

Rethinking Broadcasting Policy in a Global Media Environment

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Once upon a time, states and governments representing the public interest could – if they wished – exercise a certain constraining influence on the appetite of commercial media. Conventional wisdom has it that era is past, although a healthy synergy still exists in many parts of the world between public policy instruments and objectives in the cultural sphere. Nonetheless, in the year 2002, it is useful – indeed imperative – to situate the future of the very idea of public service media in a global context.

Great national institutions in the heartland of public service broadcasting – western Europe, Canada, Japan, Australia – continue to occupy significant space in the media landscape. In the new democracies of Africa, Asia and central and eastern Europe, the public broadcasting model is seriously examined as an alternative to its strictly commercial counterpart. Public broadcasting no longer enjoys monopoly status, is no longer clearly distinguishable from the rest, but it remains an important reminder of the social and cultural possibilities of the media, in an age when the dominant thrust is overwhelmingly oriented towards consumerism (cf. Raboy 1996).

In this new, increasingly seamless global communication environment, public broadcasting is more than an outmoded utopian dream: It can be seen as a model for public policy development with respect to media in the context of globalization, new technologies and shifting terrains of audience demographics, loyalties and behavior patterns.

This chapter explores this issue, looking at some of its theoretical foundations as well as how it is playing out in actual policy sites. My goal is to validate the idea that it is time to start thinking about transnational and global approaches to public media. I shall begin by recalling some aspects of the concept of public broadcasting.

The Idea of the Public

In a remarkable article published in the only issue of a short-lived Canadian journal in 1960, an adult education activist named Alan Thomas explored the distinctions between three notions of the same thing: the audience, the market, and the public (Thomas, 1960). Thomas reflected that the evolution of Canadian broadcasting had been dominated by the interaction between these different ways of describing the receiving end of broadcasting.

The market, Thomas noted, is characterized by attention to things rather than people; in the name of freedom of enterprise, it is attentive to the interests of “private” operators; in Canada, the market by nature tended to be continental rather than national, “and its uncontrolled operations have been seen as hostile to the existence of Canada as a national entity” (p. 22).

The public, on the other hand, is identified with the state and the community; Canada’s problem was how to create a genuine public out of separate geographic (as well as linguistic and cultural) communities: “The whole history of Canada has been a conflict between the public which is Canadian and the market which has been predominantly American” (p. 24). There was a conflict here between the classical Athenian notion of the public and the public that had developed with the age of broadcasting.

The audience is something else again, Thomas wrote. Considered passive, the audience is made up of members of a public, as well as a potential market, when they are tuned in. Unlike the public or the market, the audience is wholly a creation of broadcasting – it does not exist without it.

The crux of Thomas’ argument was that media tend to address people as members of an audience, not a public; media *policy*, however, attempts to restore the balance in broadcasting where market considerations have outstripped public ones in their relations with the audience. Audience and market tend to create a state of equilibrium. Restoring the role of the public requires some kind of intervention to counteract that.

Around the same time, in the U.S., the critical sociologist C. Wright Mills was tying the classical notion of the public to the critique of mass society, and saw a pivotal role being played by changing forms of communication. In 1956, analyzing the rise of the American ‘power elite’, Mills wrote that it “rests upon, and in some ways is part of, the transformation of the publics of America into a mass society” (Mills 1956 [1959]: 297).

The idea of the public in a context of globalization can be viewed through a similar lens. In *The Power Elite*, Mills recalled that the most important feature of “the public of opinion” that had arisen with the democratic middle class, was “the free ebb and flow of discussion” and the possibility of ‘answering back’ through autonomous organs of public opinion, actively realized within the established democratic institutions of power. (Thomas had written that one way of enhancing the role of the public was to create stronger two-way channels between producer and audience). The image of this clas-

sical democratic public was already something of an illusion in the 1950s America of which Mills wrote.

Mills reviewed the political process through which this had come about: the arrival of mass democracy upset the democratic society of publics, by placing the sovereignty of 'the people' over that of the individual. The harmony of interests assumed by the democratic society of publics had given way to the doctrine of class struggle. The idea of rational decisions based on public discussion was bypassed by the insistence on a need for experts, and by the notion of irrational man.

Mills then made a clear distinction between the public and the mass, a distinction he tied explicitly to the role of media. Nearly fifty years later, one can read in this work an opposition of the realities of conventional mass media and the promise or potential of the best offered by the so-called 'new media'. Or, one can read it as an opposition between the ideal and the reality of conventional nationally-based public service broadcasting, as Thomas might have. Mills was not talking about public broadcasting, and we have no evidence that he was even particularly aware of it. But his text, read alongside that of his contemporary, Thomas, allows us to think about the democratic possibilities of a new public service media model, grounded in the technological and geopolitical context of the 2000s.

The idea of public broadcasting

Today's notion of the public collides and overlaps with other contested, still useful, notions that need to be re-problematized: notions such as community, nation, citizen, and consumer (cf. Yudice 1995). These concepts are tied together insofar as they are all possible discourses of legitimation for public policy intervention in various spheres of human activity, particularly for national states (cf. Garnham 2000).

The idea of the public, however, is a particularly useful construct when it comes to legitimating policy intervention with respect to media and communication (cf. Syvertsen 1999). What are the new discourses on public media in an age of global politics and instantaneous communication (cf. Graham and Davies 1997)? Can we speak of promoting and protecting normative values with respect to new media such as the Internet (cf. Grainger 1999)? Can we translate pre-globalization notions of the public, confined within the borders of national states, to anything approaching a transnational or global public sphere (cf. Sparks 1998; also Venturelli 1993)? Can there be such a thing as cultural rights and entitlements beyond the framework of the national welfare state (cf. Calabrese and Burgelman 1998)?

National peculiarities aside, questions concerning media structures 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 (cf. World Radio and Television Council 2000; Tongue 1996; Atkinson 1997)?

Broadcasters, politicians, media professionals and creative people, community activists, and scholars worldwide were wrestling with this question in the early 2000s. While the diagnosis is global, the prescriptions are necessarily context-specific. When we put them together, however, we find the basis for a global portrait and a sketch of a solution in the range of models, examples and ways of framing the issues.

The context of technological convergence and the accompanying policy debates can help to further 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, for example, 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 favoring a shift towards the consumer model in broadcasting and proponents of public broadcasting feel that this 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.

For example, 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. Global cultural industries recognize this by developing products targeted to 'niche markets'. Public broadcasting has a different role, which it seeks to fulfil principally by conceiving of its audience as a public rather than a market. Some programs 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 can no longer be expected to be forces of cohesion; they can, however, be highly effective distribution systems for programs of importance to the communities they serve. For this to occur, public service broadcasting needs to be redefined in terms suitable to a new public culture, global in scope and experienced locally.

Nothing in the idea of public service broadcasting ties it intrinsically to that of nationhood. It is, however, necessarily linked to notions of community. In order to flourish in the future, public service broadcasting will need to be reconceptualized in the context of a changing role for the still-present, still formidable nation state. As the alternative to the state becomes the market, the alternative to national public service broadcasting has been constructed as private sector broadcasting; but this parallel is logically flawed as well as

politically shortsighted. The globalization of markets is both global and local, in that global products are usually produced according to a common standard, distributed worldwide and consumed locally, everywhere. As the nation state struggles to find its way in this new environment, so does public service broadcasting. It is false to assume, however, that there is no longer a need for public service broadcasting, for this is at present the only established medium that can still be said to place social and cultural concerns before the imperatives of the marketplace.

Today, despite the rapid move towards globalization, broadcasting is still legally constituted within the confines of national borders. Every national government is at some point faced with making basic decisions about broadcasting, if only to consider the allocation of frequencies to which it is entitled by international agreements. The immediate result of these decisions is a *national broadcasting system* in every country, made up of one or more component parts.

One encounters a variety of existing broadcasting institutions in this global environment. Despite a great variation from one country to the next, however, there are only three basic types of national system. Each one, while possibly encompassing different institutions, is built around a 'core' in which a particular institutional form is dominant. I call these three main types 'public service core systems', 'private enterprise core systems', and 'state core systems' (Raboy 1997).

Most of the countries we think about when we talk about public broadcasting in the conventional sense have established public service core systems. These are the systems in which companies like the BBC (UK), CBC (Canada), ABC (Australia) and so forth have flourished over the years. These are also the countries in which the question of financing has been most difficult recently. For obvious reasons, we have all been anxiously watching the evolution of these broadcasters and their efforts to adapt to the challenges of the new environment.

Public broadcasting has been relatively underdeveloped in those countries with private enterprise core systems, such as the USA, where public broadcasting was never intended to be the central component of the system. In private enterprise core systems, public broadcasting has been positioned as a marginal 'alternative' to commercial broadcasting.

The state core systems include the 'residual' systems of countries which have not yet broken with the tradition of a single, monolithic national broadcaster, as well as 'emergent' systems which, although built around a state-owned and controlled broadcaster, are opening up to alternative commercial and community voices, such as one finds in parts of Asia and Africa where democratization is on the agenda. They also include most of the former Soviet-bloc countries, which can be described as 'transitional', insofar as they seem to be inclined towards the existing dominant models.

This said, I think the most important thing to recognize now is that, in the context of globalization, *all of these hitherto national systems are merging*

into a single global system made up of a mix of public, private and other types of broadcasters. As an increasingly transnational political system emerges, new cross-border public service media are beginning to emerge, buttressed by the existing national frameworks. Television services such as TV5 and ARTE are examples of this. Associations of community radio broadcasters, video makers, and progressive Internauts abound at other points of the spectrum. The point is this: In a system that is predominantly influenced by market forces, an important place should be reserved for institutions that promote the cultural development on which the quality of democratic public life depends. This is a political project that can be approached from a perspective of media policy. In the very near future we need to begin paying a lot more attention to the *global ecology of broadcasting* as a public service environment.

Transcending the national

In light of the growing commercialization of all media, public broadcasting continues to designate a strong value of social worth, the 'last best hope' for socially purposeful media acting in the public interest. But traditional public service broadcasters are all facing pressure to diversify funding sources and increase mass-market programming at the very time that all broadcasters' market shares are inevitably in decline (due to the sheer multiplicity of channels). Competition for revenues, meanwhile, both public and commercial, is more intense than ever (cf. McKinsey & Company 1999; Graham et al 1999).

It is now apparent that, in order to survive, every broadcaster needs to find a place for itself within an overall broadcasting system that is simultaneously both local and global. There is still no substitute for independent, publicly-funded public service broadcasting organizations, as the Council of Europe acknowledged in 1994 when it identified public broadcasting as essential to the healthy functioning of the media in a democratic society (Council of Europe 1994)¹. But at the systemic level there is an important shift underway: increasingly, public authorities are looking towards the capacity of national broadcasting systems *as a whole* to meet public interest goals and objectives.

The inclusion of a European Protocol in favor of public service broadcasting in the 1997 Amsterdam Treaty was an important step in this direction (Council of the European Union 1997). This was one of the first concrete transnational agreements to support non-commercial practices in the sphere of culture. It made the point that despite the emphasis on markets and trade in international agreements, national governments could still legitimately make policies and promote cultural institutions that would foster values and objectives outside the sphere of commerce. Not only did this declaration demonstrate the power of politicians to resist commercial pressures, it was the first and to this date most substantial example of a cultural

ception to the new rules of deregulation that are being negotiated and applied by transnational authorities. It is no coincidence that this occurred in the area of public broadcasting. It is both an interesting policy model and a harbinger of the possible usefulness of the public broadcasting model in developing new public media forms in the transnational, convergence-driven media environment.

The EU protocol considers "that the system of public broadcasting in the Member States (of the European Union) is directly related to the democratic, social and cultural needs of each society and to the need to preserve media pluralism". This in itself is important in terms of legitimation of public service broadcasting at a time when its basis is under attack on both ideological and economic grounds. It links public broadcasting to the question of democracy, emphasizes its sociocultural nature as a public service, and underscores the distinctive role of public broadcasting in an otherwise uniformly commercial system.

The European Broadcasting Union remarked that this was "the first time that the role and specific nature of public service broadcasting have been explicitly recognized within the legal framework of the European Union" (European Broadcasting Union 1997: 1). The Protocol represented a political consensus and sent an important signal, according to the EBU, but "the effectiveness of this guarantee will probably depend on a clear, sufficiently broad definition being set out by each Member State of the public service remit conferred upon the public service broadcasting organizations" (p. 1).

Multilateralism

The question of public media has also figured prominently in recent debates at the multilateral level. The World Commission on Culture and Development, created in 1991 by the United Nations and UNESCO, reported to the UNESCO General Assembly in November 1995 (UN/UNESCO, 1995). In a broad review of cultural issues ranging from ethics to the environment, the WCCD proposed an international agenda for developing global policy with respect to cultural development. Several chapters and proposals relating to mass media and new global issues in mass communication were framed by the following question: "*How can the world's growing media capacities be channelled so as to support cultural diversity and democratic discourse?*" (p. 123-7)

The WCCD recognized that while many countries were dealing individually with various important aspects of this question, the time had come for a transfer of emphasis from the national to the international level. While many countries still needed to be incited to put in place or modernize existing national frameworks, a transfer of attention was now justified.

Can we envisage a world public sphere in which there is room for alternative voices? Can the media professionals sit down together with policy-makers and consumers to work out mechanisms that promote access and a diversity of expression despite the acutely competitive environment that drives the media moguls apart? (p. 117)

The WCCD admitted that it did not have ready answers to these questions, but that answers had to be sought through international dialogue. It envisioned “a common ground of public interest on a transnational scale...that different national approaches can be aligned, that broadly acceptable guidelines could be elaborated... that new international rules are not a pipe-dream but could emerge through the forging of transnational alliances across the public and private media space” (p. 117).

In short, “There is room for an international framework that complements national regulatory frameworks” (p. 117).

The WCCD’s international agenda contained a series of specific proposals aimed at “enhancing access, diversity and competition of the international media system”, based on the assertion that the airwaves and space are “part of the global commons, a collective asset that belongs to all humankind” (p. 278). It suggested that the time may have come for commercial media interests that now use the global commons free of charge to contribute to the financing of a more plural media system, where “new revenue could be invested in alternative programming for international distribution” (p. 278). Finally, it called for the United Nations system to explore appropriate global mechanisms analogous to national models of public service broadcasting.

One of the most crucial aspects of this question that needs to be addressed is how to avoid such a discussion becoming yet another debate among states, each representing its own national interest and those of its partners in the private sector, rather than among a global public dealing with global issues, across national borders and in quest of a global public interest.

The “Action Plan for Cultural Policies for Development”, adopted at the 1998 UNESCO-sponsored Intergovernmental Conference on Cultural Policies for Development in Stockholm, provided some important examples that can serve as a starting point for discussion on such matters (UNESCO 1998). The conference endorsed a dozen principles including the fundamental right of access to and participation in cultural life, and the cultural policy objective of establishing structures and securing adequate resources necessary to create an environment conducive to human fulfillment. Among the relevant policy recommendations, the conference asked UNESCO member states to:

- Promote communication networks that serve the cultural and educational needs of the public;
- Consider providing public radio and television;
- Promote space for community, linguistic and minority services;

