Abstract:
European integration, the emergence of a huge international media market and the new possibilities offered by digital technology have only made the importance of public service broadcasters more evident. Public service broadcasters act as guardians of national cultural diversity and they are essential societal institutions in the service of culture and democracy.

European public service broadcasters are essential societal institutions in the service of culture and democracy. European integration, the emergence of a huge international media market and the new possibilities offered by digital technology have only made this more evident. Public service broadcasters act as guardians of national cultural diversity.

Some believe that the cultural goals (preserving and fostering the languages, literature, theatre, music and history) can be served merely by regulating commercial broadcasters, but it is common knowledge that the dual system of public service broadcasting and commercial broadcasting should be not only preserved, but regarded as the preferable solution. As for the public service media, more than ever in the new digital environment their mission will involve a permanent reconciliation of creative requirements and market pressures with attaining socially desirable goals. Owing to their unique role financing mechanism, the stations established to provide public service can boldly introduce new scheduling and programming trends insure a plurality of opinions and motivate the owners of commercial channels to produce their own high-quality programming.

The roles of business dictate that content should be produced with as little money and effort as is possible with regard to maximizing profit even if it means just buying “cheap” entertainment in both senses of the word. This trend runs contrary to the essential interest of any society in preserving its cultural identity and media pluralism, which are and will remain invaluable. Public service broadcasters must be ready to safeguard these values in the new digital environment of the globalised information society. In a modern state, the citizens must have a guaranteed right to quality content regardless of their social position, economic status and access to technical platforms.

Public service broadcasting has an importance beyond cultural diversity. Independent media without ties to specific commercial and political interests are crucial to pluralist political democracy. For millions of Europeans living half a century behind the “Iron Curtain” that was a painful lesson, which has not lost its relevance now, nor will it do so in the future. Although in some European countries public service broadcasters have faced harsh competition and various attacks, in the end they have survived. It might not in itself be an argument for their future preservation.

As logical as the existence and role of public service broadcasters seem to be in the era of broadcasting monopolies, it is equally natural today to question public environment in the media. Is there still a need for public broadcasters? What are their cultural
obligations, political role and remit in the dual European media market. Which changes will new media, the Internet and digital technology bring, and what impact will they have in the media market. What is the role of government and parliaments in relation to the public broadcasters, and what are the implications of European Union regulation on the media market. Do the public media really make a difference, or are they dinosaurs threatened with extinction in the new and unfamiliar media landscape of modern Europe?

Let us take into consideration a recommendation adopted by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe:

“The Assembly deplores the persistent and growing threats to the integrity and special value of culture in a commercial environment. Audiovisual works, because of their cultural value, must not be regarded as a simple commodity and treated like any other service in the framework of the Doha Round of the World Trade Organization (Council of Europe, 2004).”

It is easy to understand this concern if one looks at the following assessment of commercial television in the UK made by the Independent Television Commission:

“It is certainly the case that despite the range of services on multichannel television including services such as Discovery, The History Channel and National Geographic designed to cater for particular interests; some genres are under-supplied. These include arts, education, multicultural programs and investigative current affairs which are generally commercially unattractive to produce. These genres have been hallmarks public service broadcasters.”

Programming that is not made specifically for the audience in a particular country cannot, of course – whatever its other qualities may be- reflect or reinforce its culture. Whichever of the great many definitions of public service broadcasting one chooses to cite, upholding and strengthening national and cultural identity has always been a central objective of this form of broadcasting. Also, whatever the weaknesses of public service broadcasters in particular instance may have been, most have always outperformed commercial broadcasters in the area of cultural programming which embraces all types of music, dance, drama and theatre, literature and poetry, visual arts, design, architecture and the built heritage, film and comedy.

Public service broadcasters also have a special responsibility for bringing the young audience into society and its culture. This is not to say, however, that European Broadcasting Union statistics do not display significant differences between public service broadcasters in various countries in terms of the air time they devote to culture.

Some television broadcasters also operate (sometimes in partnership with others) thematic cultural television channels (digital terrestrial, but mostly satellite), to mention only BBC 4, Mezzo, TVP Kultura in Poland, YLE Teema in Finland and TVR Cultural. It is also possible to find similar commercial channels (e.g. Artsworld on BSkyB), but this is a much rarer occurrence.

When it comes to what is known as “high culture”, the public service broadcaster has a number of obvious obligations: to expose the audience to creative artistic achievements in all areas, to raise the audience’s cultural competence (spread knowledge, understanding and appreciation of the arts) and to promote artistic creation, for example by investing into audiovisual production.

However, that is by no means the end of the story. “The system of public broadcasting in the Member States is directly related to the […] cultural needs of each society”, says the Amsterdam Protocol. Cultural needs go far beyond the presence of “Arts and Culture” in the program schedule.

But “high culture” is not enough: you also need “popular culture”, i.e. the cultural meaning systems and cultural practices of the majority classes in a society, as reflected in a
variety of program genres, prominently including drama and entertainment. This is why the European Parliament in its 1996 Resolution on the role of public service television in a multi-media society stated that: “There will naturally be an overlap in areas of popular programming – sport, comedy, drama, news and current affairs” between public service and commercial broadcasters. And this is why the Council of Europe says that it is the job of public service broadcasting stations to “provide, through their programming a reference point for all members of the public and a factor for social cohesion and integration of all individuals, groups and communities.” Other culturally-related missions of public service broadcasters, as defined by the Council of Europe, include:

► to develop pluralistic, innovatory and varied programming which meets high ethical and quality standards and not to sacrifice the pursuit of quality to market forces;
► to develop and structure program schedules and services of interest to a wide public while being attentive to the needs of minority groups;
► to insure that the programs offered contain a significant proportion of original productions, especially feature films, drama and other creative works, and to have regard to the need to use independent producers and co-operate with the cinema sector;
► to extend the choice available to viewers and listeners by also offering program services which are not normally provided by commercial broadcasters.

All this boils down to one principle: public service broadcasters should make its audience feel at home in its own society and culture, confident in its own national and cultural identity, very much a part of the nation-state.

However, there are two more items on the Council of Europe list: public service broadcasters should “reflect the different philosophical ideas and religious beliefs in society, with the aim of strengthening mutual understanding and tolerance and promoting community relations in pluriethnic and multicultural societies”. And it should “contribute actively to a greater appreciation and dissemination of the diversity of national and European cultural heritage”.

Naturally, public service broadcasting usually carries the main burden of serving cultural, ethnic and linguistic minorities, often in its regional services. CIRCOM Regional, the European Association of Regional Television, lists 376 public regional television stations in 38 European countries, and they all, in one way or another, pursue these objectives.

The Council of Europe Committee of Ministers, in its “declaration on cultural diversity” made very clear the fact that “cultural and audiovisual policies, which promote and respect cultural diversity, are a necessary complement to trade policies. The declaration also states” public service broadcasting plays an important role for the safeguarding of cultural diversity”. Along the same lines, the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity calls for “encouraging the production, safeguarding and dissemination of diversified contents in the media and global information networks and, to the end, promoting the role of public radio and television services in the development of audiovisual productions of good quality, in particular by fostering the establishment of cooperative mechanisms to facilitate their distribution”. The role of public service broadcasting in promoting cultural diversity is also recognized in UNESCO's Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions: it lists “measures aimed at enhancing diversity of the media, including through public service broadcasting” among those which States may take to achieve the goals of the convention.

The job of public service broadcasters in this context is more complicated, however. Yes, from one point of view, its job is – in the EU, but equally elsewhere – to develop “cultural commons”, needed for better mutual knowledge and understanding among member states, and thus for stronger integration. Yet, international integration also
requires a strong and secure sense of identity on the part of peoples involved in this project. Otherwise, the fear of a loss of identity and of outside domination will be a ticking bomb ready to explode at the least opportune moment.

The public interest cannot be served by regarding the cultural obligations of public service broadcasting as secondary and less important. Quite the contrary, they should be given high priority and prominence, as cultural; issues and gaining key importance in forging the future destiny of mankind. On this basis, we can now begin to answer the question of what vision of the cultural role of public service broadcasters is more appropriate in the future. There seems little doubt that if public service broadcasters are negligent about their cultural obligations, or are prevented from discharging them, they will be falling their audience at a time of special need for their contribution to unraveling the cultural dilemmas of our world. At home public service broadcasters are needed to perform all the usual tasks:

- developing the culture of broadcasting;
- providing universal access to culture;
- creating new works;
- supporting, promoting and encouraging creative talent;
- investing in the creative industries;
- facilitating cultural events;
- promoting the national culture (s) overseas.

One important form of discharging public service broadcaster’s cultural obligations is to form partnerships with cultural bodies and institutions, to enhance the impact of its programming, encourage greater participation, underpin audience appreciation, maximize the public value of cultural activity and assist those bodies and institutions, so as to reinforce the public cultural sector in general.

Bibliography:

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