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Who to serve and how? A discourse-theoretical analysis of public service broadcasting as a floating signifier²

Abstract: This talk starts by looking at the different discourses that articulate the notion of the public service, re-analyzing media models as hegemonic (and counter-hegemonic) projects, that fixate particular nodal points, such as public, service, society, culture and politics. Despite the complexities of these models, so-called mainstream media (models) have achieved a fairly high degree of hegemony, although we should not ignore the resistance organised by alternative and community media (models). In a second part of the talk, an analysis of this complexity (illustrated by a case study on Czech alternative mainstream media organisations) is combined with a reflection on how - despite this complexity - we can still uphold the juxtaposition of hegemonic mainstream media and alternative (community) media, which articulate public service in structurally different ways, showing this concept's nature as floating signifier. This is illustrated by a case study of a Cypriot community media organisation, CCMC, whose remit is aimed at dialogue, reconciliation and conflict transformation. In the final part, the talk will focus on the possibilities of creating multi-model landscapes, where publics are served in a wide variety of ways, and where media organisations ground their activities in contextualised articulations of public service.

Key words: *discourse theory, public service, meaning, Council of Europe, community media*

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Koga služiti i kako? Diskursno-teoretska analiza javnog emitera kao plutajućeg označitelja³

Apstrakt: Ovaj razgovor počinje gledanjem na različite diskurse koji artikuliraju pojam javne službe, ponovno analizira medijske modele kao hegemonijske (i protiv-hegemonijske) projekte, koji se fiksiraju na određene čvorne tačke, kao što su javne usluge, društvo, kultura i politika. Uprkos složenosti ovih modela, tzv. *mainstream* mediji (modeli) su postigli relativno visok stepen hegemonije, iako ne smijemo zanemariti otpor koji pružaju alternativni i lokalni mediji (modeli). U drugom dijelu razgovora, analiza ove složenosti (prikazana na studiji slučaja o češkim alternativnim *mainstream* medijskim organizacijama) je kombinovana s osvrtom na to – uprkos ovoj složenosti – još uvijek možemo podržavati suprotstavljanje hegemonije *mainstream* medija i alternativa (lokalnih) medija, koji artikuliraju javnu uslugu u strukturno različite načine, pokazuju prirodu ovog koncepta kao plutajućeg označitelja. Ovu tezu ilustruje studija slučaja kiparske organizacije lokalnih medija, CCMC, čija su ovlašćenja usmjerena na dijalog, pomirenje i transformaciju sukoba. U završnom dijelu, razgovor će se usredsrediti na mogućnosti stvaranja višemodelnog krajolika, u kojem se javnost uslužuje na različite načine, a gdje medijske organizacije, temelje svoje aktivnosti u kontekst artikulacije javne službe.

Ključne riječi: *teorija diskursa, javna služba, značenje, Savjet Evrope, lokalni mediji*

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1. Introduction

Public service, public service broadcasting (PSB) and public service media (PSM) remain on the political, business and social agenda of many societies throughout the world. In Europe, which provides the context for this article, the discussions on PSB remain surprisingly topical, partially because of the economic climate, characterized by a permanent crisis, combined with a strong presence of a neo-liberal ideology, which do not work to the benefit of PSB.

This article wants to have a closer look at the struggles over the *idea* of public service in the field of public service broadcasting. To provide theoretical support for this focus on the idea of public service, a discourse-theoretical backbone is developed, which also allows emphasizing the contingency and political nature of the meanings attributed to the concept of public service. Through this discourse-theoretical backbone, we can study the floating of the signifier public service, and how a traditional articulation of public service is frequently and intensely contested. A discourse-theoretical reading of two (key) Council of Europe documents on PSB allows me to first flesh out this traditional articulation of PS(B), but also allows me to show how –even in these two documents, that wholeheartedly defend PSB- discourses of contestation enter, showing how the signifier public service is indeed floating. In a third part of the article, one particular contestation of the traditional articulation of public service is developed more in detail (also because it is painfully absent in the two Council of Europe documents); namely the re-articulation of public service into community service by the community and alternative media movement. This last part allows providing substance to the final argument of this article, raised in the conclusion, that there are many ways thinkable (and ‘doable’) to serve the people through media.

2. Discourse theory and the floating signifier

One way to make theoretical sense of the contingency of the social is to revert to Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s discourse theory, as it was first (fully) developed in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (HSS - 1985). Laclau and Mouffe’s *HSS* is a highly valuable but complex and hermetic work, which can be read on three interrelated levels. The first level –discourse theory in the strict sense- refers to their social ontology (Howarth, 2000: 17) and to the position they negotiate between materialism and idealism, between structure and agency. A second –and strongly related- level is what Smith (1999: 87) calls Laclau and Mouffe’s political identity theory, which is tributary to conflict theory. Key concepts at this level are social antagonism and hegemony. Here, (more) attention is given to how discourses, identities and their nodal points are constructed and obtain fixity. Laclau and Mouffe’s post-Marxist approach becomes even more evident at the third level, where their plea for a radical democratic politics places them in the field of democratic theory. In this article, I do not want to focus so much on this third level, as the first two levels are more relevant here.

When we zoom in on their social ontology (level 1), then it is hardly a surprising move to start from the way they define discourse, as “a structure in which meaning is constantly negotiated and constructed” (Laclau, 1988: 254). It is important to emphasize here that the notion of discourse, in the broader field of discourse studies, has many meanings, and actually many different meaning. As argued before (Carpentier and De Cleen, 2007) discourse –again, in the particular subfield of discourse theory- is seen as discourse-as-representation, or as discourse-as-ideology, and not so much as discourse-as-language. This implies that discourse is not the text itself, but the structured frameworks of meaning that are *embedded in* the text. Text itself then becomes the materialization or condensation of discourse. Moreover, discourse theory emphasizes how discourse is constructed through social processes (and not so much through mere individual actions). In practice, this means that particular signifiers, or elements, are selected from the field of discursivity, and articulated together, around key signifiers, which are called nodal points. Together, these clusters of meaning form a discourse. It is important to stress that, for Laclau and Mouffe (1985: 105), the process of articulation impacts on the meaning of the articulated elements, which becomes clear in their definition of articulation as “any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice.” Of course, these articulations can change, because signifiers can become disarticulated from (or re-articulated to) a discourse, or because new signifiers can become articulated, a process which affects the entire discourse. This implies that, although discourses are constructed stabilizations of meaning, there is always the possibility of change and contingency embedded within the very way that discourse is structured.

At the second level of their discourse theory, Laclau and Mouffe build on the obvious point that there is not one discourse in society, but a multitude of different discourses, that sometimes engage in struggles in how to provide meaning to our social reality. In order to capture the inherent logics of discourses to obtain dominance over other discourses, Laclau and Mouffe revert to the originally Gramscian notion of hegemony, but reinterpret it. Originally, Gramsci (1999: 261) defined this notion in function of the formation of consent by a particular societal coalition, rather than as the (exclusive) domination of the other, without however excluding a certain form of pressure and repression: “The ‘normal’ exercise of hegemony [...] is characterized by the combination of force and consent variously balancing one another, without force exceeding consent too much.” Howarth (1998: 279) describes Laclau and Mouffe’s interpretation of the hegemony concept as follows: “hegemonic practices are an exemplary form of political articulation which involves linking together different identities into a common project.” The objective of hegemonic projects is to construct and stabilize nodal points that are the basis of a social order, the main aim being to become a social imaginary, or the horizon that “is not one among other objects but an absolute limit which structures a field of intelligibility and is thus the condition of possibility of the emergence of any object” (Laclau, 1990: 64).

Again, contingency is crucial at this level. Hegemonic practices suppose an open system, which makes articulation possible. In a closed system there would only be repetition, and nothing could be hegemonized (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 134). It is through the struggle between different discourses, their contestations, their attempts to annihilate other discourses, their attempts to gain dominance, that we can think social change and contingency. Through these struggles and through the attempts to create discursive alliances, or chains of equivalence (Howarth, 1998: 279; Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000: 14), discourses are altered, which in turn produces contingency. In contrast, when a discourse eventually saturates the social as a result of a victorious discursive struggle, stability emerges. In this scenario, a social imaginary is created, which pushes other meanings beyond the horizon, threatening them with oblivion. But this stabilization, or sedimentation, is temporal. As Sayyid and Zac (1998: 262) formulate it, "Hegemony is always possible but can never be total." There is always the possibility of resistance, of the re-surfacing of a discursive struggle, and the re-politicization of sedimented discourses, combined with the permanent threat to every discourse of re-articulation. And, again, this generates contingency.

The notion of the floating signifier comes out of this contingency. Torfing (1999: 301) briefly defines this concept as a signifier that is "overflowed with meaning." The floating signifier foremost plays a key role at the first level of discourse theory, where it is emphasized that floating signifiers are "incapable of being wholly articulated to a discursive chain" (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 113). Signifiers are not the exclusive 'property' of one particular discourse, but several discourses can articulate the same signifier. Given the definition of articulation –where the meaning of a signifier is altered through the articulatory practice itself– we can immediately see that a floating signifier obtains different meanings in the different discourses that articulate it. In Laclau's (2005: 131) own words: "its meaning is indeterminate between alternative equivalential frontiers." For instance (see Laclau, 2005: 132), the signifier of the people can obtain very different meanings whether it is articulated within a tsarist discourse, or in a discourse that opposes tsarist rule. Or, in a more contemporary version, the notion of people features both in communist and neo-liberal discourses, but has very different meanings there. A related example refers to the very different meanings of the signifiers of the audience and the public. These signifiers again take on very different meanings whether they are, for instance, articulated within a consumerist discourse, or in a democratic discourse (see Carpentier (2004) for the analysis of the signifier audience within television discourse). Floating signifiers, like the signifiers of people or the public, will in other words assume different meanings in different contexts/discourses, which illustrates the contingency of their meaning. Also in the second level, where the discursive struggle is thematized, the floating signifier features prominently, because the floating signifier is often one of the objects of this hegemonic struggle, where competing discourses try to claim the floating signifier, and fixate its meaning in the particular way that it is articulated in one of these particular discourses. Again, to use Laclau's (2005: 132) words:

“The way in which the meaning of D1 [a floating signifier] is going to be fixed will depend on the result of a hegemonic struggle. So the ‘floating’ dimension becomes most visible in periods of organic crisis, when the symbolic system needs to be radically recast.”

3. Public service as a floating signifier

The theoretical discussion in the previous part may seem abstract at first sight, but this discursive-theoretical logic allows me to define public service as a floating signifier. This approach immediately requires me to specify that I will look at public service as an idea and as a concept, and at the ways that meaning is given to this idea, through the struggles between different discourses. This does not imply that I automatically side with one particular discourse, but, at least for now, I will bracket the truth claims of the different discourses (and their articulations of public service). Also, the performative (Butler, 1990) should be immediately stressed –the way that discourses are translated into human practices is equally relevant, and finds itself in a complex relationship with their discursive articulation, where practises (“doing discourse”) can strengthen existent discourses, but also undermine them, and where discourses give meaning to practices (“discursifying doing”), condoning them, or, in contrast, condemning them.

When we look at public service as a floating signifier, there are many discourses that provide meaning to this signifier, ranging from a (neo-)liberal minimal state discourse to a welfare state discourse, from bureaucratic and technocratic discourses to autonomist and anarchist discourses. As it might take some time (and space) to discuss this discursive complexity, I want to focus here on one particular component of public service, and that is its articulation with media (and in origins: broadcasting), as captured by the concept of Public Service Broadcasting (PSB). But this focus solves the problem only partially, as PSB is still all-pervasive. One way to deal with its articulatory complexity is to see how one particular (but authoritative) institution, the Council of Europe, and more specifically its Parliamentary Assembly, articulates public service in the field of PSB, an articulation which we can label the *traditional* articulation. This articulation is (no longer) hegemonic, as many contestations have been formulated, but it can still be seen as representative of the way that public service is articulated within the field of PSB.

3.1 A traditional articulation of public service within the field of PSB

As Nikoltchev (2007: 7) –currently the Executive Director of the European Audiovisual Observatory– wrote, “For many years, the well-being of public service broadcasting has been a main preoccupation of the Council of Europe. This is evidenced by a long list of resolutions, recommendations and declarations issued by the two organs of the Council of Europe.” At the same time, these documents communicate a sense of threat and urgency, as is evidenced by the opening sentence of

Recommendation 1641 (2004, article 1): “Public service broadcasting, a vital element of democracy in Europe, is under threat.” Despite (or because) of this sense of threat, the Council of Europe documents are a good entry point into the traditional articulation of the floating signifier public service. As space is scarce, I will show this construction by analyzing only two Parliamentary Assembly documents, Recommendation 1641 (2004) and Recommendation 1878 (2009), but they provide us with a good overview of the traditional articulation of public service (broadcasting).

In these two documents, we can first of all see the articulation of public service within the field of PSB as organized. Recommendation 1641 refers to PSBs which can be “run by public organisations or privately-owned companies”, which in both cases refers to organizational structures.

As organizations, PSBs are also positioned in a specific way towards two societal fields. First, the relationship between PSB and the state places a clear responsibility with the state in organizing PSB. For instance, article 17.7 of Recommendation 1641 calls upon the member states to “define an appropriate legal, institutional and financial framework for the functioning of public service broadcasting.” Moreover, as democratically elected representatives of the public, the government (and *in extenso*, the state) has a role to play in ensuring that PSBs “should be subject to higher public scrutiny and accountability for their programming than commercial broadcasters” (Recommendation 1878, 2009, article 5). But in the same time, the articulation of PSB as independent also relates to the position of the state, which is required to respect sufficient distance. The specificity of the PSBs’ remit is actually defined as follows: “to operate independently of those holding economic and political power” (Recommendation 1641, 2004, article 2). In Recommendation 1878 (2009), the independence from government is made even more explicit; in article 13 we find the following formulation: “Recalling that public service broadcasters must be independent from the government and be able to function without its political interference, the Assembly emphasises that their funding model should reflect this independence.”

The relationship of PSB with the second societal field -business- is (even) more clear and oppositional. The previous citation from article 2 of Recommendation 1641 (“to operate independently of those holding economic and political power”) already illustrated the emphasis on the independence of PSB from market forces. In the same article, we can find the argument that PSB “differs from broadcasting for purely commercial or political reasons.” The distinction is also made clear in Recommendation 1878 (2009, article 5) where it is said that PSB “should [...] support non-commercial objectives.” Moreover, some of the threats towards PSB are located with “commercial media” or “commercial interests”, which again articulates PSB as structurally different from the societal field of business. For instance, in Recommendation 1641 (2004, article 13) it is stated that “commercial interests are trying to reduce competition from the public sector to a minimum.” Even when “commercial broadcasters” are claiming to fulfil “public service obligations”, it is argued in Recommendation 1641 (2004, article 14) that “there is no guarantee about the

quality and independence of such provision, or that it would be free-to-air, universally accessible and constant over time.” This again, articulates PSB as structurally different.

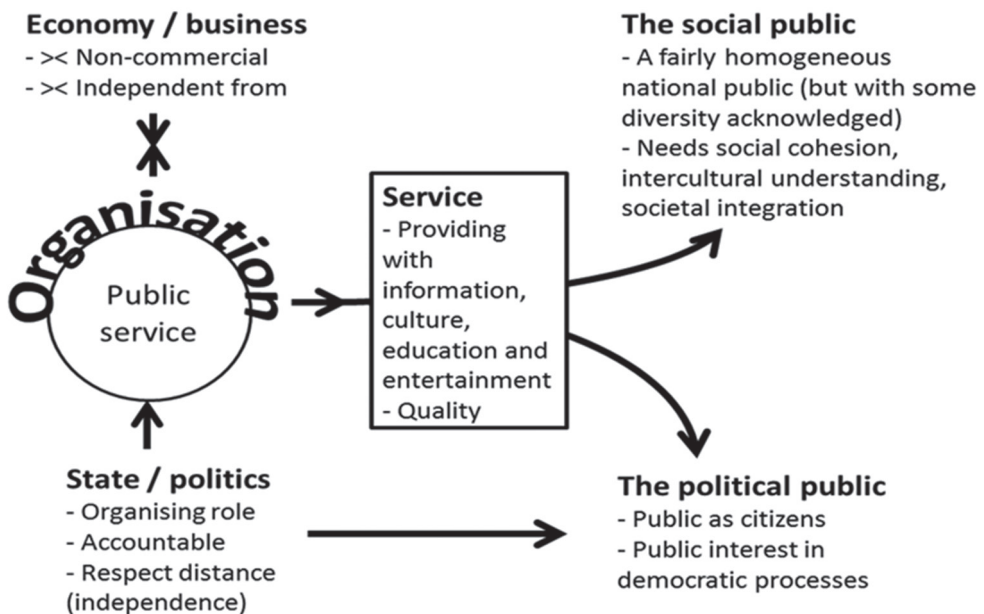
The two documents also articulate what the nature of the (public) service is that should be provided. Recommendation 1641 (2004, article 2) summarizes this service briefly, as follows: PSB “provides the whole of society with information, culture, education and entertainment.” In article 5 of the same recommendation, a similar formulation can be found: PS has to “provide a wide audience with free access to informal educational and cultural programmes.” Of course, these core definitions of the service to be provided are specified more, for instance in the emphasis on information that is generated through the “editorial standards of objectivity, fairness and independence from party political or economic interference” (Recommendation 1878, 2009, article 5). Arguably, a second articulation of the service to be provided is related to quality. PSB is seen as a protector of quality audiovisual production: “they should contribute decisively to the production of audiovisual works of high quality” it is said in Recommendation 1878 (2009, article 5). In the earlier Recommendation 1641 (2004, article 15), the “‘dumbing-down’ of general quality” because of “the growing commercialisation and concentration of the media sector” is denounced, and PSB is seen as potential safeguard against this evolution (on the condition that PSBs do not succumb to the temptation of moving into the same direction as commercial media – see below).

Finally, in addition to the organized nature of public service within the field of PSB, the particular relationships with state and market and the nature of the service(s) provided, public service is also articulated through the definition of the public. Here, I would like to argue that two articulations of the public are combined in the two documents. We can find there a social and a political public. Important is that the social public is defined as a semi-homogenous public, which spans the entire nation, and where inclusivity is validated. The public is seen as the “whole of society”, whose “social cohesion” needs to be “promoted”, which renders PSB “typically universal in terms of content and access” (Recommendation 1641, 2004, article 2). Also the public’s “social progress, [...] intercultural understanding and societal integration” (Recommendation 1878, 2009, article 5) needs to be enhanced by PSBs. Nevertheless, some diversity within the semi-homogenous public is recognized, when, for instance, references are made to the “needs of all groups in society” (Recommendation 1641, 2004, article 2) and to the PSBs’ “obligation also to serve minority viewers and people with special needs who would not be served in a purely commercial market” (Recommendation 1878, 2009, article 5). The political public is articulated through the emphasis on citizenship, as PSB is expected to enhance “social, political and cultural citizenship” (Recommendation 1641, 2004, article 2) and “support [...] public interest in democratic processes” (Recommendation 1878, 2009, article 5). At the same time, participation of the public in PSBs remains framed from within a representative-democratic logic, where public accountability does matter, but where it is organized by “the parliament, the government and/or

a regulatory agency” (Recommendation 1641, 2004, article 10). The public should be heard –there is a need for “public accountability mechanisms for quality control [that] should be established, including evaluations by users” (Recommendation 1878, 2009, article 15)– but there are no indications that a more elaborate political role is desired for the public.

Figure 1 summarizes the more traditional articulation of public service within the field of PSB, in the two Council of Europe documents.

Figure 1: The council of Europe’s articulation of public service



3.2 Contestations

This traditional articulation of public service is hardly hegemonic (any more), and a wide variety of discursive contestations originate from the three actors that were mentioned before (state/government, market and public). In some cases, traces of these discourses that (aim to) rearticulate public service, or aim to completely undermine and even annihilate the idea of public service within the media field, can be found in the two documents under scrutiny. Market-related actors ground their contestations in a liberal right-to-profit and tend to articulate public service broadcasters as competitors, whose range needs to be restricted. Even if Recommendation 1641 (2004, article 14) disagrees with the claim, the document

still refers to this claim of “commercial broadcasters”, where they argue that they also fulfil “public service obligations”, which (if the claim is accepted) would then render PSB unnecessary. In the same recommendation, the very charged word ‘attack’ is used when a reference is made to the legal strategies of commercial media, who “attack the funding systems for public service broadcasting”, and “challenge the possibility of public service broadcasting expanding into new areas and new services” (Recommendation 1641, 2004, article 14).

Even if Recommendation 1641 defends PSB, we can also find references to the strategy of defensive expansion that PSBs have been using to maintain their position in different European countries, resulting, for instance, in the transformation of Public Service Broadcasters (PSBs) into Public Service Media (PSM), using multiple platforms. Another site of struggle is the area of entertainment, where both commercial media and PSB have argued for the significance of their (own) input. Recommendation 1641 (2004, article 15) refers to this area as the “popular genres”, and takes a critical stance towards “the use of public money for such purposes.” The strategy of defensive expansion is also critiqued more in general, when Recommendation 1641 (2004, article 15) continues: “Public service broadcasting is suffering an identity crisis, as it is in many instances striving to combine its public service obligations with chasing ratings and the need to secure an audience to justify its ‘public’ character or simply to attract advertising revenue.”

Also the government/state and the public at large contest the traditional articulation of public service. In the case of the relationship between the government/state and PSB, we can find a disarticulation of financial responsibility from the traditional articulation of public service. Governments are not, or not any more, taking sufficient (financial) responsibility, as it is reported for a series of countries: “Severe financial difficulties are experienced with public service broadcasting in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia” (Recommendation 1641, 2004, article 8). But the main discursive contestation is oriented towards the creation of PSB dependency towards government and the state. In the same article of Recommendation 1641, we can find a reference to the Croatian situation at that time (“There are still attempts to change laws in order to make them more suitable for a ruling majority, as with the new Croatian Law on Radio and Television.”), but also in a later article, it is mentioned that “In the United Kingdom, there is growing concern at the government’s attitude to the renewal of the charter of the BBC, fuelled by the very public row between the corporation and the government” (Recommendation 1641, 2004, article 11). Finally, also the public itself is deemed critical towards PSB, sometimes disarticulating objectivity and truthfulness from the PSBs’ traditional identity, and sometimes objecting to the PSBs’ lack of internal democratic participation. But Recommendation 1878 (2009, article 12) also contains a trace of another disarticulation, namely the disarticulation of the signifier relevance from the traditional PSB identity, when it is mentioned that “public acceptance of funding public service broadcasting is decreasing in view of the increasing audiovisual content available through converging media platforms and the Internet.”

The discussion above refers to the contestations of the traditional articulation of public service, which is still very much grounded in a context of mainstream media organizations. Outside this realm, there are two other (major) contestations that need to be included in this overview. One older one will be discussed more at length in the next part, and that is the re-articulation of public service into community service by community and alternative media organizations. A more recent one is the re-articulation of public service through digital (or online) media, which is located in two related sets of argumentation. First, the importance of the organizational structure as key location for media production becomes contested. Shirky's (2008) *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations* is a good illustration of this line of argument, as it emphasizes the processes of collective action and community building that support the digital participatory culture, bypassing traditional organizational structures. Mass amateurization ("a world where participating in the conversation is its own reward" (Shirky 2002)) and mass collaboration are seen as main societal driving forces that have, for instance, displaced media professionalism. Second, the idea of participation, central to digital media discourse, feeds into the idea that mainstream (audiovisual) media have become superfluous, and that the multitude can provide its own public service. This articulation of self-public service again fundamentally questions the necessity and relevance of PSB.

4. Community media – Re-articulating public service into community service

But the main contestation of the traditional public service model I want to discuss here is the re-articulation of public service into community service. This re-articulation has been championed by community and alternative media organizations, that –from the 1960s and 1970s onwards (see, e.g., Colombo (2014))- proposed a different way of thinking about the services provided to the public. They are counter-hegemonic forces that focus less on the distinction between PSB and commercial media, but consider both as mainstream media, and desire to produce an alternative to these mainstream media, even if some of their remits approximate those of PSB, for instance in their emphasis on independence. Moreover, they share with mainstream media in general the focus on organizational structures, although their participatory, grassroots and horizontally-structured organizations are very different from the mainstream media's organizational structures.

In addition, community and alternative media organizations are much more -than mainstream media- characterized by fluidity and diversity. This diversity is also visible in the different ways the identity of community and alternative media organizations has been constructed in academic theory. As argued before (Carpentier, 2011: 94ff), four different approaches can be distinguished in the subfield of community and alternative media theory (see Figure 2), and they need to be combined with each other in order to capture the diversity of this media subfield.

The first two models are the most dominant; they are both media-centred models that try to describe the functioning of community media (approach 1) and alternative media (approach 2). The first approach, the serving the community approach, uses a more essentialist theoretical framework, stressing the importance of the community served by the media organization. In the second approach, alternative media models focus on the relationship between alternative and mainstream media, putting more emphasis on the discursive relation of interdependency between two antagonistic sets of identities.

These traditional models for theorizing the identity of community and alternative media are complemented by two more society-centred approaches. The third approach defines community and alternative media as part of civil society. In order to incorporate the more relationist aspects of civil society theory –articulated, for instance, by Walzer (1998)– they are combined with Downing et al.’s (2001) and Rodriguez’s (2001) critiques of alternative media, and radicalized and unified in the fourth approach, which builds on the Deleuzian metaphor of community and alternative media as rhizome. This approach allows (even more) incorporating aspects of contingency, fluidity and elusiveness in the analysis of community and alternative media.

Figure 2: Defining community and alternative media

| | Media centred | Society centred |
|---|---|---|
| Autonomous identity of CM (Essentialist) | <i>Approach I:</i> Serving the community | <i>Approach III:</i> Part of civil society <i>Approach IV:</i> Rhizome |
| Identity of CM in relation to other identities (Relationalist) | <i>Approach II:</i> An alternative to mainstream | |

Source: Carpentier, et al., 2003

In these four approaches, public service is redefined as community service. This is most explicit in the first approach, which highlights that community (and alternative) media serve a specific –often geographically defined– community, thus validating and strengthening that community. This articulation can also be found in the 2008 European Parliament’s (2008) Resolution on Community Media in Europe, which states that “community media are non-profit organizations accountable to the community that they seek to serve”. Different from the emphasis on the whole-of-society articulation to be found in PSB, community and alternative media use more targeted, contextualized and localized definitions of community, even if they often combine different communities as their constituencies (see Carpentier,

er, 2015). Second, access by the community, interaction with the community and participation of the community (and its constituent subgroups) are considered key-defining factors. An illustration can be found in Howley's (2005: 4) work, when he describes community media as "locally oriented, participatory media [that facilitate the] process of collective identity construction in geographically defined communities." Tabing's (2002: 9) definition of a community radio station – as "one that is operated in the community, for the community, about the community and by the community" – makes it even more clear that participation in media organization is not only situated at the level of content production, but is also related to management and ownership.

But also the alternative media approach incorporates a re-articulation of public service, in the sense that community and alternative media produce an alternative service to the public. These media organizations achieve this by defining the public as a chain of communities, that are served by a plurality of community and alternative media organizations. This alternativity is further played out at the level of content, form and organizational structure, which can be found in Waltz's (2005: 2) definition of alternative media as "[...] those media that provide a different point of view from that usually expressed, that cater to communities not well served by the mass media, or that expressly advocate social change [...]." Part of the alternativity that Waltz describes has already been mentioned before (for instance, the focus on community as an alternative to the focus on the national public), but it can also be found in the emphasis on radical independence from state and market, which protects them from the type of interferences that PSBs often have to face. Also their horizontal decision-making structures –evenly mentioned before– which allow members of the community to co-decide on content, management and ownership, are important within the alternative media approach, because the focus on horizontal decision-making structures again opens up a different –alternative– articulation of public service, namely as a service about which the public (or better, the community) decides for itself. Waltz's definition also shows the importance of community and alternative media as carriers of non-dominant (possibly counter-hegemonic) discourses and representations, stressing the importance of self-representation, and also the need to move away from restrictive and disciplining quality definitions, replacing a more conventional approach towards form and quality by what I have termed before as negotiated quality (Carpentier, 2011: 337ff).

Finally, also the civil society and rhizomatic approaches contain re-articulations of public service, exactly because of their emphasis on civil society. Community and alternative media provide spaces that allow citizens to have their voices heard, and to intervene in the mediascape. For these reasons, they are sometimes termed citizen media (Rodriguez, 2001; see also Pettit, et al., 2009) or civil society media (Hintz, 2007). As Rodriguez (2001: 20 – emphasis in original) formulates it, citizen media allow citizens to become a "collectivity [that] is *enacting* its citizenship by actively intervening and transforming the established mediascape". Hintz (2007: 244) refers to civil society media that encompass "media organizations,

groups, and projects, which fit into the basic non-state non-commercial model and share the structural and thematic tendencies of civil society.” He continues, “Participation, emancipation, and empowerment represent crucial features” (Hintz, 2007: 244). The rhizomatic approach not only emphasizes community and alternative media’s close connection to civil society, but also that community and alternative media are at the crossroads of civil society, connecting many different civil society organizations and social movements. Also, the rhizomatic approach allows seeing that community and alternative media organizations sometimes enter the realm of state and market, using the resources of state and market to their benefit, and simultaneously deterritorialising the logics of state and market.

5. A brief conclusion

The argument made in this article does not consist out of an attack on public service, public service broadcasting or public service media. Nor do I want to ignore the wide variety and hybridity of public service media practices that remain somewhat hidden behind the focus on the idea of public service (broadcasting) in this article. There are indeed many different ways to translate the idea of PSB into organizational practice –take for instance the valuable emphasis on local public media in Montenegro as just one example- even if the idea of PSB, or how the signifier public service is articulated within the media field, is at the same time remarkably stable and similar, in particular when we compare it to the signifiatory diversity of community and alternative media organizations.

The contribution of this analysis of public service (broadcasting) as a floating signifier is that it negates (and questions) all taken-for-grantedness, in focusing on the mechanics of meaning, or how meaning is actually constructed. A discourse-theoretical framework avoids the trap of seeing achievements as permanent and problems as insurmountable and to-be-accepted. Discourse theory is, in this sense, a theory of hope, that does not remain naively blind for the contingency of what is (deemed) precious. As many academics and institutions do (see, just for one instance, Banerjee and Seneviratne, 2005), I see public service broadcasting as a valuable intervention in the media landscape. At the same time, PBS cannot be approached uncritically and it cannot be seen as the only democratically and socially valuable model.

This discourse-theoretical analysis of the articulation of public service within the media field shows many things. It shows how the traditional identity of PSB has been contested on almost every front, by a variety of actors. It shows how these contestations affect almost every signifier that is used to articulate public service. But it also shows the centrality of the signifier diversity, in the sense that PSB are seen as a guarantee of diversity (against the homogenizing forces of the market), and that they are to incorporate respect for societal diversity, even though they still have to focus on the nation, which creates a homogenizing tendency. At the same time, the analysis shows that PSB has dealt with this signifier of diversity in

a reductionist way, partially as a consequence of the problematic tensions between diversity and homogeneity, and between decentralization and centralization.

Here, I would argue, there is still space for a broader articulation of diversity, allowing for different ways to serve people, as public and as communities. And, there is also quite a lot of space left for an increase of the diversity of relationships between media organizations and their public/communities, some of which that need to allow for more participation and power-sharing than that is now the case.

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