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Public Service Media and Exposure Diversity

Introduction

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Exposure diversity is a relatively new and as yet to be explicitly formulated objective of contemporary media policy. While it holds certain potential—in particular in the messy digital space characterized by abundance and exponentially increased user choices—it comes with certain risks too. The role of public service media in ensuring exposure diversity is an underexplored yet important topic of media policy and law. This article introduces the special section on public service media and exposure diversity and outlines the key motivation behind it. It briefly presents the main contributions and a summary of their arguments, as well as the red line that holds them together.

Keywords: public service media, media diversity, exposure diversity

Public service media have traditionally played a leading role in the realization of diversity as one of the prime objectives of media policy and in this way have ultimately contributed to a functioning public sphere. By offering a program that is as diverse as it is qualitative, public service media have been instrumental in exposing the audience to a diversity of information. This mission was not expressly formulated in the mandate of public service media because under the conditions of analog media, the equation was simple—a diverse supply by public service media, which at the time also enjoyed the

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position of a primary means of information, presumably led to diversity in consumption too. Meanwhile, however, the number of digital outlets and types of media content offered to users, as well as the tools of user empowerment and engagement (such as social networks and search engines) have exploded. The presumption that exposure diversity is a plain function of supply, as well as the role of public service media in making this link happen, are rightly put in doubt.

The questions of whether media users are still exposed to a diversity of content and how to ensure the attainment of this diversity as a key public policy objective take on very different connotations. In one extreme position, critics call for the abolition of public service media, as the diversity of content in the digital networked environment is a given and sovereign users can freely exercise their choice and access and consume content as to their needs and interests. On the opposite side, many voices doubt consumer sovereignty and point to the many dangers that the digital space, despite the mind-boggling amounts of information available, may have brought about. The risks noted relate not only to the individual empowerment of the user depending on his or her skills and prior knowledge but also on broader societal risks resulting from tailored media consumption. Proponents of this position call for active state involvement and for reinvention of public service media. To be sure, there are many nuances in between these extremes that underlie the transformation of public service media and the intense public debate around it. There are still many questions in this discourse that have remained unanswered and put contemporary media policy choices on shaky grounds. For instance, does the realization of media diversity as a public policy goal depend more on the question of whether users are willing and able to search for and make diverse media selections? If yes, who helps them in making (but also influencing) these choices? The public service media, with their carefully crafted and diverse programming? Or, rather, search engines and social networks that seem to occupy more and more of audience attention? Can it still be the task of public service media to add to the digital abundance and offer types of content that are almost certainly available elsewhere (provided that users are able to find them)? Or could their mission be shifting from providing diverse supply to stimulating and enabling users to benefit from the diversity of media content offered elsewhere and actually consume it?

These, as well as the underlying dilemma of public service media design, were some of the questions that have inspired this special section. Departing from the assumption that media diversity policies, as an incremental part of the mission of the public service media, are not only about providing a diverse choice of content from different sources but also about making sure that the audience is actually being exposed to a diversity of media content (Napoli 2011), the main focus of this special section has been to examine how the public service media could have a more active part in helping the audience find and choose diverse media content. This is not merely a question of scholarly interest but one that figures quite prominently in the public policy discourse. For example, in the United Kingdom, the House of Lords Select Committee on Communications (2014) recently explicitly advised

> the Government and the BBC [British Broadcasting Corporation] . . . to consider whether the BBC might be given a more explicit responsibility—with respect to its online offer for news and current affairs content—to stimulate consumption of diverse viewpoints from different external sources. (para. 92)

In other words, the Select Committee envisions an active role for the BBC not only in offering diverse programming but also in stimulating diverse exposure. The Select Committee also noted that in evaluating media pluralism on the British market not only the supply but also the *consumption* of content should be taken into account. This is justified in light of the new challenges to the realization of media pluralism as a public policy goal that have arisen from changing user habits and new agents seeking to influence and direct users' choices. Similarly, in its report on the future of public service broadcasting, the Dutch Raad voor Cultuur (Council for Culture) (2014) advised the government that in the future public service media need to focus more strongly on their guiding function. As the Raad voor Cultuur explained, cable operators, telecommunications providers, but also Google or YouTube have an increasing influence on the choices of the audience. In order to be able to guarantee that in the future public service media content is available as well as—perhaps even more importantly—*findable*, it is essential that users are able to find their way through the digital abundance. The Raad voor Cultuur clearly sees a role for public service media serving as a guide for the audience.

This potential guiding function of public service media is the central theme of the first two contributions in this special section. Natali Helberger examines the new opportunities that technology offers to proactively guide and engage the audience with diverse media content. In particular, she argues that algorithmic profiling and targeting is not only, as commonly discussed, a means to show users more personally relevant advertising. It could also be a means for the public service media to gently nudge the audience toward making more diverse choices, based on their personal preferences and viewing habits. When engaging in such a proactive, user-centric guiding function, however, the public service media, as well as regulators, need to take into account the broader ethical implications of such an approach. In particular, Helberger argues that a more proactive involvement with the choices of the audience should not be possible without a—yet to be developed—body of algorithmic media ethics.

The next contribution, by Mira Burri, contemplates a possible role for public service media as a "public service navigator." Along the same lines as Helberger, she argues in favor of using the capabilities of digital media, and after having provided a thoughtful and concise overview of the various challenges to diverse exposure in the digital space, highlights possible elements of such a public service navigator "as a mechanism for influencing the conditions of access to content, particularly its visibility, discoverability, and usability." Importantly, the author also explores on a more practical level the different scenarios in which such a public service navigator could be implemented and their implications for the present and future design of the institution of public service media.

The role of users and the choices they make (and if these choices are sufficiently diverse) are a core, and yet often neglected, element in the media diversity discourse. The role of users and their experience of diverse content are central to the third contribution in this special section. In "Diversity by Choice: Applying a Social Cognitive Perspective to the Role of Public Service Media in the Digital Age," Christian Pieter Hoffman, Christoph Lutz, Miriam Meckel, and Giulia Ranzini argue that exposing consumers to digital media content may be one thing, but ensuring that they are actually experiencing and making sense of diverse content is another, no less important, aspect of making media diversity policies work. More specifically, they provide an insightful account of three challenges to diversity experiences—namely, that users may not be motivated to seek out diverse content, are unaware of the

current limits to diversity (for example, because of "filter bubbles"), or are not able to ensure access to diverse media content because they lack the appropriate skills. Against this backdrop, the authors envisage an important role of the public service media in enhancing not only diversity of supply and exposure, but also the users' diversity experience with and appetite for diverse content.

Thomas Gibbons then turns the reader's attention to another dimension of active user engagement with diverse media content that ultimately encourages the dialogue between different groups in society. According to Gibbons, this form of "active pluralism" finds its foundations in the political theory of media pluralism and should be an essential element of contemporary media policy toolboxes too. Gibbons develops his vision on the role of the media, and public service media in particular, in promoting viable forms of active pluralism. He highlights the importance of not simply informing the audience but, more actively promoting engagement and provoking debate—which at times may be in tension with the traditional tendency of public service media to foster consensus rather than disagreement.

How the public service media as an institution actually fare in our digital environment is the subject of an analysis by Damian Tambini. In his contribution, he reports on a study of public service media and the process of digitization in 56 countries. His findings about the decline of audience and funding for public service media are an important reality check and also a concern for the more proactive visions of what public service media could be and do in the future, as suggested, for instance, in the course of this special section. It also shows that public service media and their audiences in industrialized countries, such as in the United Kingdom or Germany, may face very different challenges than the ones in Egypt, Peru, or Kazakhstan. Also, the fact that in many countries, public service broadcasters are still state-administered casts an entirely new light on the question of whether and to what extent public service media should be engaged in proactively guiding and stimulating audience choices.

Finally, in the last contribution to this special section, Sandra Cortesi and Urs Gasser focus on a particular audience segment: young users. So far, debates about media diversity in general and exposure diversity in particular were rather agnostic about the fact that the audience is very heterogeneous in itself and that different categories of users may require different kind of diversity measures, including those that promote more diverse exposure and engagement. The case of youth interaction with online news is instructive as a study of the ways young Internet users consume media content and demonstrates the stark contrast between actual media practices and the rather idealized ideas about media consumption and media users that have informed traditional media policies. The article also gives excellent insight into the ongoing transformations of media markets.

Overall, this special section offers a well-researched, nuanced and interdisciplinary discussion of exposure diversity as an essential new element of forward-looking public media policies. We hope that it will stimulate thinking about the future of public service media as key societal drivers of information flows, of cultural and civic dialogue and engagement, and contribute to the current academic and policy debates on their transformation.

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