

Chapter 9

Public service media

Exploring the influence of strong public service media on democracy

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Abstract

This chapter examines the extent to which public service media can constitute a countermeasure to ongoing developments in the media market, media regulation, and journalism professionalism, some of which threaten the ideal role of the media in a democracy. Within the concept of a media ecology and with respect to the overarching dimensions of the Media for Democracy Monitor (MDM) project – *Freedom / Information, Equality / Interest Mediation, and Control / Watchdog* – we ask whether public service media make a difference for democracy. The findings are related to the question of whether strong public service media have an influence on the performance of other media. We consider this question – if the media sector is characterised by convergence or divergence – and compare countries with robust public service media with countries that have traditionally weak public service media. From this, we conclude that public service media are relevant for democracy due to their performance and their impact on the general media ecology.

Keywords: public service media, role of media in democracy, media ecology, audience shares, democracy indices

Introduction

Media markets, media regulation, and journalism professionalism are developing in a direction that possibly threatens the role media plays in a democracy. Specific issues include ownership concentration, deregulation, or a lack of media regulation, and the threatening of journalistic quality standards and deterioration of journalistic working conditions. Public service media (PSM), secured by public funding to a certain degree from market forces and subject to public control over a public remit, could be considered a countermeasure to these developments. If PSM perform as strong institutions, they could potentially have a positive influence on the performance of other media. With the key dimensions of the Media for Democracy Monitor

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(MDM) project – *Freedom / Information (F)*, *Equality / Interest Mediation (E)*, and *Control / Watchdog (C)* – it is possible to evaluate the contribution of PSM in a specific media ecology and answer the question of whether strong public service media can make a difference for democracy.

This horizontal chapter addresses a variety of MDM Indicators and applies the findings to the performance of public service media (for related research questions, see Trappel & Tomaz, 2021a: 20–52):

- (F3) Diversity of news sources
- (F4) Internal rules for practice of newsroom democracy
- (F5) Company rules against *internal* influence on newsroom/editorial staff
- (F6) Company rules against *external* influence on newsroom/editorial staff
- (F7) Procedures on news selection and news processing
- (F8) Rules and practices on internal gender equality
- (F9) Gender equality in media content
- (F10) Misinformation and digital platforms (alias social media)
- (F11) Protection of journalists against (online) harassment
- (E1) Media ownership concentration national level
- (E3) Diversity of news formats
- (E4) Minority/Alternative media
- (E6) Content monitoring instruments
- (C7) The watchdog and the news media's mission statement
- (C9) Watchdog function and financial resources

Commercial and public service media: Challenges and disputes

The term media ecology is most often associated with Marshall McLuhan and the Toronto School. It was first introduced as a concept in his book *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (McLuhan, 1962). In this chapter, we give media ecology the following meaning: the study of the relationships between actors in the media, including individuals acting in the roles of either citizens or consumers in mediatised societies. We use the concept of media ecology to understand the connections between commercial media producers and PSM providers, the logic of their *modus operandi*, the jurisdictions that define their duties and opportunities, and the resulting media climate and power structures.

Dahlgren (2006) describes the evolution of a multitude of different public spheres that arise in society, with different purposes. One of these public spheres is provided by the PSM, which should ideally function as an intermediary be-

tween the state and society, providing a channel between “an informed elite discourse and a responsive civil society” (Habermas, 2006: 411). Separating the roles of the state-owned PSM and the market’s commercial media serves to maintain an interrelationship between the media and public opinion. This relationship is also one basic tenet for a successfully maintained “Nordic media welfare state” (Syvertsen, 2014).

The main obligations of PSM to “promote social cohesion, [serve] needs related to cultural diversity and the demands of democratic process, [and attend to] the needs of special groups and individual users” (Bardoel & Lowe, 2007: 16) contribute to “a healthy balance in commerce versus culture” – and all this pursued with a public service ethos that Bardoel and Lowe (2007: 16) define as “communication in the public interest”.

We agree that a healthy balance between PSM and the commercial media is fundamental to achieving a well-rounded public discourse. Both actors are indispensable. However, we aim to show that recent developments demonstrate how the roles and duties of PSM and commercial media are somewhat out of synch and disordered.

Three competing approaches frame the debate about public service media and its relationship with the market, according to Jakubowicz (2007b): one that prioritises the market as “the proper mechanism for the satisfaction of individual and social needs” (in which no public service broadcasting is needed) (Jakubowicz, 2007b: 115); one that regards PSM as a supplement for what the market does not supply (with a place for a kind of “niche” public broadcaster); and one that argues that “whatever the market may offer, the community still has a duty to provide broadcasting services free from the effect of the profit motive” (Jakubowicz, 2007b: 116). Jakubowicz (2007b: 116) comments further that “the future of [public service broadcasting] will depend on the resolution of the growing conflict between these three approaches”.

The main critics of competition in the broadcasting market argue that it is unnecessary, either because nowadays there is no scarcity in supply (as there was in the beginning of the public service media) or because they have a similar programming profile to the private generalist channels. Secondly, commercial actors feel harmed by what they call “unfair competition”, because PSM has public funding and, in addition, competes with them for advertising revenues, in a time when advertising for television channels (and media in general) is shrinking dramatically. Finally, commercial channels accuse public service broadcasting of trying to get high audience rates by using popular programmes (e.g., quiz shows or football transmissions), thus preventing private competitors from getting better shares and the corresponding revenues in terms of advertising.

Those who defend the importance of some kind of PSM with a specific position and a differentiated role suggest, on the contrary, that PSM is necessary,

because although supply is not scarce, neither is it diverse. In a time of clear “ascendancy of marketization policies” (Jakubowicz, 2007b: 122), the increasing competition among commercial channels tends to lower the level of quality, resulting in a similarity of use (and abuse) of popular programming genres in order to attract larger audiences. Diversity in supply is, therefore, more illusory than real. A public service operator, less dependent on market-driven criteria, is expected to offer some variation and pay attention to the people as citizens (not just consumers) – in terms of content or in terms of procedures.

As for competition between public and private actors, it must be stressed that these are not so easily compared. In every country participating in the 2021 MDM project, PSM is bound by a contract with the state that imposes obligations (to present a pluralism of opinions, represent diversity, pay attention to minorities, implement specific measures for accessibility, support national audiovisual production, and defend the national language and culture, to mention a few), while commercial channels have more freedom to manage their programming options. Furthermore, public operators are influenced by some kind of public control in a way that private operators are not.

As for advertising, PSM and private companies follow different rules, and there is variation between countries. In recent years, some limitations were imposed on public operators (e.g., in Portugal, the first public channel is allowed to have only 6 minutes per hour in advertising, while the commercial operators have a limit of 12 minutes per hour, and the second public channel has no paid advertising at all; Fidalgo, 2021). Furthermore, recent research suggests that the coexistence of public and commercial broadcasters does not harm the revenues of the latter and may even benefit them: Some studies show that “the higher a country’s per capita public service media revenues, the higher the per capita commercial broadcaster revenues” (Sehl et al., 2020a: 11). These findings reinforce the idea that the negative effect of PSM on commercial media is treated more as “an article of faith”, while a concrete evaluation in the field suggests that competition does not crowd out commercial media. On the contrary, it “produces benefits of increased consumer choice, lower prices, increased quality and better service” (Sehl et al., 2020a: 2).

Finally, the idea that PSM seek high audience rates (with the corresponding ability to get more advertising) needs nuance too. Public service media are expected to attract viewers, taking into consideration its purpose, mandate, and costs. PSM that are too niche – only devoted to fringe audiences and to content that commercial operators find unattractive, demanding, or expensive – cannot be expected to meet the general needs of the community it intends to serve and fulfil its mission. This is a paradoxical situation, as suggested by Bardoel and Lowe (2007: 16): “When public service broadcasting companies are successful, the commercial sector calls that market distortion, but when public service broadcasters aren’t successful enough, the commercial sector says

[public service broadcasting] lacks legitimacy and is a waste of public money”. Programmes from public service media are expected to be of good quality as well as attractive to viewers. As Jakubowicz (2007a: 186) points out,

[a proper public service] perceives its audience as composed of whole human beings, with a full range of needs and interests (as citizens; members of different social groups, communities, minorities and cultures; consumers; and seekers of information, education, experience, advice and entertainment), also seeking to broaden their horizons and enrich their lives.

The following paragraphs, discussing the performance of PSM, unfold against this background.

Performance of public service media

As the sample of countries participating in the 2021 MDM research project are all mature democracies (for a discussion about the inclusion of Hong Kong, see Tomaz & Trappel, Chapter 1), they rank relatively high in the relevant indices, such as the World Press Freedom Index or the Freedom of Expression Index (Trappel & Tomaz, 2021b, 2021c). The situation of the public service media cannot be ranked as easily, but it is possible to categorise countries into groups according to the audience share that their PSM reach. According to Schneeberger (2019: 2), “audience market shares of European public service broadcasters have generally decreased with an average contraction of 10 percent over a six-year period from 2012 to 2017. This negative trend was less pronounced among PSBs in the EU (-5.5%)”. However, irrespective of these trends, there are substantial differences between countries. In the following, we consider PSM with higher audience shares to be stronger than PSM with lower audience shares (the amount of public money granted to PSM might also be an indication of strength, but the relation to strength and influence is less clear; therefore, it is not used here). Table 9.1 shows the ranking of the studied countries in the World Press Freedom Index 2020 and in the Freedom of Expression Index 2019, as well as the strength of their PSM according to audience share. We identified the upper third, with an audience share of 35 per cent and higher, as having a strong PSM sector and the bottom third, with an audience share under 20 per cent, as having a weak PSM sector. These flank the middle range, with a 20–34 per cent audience share.

Table 9.1 *Democracy indices and strength of the PSM sector*

Strength		Audience share of PSM (%) (TV)	World Press Freedom Index 2020 ^a	Freedom of Expression Index 2019 ^b
Strong	Austria	48.1 ^c	18	38
	Belgium (Flanders)	40.1 ^d	12	9
	Finland	43.5 ^e	2	8
	Germany	47.3 ^f	11	23
	Iceland	65.0 ^g	15	14
	Italy	35.7 ^h	41	20
	Netherlands	35.5 ⁱ	5	21
	South Korea	37.98 ^j	42	13
Medium	Australia	27.2 ^k	26	29
	Denmark	33.0 ^l	3	2
	Sweden	34.9 ^m	4	10
	Switzerland	31.0 ⁿ	8	1
	United Kingdom	30.6 ^o	35	12
Weak	Canada	6.8 ^p	16	19
	Greece	9.6 ^q	65	47
	Portugal	14.16 ^r	10	16
n.a.	Hong Kong	n.a.	80	80
	Chile	n.a.	51	36

Comments: Audience share for Denmark only reflects DR, not TV2; and for the UK, only BBC, not ITV.

Source: ^aReporters Without Borders, 2020; ^bLührmann et al., 2019; ^cGrünangerl et al., 2021; ^dVar, 2021; ^eFinnpanel, 2020; ^fHorz-Ishak & Thomass, 2021; ^gJóhannsdóttir et al., 2021; ^hAgCom, 2020; ⁱSKO, 2021; ^jKorea Communications Commission, 2020; ^koztam, n.d.; ^lMedieudviklingen, 2019; ^mTV 2, 2019; ⁿMediamätning i Skandinavien, 2021; ^oBFS, 2021; ^pOfcom, 2021; ^qCBC/Radio-Canada, n.d.; ^rNielsen, 2021; ^sCAEM, 2020

In the following paragraphs, we see how PSM perform with respect to the overarching dimensions of the MDM project: *Freedom / Information (F)*, *Equality / Interest Mediation (E)*, and *Control / Watchdog (C)*, and whether high scores in these dimensions correlate with a strong or weak PSM sector.

Performance of public service media with respect to Freedom / Information (F)

The role public service media perform with respect to the diversity of news sources (Indicator F3) is quite diverse in the sample. They have an important impact, in cases where they strengthen as owners the national press agency (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, and South Korea), when they are running their own in-house news service (Finland), or when they (in a rather recent development) cooperate with privately owned quality media in complex investigations (e.g., *Panama Papers*, Germany). In the Nordic countries, PSM

participate in a network organised by Nordic public service broadcasters, and European countries participate in the European Broadcasting Union network, both relevant sources for audiovisual news material. Another important factor for diversity of news in a national context is the ability of media to deploy foreign correspondents to different countries. This is an asset which is very much dependent on the financial power of the media house, and it is mainly found within public service media that have enough resources to maintain a relevant network of foreign correspondents (Finland, Germany, and the United Kingdom). Others had to reduce their staff and offices abroad (Canada, Belgium, and Portugal), but some still have more foreign correspondents than any other news media in the market (like Portugal).

Turning to the legitimacy of PSM, trust in the news from public broadcasters is quite high in all countries. The lack of staff diversity is a problem within all public broadcasters. However, it is only a hot topic for debate in countries like Canada or Germany, where there is a general sensitivity to the issue of minority representation (see Núñez-Mussa et al., Chapter 13).

While written rules for newsroom democracy in the media (Indicator F4; see also Trappel et al., Chapter 14) are quite scarce in all countries of our sample, the ones that exist are found mostly within public broadcasters, where special editorial statutes can settle a conflict between the newsroom staff and editors-in-chief (Austria and Germany). In countries with a vital culture of informal internal newsroom democracy, this also applies to the public broadcasters, although they are not a beacon in this respect. In some countries (e.g., Italy, the Netherlands, and Portugal) there are provisions for establishing newsroom councils, which then apply to all media, including public service media.

When it comes to company rules against internal influence on newsrooms and editorial staff (Indicator F5; see also Tomaz et al., Chapter 8), much depends on the ownership structure of the media company, and public broadcasters may be subject to strict broadcasting laws regulating their independence. However, law and reality differ, and we find some examples where existing provisions are bent. We find strong newsroom independence in countries where PSM have a strong position or the culture of an independent public broadcaster has a long tradition (as in Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden). The preparedness of the newsroom staff and the editors-in-chief to reject interventions by the board of trustees is a strong asset in guaranteeing independence in these countries as well. Nevertheless, confrontations of single journalists by politicians are reported in some countries (Hong Kong, Greece, Italy, and the United Kingdom). The legal position of a public service broadcaster does not hinder the police from raiding the home or headquarters of PSM staff, as happened in Australia (Dwyer et al., 2021). In countries with strong public service media, public broadcasters tend to be put under stricter control than in countries where PSM is weaker. The demands for control mostly come from

right-wing forces on the political spectrum, or – as is the case in Hong Kong – from forces that undermine independence in the political structure as a whole (Lo & Wong, 2021). Discussions about the funding of PSM seem to open up a flank for political interference, and new funding models were being discussed (Germany and Finland) or had taken place (the Netherlands and Denmark) in several countries. The MDM country reports show that the issue of PSM's independence is double-sided: On the one hand, legal provisions can build a strong bulwark against political interference, but on the other, such provisions – for example, when they are about government influence on the appointment of CEOs – may also create a gateway for further influence.

Legal provisions may be a barrier to influence from advertisers on public broadcasters (Indicator F6; see also Tomaz et al., Chapter 8), and we observed a strong professional ethos among journalists to resist attempts to exert influence. But as statistical evidence for the amount of money that is going into advertising is missing, we can only deduce that a high amount of public money, compared with the income of advertising, is a rampart against economic influence from advertisers.

Procedures of news selection and news processing (Indicator F7; see also Núñez-Mussa et al., Chapter 13) mostly – in PSM as in any other media – take the form of informal discussions and decision-making and do not encompass institutionalised means of criticising journalistic working habits. Only in the United Kingdom (Moore & Ramsay, 2021) and Sweden (Nord & von Krogh, 2021) did we find more formal guidelines for news selection and processing in PSM.

Although there are internal rules and practices on gender equality (Indicator F8; see also Padovani et al., Chapter 4) in many countries, women continue to be underrepresented in managerial roles (with the exception of Sweden), and a substantial gender pay gap remains. Public service media have less of a pay gap due to legal requirements, but are still male dominated. A similar situation applies to the representation of women in media content (Indicator F9; see also Padovani et al., Chapter 4; Núñez-Mussa et al., Chapter 13). We observe among journalists a growing sensitivity to gender equality in media content, but no formal rules apply. Only in Finland are PSM and newspapers now actively ensuring that the distribution of gender – both for journalists and consultants used in broadcasts – is equal (Ala-Fossi et al., 2021).

Many factors have led to a higher sensitivity to misinformation and digital platforms (Indicator F10; see also Mayerhöffer et al., Chapter 2). It is more the PSM which have the mandate to counter misinformation and that to a large extent introduced activities to counter them – mostly by teams dedicated to fact-checking (Germany and the United Kingdom). Although this is in most cases not done with the help of algorithmic or data-driven solutions (journalists often mistrust them), fact-checking and double-checking of information is seen as part of the job.

The degree of protection against (online) harassment of journalists (Indicator F11; see also Baroni et al., Chapter 3) is more dependent on whether journalists

have a contract or are freelancers than if the media house they are working for is private or PSM. While a special cybersecurity team to counter attacks against individual reporters and against the journalism produced is in force in the Swedish public broadcaster, journalists are mostly protected on an ad hoc basis (Nord & von Krogh, 2021).

To conclude, regarding the performance of the public media with respect to the dimension of *Freedom / Information (F)*, broadcasting regulation and relatively stable resources give PSM better conditions to establish the tools and procedures needed for better service. However, PSM do not seem to use these advantages to the full extent, as PSM do not always perform better than private media.

Performance of public service media with respect to Equality / Interest Mediation (E)

In today's media field, media ownership concentration (Indicator E1; see also Trappel & Meier, Chapter 7) is a dominant feature that considerably affects the media market structure in several countries. Within the rather oligopolistic environment of the news media sector, it is striking that PSM, in terms of popularity, usually enjoy a distinctive position regardless of market size (e.g., in Austria, Finland, Iceland, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United Kingdom).

Even in countries with linguistic diversity (e.g., Switzerland), where the emphasis is usually placed on the development of regional and linguistic markets with media content being produced to address the needs of different language groups, PSM stand out by providing highly competitive radio and television programmes compared with those aired by their private counterparts. Maybe the most distinctive example comes from Flanders, Belgium, where recent media outlet mergers have transformed the small and highly concentrated media market. However, the public service broadcaster VRT has maintained its dynamic position in the free-to-air radio and television field (Hendrickx et al., 2021). Additionally, in Switzerland, the public service broadcaster SRG SSR has succeeded by providing highly competitive radio and television programmes compared with those aired by its main counterparts, namely foreign channels (Bonfadelli et al., 2021). Resistance to the trends of media ownership concentration can also be found at local level, with public service media playing a key role in news content diversity, for example, the regional radio news services of ARD in Germany (Horz-Ishak & Thomass, 2021).

News provision (Indicator E3; see also d'Haenens et al., Chapter 16) is a field of fierce competition between the public service and commercial broadcasters (e.g., in Chile and Iceland) with most media markets presenting a great variety of news dissemination formats (e.g., in Iceland, Denmark, Sweden, and Italy). Austria is a distinctive case, with an increasing variety of news formats both online and in the broadcasting sector over the last decade (Grünangerl et al.,

2021). On the other hand, trends of decreasing diversity of news formats also exist (e.g., in Portugal, Switzerland, and Iceland, particularly at the regional and local level). But what stands out in some media contexts is the different orientation between public service and private media in terms of news topics and categories covered. For instance, the tendency of public broadcasters towards hard news reporting stands in sharp contrast to the preference Austrian private broadcasters have for sensationalist forms of news presentations (Grünangerl et al., 2021) and Swiss private companies' emotionalised and personalised patterns of news coverage (Bonfadelli et al., 2021). An exceptional case in news provision is the public service broadcaster VRT in Flanders, Belgium, which is the only news corporation in the region adopting a specific gender quota in its news services to promote equal representation (Hendrickx et al., 2021).

Public service broadcasters seem to present a high level of digital competency, with some of them standing out in the way they have adapted their content delivery to the digital environment by means of, for example, digital ventures incorporating a range of news genres in Denmark (Blach-Ørsten et al., 2021) and Finland (Ala-Fossi et al., 2021); highly visited websites in Canada (Taylor & DeCillia, 2021); or innovative digital tools, such as the mobile news apps and hourly updated news streams offered in Germany by the public service television format Tagesschau of ARD (Horz-Ishak & Thomass, 2021), the availability of various digital platforms in the Netherlands (Vandenberghe & d'Haenens, 2021), or the convenient and visualised news format of card news in South Korea (Kim & Lee, 2021).

In terms of media content addressing the needs of minorities (Indicator E4; see also Núñez-Mussa et al., Chapter 13), there are countries where the public service broadcasters are among the leading players in providing alternative content, in some cases legally obliged to do so (in Austria and Finland). A distinctive example is Finland, which, although it is still an ethnically homogenous country, the public service broadcaster Yle, instigated by the law, provides radio, television, and online flow in minority languages used in the country, such as Swedish, Sámi, Romani, Finnish sign language, English, and Russian (Ala-Fossi et al., 2021). In Austria, as well, the public service broadcaster ORF is legally obliged to provide programmes in the official minority languages (Grünangerl et al., 2021). Beyond the European continent, Hong Kong provides an example with the public service broadcaster RTHK producing programmes intended to promote cultural diversity and reflect the life of ethnic minorities (Lo & Wong, 2021).

Although the allocation of public subsidies to minority-language media is rare (with the exception of the Finnish media market), the preservation of the linguistic and cultural diversity is still usually a task for the public service broadcasters, which appear to be committed, often by law imposition, to providing programmes in the official minority languages (e.g., in Switzerland;

in Sweden particularly by the public service radio; in the Netherlands with NPO still aiming to have balanced representation of people with non-western migration backgrounds; and in Australia by the second-largest public service broadcaster SBS) (Bonfadelli et al., 2021; Nord & von Krogh, 2021; Vandenberghe & d'Haenens, 2021; Dwyer et al., 2021). In some cases, such as the United Kingdom (Moore & Ramsay, 2021) and Italy (Padovani et al., 2021), the need for information in minority languages is met both by public service and commercial media organisations. Canada is a unique case, since it is the only place where efforts in expanding the national media system beyond the dominating languages of English and French have been systematic over the last two decades (Taylor & DeCillia, 2021). In contrast, in Denmark, the public broadcaster DR no longer transmits programmes in minority languages, nor are there private alternatives (Blach-Ørsten et al., 2021). In media markets where sign language has been recognised as a minority language, it is employed in news broadcasts or other selected programmes produced by the public service broadcaster (e.g., in Austria and Iceland), while at the same time, increased Internet use has given rise to new, alternative flows of information managed by minorities (e.g., in Portugal and South Korea).

Media content monitoring processes and accountability mechanisms (Indicator E6; see also Thomass et al., Chapter 11) vary from country to country and are based either on public authorities or private entities. Public service broadcasters' news services are usually subject to monitoring procedures conducted by special authorities, whose task it is to examine that PSM compliance with the set of rules and obligations as defined in their mission statements. For example, in Italy, the Pavia Observatory conducts a significant monitoring process related to political pluralism in the news services of RAI (Padovani et al., 2021). In the United Kingdom, the BBC is monitored by the organisation News-Watch, emphasising news and current affairs programming related to the European Union and news output, and the remaining programming is regulated on the basis of the broadcaster's editorial guidelines, which are set out in the Royal Charter and Agreement (Moore & Ramsay, 2021). In several countries, PSM are obliged by law to adopt mechanisms of self-regulation or self-inspection of content (e.g., in Iceland, Finland, the United Kingdom, Switzerland, Austria, and Germany), forging a greater level of self-monitoring compared with private media. The momentum of public service broadcasters towards self-regulation mechanisms (e.g., in Finland, Iceland, Austria, and Germany) is reflected in their tendency either to incorporate, in a formal way, specific rules supplementing the general ethical rules (e.g., in Germany) or to adopt stricter rules than their private counterparts (e.g., in Austria). Additionally, where an ombudsperson – an alternative self-regulation mechanism – has been set in place in order to address media content and receive audience's complaints, it is usually applicable to both commercial media and PSM (e.g., in Denmark, Canada, and Portugal).

As to the pluralism of viewpoints being heard in the media content, the MDM research findings reveal that media organisations usually lack formal rules or standardised procedures for ensuring internal pluralism in newsrooms (Iceland, Germany, Flanders, and Chile) or show no respect for such rules (Hong Kong). The diversity of voices being heard is hence determined by editorial meetings or dictated by single measures derived from the management. Even in the case of PSM, obligations for internal pluralism as part of their mission statement (e.g., in Austria) or as part of a law imposition (e.g., in the Netherlands and Switzerland) are scarce. However, when there are no standardised procedures favouring internal pluralism, PSM, compared with their private rivals, appear to be more sensitive or dedicated to mechanisms safeguarding the plurality of opinions. This is exemplified by the Danish public service broadcaster DR incorporating a Director of Pluralism and Diversity, whose job it is to ensure a series of pluralism activities, related, for instance, to the recruitment of participants in popular programmes or to the positioning of journalists.

In relation to pluralism, it is interesting that some countries have rules mandating balanced coverage of political topics and officials, though media outlets do not always comply with them. For instance, in Portugal, the Regulatory Entity for the Media (ERC), which is in charge of monitoring the level of political pluralism in news content, has revealed the tendency of the public service broadcaster to give prominence to the government and its supporting party at the expense of the main opposition party, though this practice seems to be decreasing now compared with the past (Fidalgo, 2021). An extreme case is Italy, where the historical news programme TG1 (Telegiornale 1), broadcast on the RAI1 television channel, is obliged by service contract to devote time to all political forces in proportion to their parliamentary power, and at the same time the “*par condicio*” broadcasting rule aims to guarantee equal treatment of all political parties appearing on the news media during elections (Padovani et al., 2021).

To conclude, the increasing levels of media ownership concentration, either at national or local level, do not seem to prevent media market competition, with public service and commercial media coexisting in a continuously evolving media ecology. Public service broadcasters worldwide try to produce programmes addressing the needs of ethnic-cultural minorities, even when private media do not. The culture of self-monitoring is stronger in public service broadcasters, which are more actively dedicated to self-regulation mechanisms. Sometimes this is imposed by law. Pluralism in newsrooms, though rarely protected by official rules or by law imposition, is a goal that PSM show greater sensitivity to, compared with their private counterparts.

*Performance of public service media with respect
to Control / Watchdog (C)*

The watchdog function of journalism has often been referred to as a cornerstone of a well-functioning democracy (Trappel et al., 2011; Weaver & Wilnat, 2012). The exercise of public power and political decisions – with great implications for citizens' daily lives – must be regularly scrutinised by independent media. The quality of public debate increases if media are able to hold powerful offices, individuals, and groups in society accountable.

Theoretically, PSM seem to have a central role to play in society by producing investigative and independent journalism. The basic idea for PSM is to serve the citizenry with accurate, relevant, and reliable information about what is going on in society. Generally speaking, PSM are expected to be impartial in reporting and stand free from the pressure of powerful political and economic interests. However, public service conditions are not uniform, but vary from country to country with regard to regulatory frameworks, financial models, and links between media and political system (Arriaza Ibarra et al., 2015). It is reasonable to assume that the varying conditions influence the ability to fulfil the democratic watchdog role. This is especially true in illiberal political systems where the state captures PSM and transforms them into state media. But, while such state broadcasting is equivalent to state ownership of media, granting media little autonomy and submitting media to close supervision, PSM are antithetical to state broadcasting. PSM are in public ownership, perform a public mandate, and try – secured by a public control as, for example, broadcasting councils – to work autonomously.

This section focuses on the watchdog function of PSM in the 18 countries covered in the 2021 MDM project. We discuss the importance of public service media for investigative journalism, the ways in which public service media contribute to the control and accountability of political powerholders, and how investigative journalism in public service media has developed in recent years. Two specific indicators in the MDM project are analysed, one regarding the watchdog and the news media's mission statement (C7) and one measuring the watchdog function and financial resources of media (C9). Both indicators applied to public and private media companies, but this chapter refers only to observations of PSM performances in the MDM country reports.

In most countries, the independent role of PSM is normally mentioned in the mission statement of the institution in question, stating that reporting should be in the public interest and independent from any kind of power. In the United Kingdom, the watchdog function is implicit, rather than explicitly set out in the BBC's constitutional documents, while the company's editorial values stress the importance of operating in the public interest, reporting stories of significance to audiences and holding the powerful accountable (Moore & Ramsay, 2021). Investigative journalism is also one of the missions of the public broadcaster

RAI in Italy (Padovani et al., 2021), and the Flemish public broadcaster VRT is obliged to invest time and money into investigative journalism (resulting in startling reports about corruption in politics and privacy issues) (Hendrickx et al., 2021).

Perhaps even more interesting than official mission documents is to analyse whether watchdog journalism is actually performed by PSM. The interviews conducted with PSM representatives for the MDM project give rather scattered answers. In some cases, public broadcasters report increased spending on investigative journalism. The Finnish public broadcaster Yle, which also has a specific investigative group, has exceptional resources for investigative journalism in the form of documentaries and other current affairs programming (Ala-Fossi et al., 2021). In Sweden, the PSM SVT reports that the budget for investigative journalism has increased significantly, and that practices and methods are implemented on regional levels (Nord & von Krogh, 2021). The Canadian public broadcaster CBC argues that “its investigative work sets it apart from the rest of Canada’s news media, highlighting its important journalistic contribution as part of its mandate and a justification for the taxpayer money spent on the public broadcaster” (EMRG, 2020: 5). In Iceland, the public service broadcaster RÚV constitutes a considerable exception to the general trend of media outlets’ inability to perform quality in-depth reporting, along with the paradigm of ad hoc resources (Jóhannsdóttir, 2021).

Still, the most common reflections in the interviews are based on the observation that resources spent on investigative journalism are too scarce, and not in line with editorial ambitions in public service media. In Germany, “austerity measures in public service [media] led to a hiring freeze, just when investigative reporting is seen as a way to counter fake news and foster trust in the media” (EMRG, 2020: 7). Public broadcaster ABC in Australia previously enjoyed a good reputation for its investigative reporting, but “it is now having serious limitations placed on its functioning due to funding cuts” (EMRG, 2020: 4). In Italy, investigative journalism in public media is not perceived as being sufficiently represented in news programmes (Padovani et al., 2021).

To conclude, PSM sometimes make important contributions to democracy by offering investigative programmes and spending considerable resources on watchdog journalism. In some countries, public service programmes are explicitly mentioned as flagships in the investigative journalism environment. At the same time, public broadcasters in most countries generally struggle with budget cuts and increasingly market-oriented media policies that risk weakening the vital democratic control function of PSM.

In most countries participating in the MDM research project, lack of resources and time are the major constraints facing news media when taking on the task of investigative reporting. The resistance to this trend, albeit scarce, is twofold, derived either from the public service broadcasters’ struggle or from

innovative media policies, adaptable to the current challenges of the media markets, with the aim of giving impetus to investigative journalism.

The significant role of PSM in defending investigative reporting as a vital part of the media's democratic function in a challenging context gives rise to an important conclusion: The stability in the watchdog role of media organisations can be ensured to the extent that quality in-depth reporting becomes an integral part of the self-definition of journalism, both informally as an individual culture of media professionals, and formally as a codified mission in line with an efficient media policy enhancing the watchdog culture in practice.

Public service media and commercial operators: Finland, a case study

As an example of the dynamic between PSM and commercial media, the empirical material from the Finnish interviews provides for an interesting case study. On 17 December 2020, the Finnish Government proposed an amendment to section 7 of the Act on Yleisradio Oy [Yle], the Finnish public service media (Finnish Government, 2020). The proposition is a result of a joint venture by the Finnish commercial media to change the legislation regarding what type of content the PSM can publish online. The initiative was taken by the Finnish Media Federation (Finnmedia) on behalf of the commercial media actors in Finland as a private complaint to the EU Commission in 2017. The response from the European Union has been a reference for the preparation of the law change, but the content is classified. The changes to the law are clearly stated in the suggested new version of section 7 in the law:

In this bill, it is proposed that the Act on Yleisradio Oy be amended so that the provisions on Yleisradio Oy non-profit activities are clarified. The proposed regulations constraint Yleisradio Oy's ability to publish content in text form, as a part of its assignment to provide for a public service [translated]. (Finnish Government, 2020: 1)

Thereby, if the law is accepted, Yle would be prohibited from publishing news articles on the web in text format only. All published textual content should relate to audiovisual television or video content published by Yle. The commercial media representative Finnmedia argues that Yle, by publishing journalistic content only in textual form, distorts the competition. Clearly, the competition in this case has nothing to do with public service media. The real competition – as also stated in the interview with the editor-in-chief of the main daily newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* – is from the platforms, notably Facebook and Google, but not Yle.

Quite likely, the proposition will be approved by the parliament in 2022, where the populist party “The Finns Party” are opposed to strengthening PSM. This tendency has been shown to be common among right-wing parties on the whole (Schulz et al., 2019; Sehl et al., 2020b). Consequently, the new law would lead to a situation where, in order for PSM to report news rapidly, it

would have to take an artificial detour and translate the essential messages into video or spoken form. The reporters at Yle are currently preparing for this by, among other means, creating an AI-based synthetic voice that will read aloud the text that would otherwise be considered illegal.

This case clearly demonstrates the common misconception about the essence of public service. Public service media are, by definition, not a competitor: As they are not “on the market”, they cannot skew the competition. Users of PSM do so in their capacity as citizens, not consumers. The questioning of PSM is not unique to Finland; similar discussions and legislation changes are recent in Germany, Denmark, and Portugal. These changes are worrying from a media ecology perspective.

In the case of Finland, the arguments are poorly motivated, and to a large extent, deliberations happen behind closed doors. From a democratic point of view, the end results are, in the worst case, damaging to the citizens and thereby also to democracy in general. There have been many critical responses to the suggested new law, both from civil society and academia.

Following the suggested changes to the law in December 2020, a team of Finnish scholars were asked to give their expert opinions in a hearing arranged by the Transport and Communications Committee, which is part of the Parliament of Finland (Ala-Fossi et al., 2021). Their opinions will later be published on the parliament’s website (we present their core arguments here with permission). The proposed provisions as stated in the legislative proposal (Eduskunta Riksdagen, 2020) would restrict Yle’s ability to publish textual content as part of its public service remit. The main arguments presented by said scholars in the hearing on 12 March 2021 were as follows:

- The proposal will reduce the amount of freely and readily available quality journalism online, thereby undermining equal access to information available to the citizens.
- Definitions of the roles, duties, and regulation of the public service broadcaster are unquestionably and unequivocally a national issue and not something to be decided by the EU Commission.
- The suggested division of online content into textual and audiovisual categories is a technologically obsolete and artificial construct. Media content published in digital form is not tied to any one particular form of utilisation.
- There is no clear research-based evidence of market failures of the commercial media caused by a public service broadcaster providing news for free online.
- The suggested restrictions are not clearly motivated or justified in relation to the potential benefits for the commercial media. The bill is very open to interpretation and the proposed regulation is likely to result in a recurring complaint being issued by Finnmedia.

The scholars then proposed that a better way forward would be for no legislative reform to be made at this stage and that a parliamentary working group be assembled in order to consider the clarifying of section 7 of the Broadcasting Act, and the ways in which textual journalistic online content can be included in the PSM remit. Furthermore, they requested that Yle's textual news and current affairs journalism would be defined as one of Yle's new core services and that the law should be revised accordingly.

The legislation about the roles, duties, and autonomy of PSM warrant further studies with a larger European scope. Meanwhile, current research has rather clearly shown that there is little or no evidence of a negative market impact on European commercial media due to PSM publishing free content online (Nielsen & Sehl, 2016; Sehl et al., 2020a).

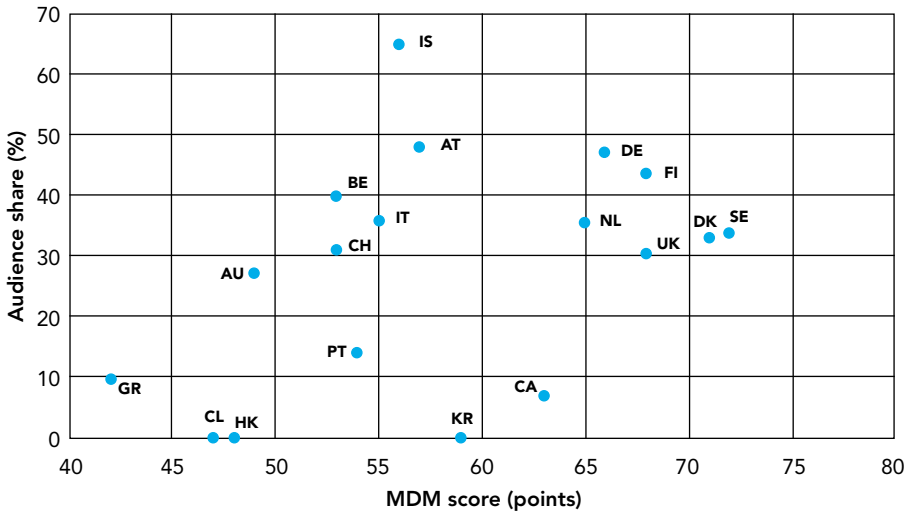
Comparing the state of democracy and public service media across countries

In this section, we examine the indicators about the state of democracy and compare the findings to the results of the former sections in order to determine whether high rankings within the World Press Freedom Index 2020 (Reporters Without Borders, 2020) and the Freedom of Expression Index 2019 (Lührmann et al., 2019) correlate with high scores within the MDM project. We further analyse the possible relation between these scores and the strength of the PSM sector in each country. We stipulate that PSM, on the ground of their mandate, are obliged to serve democracy. Countries with a strong PSM sector are therefore expected to have high scores in the MDM indicators.

Most of the countries with a strong PSM sector also reach high ranks in the World Press Freedom Index and the Freedom of Expression Index; this is true for Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Germany, and Iceland. But there are also countries which rank high in these indices that have medium-strong PSM (Italy, Switzerland, Sweden, and the United Kingdom) or weak PSM (Australia, Canada, and Portugal).

Figure 9.1 shows the position of the various national PSM in terms of their audience shares and scores within the aggregated MDM indicators of the dimensions *Freedom / Information (F)*, *Equality / Interest Mediation (E)*, and *Control / Watchdog (C)*.

Figure 9.1 2021 MDM scores and strength of the PSM sector



Comments: Chile, Hong Kong, and South Korea are missing values for audience share.

As shown in Figure 9.1, strong PSM does not always correlate with high scores in the dimensions of *Freedom / Information (F)*, *Equality / Interest Mediation (E)*, and *Control / Watchdog (C)*. Looking only at the overall scores in relation to the position of PSM in the audience market, we find countries where a high audience share correlates with high overall scores in the MDM (Finland, Germany, and the Netherlands), and vice versa (Greece and Portugal). Two groups have either a high audience share in the market but only middle-ranging scores in the MDM (Austria, Belgium, Iceland, and Italy) or a middle position in the audience share but high-ranging MDM scores (Denmark, Sweden, and the United Kingdom). A similar division occurs in those countries of which the PSM have a middle position with regards to audience share, but low scores in the MDM (e.g., Australia) and where PSM enjoy a low audience share, but reach high scores in the MDM (Canada).

These data show the tendency for countries where PSM have a comparably strong position in the media ecology to perform better with respect to the overarching dimensions of *Freedom / Information (F)*, *Equality / Interest Mediation (E)*, and *Control / Watchdog (C)* than countries where PSM reach a low audience share and have a weaker position. We argue that the reasons for this tendency are found in the details of the MDM indicators. With respect to the performance of PSM in terms of *Freedom / Information (F)*, broadcasting regulation and relatively stable resources give PSM better conditions to establish tools and procedures for better performance, although PSM does not always use them to the full and expected extent.

The culture of self-monitoring is stronger in public service broadcasters. PSM appear to be more active or dedicated to self-regulation mechanisms than private media. Pluralism in newsrooms, although rarely protected by codified rules or law imposition, is a goal for which PSM show greater sensitivity, compared with their private counterparts.

PSM also play a significant role in keeping investigative reporting alive, constituting a vital part of the PSM democratic role. We also argue that the stability of the watchdog role of media organisations can be ensured to the extent that quality in-depth reporting becomes an integral part of the self-definition of journalism, both informally as an individual culture of media professionals, and formally as a codified mission in line with an efficient media policy enhancing the watchdog culture in practice. This is true for both PSM and private media. Strong public service media will enhance the chance that the media ecology is working to this aim, provided that PSM are using their resources and autonomy to reach that aim.

Conclusion

Ongoing developments in the media market, media regulation, journalism professionalism, and related areas challenge or threaten the role the media ideally play in a democracy. This chapter provides evidence of the extent to which PSM can constitute a countermeasure. The chapter shows how PSM perform with respect to the overarching dimensions in the MDM: *Freedom / Information (F)*, *Equality / Interest Mediation (E)*, and *Control / Watchdog (C)*.

The overall MDM scores in relation to the position of the PSM in the audience market shows a quite complex picture: We find cases where a high audience share correlates with high MDM scores (Finland, Germany, and the Netherlands), and vice versa (Greece and Portugal). We can conclude that good performance with respect to our MDM indicators pays off in audience approval. But the question remains of why this is not the case with the two groups of countries that have either a high audience share in the market but only middle-ranging MDM scores (Austria, Belgium, Iceland, and Italy), or a middle position in the audience share but high-ranging MDM scores (Denmark, Sweden, and the United Kingdom). Here, the relation between market position of PSM and their performance is less clear-cut, and it would need deeper analysis not only of the single factors of the MDM indicators, but also of the contextual conditions, in order to find the reasons for these inconsistencies. A similar deeper analysis would be needed for those countries of which the PSM have a middle position with regards to audience share, but low MDM scores (e.g., Australia) and where PSM have a low audience share, but reach high scores in the MDM (Canada). Our assumption is that – beyond the MDM performance indicators – a reflection

of the sociocultural and historical development of PSM in the given country are underlying influencing factors, which would need still another approach than the one we employed here. Several additional questions could be asked: How has the longer tradition of acceptance of public broadcasting been? How have political actors related to public service broadcasting and media? Which cultural and social roles did public service broadcasting, and now public service media, play in the given countries? Questions like these cannot be dealt with in a snapshot picture like our indicators give.

Relating the findings to the concept of media ecology, where strong PSM influence the performance of other media, countries with PSM enjoying high audience shares, as opposed to countries with less influential PSM, better serve democracy. Those countries with a strong PSM sector rank in the upper regions of the relevant democracy indicators. From this, we can conclude that public service media do not only claim to be relevant for democracy, but do indeed deliver services within a media ecology with an impact on how media perform in general.

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