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PUBLIC SERVICE MEDIA BETWEEN THE STATE AND THE PUBLIC: RE-CENTRING PUBLIC SERVICE MEDIA OPTIONS FOR THE NEW DEMOCRACIES

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Abstract: *The premise of this paper is that the potential of public media has been underused in the projects of democratizing states and democratizing media. We would like to see what the realistic options are for the public media sector to develop as a hub of creative production and citizenship for domestic content producers and beneficiaries. It might be high time to reconsider public options, in the event of failing markets and uneven results of citizen or community journalism projects. I believe that one cannot impose quality journalism where there is no market demand for it, and one can hardly invent civil society in areas where there has been none. At the same time, it might be at least thinkable to envision democratic governance, pluralism, a public interest agenda, and fun in a public media system. I still remember the dull television offer of the Romanian State Television (TVR) before the fall of communism in 1989. At the same time, I remember as well the interesting and culturally aimed magazines that were widely available and widely read.*

Keywords: *public service media, state media, commercial media, democracy, citizenship*

Conceptual in-distinctions between state and public media and some of its consequences

In light of the East-West dichotomy, the simplistic view of the broadcasters from behind the Iron Curtain was that they were mere mouthpieces of the formal power in their respective countries. The view of Lenin that the press should be the "armed arm of power" had come to be taken for granted in the older theoretizations of the media (Sieber, Peterson, Schramm, 1956). All the while, it is impressive how resistant this normative perspective has turned out to be, despite its actual limited explanatory power (Hallin, Mancini). Meanwhile, the options of the public broadcasters in Romania have just narrowed down with the removal of the tax on radio and television, but we are confident that creative policy can bring in new opportunities.

When it comes to the contemporary views on state/public media, it is striking to observe how similar the perspectives on public media systems are in new democracies, from Bangladesh to Croatia, from Taiwan to Romania. This was one of the conclusions of the plenary session of the European Sociological Association RN18 conference in 2014.[1] Simply put, people do not like public media because they believe it is the same with state media; all the while, commercial media is fully supported on the grounds that it is "free." Furthermore, some representatives of the emerging public media believe that they work for state media. Even large nongovernmental entities use the terms *state* and *public media* interchangeably, as if they described the same thing.[2] Is state and public media really the same thing? Is the Chinese State Television similar to BBC, really? The working hypothesis is that various stakeholders, in the emerging markets of loyalties (Price) have used the terms "state media" and/or "public media" in the transition periods, in newly democratizing countries. This cacophony has led to the institutionalization of confusion.

[1] http://topub.unibuc.ro/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/ESA-RN18_Program_10oct_2.pdf , see especially p. 5.
[2] See Open Society Foundations country reports on Mapping Digital Media, 2010.

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I argue that the conceptual in-distinction between state and public media contributes to the little legitimacy that "public media" has enjoyed as possible alternative in newly democratizing states. It is true that at least in Eastern Europe the new public media has been painstakingly built on the ashes of state media systems. It is as true that state media had been an appurtenance of state power in the authoritarian regimes, thus being deeply distrusted by the citizens.

By the same token, scholars and policy makers from democratic states might have not trusted media elites that got shaped under authoritarian regimes. Nevertheless, empirical evidence shows that media elites were feeling as oppressed as any other individuals under the authoritarian rule (Petre). While the state media systems have been regarded as extensions of authoritarian regimes, the public media has not been considered as an option in itself. In new democratic orders the commercial media systems have started to dominate, built on ideas of free trade and free market. All the while, public media has not been properly conceptualized in its own right.

Valuable research on the recent history of the former state broadcasting institutions brings to the fore a much more nuanced perspective on the subject. Recent contributions (Mustata; Matei) highlight the larger aim of modernization and the unintended consequence of the professionalization of journalism within the development of these broadcasting organizations in the sixties and seventies. These researches show that the moment of maximum agency for broadcasting content producers was reached in the sixties and thus during the communist period. Moreover, Alexandru Matei convincingly points out that, in the same period, the Romanian Television (TVR) was more of a public service than the mouthpiece of power. These new historical evaluations of the Romanian broadcaster, as well as the underused potential of public media in Romania after 1989, along the reconsideration of public options for the future of media in Europe make us take a closer, sober and fresh look at the Romanian public service sector in itself and for itself.

The United Stated and the media in the new European democracies

The Unites States took the most responsibility for media transitions in new democracies, with massive investments of ideas, know-how, time, and money. Media scholar Peter Gross[3] estimates that between 1990 and 2008 USA governmental and nongovernmental organizations spent more than seventy million dollars for democratizing media in Romania alone. It is equally true that the United States does not have a robust or popular public media system itself. USA tradition acknowledges the fact that private enterprises can work for the public interest just as well, in the good republican tradition and faith in the public good. At the same time, the idea that democratization of the media should be problematized along the democratization of the state is present in the literature (Price, Rozumilowicz, Verhulst, 2001).

The United States has traditionally enjoyed a robust civil society, even though Americans themselves have been "bowling alone" lately (Putnam). Civil society means democracy from below, thus more genuine than democracy from above. Nevertheless, the type of media democratization that civil society projects enhance is inherently fragmented and potentially less consequential than representative democracy from above. On the other hand, attempting change from top down is dangerously close to the centralizing projects of the authoritarian regimes. It is one of the puzzles that need to be addressed as we attempt to properly conceptualize public versus state media. The classic Weberian distinction between authority and power and consequently between legitimacy and lack of legitimacy can represent a conceptual key for solving this puzzle.

[3] As keynote speaker at the conference: *Models of / Models for Journalism and Communication*, Bucharest, 19-21 November 2009 organized by the FJSC (School of Journalism and Mass Communication Studies), University of Bucharest.

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It seems that the American media construal has been exported to the emerging democracies from Eastern Europe, while Europe has not been particularly vocal in the nineties. Has the European Union been so inward looking that it missed the opportunity to provide a good model of know-how? It might be that the United States took more responsibility in shaping media in new European democracies, than did Europe itself.

In order to understand this case, we need to explore the parties involved, the stakeholders. The existing literature on the issue proposes a framework for evaluating the evaluators on media policy (Price, Abbott, Morgan). Who were the actors involved in media policy making for new democracies? What kind of policies has been drafted? What were the main ideas driving these policies? How about the academic papers on the issue and their authors?

Public Service Broadcasting under siege and the transformation of media in Eastern Europe

By the eighties, the trust in Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) was fading away in its very core, Europe. Public media was being accused of being paternalistic, of being ruled by a few elites that would pretend to know better than a regular citizen. The usefulness of the classical PSB system had been put under serious doubt for more than two decades. Thus, criticism was driven by ideas related to the PSB's elitist nature, its paternalism, its limited accountability, its large budgets, its obsolete structuration in the age of democratic access to the free flow of information, and its obstruction of the free market (Peacock). Moreover, the neoliberal pressures driven by the free trade agenda of the United States added additional strain to the already feeble legitimacy of public broadcasting all over Europe.

In Eastern Europe, after 1989 the broadcasting system found itself under the double burden of European scepticism about public broadcasting, and its own legacy as state broadcaster under the communist regime. In Europe, the peak of liberalization was reached in the nineties, just at the time when communism fell in Eastern Europe and the options of change were being considered.

Liberalization was the path that became legitimate in Eastern Europe, along the positive juxtaposition of free market and democratization (Splichal). Privatization was regarded as a correlative of democratization for Eastern Europe throughout the nineties. Moreover, the former state intrusion in all aspects of life further de-legitimated anything that would limit the perceived newly gained freedom (Jakubowicz). Regulation was considered a limitation, and consequently most legislative projects related to the field of journalism failed in the nineties. Massive deregulation followed, to public acclaim. The former state broadcasting system attempted to gain autonomy from the formal power, but had lost most of its audiences to the emerging private players on the media market (Mungiu-Pipidi). The old broadcasting system came therefore to be considered a relic of the old regime.

Meanwhile, the economic crisis has revealed the limitations of the neoliberal model in our part of Europe as well. Around half of the journalists have lost their jobs to the crisis or experience economic, editorial, or technological hardships (Surugiu). The main conclusion of my own doctoral research was that journalism managed to be the voice of change in Romania, but not the main actor of its own transformation (Petre).

The free market and the media

Meanwhile, as Jurgen Habermas perceptively points out, the commercialization of the public sphere has become dominant. This transformation does not necessarily enhance media subjects that have to do with the public interest but with the interest of the public. More often than not, the two are not

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the same. While public media mainly interpellates the audiences as citizens, commercial media addresses them as potential consumers.

The alternative to public service media has become the emerging commercial media system, with its promise of grassroots democratizing agenda. The results, in the words of media scholar Denis McQuail, have been a large scale, low cost and low taste media offer (McQuail, Siune).

All the while, the economic crisis has revealed the even more serious limitations of the liberalized, deregulated, media system. Dependence on advertising creates commercial pressure on content structuration. It moves broadcasters onto the verge of extinction or onto the path of concentration. Digital aggregators do not take editorial responsibility for the content that is available on-line. Pluralism and diversity are almost impossible missions on the commercial media platforms; that can aggregate enclaves of like-minded individuals not interested in the exchange of ideas, but on the confirmation of their own (Dean). Journalists become multitasking, multiplatform content producers, under precarious work conditions (Petre; Surugiu).

The potential of public service media reconsidered

We need to problematize the relevance of public service media in the age of liberalization and digital access. We take into account international comparative research that has revealed two main dangers that hunt public service broadcasting systems: external control (political or other), and sub-financing (Mendel).

It might be high time to reconsider public options, in the event of failing markets and uneven results of citizen or community journalism projects. I believe that one cannot impose quality journalism where there is no market demand for it, and one can hardly invent civil society in areas where there had been none. At the same time, it might be at least thinkable to envision democratic governance, pluralism, a public interest agenda, and fun in a public media system. I still remember the dull television offer of the Romanian State Television before the fall of communism, 1989. At the same time, I remember as well the interesting and culturally aimed magazines that were widely available and widely read.

My premise is that the potential of public media has been underused in the projects of democratizing states and democratizing media. We would like to see what the realistic options are for the public media sector to develop as a hub of creative production for domestic content producers and beneficiaries. Overall, we want to contribute with coherent, up to date policy driven knowledge. As Sandra Braman states,

> Media policy is co-extant with the field of information policy, defined as all law and regulation dealing with an information production chain that includes information creation, processing, flows and use. More narrowly, media policy as a distinct subfield of information policy deals with those technologies, processes and content by which the public itself is mediated. (Braman 153)

In the wake of the economic crisis in Europe, public options for the media have been reconsidered (Picard, Siciliani). The potential of public media is being revalued because it is a structuration that theoretically allows for pluralism and diversity, creative production, editorial autonomy, sustainability, and accountability to the tax paying citizens; ultimately, it is a correlative of democracy (Mendel). No less importantly, public service media has the potential to interpellate the audiences as citizens involved in the polis, who hold elected power accountable.

We consider that the time has come to reconsider public service media for the new democracies as well, although it only occupies a limited space on the media market and does not enjoy the youth popular support. Public media is not very much liked, nor trusted, in Romania, and

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structurally it runs the danger of re-etatization. All the while, the public service media sector does stand a chance of becoming a hub for domestic creative production and active citizenship in the event of convergence of the old and new media platforms. Moreover, public service media can expand over the Internet world, as Christian Fuchs perceptively points out. With the right policy in place, public service media on old and new platforms stands the chance of bringing in pluralism and programming diversity at the content level; editorial independence at the journalism practice level; freedom from political control at the formal governance level; accountability and transparency at the procedural level, and appropriate funding by steady and accountable redistributions.

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