Media and public communication in the era of digital platforms: Towards European Public Open Spaces (EPOS)

– Draft 16 February 2018 –

contact: Volker Grassmuck <vgrass@vgrass.de>

Abstract

The proposed project approaches how crises in Public Service Media (PSM) can be addressed by explorations of public space online, where pan-European cooperation can lead to new forms of production and dissemination of public knowledge. This project seeks to engage with European culture across a range of EU member-states, addressing commonalities between PSM organizations, public institutions like Europeana and commons communities like Wikipedia and exploring how democracy might be revitalized. While PSM are under pressure from multiple angles, they remain one of the most important sites for public culture and integration. The EPOS project explores how the establishment of a Europe-wide participatory platform, free from state and market interests – that draws on existing PSM activities – would further enhance and protect the public sphere. To do so, the research packages aim to: address the growing demand by citizens for participation in PSM governance and content decisions; explore how the public sector is being delegitimized; ask how European PSM have been contributing to a civic commons online; interrogate how new forms of organizing media contribute to transnational digital publics; and to analyse the effects of algorithms used in PSM personalization. By partnering with a range of public knowledge stakeholders and engaging in on- and offline exchanges we will ensure that diverse perspectives inform the research and facilitate sharing among all partners. They include PSM organizations, especially in Europe's smaller democracies, and public and civil society institutions. In so doing, we will also enhance academic knowledge in this area.

Table of Contents

Public Service Media (PSM) are at a cross-roads. Critics from commercial media, market-radical economists, populist parties but also growing numbers of citizens are demanding that PSM are shrunk or abolished altogether or that their funding be switched from broadcast fee to taxes, bringing PSM under direct political control. This crisis is part of two larger and interlinked dynamics: The **de-legitimization of truth** (media, science) and that **of the public sector** in general and European public institutions in particular. PSM have responded by strategies of rejuvenating and digitizing themselves and becoming more open and participatory (e.g. BBC 2015).

PSM emerged at the beginning of the 20th century in parallel to the idea of "Daseinsvorsorge" (Jaspers/Forsthoff). The concept translates into "Service public" in France and Switzerland and in EU parlance into "**services of general interest**" ("non-market services which the public authorities class as being of general interest and subject to specific public service obligations"). The EC Communication "Services of general interest in Europe" (96/C281/03) acknowledges these as "at the heart of the European model of society" and "as part of the set of values shared by all our countries that helps define Europe." In the Amsterdam Protocol (EU 1997) PSM were included in the category of services of general interest, "considering that the system of public broadcasting in the Member States is directly related to the democratic, social and cultural needs of each society and to the need to preserve media pluralism."

The **loss of young audiences** and the **digital revolution** have been two main and interlinked challenges for PSM since the late 1980s. PSM established websites in the second half of the 1990s and catch-up VoD sites in the early 2000s. Yet while young people are online they do not frequent PSM sites. Thus the current strategy of BBC, ORF, ARD/ZDF (with Funk.net) etc. is to take PSM content to where young audiences inform and entertain themselves: third party social media sites like Youtube and Facebook.

Yet, communicating **PSM content on commercial platforms** has raised a number of issues. PSM have no control over the context in which their content appears. Purpose of the platforms is shareholder value through selling advertising and user data. Selling user data is unethical, and online advertising in many countries is illegal for PSM. Even if platforms do not directly link ads to PSM content, it inevitably increases the value of the commercial firm, and allegations of misuse of public broadcast fees were to be expected. Platforms may change technical functions, ranking and contractual terms at any time, making it difficult for PSM to plan ahead and comply with their requirements. PSM, just like individual users, make themselves prone to lock-in and dependency upon a monopoly platform. The main problem though is that users are accrediting content to the platform rather than to PSM, thus blurring the identity and recognisability of public media.

Finding solutions to these issues have been important factors driving the debate on PSM's online remit and towards a Public Open Space Platform. **BBC** (2015) initiated the shift by declaring it would become "fit for the Internet" and open its platform for others. With reference to Wikipedia it defines an **open platform** as "a place that enables multiple producers and users to interact and create value for each other. Platforms bring together content from many providers, not just one. Platforms thrive by encouraging everyone to create, share and participate." Under the label "Ideas Service" the BBC has started to cooperate with UK culture, cultural heritage and scientific institutions.

The BBC's open platform plans resonate throughout Europe. In Germany, Dörr/Holznagel/Picot (2016) called for a national public communication space they named **"Public Open Space"**. It should network different PSM, public culture and knowledge institutions as well as NGOs. They see user participation through comments, recommendations and user-produced content as crucial for societal integration by bringing communities into conversation again and countering fragmentation. In Switzerland, GDI (2016) suggests that the **SRG** turn itself into an open, participatory, decentralized platform, open for educational and other knowledge institutions, supporting user creativity with know-how, infrastructure and archive access, encouraging

innovation, with the aim of providing Switzerland with an operating system for a digital direct democracy.

Knowledge Commons Communities (KCC) were nurtured by the Internet in parallel with the digitization of PSM. Science, the original, knowledge commons (Merton), reclaimed its communications in pre-publishing (arXiv.org) and in Open Access (Guédon 2001). KCC are producing a growing corpus of free software, OA publications and data, Internet and free wireless protocols, Wikipedia, Open Educational Resources (OER), and a plethora of free-licensed works for others to build on. This is echoed by moves towards re-use of public-sector information (EU RPSI Regulations 2015), Freedom of Information and Transparency laws, OA requirements by public science funders, support for OER etc. There have been attempts to forge cooperations between PSM and Wikipedia (BBC Creative Archive, ARD Working Group on CC), with little lasting effect, even thought both sides agree that their remits and goals are so close to each other that linking them is inevitable. PSM from their beginning have been committed to free and universal access. PSM like Wikipedia are dedicated to quality-controlled, relevant, sourced, double-checked, neutral point of view knowledge. Public and commons knowledge strive for the widest public uptake and utility of their resources. Both are committed to serving the interest of the public not that of commercial profit.

User participation involves governance of the EPOS platform as well as contributing content. There have indeed been calls for a public service Youtube, with high quality journalistic, educational and cultural content and without advertising (Hündgen 2013). The Public Network Value study found that it is considered equally important to place PSM content on social media as it is to establish own social networks (ORF/BR 2015: 81). GDI (2016) proposes to support user creativity with know-how, infrastructure and archive access, encouraging experimentation. An actual example is Australian Broadcasting Corporation's open contribution platform ABC Open.

A „**Civic Commons Online**" that has been discussed among an international group of media and communications researchers (e.g. Bua 2009) is another relevant approach. Their starting point is a Habermasian model of deliberative democracy that is dependent upon public sphere spaces that are free from state and market influences. They then find that the Internet has become a largely commercial space that has not fulfilled the hopes for democratizing the public sphere. They conclude by proposing PSM as solution. Its remit is already to enable public opinion forming by providing quality, balanced information and rational discourse that Habermas distinguishes from unchecked private opinion. PSM is already provided with public funding, ensuring its independence from state and market. This uniquely positions PSM to also establish a deliberative Civic Commons Online (s. Ramsey 2013). GDI (2016) frames its platform proposal as an "an operating system for a digital direct democracy".

What is largely lacking in the current proposals for PSM platforms is the **European dimension**. The platform debates so far are nationally focussed. While the BBC brands its Ideas Service "a democratic gift to the world", its content network only encompasses national knowledge institutions. From a European perspective, it is evident that a European public sphere is one of the big desiderata of Project Europe. The debate is ongoing whether this can best be achieved by central pan-European media, by distributed networks or by strengthening European capacities in existing national and regional media. The bold vision pursued by the EPOS project is pan-European from the start.

The project will hence investigate the unique opportunity for partnerships between PSM, public and civil society knowledge institutions and audiences, for jointly establishing a public, open, participatory platform for knowledge produced in the public interest. This is a chance for a **triple-win-situation**: PSM and the other partners would make publicly funded knowledge in the public interest visible as distinct from commercial media and gain in recognition and legitimacy. Citizens would gain a one-stop portal for reliable, high quality information and debate, for current and heritage culture, offering orientation in times of post-truth and hate speech. Finally, European

democracy would benefit from a space free from state and market interests, a space of pan-European exchange, opinion forming and deliberation.

The EPOS research project explores the trajectories of the current debate in PSM by **researching** the issues involved from the perspectives of communications and media systems research, media policy research, organization and regulation research, Open Access and Open Data research, media sociology and media law. Secondly, it engages stakeholders in **knowledge exchange** in interviews, symposia, online working groups and joint experiments in order to learn from their experiences, incorporate their perspectives into the project and facilitate sharing among all partners. Thirdly, the project strives to develop a functional **prototype** of an ideal platform that makes its components and features tangible. Expected deliverables include academic papers, policy recommendations, best practices collections and working demos or mockups of what the different components of an EPOS platform could look like.

1. Research Packages

RP1: participation – Barbara Thomass, Christine Horz

RQ 1: How does the participatory turn resonate in the citizen-PSM relations?
RQ 2: What kind of actors in European civil society demand participation in PSM?

This exploratory and comparative analysis has a two-fold approach. First, PSM in selected European countries and their strategies related to the growing demand of parts of the public to be included in PSM-related decision-making will be analysed and compared. Second, activists groups will be analysed, who articulate their will to participate in three dimensions:

1. Regulatory dimension: media governance, participation and co-determination in broadcasting councils.
2. Content dimension: programme quality, professional ethics, supervision of programme standards and ombuds models.
3. Social dimension: programming mandate, PSM's remit, public value, funding and demographic change.

Building upon previous research on activists engaging in media policy (Horz 2016), this project will empirically investigate two scarcely researched phenomena: First, current considerations of media politics and PSM institutions on how to renew their remit for a democratic society and tackle the challenges resulting from digitisation and the major shift in audience behaviour (Iosifidis 2010:1; Jakubowicz 2010; Lowe 2008). Second, new forms of media activism demanding more participatory options and innovations of PSM in the face of digitisation.

These topical developments point to the hypothesis that both PSM and it's public have not yet found a mutual common ground for debate about the digital future of PSM. This European comparative project hence strives to explore both actors' aims to find out about overlapping or opposing goals, build up a typology for both phenomena and consider challenges and opportunities for media-user participation in the above dimensions.

RP2: public and commons knowledge – Ellen Euler, Volker Grassmuck

RQ1: What are the factors behind the de-legitimization of the public sector?
RQ2: How can the link between public and commons knowledge practices be strengthened?

In parallel to the EU declaring PSM to be services of general interest, governments in the 1980s and 1990s framed public administration as inefficient and wasteful and the market as the most efficient information mechanism for matching consumer demand and supply. The wave of privatizations of public services also introduced the "dual system" of public service and commercial broadcasters and pressured PSM to commercialize, outsource, enter into PPPs. New Public Management (NPM) strove to reorganize public administration as an internal market and reframe the citizen as "customer".

The failure of the NPM strategy led to the concept of "Public Value" (Moore 1995, 2013), putting the public back into the centre. The resources allocated to public tasks are decided in representative democracy. „It is the only way we know how to create a 'we' from a collection of free individuals." (Moore 1995: 30) The BBC (2004) translated Moore's concept to PSM where it was adopted across Europe. Yet public administration continues to be in ill repute. PSM's standing is as low as never before. Building on Grassmuck (2014) the research will explore the factors involved in this development.

While public and commons knowledge are categorically different, the two share fundamental values and orientations and are significantly different from commercial knowledge, which makes them natural allies. The research question then is, how a cooperation between PSM, public and civil society KCCs together with "the people formerly known as the audience" (Rosen 2006) can be forged on a pan-European scale, creating an interacting, lively and procreating corpus that is more than the sum of its parts, and whether this alliance might build on top of an existing network like Europeana.

RP3: a civic commons online – Phil Ramsey, NN

RQ1:   In what ways are European PSM organisations contributing to the concept of public space online?
RQ2:   What are the opportunities for them to further contribute in this way?

In this project I will aim to build on my work on the civic commons (Ramsey, 2013). There I postulated that BBC Online policy offered opportunities for the establishment of a civic commons online, and that in so doing the BBC would meet its responsibilities in the area of online set by the BBC Trust.

This project will build on work such as Schweizer's (2016) exploration of PSM and the commons, and will extend her argument that "the commons concept can be a powerful narrative for legitimating PSM by representing the enterprise as a societal alternative to corporate commercial media". In so doing I will trace the concept of the civic commons across various European PSM organisations, analysing the ways in which these organisations can already be said to be contributing to the concept of public space online, and through addressing ways in which they could further contribute.

RP4: organizing transnational digital publics – Leonhard Dobusch, NN

RQ 1: How do new forms of organizing media contribute to transnational digital publics?
RQ 2: How can lock-in effects of market-dominating platforms be overcome?

Digital networks facilitate stable cooperative environments that institutionalize digital relations in new ways and thereby create transnational digital publics. Building upon my previous work on new forms of organizing outside of traditional organizational structures (e.g., Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015), this project will address the two questions above by empirically investigating two new phenomena.

First, the growing amount of (big) data available for public scrutiny requires re-defining traditional notions of journalism and transparency (Fenster, 2015), leading actors to engage in new forms of organizing such as the "The International Consortium of Investigative Journalists", which teamed up to cope with the massive number of documents in the "Panama Papers". Second, we observe how PSM increasingly rely on transnational platforms like YouTube and Facebook for reaching their audiences. Both these phenomena illustrate how traditional organizational boundaries of public and private media are being crossed in the digital public sphere.

This project explores the potentials and the dangers of such PPPs. It asks how new setups can bridge the different organizational cultures in PSM and and in KCCs like Wikipedia and what they can learn from each other. It finally addresses the lock-in effects of existing platforms and the conditions necessary for establishing alternative platforms like EPOS.

RP5: Algorithms as PSM chance and challenge – Christian Herzog

RQ1: Which challenges are posed by algorithmic personalisation strategies for PSM?
RQ2: How can PSM best grasp the changes offered by algorithmic personalisation strategies?

Algorithmic personalisation strategies and recommender systems have become a key facilitator in linking PSM, intermediaries and audiences. On the one hand, for PSM the use of algorithms is problematic as it further undermines the traditional feature of universality (Van den Bulck & Moe, 2017, in press). It causes a variety of ethical problems and affects the identity of PSM organizations. On the other hand, personalisation strategies also offer chances. For instance, by means of algorithms PSM organizations can reach out to minority audiences effectively, increasing exposure diversity (Sørensen & Hutchinson, 2017, in press).

This RP is concerned with investigating and contrasting the strategies pursued by PSM, chances and possible pitfalls, in cross-country comparative perspective. Drawing on interviews, policy and strategy documents, it will develop best practice case studies how to cope with the challenges of algorithms.

2. Knowledge Exchange

The project is building a network of stakeholders from four constituencies – PSM, public knowledge institutions, civil society KCC and audiences – and involves others like policy makers, unions and youth organizations. It engages stakeholders in knowledge exchange in interviews, symposia, online working groups and joint experiments in order to learn from their experiences, incorporate their perspectives into the project and facilitate sharing among the partners.

Potential partners can be identified along the main components of an EPOS platform:

Cooperation with European PSM
Partners include the Public Value Competence Center of ORF and the Cultural Broadcasting Archive CBA/FRO. PL Thomass is Second Deputy Chairperson of the Administrative Council of ZDF and well-anchored in the institution. Others like EBU, BBC, SRG, ARD, BR have been approached for partnerships.

Cooperation with public knowledge institutions
Our first partner is Europeana Foundation. The German Federal Office for Civic Education (BpB) has expressed interest and willingness to negotiate a commitment in the case of a Full Proposal.

Cooperation with civil society knowledge institutions

Partners include Wikimedia Germany, Open Knowledge Foundation and the coordinator of the H2020 netCommons project and its member NetHood.

User contributions and participation
Our first partner is Publikumsrat, initiated by Team Member Horz. Others like EAVI have been approached.

A civic commons online
Our first partner is Mediale Pfade that together with BpB operates Bewegtbildung.net for civic education by means of webvideo. Team members have numerous contacts to national and European media law makers.

Working Groups

The online working groups will address the central issues of conceptualizing EPOS, including but not limited to:

- cross-cultural and cross-linguistic journalism
- 'quality' in journalism and programming
- bringing cultural heritage alive (2018 is European Year of Cultural Heritage)
- from catch-up service to archive remit
- copyrights (contract terms and collecting societies)
- engaging citizens in deliberation on current and structural issues
- diversity in hiring, programming, supply
- technology / usability (distributed infrastructure, security, data protection, UA/UX)
- potentials and dangers of personalized recommendation systems (cp. EBU RecSys)
- transition strategy (if we build it, will they come?)

3. Prototyping

The project can obviously not attempt to build the actual EPOS platform. What it can do is practically explore the conceptual issues of such a platform by means of rapid prototyping. The working groups would inform themes for partners, barcamps and hackathons to delve into and develop mockups, functional sketches and prototypes that can demo the platforms' potentials. The spirit is that of thinking out of the box without limiting oneself by real-political concerns, imagining the unthinkable, building and expanding on existing cooperations (e.g. on cultural heritage between Wikipedia GLAM and Europeana to include PSM), focussing on low-hanging fruit that can demo the power of the vision early on.

Tool Box

Research on tools and infrastructures for the EPOS project and for the platform itself starts with a survey of the wide range of available Free Software. It includes:

Software
- **Framasoft** – 1.600 Free Software programmes as SaaS: Pads, Wiki, Forms, Calc, Agenda, PeerTube, Maps, Slides, Videoconf...

Distribution & Publishing
- PeerTube – Federated (ActivityPub) video streaming platform using P2P (BitTorrent) directly in the web browser with WebTorrent and Angular.
- GNU MediaGoblin – federated media-server.

End-user presentation
- MediathekView – harvests German-language catch-up archives of PSM in DE, CH and AT and presents all currently available video items for streaming and download; also available in webbrowser.
- Kodi – media centre for playing local files and external live and on-demand resources through a large number of add-ons, including MediathekView; formerly XBMC (Xbox Media Center).

Cooperation
- Wire – end-to-end encrypted group messenger, incl. video.
- Loomio – tool for online discussions & decision making, with Slack integration; free software developed by a worker-owned cooperative social enterprise based in New Zealand. → EPOS group in Loomio.
- Commons In A Box – out-of-the-box functionality creating a space where members can discuss issues, cooperate on projects and share their work; developed by City University of New York, powers the CUNY Academic Commons.

Media Research
- Mediacloud – big data analytics platform for investigating topics in digital media, a joint project by the MIT Center for Civic Media and the Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University.

Prototyping

Prototyping exercises include:

- community curation on top of MediathekView
- curation of rights-cleared PSM news into Wikipedia
- interlinking knowledge corpora by means of Wikidata
- joint projects of all four stakeholder groups on core issues, e.g. migration
- plugging civil society digital education and OER activities into EPOS
- utilizing open data for media programming

References

BBC (2004) Building Public Value: Renewing the BBC for the Digital World, Juni 2004

BBC (2015) British, Bold, Creative. The BBC's programmes and services in the next Charter, September 2015

Bua, Adrian (2009) Realising Online Democracy: A Critical Appraisal of Online Civic Commons, Compass, London, Mai 2009

Dobusch, L., & Schoeneborn, D. (2015). Fluidity, identity, and organizationality: The communicative constitution of Anonymous. Journal of Management Studies, 52(8), 1005-1035.

Dörr, Dieter; Bernd Holznagel, Arnold Picot (2016) Legitimation und Auftrag des öffentlich-rechtlichen Fernsehens in Zeiten der Cloud, study commissioned by ZDF, August 2016

Fenster, M. (2015). Transparency in search of a theory. European Journal of Social Theory, 18(2), 150-167.

GDI (2016) Öffentlichkeit 4.0. Die Zukunft der SRG im digitalen Ökosystem, Studie von Karin Frick, Jakub Samochowiec, Detlef Gürtler im Auftrag der SRG SSR.

Grassmuck, Volker (2014) Von Daseinsfürsorge zu Public Value, in: Dieter Klumpp, Klaus Lenk, Günter Koch (Hrsg.), Überwiegend Neuland. Zwischenbilanzen der Wissenschaft zur Gestaltung der Informationsgesellschaft, edition sigma, Berlin, 2014, pp. 77-107

Guédon, Jean-Claude (2001) In Oldenburg's Long Shadow. Librarians, Research Scientists, Publishers and the Control of Scientific Publishing, ARL, Washington, D.C.

Horz, Christine (2016): Networking Citizens. Public Service Media and participatory audience initiatives in Europe. 27 pages. RIPE@2016: Public Service Media in a Networked Society. Antwerp, 21.-24.9.2016. (download: http://ripeat.org/library/).

Hündgen, Markus (2013) 10 Bewegtbild-Thesen, 13.11.2013

Iosifidis, P. (Ed.) (2010) Reinventing Public Service Communication. European Broadcasters and Beyond, Palgrave Macmillan UK

Jakubowicz, Karol (2010) PSB 3.0: Reinventing European PSB, Palgrave Macmillan UK

Lowe, Gregory Farrell (2008): The role of Public Service Media for widening individual participation in European democracy. Council of Europe's Group of Specialists on Public Service Media in the information society. Strasbourg.

Moore, Mark Harrison (1995) Creating Public Value: Strategic Management in Government, Harvard College

Moore, Mark Harrison (2013) Recognizing Public Value, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass.

ORF/BR (2015) Public Network Value, Study by Thomas Steinmaurer, Universität Salzburg

Ramsey, P. (2013). The search for a civic commons online: an assessment of existing BBC Online policy. Media, Culture & Society. 35(7), 864–879.

Rosen, Jay (2006) The People Formerly Known as the Audience, posted on Pressthink on 27 June 2006.

Schweizer, C. (2016). Public Service Media and the Commons: Crossing Conceptual and Institutional Boundaries. In G.F. Lowe and N. Yamamoto (Eds), Crossing Borders and Boundaries in Public Service Media (pp.171–184). Gothenburg: Nordicom.

Sørensen, J.K. & Hutchinson, J. (2017, in press) Algorithms and public service media. RIPE@2017 Reader. Göteborg: Nordicom.

Van den Bulck, H. & Moe, H. (2017, in press) Public service media, universality and personalisation through algorithms: mapping strategies and exploring dilemmas. Media, Culture & Society. https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443717734407