

Debate

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From broadcasters to open ecosystems

On the reform and future of public service broadcasting

Abstract: In the age of digital platforms, democratic public discourse is increasingly being structured by private, primarily profit-driven companies. While the dual media system in Germany persists, this context presents public service media with the challenge of establishing a relevant public discourse in line with alternative logics that primarily center around a democratic mandate. If they are to tackle this challenge successfully, public service media must themselves become platform operators – opening up their communication infrastructure to their own audience in particular, as well as to other non-profit and, in certain areas, even commercial media. In contrast to the narratives that dominate the media, public service broadcasters in Germany are already very advanced in the development of services like this. A public service ecosystem strategy based on open software, protocols and platforms would thus not mean radical upheaval, but primarily the logical further development of digitalization pathways that have already begun.

Keywords: public service media, democratic mandate, digital platforms, openness

Translation: Sophie Costella

As I reflect on the reform and future of public service broadcasting in this paper, I will do something unheard of in the current debate: I will dare to be optimistic. I will present the hypothesis that the best days of public service broadcasting are still ahead of us – not only that the need for public service media is more urgent than ever in the age of public discourse on digital platforms, but also that we in Germany are on the right path towards reforming public service media to allow them to fulfill their new, or renewed, mandate.

Vision: The opening of public service media

Let's start with the basics. Why do we, as a society, fund public service media in the first place? Why do even people who do not ever use, or want to use, the public broadcasters ARD, ZDF or ORF in Austria have to pay for them? Firstly, it is simply a fact that, in highly specialized societies with media funded through advertising, we always help to fund media that we do not use ourselves, perhaps even that we find appalling, whether we want to or not. Someone like me, who never watches the German private broadcaster RTL II yet has bought a Nintendo Switch for their children, is helping to fund this trash TV channel – simply because Nintendo buys a huge amount of advertising on the channel (cf. CHARLTON et al. 2013). The same is true, of course, for online platforms funded by advertising.

The main difference between public service media and media primarily funded through advertising is their obligation to adhere primarily to a logic in line with their democratic mandate. That does not mean that public service media are always and automatically better, more substantial, or more serious. Of course *Traumschiff* (a German soap opera) and *Fernsehgarten* (an entertainment show) could also be broadcast on a private channel (instead of public service TV). Or perhaps they could not, given that a very large part of their audience is outside the most relevant target group for advertisers – 19-49-year-olds (EICK 2007). Public service media, at least according to their democratic mandate, look at all target groups, not only the most relevant for advertising. By following a different logic and thus achieving relevant reach, they contribute to a more diverse, democratic public discourse that benefits everyone – even those who use such media only selectively, if at all.

I have used the term ›logics‹ here because it sounds nicely scientific and neutral. But what I actually mean, of course, is dependencies (PFEFFER/SALANCIK 1978). After all, however large many newspapers print ›independent‹ on their front pages, there are ultimately no independent media, merely different dependencies (DOBUSCH 2021). Some are dependent on their subscribers, others on their advertising customers, others on donors, others on rich patrons, and still others on license fees defined by policymakers. Each form of dependency has consequences for a medium's orientation; each form of dependency can become a problem. Rich patrons, for example, are just as likely to fund pro-democracy investigative services like ProPublica as they are to fund trash channels that threaten democracy, such as the market leader in Austrian commercial television, ServusTV. Its late owner and RedBull billionaire Dietrich Mateschitz once briefly closed the channel down because its 200-strong staff had wanted to set up a works council (BAKIR 2016) – something they have not achieved to this day.

If there is no such thing as totally independent media, we can ideally hope for a media landscape in which individual forms of dependency do not *dominate*, but different forms of dependency mutually *keep one another in check*.

Last year's takeover of Twitter aka »X« by the then richest man in the world clearly demonstrated how relevant this remains even, indeed especially, in the age of digital platforms. For all the justified criticism of public service media, a rich billionaire cannot simply turn up tomorrow, buy it, throw out half the staff and appoint neo-Nazis as columnists.

Yet even ignoring the striking case of Twitter, we live in a platform monoculture. Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, »the platform formerly known as Twitter« – all these platforms are privately owned, funded by advertising, and controlled by algorithms that reward »engagement,« i.e., clicks, view times and the number of comments (BRUNS 2018). The platform operators accept that the best ways to achieve this »engagement« are emotionalization, polarization, loud exaggeration and un-nuanced points of view – not because they necessarily approve of the resulting aggravation of conflicts in society, but simply because it pays. They are simply primarily profit-oriented.

If it were not already clear, this point demonstrates why public service media are more important than ever in the age of public discourse via digital platforms. More urgently than ever, we need alternatives to and escape routes from the large, profit-driven platforms. We need digital public spaces that have a primary duty to a democratic mandate (DOBUSCH 2022b).

In addition, public service media are focused on compromise and consensus even in terms of their structure. Take the German ZDF as an example: Not only the Executive Director, but also 8 of the 12 members of the Supervisory Board need a 60% majority in the Television Council to be elected. The statutory basis, the ZDF State Agreement, requires unanimity among 16 German states. This is just about as far removed as it is possible to be from private platforms, where those who shout loudest, most emotionally, and most radically are heard.

Yet if public service media are to meet this urgent need for non-profit alternatives to the large advertising and commerce platforms, they need to change both themselves and their role. Public service media need to become platform operators themselves. They need to open themselves and their communication infrastructure to their audiences in particular, as well as to other non-profit and, in some areas, even commercial media.

Together with my colleague Jan-Hendrik Passoth, Professor of Sociology of Technology, I have identified three key areas here in which public service media need greater openness (cf. DOBUSCH/PASSOTH 2022):

The first is opening the software to achieve joint, transparent development based on open-source software, open standards, and open protocols. If implemented consistently, this would seamlessly invite international cooperation with

other public service media in Europe and beyond, with no need to agree on every detail, every feature, every strategic issue in advance. Open software and open standards as a kind of unilateral Europeanisation.

The second is opening up to interaction with the audience and participation in society (DOBUSCH/PARGER 2021). Today, if I want to discuss the latest episode of Jan Böhmermann's *ZDF Magazin Royale* (a political satire show in Germany) with other viewers, I have to hope that at least excerpts of it are on YouTube. It is absurd that people are forced onto commercial platforms like YouTube and Instagram when they want to discuss content from public service media. The contradiction with the mandate to encourage the process of democratic opinion forming is striking.

Thirdly, media libraries need to be opened to user-generated content and other non-profit media services – from universities and museums to blogs and podcasts. The media libraries should offer all these other providers a platform and thus help to boost non-profit services in general.

Public service media move slowly, but constantly and sustainably

Many are probably now asking themselves how I can be so naïve as to believe that national public service media could possibly have even the slightest chance against the large, dominant global players. Surely »a public service counter-model,« in the words of Sascha Lobo (2022), whom I greatly admire in principle, is just »grotesque Airbus nonsense?«

No. But there is a reason why even those who understand the internet well, like Sascha Lobo, find it difficult to see why public service media are in a better position to face the digital future than their image as dry, bureaucratic institutions would suggest – and not only because we in the public service media refer to the internet as »telemedia.«

While the rise of the digital platform giants largely progressed in line with Mark Zuckerberg's well-known motto »move fast and break things« (TANEJA 2019), with the goal of achieving exponential hockey stick growth curves at any cost, public service media in Germany and Europe have preferred the motto »move slow and build things.« Their growth is more linear than exponential. Of course this makes less of an impact and is less spectacular. But ultimately the approach is probably more sustainable and certainly more democratic.

Let us look at a specific example. Following ratification in all 16 German state parliaments, the 2nd amending Inter-Länder Treaty on Broadcasting came into effect on May 1, 2019. It was a historic date in the history of public service online services in Germany. Why? Until then, public online services – essentially the media libraries – were forbidden from providing links without a direct

connection to programming. This ban on links has now gone. A little while earlier, the then ARD Chair and BR Executive Director had called for a public service platform that was regularly referred to in the media as a »super media library« (BOUHS 2018), ideally at a European level and including commercial providers.

So where are we now, almost five years on? Not only have the various ARD media libraries, each developed independently, been combined, they have also been interwoven with the ZDF media library based on shared, open standards (ZDF 2023). As a result, I can now watch the ZDF *Heute Show* in the ARD media library and the latest episode of crime series *Tatort* (ARD) in the ZDF media library; even the banners of recommendations in the media libraries provide suggestions across the various broadcasters and channels. Further integration with the Austrian ORF and the Swiss SRG is underway. To a certain point, that is already a small, local super media library.

Less progress has been seen in opening the media libraries to the audience and other non-profit content producers. It is still bitterly ironic when Jan Böhmermann calls on viewers, as he did in his program on November 10, 2023, to leave suggestions as comments in the ZDF media library. Viewers who want to talk to others about content on public service media still have to switch to commercial platforms in order to do so. But some progress is being made here, too.

Firstly, the fundamental requirements for making public service media libraries »social« have already been put in place. The shared search function was preceded by a shared login across the media libraries. And this login is well-used, because it is associated with features: Series like *Parfum* have a minimum age of 16 years and can only be broadcast in the evening. Once logged in, however, viewers can watch them around the clock – and seamlessly switch between cell phone and tablet to continue watching. As a result, ZDF alone has millions of registered users (ZDF 2022). All these users already have a personal profile. Equipping this profile with additional features such as comment functions, sharable playlists, and upload functions would not require a revolution – it would be the next logical step (DOBUSCH 2022b).

Furthermore, at the end of last year, ZDF launched a pioneering R&D project named the »Public Spaces Incubator,« designed to trial not only the opening of media libraries for audience contributions, but also specifically embedding in local, protocol-based social networks in the form of software code (DOBUSCH 2023). The project is a collaboration with other public service media in Belgium, Switzerland and Canada – only conceivable and feasible because it is based on open software, standards and protocols.

The more public service media become involved in local and open social network structures like Mastodon, the more the alleged disadvantage of the strong national or even regional focus of public service media morphs from a bug into a feature: It actually becomes desirable for ARD broadcasters to operate their own

Mastodon and Peertube servers. Open software, standards and protocols thus form the basis for the emergence of a regionally based, transnational ecosystem of public service and other non-profit providers that is large and dynamic enough to create some of the effects of a public service network. It is precisely this that would allow them to offer a true, local, non-profit alternative to the global, profit-oriented uniform platforms by following a completely different logic (DOBUSCH 2022b).

Conflicts on the road to the future of public service media

If everything I have written so far is true – that public service media is more necessary than ever in the age of digital platforms and that there is slow yet constant development towards an open, local and connected public service ecosystem – why is the tone of the public debate on public service media so negative? Why is outlining a rosy future for public service media considered provocative?

I do not believe that it is purely down to scandals like that at RBB, which cannot be sugarcoated in any way and which once again demonstrated the need for greater transparency and democratic accountability in oversight painfully clearly (DOBUSCH 2022d). But there is progress here, too: The 4th amending Inter-Länder Treaty on Broadcasting, on which negotiations have already been completed, includes improvements in transparency and compliance.

Instead, I believe that the negative feeling towards public service media primarily has two causes. The first is the far-reaching digital transformation of the traditional commercial media houses that are primarily funded through advertising. The foundations of their business model have been thoroughly shaken for years now by advertising on Google and social networks, which reaches its target audiences with a much higher degree of accuracy than conventional print or television advertising. That is not public service media's fault, but I can certainly understand why commercial providers see any limitation on public service media's online services as welcome support in their fight for survival – even if it means lobbying for ridiculous anachronistic concepts like the ban on »press similarity« (DOBUSCH 2017).

Up to a point, this conflict is impossible to resolve. On an internet full of content, human attention is the scarcest resource: Of course public service and private media are in competition with one another. At the same time, that is precisely the point: This competition based on different logics is one of the reasons why public service media were established. And because what really matters online is which content is presented and recommended and how, I do not consider it useful to open public service media libraries to commercial content.

However, I certainly see potential for synergies and for digital public value that goes beyond competition in programming. If media library software is

finally developed based on open software as I have outlined, of course commercial media providers can also use and adapt this code, thus saving on development costs in a field that does not make a difference to competition anyway (HARTUYUNYAN et al. 2020). Why not also operate shared services for authentication and streaming? There would certainly be fields in which collaborative relationships between public service and private media were possible. A certain level of tension will always remain – and that is not a bad thing.

Much worse is the second angle from which public service media are confronted with fundamental and often shrill criticism: that of right-wing populist and even neo-fascist demagogues (HOLTZ-BACHA 2021) in Austria, Switzerland and Germany calling for the abolition of the license fee. In Italy, they have just pushed through a radical reduction.

They and their associates do not simply want to make public service media more democratic or improve its quality – they have a problem with the idea and structure of public service media itself. In Germany and Austria in particular, this idea and structure were born as a direct reaction to the way mass media were misused for propaganda during the period of fascism and National Socialism. It is therefore no wonder that today's ideological children of fascism have a fundamental problem with public service media.

But there is also a very pragmatic reason why the far right and fascists fight public service media: While they find it difficult to spread disinformation and hatred in public service media – although this is of course not entirely immune – they are rewarded for it on commercial platforms with likes, shares and therefore reach (BRUNS 2018; DOCTOROW 2020). They have no interest in democratic compromise – they want to destroy democratic processes. Media that, like public service media, are structurally designed around compromise and balance, stand in their way.

How public media react to these anti-democratic trends is crucial, and will remain so over the next few years. The greatest danger lies in giving in to the pressure for more »balance« in reporting, which is actually a demand for »false balance« (BIRKS 2019). Confronting a climate researcher's suggestions for how to address global warming with someone who denies that global warming is caused by humans is not balance, but »false balance.« The same goes for attempting to avoid accusations of bias and activism by reporting less on the climate crisis than would be appropriate (FAHY 2017). Yet this is exactly what is happening in many editorial offices, including those of public service media. Wolfgang Blau (2022), for example, reports after numerous conversations with colleagues that »the fear of being accused of activism is one of the most frequent reasons why journalists shy away from reporting on the climate crisis more often than before.«

Surviving this dispute demands self-assurance on what public service journalism means and self-reflection on how to effectively counteract accusations of

activism, which are ultimately nothing but criticism of a certain normative view. These are questions that I think about a lot, given that they affect me personally as an academic. Academics who openly make political statements are also regularly referred to as »activists.« In other words, in the fight against targeted disinformation campaigns and neo-fascist tendencies, journalists and academics are often in the same boat (DOBUSCH 2022c).

Both are making a mistake in this situation if they row back and deny that normative positions play a role in journalistic and academic cognitive processes. That is always wrong. Merely the decision on which topic among an infinite number of potential topics is selected as relevant enough for research or a study is in itself always and unavoidably normative, indeed political. The same goes for the question of which focus is selected, who is interviewed and quoted, what is mentioned and what omitted. None of it is free from normative considerations (DOBUSCH 2022c).

That is also the reason why, as far back as 1904, Max Weber placed the term »objectivity« in quotation marks in the title of his essay *The »Objectivity« of Knowledge in Social Science and Social Policy*. But if normative decisions are unavoidable, what could the answer look like?

I would therefore like to finish by looking at another digital platform that has not been mentioned up to now; a platform that is rarely mentioned in the media debate on digital public discourse, even though it is almost impossible to overstate its importance for our knowledge and therefore our understanding of the world. I am talking about the free online encyclopedia Wikipedia. Not only is it the only non-commercial website among the 100 most-visited websites in the world – it is also by far the most-visited website and the most important gateway to global knowledge. Google features it prominently in search results. And Wikipedia data is key in training the new, much-hyped AI applications.

Looking at the credibility and robustness of the Wikipedia knowledge reveals that, especially in dynamic and politically controversial topics from covid-19 to the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine to the climate crisis, the site provides highly accurate and up-to-date information (BRUCKMAN 2022). One of the ironies of internet history is the fact that, in the first ten years of its existence, the most frequent question on Wikipedia was »Can we believe what it says? Anyone can write whatever they want on there!«

Paradoxically, this radical openness on the part of Wikipedia both makes it open to attempted manipulation and is part of the solution for successfully resisting attempts at manipulation. Every change is permanently and transparently traceable, and the same goes for documentation of its own errors and weaknesses. There are extensive articles on systemic bias on Wikipedia as a result of the significant dominance of men among its authors, and a long list of errors and attempted manipulation in the history of Wikipedia (WIKIPEDIA 2024).

The second reason why the Wikipedia knowledge is so robust is that, in dramatic contrast to the large commercial platforms, it forces compromise (SEEMANN 2019). There is just a single article on each topic. Contradictory views have to be discussed to find a compromise or reflected as controversial in the article itself. This demonstrates knowledge as what it has always been: disputed and provisional. There is no such thing as certain knowledge. At the same time, even this knowledge is not the result of voting, but is negotiated. This is not always pretty to watch; of course there are conflicts – for example on whether the Donauturm in Vienna is architecturally a television tower, even if it has never acted as a television tower. Ultimately, there is no alternative to compromise.

Wikipedia is the best example of the enormous potential of open, community-funded platforms based on consensus, or at least compromise. At the same time, Wikipedia does more than set an example – not perfect, but still an example – when it comes to transparency and deliberation. From the point of view of public service media, Wikipedia is also a third-party platform that has a global structure yet still has local connections in more than 200 language versions. It is a place to distribute public service media content outside algorithms driven by advertising; where audio and video content from public service media perfectly complement the texts of the articles. It is a partner in the endless effort to say things as they are (DOBUSCH 2022a).

Wikipedia also serves as an example to show that this is certainly ambitious, but also realistic. Since early 2023, ZDF and ARD have regularly published videos that find their way into Wikipedia articles. Videos from ZDF program *Terra X* help to explain global warming, for example, while videos from the makers of daily news program *Tagesschau* explain how the German electoral system works – just two of hundreds of examples that are now viewed millions of times every month (FRANKE 2023).

Following on from this specific example, I would like to finish by summing up why I firmly believe that the best years of public service media are still to come:

Firstly, with an obligation to their democratic mandate, they will differ even more markedly from private, profit-oriented media than they have in the past, and take on new digital roles.

Secondly, the reforms necessary to achieve this are not only in sight: We are already in the midst of them. What I have described here is not even a revolution, but a logical further development of digital pathways that have already begun.

Thirdly, the conflicts on this road are not an existential threat, but are worth conducting – as a necessary opportunity for self-reflection and self-assurance on what the role of public service media in an age of digital platforms and neo-fascist movements can, should, indeed must be.

This article is based on a speech held by Leonhard Dobusch at the presentation of the Otto Brenner Prizes for Critical Journalism 2023.

About the author

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