

PUBLIC VALUE TEXTE



PUBLIC SERVICE MEDIA
IN EUROPE

THE FUTURE OF
PUBLIC SERVICE MEDIA
IN THE EUROPEAN UNION



QUALITY DIMENSIONS

INDIVIDUAL VALUE

TRUST
SERVICE
ENTERTAINMENT
EDUCATION AND SCIENCE
RESPONSIBILITY

SOCIAL VALUE

DIVERSITY
ORIENTATION
INTEGRATION
RESPONSIVENESS
CULTURE

NATION VALUE

IDENTITY
ADDED VALUE
FEDERALISM

INTERNATIONAL VALUE

EUROPEAN INTEGRATION
GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

CORPORATE VALUE

INNOVATION
TRANSPARENCY
COMPETENCE

In order to define distinctive media quality Austrian Broadcasting Corporation has created a structure of five Quality Dimensions. Comprehensive media production in TV, radio and online is described along 18 categories to prove how ORF fulfills its Public Service Mission in the context of the current media environment and its challenges. More information, statements and documents you may find on <http://zukunft.ORF.at>.



PUBLISHED AND PRODUCED BY:
Österreichischer Rundfunk, ORF
Hugo-Portisch-Gasse 1, 1136 Wien

DESIGN:
ORF Marketing & Creation GmbH & Co KG

RESPONSIBLE:
ORF-Generaldirektion Public Value

PRINTED BY:
ORF Druckerei

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THE WAY FORWARD.

There is much at stake in Europe these days: Alarming effects of climate change are threatening all countries, social unrest and tensions are supporting the segmentation and polarization of societies, increasing populism and illiberal democracy are affecting the political arena, the war in Ukraine has ended a period of security and peace in Europe. What most of us expected as given for granted is dramatically at stake. At the same time digital transformation creates new dimensions of insecurity. Artificial Intelligence enabling new and fascinating opportunities are revealing an unfriendly face of technological innovation. Filter bubbles and Hate Speech endanger the individual as well as the public discourse of citizens, uncontrolled algorithms owned and used by a handful of global acting companies are increasingly influencing the public sphere of European societies. What has been considered a transformation turns out to be a massive disruption of media economy and media perception. The visions of more freedom, more democracy and more social welfare have been replaced by fear and insecurity.

Since its first years after World War II Public Service Media has been a stable European institution in media, a backbone of trusted information and entertainment, a media infrastructure beyond state control and business interest, media for the common good creating Public Value instead of Shareholder Value, media supporting democracy and citizenship. Today however, PSM is challenged more than ever: Right wing parties are fiercely attacking its journalists, public funding is questioned, governments misuse their power threatening the independence of PSM, social media of global giants endanger its relevance.

How can PSM react? How can it resist? How can it face the enormous dynamics of digital transformation? How can PSM remain a trusted source of information and quality entertainment? And most important: How can it be useful for Europe, its citizens and democracy?

These questions are heavily discussed when the Public Value representatives of ARD, ZDF, SRG and ORF regularly meet, in close cooperation with the EBU. As a matter of fact, PSM are joining forces in many ways when it comes to define, to produce, evaluate, and communicate the distinctive quality of PSM.

Inspired by the elections to the EU Parliament in June 2024 we decided to have a look at the European dimension of PSM seen from external expertise. We invited scientists from all over Europe to reflect and

comment: What is the role of PSM amid all social and technological changes? How can it resist obvious challenges and support the public sphere of European democratic societies in the future?

The contributions published here do not represent the position of each national PSM, in fact they express a diverse and critical perspective of independent European media experts. Their comments might inspire the debate about the Future of PSM and its role for Europe.

Despite all challenges PSM is a powerful European infrastructure of media. Contrary to its national and international commercial competitors it is based on Public Mission, supported by Public Funding and most important guaranteeing Public Control. Its Public Value may become a substantial contribution to create a safe and trusted space in media and help to regain the power of democracy and citizenship in Europe.

KLAUS UNTERBERGER KONRAD MITSCHKA
ORF GENERALDIREKTION PUBLIC VALUE

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| HUNGARY |

WHERE IS THE PUBLIC VALUE HERE?

PROF.DR. GÁBOR POLYÁK EÖTVÖS, LÓRÁND UNIVERSITY
ASS.PROF. ÁGNES URBÁN, PHD, CORVINUS UNIVERSITY OF BUDAPEST

The Hungarian public service media is internationally seen as a negative example, and this is completely understandable. The first step in media capture was the restructuring of the public service media and the creation of an editorial line loyal to the government. The aim was already obvious in 2010: the election winner Viktor Orbán wanted to build a media background that would keep public opinion under full control, and the public service media played a major role in this. Fourteen years have passed since then and we can say that the experiment has been successful from their point of view: they have succeeded in creating public control in a European Union member state and the public service media have played their part in this.

Blurred responsibilities, lack of transparency

Hungary has never had a truly independent, highly prestigious public service media (PSM). Even before 2010, the public media were biased towards the political forces in power, but it never turned to uncritical propaganda. A major step forward was taken in 2010, with organisational change creating full dependency (Mertek, 2021).

The Media Act merged the previously distinct public service media providers into the Media Service Support and Asset Management Fund (hereinafter Fund). The law states that this Fund exercises the ownership rights and responsibilities of PSM assets, and – among other things – it is also in charge of producing or supporting the production of public service broadcasting items. At the head of the Fund is a CEO who can be appointed and recalled by the president of the Media Council without providing reasons for the dismissal, and whose work is not subject to review by any public body. At that time PSM were provided by four closely held corporations, but public media service providers had no production capacities of their own, so their latitude is limited to ordering shows from the Fund. These four private limited companies were Magyar Televízió Zrt. (Hungarian Television), Duna Televízió Zrt. (Duna Television), Magyar Rádió Zrt. (Hungarian Radio), and the Magyar Távirati Iroda Zrt. (Hungarian News Agency).

Another organisational change took place in 2015. As a result of amendment of the media law, Duna Media Service Nonprofit Ltd. (hereinafter Duna) was established as the legal successor of the prior companies.

Duna became the provider of all public service television, radio and on-line content services, as well as public service news agent's activities.

Based on the media law Duna is subject to the outside review of several public bodies (Board of Public Service Foundation, Public Service Fiscal Council, Public Service Council) but the Fund is subject to the review of a single organisation: the Media Council. Media Council members were delegated by the ruling party, so there is no independent control over the Fund.

So, according to the media law *de jure* public service media provider is Duna and it is more or less appropriately subject to external control mechanisms, but in reality, the oversight is merely a façade since it has no resources for the actual performance of these functions. *De facto* the Fund produces and buys the programmes, so the Fund disposes taxpayer funds without being subject to any meaningful outside control.

The spending of the Fund is not transparent, although since 2019 at least an annual report has been published on the website. In any case, it is unclear how much the Fund has spent on certain public service purposes. In addition, the Fund publishes contracts over 5 million HUF, but it should be added that this is a poor quality scanned pdf in a non-searchable format.

The function and financial system of the national news agency (MTI) was also changed in 2011, it became integrated to the public service media system. This occurred in parallel with the centralization process of the public service media. MTI's responsibilities were expanded to produce news programs for other public media service providers. MTI's fees were abolished, it offers its news services free to all media providers. It destroyed the news agency market in Hungary. There was no one in the market who could compete with free services and, one by one, MTI's commercial competitors went out of business leaving the state-owned provider as a monopolist in the market.

PSM as propaganda machine

The propagandistic editorial practice of the Hungarian public media is well documented. There are a lot of examples for propaganda and lies. Even OSCE criticized the biased editorial practice during the 2018 and 2022 election campaigns.

The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights Parliamentary Elections report also analysed the news shows of the M1 public

television channel and found strong bias during the election campaign. “In its editorial coverage, M1 showed bias in favour of the ruling coalition and the government, which received around 61 percent of the news coverage. On average, 96 percent of it was positive in tone, while 82 percent of the coverage devoted to the opposition was negative. This is at odds with OSCE commitments and international standards on fair access to the public broadcaster’s programmes and undermined the public’s corresponding right to receive media output. (OSCE, 2018).

Findings in the 2022 election campaign were similar. The M1 public television channel was biased in favour of the government and the governing party. There was no clear distinction between the coverage of the government and the ruling party Fidesz and the vast majority of these news were positive towards them. The opposition coalition received 43% of the total coverage, and this coverage was overwhelmingly negative. Reports were often laced with comments and unsubstantiated allegations attacking the opposition candidate (OSCE, 2022).

Mertek Media Monitor also analyzed the major television news programs in the 2022 election campaign. In the public television news, the opposition candidate was barely given any airtime to present his positions and views himself. He was barely quoted in the coverage about him; for the most part, a still image of him was featured while his personal comments were single sentences or fragments taken out of context, completely unsuitable for presenting his actual opinions. The government politicians had a total of 161 minutes of speaking time in the public television news shows, while their opposition counterparts had 37 minutes. (Mertek, 2022) It is also important to note that the opposition candidate was not invited to appear in the public service television at all, except for the five minutes which was obligatory quota in the campaign for all candidates.

In addition to the lack of balance in news coverage during the campaigns, it is also clear that the PSM aligned itself with the Hungarian government’s foreign policy line and increasingly promoted the Russian narrative.

Already in 2014, at the time when Crimea was annexed by Russia, the presence of the Russian narrative was identifiable in the coverage of the state-owned news agency, which had been integrated into the PSM system in 2011. As Rácz (2016) found in his content analysis, MTI news agency clearly favoured the Russian narrative.

Bódi et al. (2022), concluded that in 2020 presentation of fake news prob-

lem was changed: instead identifying false information, the accusation of fake news emerged as a communication instrument against the domestic independent media, the opposition, and the international liberal elite.

A recent study found that the anti-EU narrative has emerged as the most dominant narrative in public communication about the war in Ukraine. This narrative is an extension of the “Brussels” antipathy, which has been a mainstay of government and PSM communication for years before the war broke out. At the same time, it is an important element in the efforts to absolve Russia and the Russian political leadership of responsibility for the current problems. Instead of Russia and Putin, “Brussels” is presented as the source of the problems that Hungary is facing because of the war and the government’s policies (Urbán et al., 2023).

Conclusion

In well-developed democracies, the public media are an important part of the media system. They serve as guarantees of reliability and credibility, and they have a definite role in the fight against disinformation. The situation is completely different in Hungary, where public media are part of the problem rather than the solution. Public service news programmes constantly spread propaganda and disinformation.

The organisational framework established in 2010 and partially amended in 2015 is not at all suitable for ensuring unbiased and diverse information and programming. Under the current organisational, financing and staffing conditions, there is no chance of restoring a genuine public service media service in Hungary. Therefore, any future media policy proposal must start from the premise that a completely new public service institutional framework must be created, providing a stable framework for the realisation of the public service ethos.

The current organisational and funding frameworks do not comply to the European regulation because of the use of unlawful state aid. The European Commission attaches strict conditions to public service media funding in order to forestall the market-distorting use of public funds. The blurred responsibilities, the lack of transparency in funding and the doubled organisation structure (one pseudo PSM with real control mechanisms and another institution with huge budget and without any control) is the hacking of the European rules.

The authors of this paper – together with other complainants – submitted a complaint to the European Commission. The Commission has been reviewing the complaint since 2016 and it seems that it will close the pro-

cedure without any formal investigation. It means that the Commission which investigated the state aid rules of several European PSM in the last years, is not willing to investigate the unlawful state aid of the Hungarian propaganda machine.

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