the one side and minimally regulated market mechanisms on the other. It is between policies designed to reinvigorate public communications systems which are relatively independent of both the state and the market, and policies which aim to marginalise or eradicate them” (Murdock 1992: 18). The object is to create “a new kind of public communicative space, rooted in a constructive engagement with emerging patterns of political and cultural diversity” (Murdock 1992: 40).<sup>9</sup>

One of the most difficult conceptual new fields to open is that which seeks to look beyond the exclusivity of traditional institutions to imagine new vehicles for meeting public service objectives. Here, a progressive approach to strategic intervention in public broadcasting could take a page from experiences with sustainable development. Development theory, once built around the idea that the introduction of full-blown communication systems to traditional societies would hasten “modernization” and hence economic, social, and political development, has gradually adjusted to the notion that small-scale horizontal communication operating at the grassroots level can be more beneficial in fostering autonomy and endogenous development (see O Siochru 1992). At the same time, however, this does not mean abandoning the demand for communication equality between rich and poor (Raboy and Bruck 1989).



thought regarding commercial activity. One has it that commercial and public service objectives are wholly incompatible and cannot be combined within a single service. The other view is that they can coexist, and public and private broadcasting can compete in the advertising marketplace to the mutual benefit of both. I would like to suggest that there is a third conceptual and structural approach to this question: Assuming that certain activities of broadcasting can be financed commercially and others can not, why not redistribute the benefits of the commercial sector to finance the non-commercial sector? This systemic approach is partially recognized in some countries which legally define their national broadcasting systems as public services, thus legitimating the regulatory intervention of the state; however, it is rarely operationalized through the appropriation of the fruit of lucrative activity to subsidize the rest. It is just assumed – with no basis in logic, only in ideology – that commercially viable broadcasting should be left in the private sector and unprofitable broadcasting activity should be subsidized some other way. On the other hand, one could just as logically argue that, insofar as the social basis of broadcasting is public service, the profits of the lucrative sector should be redistributed within the system. If this is an unlikely formula, it is not because of any conceptual flaw, but because of broadcasting's capture by private industry.

Indeed, the leaders of the global broadcasting industry have turned this idea on its head by claiming that the product they are selling is a public service. As early as 1960, CBS executive Frank Stanton proclaimed that “a program in which a large part of the audience is interested is by that very fact... in the public interest” (quoted in Friendly 1967: 291). More recently, Rupert Murdoch has stated: “Anybody who, within the law of the land, provides a service which the public wants at a price it can afford is providing a public service” (quoted in Ellis 1994: 1). To the extent that “the public” is just another way of describing the aggregate consumer market for broadcasting, they are of course correct, which is why, once again, it is important to get the terminology straight. Meanwhile, the idea of public service broadcasting has been undermined by the erosion of the public commitment to the service that has been provided by existing public broadcasting institutions. In many cases, this erosion has been egged on by the abuse of the term by national governments seeking to use broadcasting for a higher national purpose, claiming that this is in the public interest.

To the contrary, the role of public service broadcasting, as Ellis points out, is to provide a space in which “the emerging culture of multiple identities can negotiate its antagonisms” (Ellis 1994: 14), not cater to accentuating difference, as commercial multichannel broadcasting has a tendency to do. Exploring new possibilities for consensus rather than imposing it is the opposite of the former role of public service broadcasting – which goes quite a way to explaining why the traditional strategies of the major national public service broadcasters no longer work and why they are in trouble as they seek to accommodate a new *raison d'être*. “We have been so preoccupied by the challenges to Public Service Broadcasting from within broadcasting that we have failed to notice the profound changes that have taken place in the public whom broadcasting is supposed to serve” (Ellis 1994: 16).

A's work could be subsidized by the profits generated by Corporation B. Thanks to the availability of multiple channels, video recording, and playback technology, the public interest objectives of both citizenship and consumer sovereignty could be met without the information and resource loss brought on by public-private competition. Yet there would be room in such a system for a private sector of regulated carriers and competitive content providers. There would also be room for a variety of public services from the national to the local levels.

Since the early 1980s, broadcasting has been a site of ideological conflict between opposing models of society and a clash of concepts of democracy as well as notions of culture and economics (Rowland and Tracey 1990). According to one side in this conflict, the general interest demands that there be public institutions mandated to intervene strategically to guarantee quality, diversity, and independence in broadcasting that other institutional arrangements can not ensure; the other view holds that regulation and public policy regarding media are neither necessary nor legitimate.

Advocates of the public service approach to broadcasting must demonstrate concretely what institutional arrangements can be expected to meet their objectives and why these are possible only through regulation and public policy (see Hoffmann-Riem 1992). First of all, they must demonstrate what public service broadcasting should do in the new broadcasting environment and, especially, what distinguishes public from private sector broadcasting (see eg., Wolton 1992; Chaniac and Jézéquel 1993).

Private broadcasting, it may be argued, can also fulfil public service goals. However, it is unlikely that it would bother to try if not pushed in that direction by the competition and example of public broadcasters. This likelihood points to one of the most subtle arguments in favour of public broadcasting: public broadcasting sets the overall tone of the market, acts as a catalyst and serves as an example to all broadcasting services (Hultén 1995). It also points to the need to conceptualize broadcasting as an ecological environment, requiring a healthy diet of balanced offerings as well as nurturing and protection (Raboy 1993). Balance has until recently been guaranteed by the distinction between public and private services, but it is now threatened by two phenomena: the systemic disequilibrium shifting strongly toward private commercial services and the effects of commercialization on public services.

This shift can only be counter balanced by an opposite one: creation of more public service mandated organizations and removal of the pressure to meet commercial criteria. Overriding this is the legitimization of legally framing broadcasting as a public service and, consequently, considering the overall broadcasting framework as a public service environment. It is at this level that one should look at political developments such as the Council of Europe resolution referred to at the start of this essay. One has to go further than foresee a specific role for public service institutions; however, it is private sector broadcasting that should be conceptualized as the complementary form, providing services that public institutions can afford to abandon, not

