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## Public Service Media and the Political System

**Abstract:** In this paper the social and political conditions that have been linked to the development of Public Service Broadcasting are investigated. The ongoing transformation from Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) into Public Service Media (PSM), that bounds together legacy electronic media with new media, seems to require similar conditions. Particular attention is devoted to the possible existence of these conditions outside of the Western World where the idea and the practice of PSB was originally tested.

**Key words:** *Public Service Broadcasting, political system, television*

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## Javni medijski servis i politički sistem

**Apstrakt:** U ovom radu se istražuju sociološki i politički uslovi koji su povezani sa razvojem javnog radio-difuznog servisa. Trenutna transformacija iz javnih radio-difuznih servisa (JRDS) u javne medijske servise (JMS) u kojoj se spajaju nasljeđe elektronskih medija sa novim medijima, izgleda da zahtjeva slične uslove. Posebna pažnja posvećena je mogućem postojanju ovih uslova izvan Zapadnog svijeta gdje su izvorno ideja i praksa javnog radio-difuznog servisa testirani.

**Ključne riječi:** *Javni radio-difuzni servis, politički sistem, televizija*

## Introduction

As it is well known the idea of Public Service Media (PSM) is replacing the previous Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) to indicate the need to relate broadcasting to other means of communication and mainly to new media. For many scholars as in the case of PSB also PSM represents some sort of “universal concept” that works at every historical time and in every condition. To be more precise: there is a general consensus about three main principles to which PSM has to refer: universalism, fairness and national identity (McQuail, 1992). First of all public media have to reach all citizens: this was the original mission of PSB. When technology made this goal easily reachable, universalism has taken a difference substance: all different voices and imaginaries that were present in the society had to have their space in public channels and they need to be treated with fairness. And finally, at least in the first period of PSB, the construction and reinforcement of national identity, the defense and diffusion of national language and culture was among the main aim of public radio and television.

The question I want to address is the following: are these aims “universal” or are they depending on specific social and political conditions? On one side, the already quoted principles appear not to disputable being valid in every context, but at the same time they are deeply rooted in the specific history and development of that part of the world where these principals were born and conceived, notably western European democracies. They represent an important part of the history of the so called “old continent”.

To answer the previous question we can learn a lot from past history and therefore I will be forced to use the definition of Public Service Broadcasting as this was the definition in use when the idea of public radio and public television were born.

## PSB and welfare state democracies

The previous “universalistic” principles inspired some of the major policy solutions that were adopted to solve the problems deriving from the situation of mass media scarcity within which, as we all know, PSB was born. Rulers were persuaded to put under the control of public authority instruments of communication, such as radio and television that already at their first appearance were clearly perceived as being very powerful. Because of this situation of scarcity of sources of information. PSB was placed, following different patterns as to the different countries, under the control of the State for several reasons, some of military nature, others depending just on imitative adaptations (following the solutions adopted as to radio and telegraph) but essentially it was the logic of welfare state that represented a main pressure in the direction of the development of the idea of Public Service Broadcasting (Briggs Burke, 2000). Indeed most of the European governments thought that such a powerful media could not be left in the hands of few owners: all citizens had to enjoy the possibilities offered by these new media that were developing in those years.

Here politics matters: the logic of welfare state implies a clear vision of the relationship between the state and the citizens: an idea that is rooted within specific conditions and within a specific political philosophy. Indeed, PSB was born because the state was supposed to take care of its citizens offering everybody the same opportunities. Within this logic, the State was ensuring everybody to get the same opportunities to be educated, to be attended when sick, to have a calm and happy old age etc. In the same way, citizens had to enjoy the same opportunities to be informed and to inform others. This was the principal, universalistic “mission” of PSB when it was originally established: this mission was deeply rooted in the political logic that was addressing, at that time, many of the Western European democracies. This was the logic of welfare state democracy.

This logic is very rare outside Western Europe. Welfare State, so to say, is a “Western European invention” deeply seated within specific social, economic, cultural and political conditions that have featured the historical evolutions of some countries in Western Europe. More in particular I would say that the idea of welfare state is deeply depending on three main conditions. First of all it developed within democracies that either were established for a long period of time (this was in particular the case of Great Britain) or were enjoying a sufficient level of social legitimation as a response to traumatic events (this was the case of postwar Germany). In both cases there was a sufficient level of consensus about the so called “rules of the game”. Even if departing from contrasting points of view, the different parts of the society (political parties, unions, interest groups, etc.) acting within the national public sphere and the decision making process shared a general consensus on what could be the goal and the mission of state institutions and which rules had to be applied.

PSB was born and developed within a political and cultural situation in which the idea of common good and common interest was dominating over competing visions of the society. At least the idea of common interest coexisted with the awareness of competing interests and visions that were recognizing themselves as legitimate, even if opposite, visions. In this way it was easy to accept and to promote the idea that also Public broadcasting had to ensure all different groups of the society equal opportunities and conditions for a fair competition.

The idea of PSB developed also in connection to the presence of strong and well rooted social organizations, either political or of different genre, demanding their right to be put in the condition to communicate and interact through the mass media with the citizens and with other social organizations. The entire framework of these social organizations with thousand of members, even if of competing nature, was deeply rooted in the society and used to be awarded with opportunities of communication deriving from other means such as newspapers. The definition of “socially relevant groups” that was adopted and still is adopted in Germany as to public broadcasting was a clear sign of strong organizations of different nature that were present and active in the society (Humphreys, 1994). In the same way it is well known the “pillarization” of public broadcasting that has featured the Neth-

erlands for many years and that has represented a vivid proof of organizations of different nature, political, religious well rooted in the society (McQuail, 1993).

To sum up: the stability of the political system together with a sufficient level of consensus on the so called “rules of the game” and the existence of rooted social organizations defined the framework within which the more general idea of Public Service (not just referring to the media) developed. In many Western European countries this idea involved first of all the area of health, retirement, education, transportation: also the area of communication, its mission and procedures was then involved. This framework has a precise identity in time and space.

Today the idea of Public Service Broadcasting is in crisis for many different reasons but also because those conditions within which it firstly developed have dramatically changed. First of all, the condition of scarcity does not exist anymore: it has been replaced by a condition of “abundance” (Blumler, Kavanagh, 1999; Chaffee, Metzger, 2001; Bimber, 2003; Keane, 2013), at least as to the traditional “old” media, such as radio and television, that can make the traditional idea of Public Service Broadcasting old fashioned. This is a questionable point but there is no doubt that if the idea of PSB was born also because of the situation of scarcity; well, this does not exist anymore and today justification for Public Service Media has to depart from this acknowledgement. Universalism has to refer to a different set of media and at this regard the idea of Public Service Media (instead of Public Service Broadcasting) makes sense as it includes the provision of opportunities of communication including media, such as the Internet, that, in some countries, may not be well developed as the “old” ones.

Also the importance and the role of intermediary organizations is changing: in many contexts it is dramatically decreasing. As Peter Dahlgren wrote: ‘Postmodern politics is increasingly marked by a lack of commitment to traditional institutions such as political parties, labour unions and civic associations, yet composed of temporary alliance around issues and values linked to everyday life (such as morality, identity and worldview)’ (Dahlgren, 2000:318). Intermediary organizations were the ones that were enjoying at the best the opportunities offered by PSB and they were the ones that were legitimizing and supporting its existence. Their weakening in many established democracies and their increasing volatility in many transitional democracies determine the absence of well rooted organizations and the scarce reliability of those that exist. Moreover, very recently the rapid development of the web has offered to what Bruce Bimber calls “post bureaucratic organizations” (Bimber, 2003) (those new organizations essentially rooted on the web, that are replacing the old ones based on human capital) new instruments and occasions to communicate in an affordable and more immediate way to their potential constituencies. The legitimation of PSB deriving on the fact that it was offering the possibility, in many cases, the only possibility, to intermediary organizations to talk directly to a large audience has therefore disappeared.

The process of individualization that is affecting many countries around the world and mainly many countries among Western democracies, is indirectly affect-

ing the idea of Public Service too. There are many aspects of this change: first of all we observe a diffuse crisis of the more general idea of Public Service as to different fields of the society and not just as to communication matters. This crisis derives from the minor availability of economic resources for most of those services that were distributed along the logic of public interest. Less and less, public resources have been devoted to all those services that previously were allotted to citizens following an attitude of reciprocal and community support. This change has affected the Northern European countries too where the logic of Public Service was originally born and where it was deeply rooted: in these countries many services have been cut and, among these, also economic subsidies to print press has been dramatically diminished.

Therefore citizens have been forced to provide by themselves all those services that were previously supported by the State: this shift has been accompanied by more general new attitudes that are featuring what Bauman calls “liquid modernity”. This is marked by the increasing process of individualization (Bauman, 2000) that produces a weakening of the idea of general interest within which the idea itself of public service is seated. A completely different symbolic context for the survival of the idea of PSB is therefore raising and progressively that “aura” of legitimation that featured its evolution in the first years is also disappearing.

This more general change of cultural and political nature, has affected not just the “ideal” notion of PSB and its “symbolic” dimension but its real practice as well. The legitimation to allocate resources to this kind of services has progressively disappeared. At least it has lost ground in face of the diffusion of attitudes more and more focused on private gains and satisfactions, on consumption and entertainment. At the same time those organizations that were requiring support to have a free space of expression are dramatically weakening.

## **Beyond western world**

What has been outlined in the previous lines is what is taking place in many western democracies, but what beyond them? The conditions that made possible the birth and the development of PSB don’t exist in most of the countries beyond Western world and have not featured their evolution. First of all, the philosophy and the practice of welfare state is, as it is well known, a European “invention”, so to say, and, in any case it is a European feature, hard to be found outside the borders of the “old” continent. The clearest example is represented by the USA where Public Service Broadcasting does not exist or is very weak. Indeed, Public Broadcasting Service (PBS, the only existing so called “public” television) has nothing to do with the State being funded through different sources, mostly of private nature. In the same way, as it is well known, all those policies that in Europe give real life to the idea of “Welfare State” are very weak in the USA up to the point that they don’t exist at all as it is the case in many social and economic fields: healthcare is very weak and just the courageous choice of Barack Obama has brought some improvement;

also the idea public school has hard life in the USA. Other countries as well have followed their example.

In many other countries the idea of Public Service Broadcasting exists but it does within a completely different policies framework. Indeed, in these countries the idea itself of welfare state is very weak: social policies in favour of the citizens are very rare, if they ever exist, as to all different fields, education, healthcare, transportation, etc. That culture of social solidarity that “ideally” was motivating welfare state policies in many Western European countries is not rooted in most of the countries outside this part of the world. Worries regarding the fact that citizens could be adequately informed and could be able to inform too are not among the priorities of governments. Indeed, rather than making sure that all citizens could enjoy the same opportunities in terms of communication, very often the State is using public television to achieve particularistic goals opposed to the logic of universalism that, on the contrary, was supposed to direct, and in some case was effectively directing PSB in most of Western European countries.

In many countries the State is a “corruptive State” (Mungiu Pippidi, 2010) that does not act following those logics that were motivating the existence of PSB in Western European countries. The State depends on a mixture of political and business interests of particularistic nature: its attitude towards public television responds to the same logic and therefore all those ideals of universalism, fair behavior in front of the competing parts of the society, separation from particularistic interests don’t find any place. This is what it is possible to observe in many Central Eastern European countries (Gross, 2002, Jakubowicz, Sukosd, 2008) but in other parts of the world as well (Waisbord, 2000; McCargo, 2012).

## **Which political condition for a better PSB**

From the existing literature and research we learn that all those goals that constitute the “ideal” legitimation of the idea of Public Service Broadcasting seem to depend on four major political and cultural dimensions. First of all, the possibility to run a public television system separated from the political system and acting following stable rules of universalistic nature depends on the grade of consolidation of the democracy. When, and where, democracy is not well rooted, the State is under construction: political scientists talk at this regard of “politicization of the State” (Grzymala Busse, 2003) or “State capture” (Mungiu Pippidi, 2010). Public institutions are still under construction and different groups within the society struggle to affect its construction in their favor. In this situation very often the State is put under the control and pressure from different interest groups and is not able to establish durable rules of universal interest.

At this regard, in his recent book Andrew Chadwick has talked of hybridization between democratic regime and authoritarianism that features many so called transitional democracies (Chadwick, 2013): rules are not well established and they are very volatile; formal regulation coexists with informality. PSB, when it exists,

suffers of all the consequences of this instability and even formal regulations that could appear close to the ideal image of a universalistic public service are often neglected and not respected.

In this instable situation there is not a general consensus on the so called “rules of the game”, those rules that direct public life: the idea itself of PSB becomes a very contested one once there are groups that compete for defining its mission and its performance.

Usually the weakness of the rules of the games end in determining a high level of distrust among the competing groups and therefore a need for a reciprocal, continuous control. This is what happens in Italy with the so called “lottizzazione” of Italian public television: responsibility seats within the board of directors and the management of RAI are distributed to different parties as resources to be distributed to their clients but also as an occasion and a mean for the competing parties to control each other within those “rooms” where decisions are taken (Mancini, 2009).

Even if this may sound strange, the ideal mission of PSB is better performed in presence of strong political and social organizations and more in general of strong intermediary organizations. Indeed, most of the times, at least in the democratic systems, strong political and social organizations exist next to a well rooted democracy and therefore next to stable rules that ensure the reciprocal respect even among competing parts of the society. In this situation it is a general advantage to have a public service that guarantees all groups. Well rooted political organizations have a message to diffuse and their demand for a public space where this can be done free of charge is more effective.

As we wrote in “Comparing Media Systems”, PSB can better accomplish its universalistic functions when a high level of rational legal authority exists. The concept of rational legal authority deriving from Max Weber is not an easy one: in the view of the German sociologist rational legal authority represents the core of modern societies being an instrument that links people together through the expectation of reciprocity: the need of order and protection (Mancini, 2012). Rules exist and they have a universal validity not depending on the groups or factions that act in the society. It is well known that this attitude has featured the evolution of several western countries and has identified that process of bourgeois rationalization (Hallin, Mancini, 2004) that has accompanied the development of liberal societies. Professionalization, specialization and their evaluation through fair exams have been the component of this process that has affected the development of many western democracies.

PSB was born within this framework of universal assumptions that went together with the consolidation of democratic regimes. We observe today that PSB is better performed where rational legal authority is better developed preventing the diffusion of a political culture inclined to particularism, clientelism and instrumentalization (Hallin, Papathanossopoulos, 2002).

Also the distinction between majoritarian and consensual democracy, orig-



inally theorized by Arend Lijphart (1999) is another feature of the political system that may affect the performance of PSB. Indeed in consensual democracy, as Lijphart stresses, the different groups of the society are inclined towards policies of sharing public resources to ensure the survival of the political system, what Lijphart defines “accommodation”. Also the “resources” of PSB will undergo this process: this is what happens, for instance, with the distribution of responsibility positions within PSB organizations. In those consensual democracies where there are strong and well rooted intermediary organizations and therefore democratic order is well consolidated, where the level of rational legal authority is diffuse, the groups representing the different economical, cultural and political interests that exist in the society are able to influence public media within a more general attitude of universalism and fairness.

On the contrary, most of the times, when the so called rules of the game are not well rooted, when that process of construction of autonomous body representing, defending and promoting general interest is not sufficiently developed, competing groups within a consensual democracies may try to affect public television promoting their own particularistic interests. They conceive and use PSB as a resource to be divided with the competing groups; to be distributed to their own members and as an instrument to promote their own image and to build consensus in their favour.

In the case of majoritarian democracy, two alternative solutions for PSB seem to be possible: in presence of well rooted and shared democracy and of general consensus on the idea of general interest, governments will preserve public television from direct influence as it represent a guarantee in the case of alternative majority and a way to distribute with fairness the material and symbolic resources of PSB.

When, on the contrary, majoritarian democracy is connected with low consensus society and therefore with rules that are still under construction or matter of conflictual views, parties in government will use PSB at their own use which will of particularistic and instrumentalized nature.

Public Service Media do not grow up in a vacuum. Their idea but also their real performance are possible in presence of specific conditions mostly of political nature. The frequent failure of PSM depends on the fact that these conditions do not exist. It is necessary to work in favour of the idea of PSM but also to make possible that these conditions are established.

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