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Abstract

Public service media are no longer limited to radio and television as new media genres emerge. Among others, online media supplement radio, television and the press since the mid 1990s and became a medium in its own right. Moreover, online media become an essential element of media consumption patterns. Public service media compete not only with private radio and television broadcasters but also with the press. The question arises, whether such competition in the online field results in more diversity and higher output quality, serving the public interest better. In Europe, there are at least two different schools of thought. One line of argument accepts the public service expansion into online and regards online media as necessary and important field for public service activities. Another line of argument suggests limiting the public service remit strictly to radio and broadcasting and considers online media as emerging market subject to competition among private companies only. Based on the results of a comparative empirical analysis of online media provided by public service broadcasters and print publishers in Switzerland, Germany and Austria (from 2006) the article shows that the achieved results in media output are disappointing. Only few online media live up to the expectations. The article finally argues that the extension of the public service remit to online media might enhance quality and diversity.

CONVERGENCE

ARTICLE

Online Media Within the Public Service Realm?

Reasons to Include Online into the Public Service Mission

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Abstract / Public service media are no longer limited to radio and television as new media genres emerge. Among others, the online medium has supplemented radio, television and the press since the mid-1990s and has become a medium in its own right. Moreover, online media have become essential elements of media consumption patterns. Public service media compete not only with private radio and television broadcasters but also with the press. The question arises, whether such competition in the online field results in more diversity and higher output quality, serving the public interest better. In Europe, there are at least two different schools of thought. One line of argument accepts the public service expansion into online media and regards online media as a necessary and important field for public service activities. Another line of argument suggests limiting the public service remit strictly to radio and broadcasting and considers online media as an emerging market subject to competition among private companies only. Based on the results of a comparative empirical analysis of online media provided by public service broadcasters and print publishers in Switzerland, Germany and Austria (from 2006) this article shows that the achieved results in media output are disappointing. Only few online media live up to the expectations. The article finally argues that the extension of the public service remit to online media might enhance quality and diversity.

Key Words / digital media / diversity / online media / online performance / public service media / quality

Introduction

During the mid-1990s internet software (mainly www and browser technology) allowed for new ways and means to address simultaneously a large number of internet users with information and news content. More than a decade later, online media can be considered a relevant mass media outlet for a growing number of internet users who inform themselves about the latest news by surfing news websites. A new mass medium has been established with distinct structural features regarding its institutionalization, newsroom routines and journalistic approach (Trappel, 2007a: 123).

For mass communication research, the emergence of new mass media raises a number of research questions. Among them, the question concerning their contribution to diversity is of predominant importance at the macro level of research. 'Diversity has been the most potent concept in communication policy in modern times and in some degree remains so' (McQuail, 2007: 41). Among the many normative concepts in mass communication research, diversity is probably the most prominent one. When Denis McQuail revisited this concept in 2007 he underlined the ambiguities of the concept as well as its continued importance. Diversity can be an end in itself but it can also be a necessary requirement to attain what society requires.

When new media emerge, the level of diversity is expected to increase. At the levels of ownership, content, receiver/audience and channel, additional mass media might increase diversity. New forms of journalistic expression might be created, new modalities of consumption might be developed and new business opportunities might attract entrepreneurial initiatives.

The concept of diversity was one of the main reasons to establish a specific regulatory regime some 40 years prior to the emergence of new online media. When television was introduced as a new mass medium in the 1950s an entirely new regulation concept was developed to cope with the specificities of this new medium. Public service obligations were imposed and public service privileges were granted to broadcasters all over Europe, partly along the lines of earlier radio regulation, partly as newly established regulatory regimes. When online media made their inroads into a significant and growing number of households in the late 1990s, no such regulatory regime was introduced. On the contrary, online media were (and are) exposed almost entirely to market forces as a governing principle.

Thus, while new online media can be expected to enhance diversity by competing with existing media outlets, the consequences of the absence of a specific regulatory regime might be studied by scrutinizing the performance of online media. The research questions therefore are: What is the contribution of new online media to diversity? Might the concept of public service media be meaningful for online media?

This article argues that the institutionalization of new online media has so far not generated much diversity and that the regulatory concept of public service media might enhance the performance of online media. These arguments are developed along the example of online media in Austria, Germany and Switzerland.

Diversity and Public Service Media

Two powerful and interlinked concepts have dominated the development of the mass media after the Second World War in Europe. Diversity can be understood as the dominant media policy concept in western Europe with a wide variety of means to implement it. As Olof Hultén puts it: 'Public service broadcasting in western Europe is, however, regarded as the primary guarantor of diversity and pluralism' (Hultén, 2007: 197). While the number of print media was often considered sufficient to sustain diversity, radio and television were introduced with more regulatory rigour. Both media were quickly subject to licensing regimes, granting privileges and imposing obligations to specific media institutions in almost all European countries.

Trine Syvertsen has pointed out that the relevant structural question asks for public service as a specific form of governance, and not for the institutions. 'Rather, public service broadcasting is seen as a particular model of media governance, a set of political interventions into the media market with the purpose of ensuring that broadcasters produce programs that are valuable to society' (Syvertsen, 2003: 156).

The fundamental concept of public service provides for privileges in return for the delivery of specific services, as has been described by mass communication scholars many times. The former UK Culture Secretary, Chris Smith, listed the key requirements and said that the BBC

> *. . . should provide something for everybody, making the good popular and the popular good; it should inform, educate and entertain, expanding people's horizons with new and innovative programming; it should operate efficiently and effectively and provide value for money for licence fee payers; it should stimulate, support and reflect the diversity of cultural activity in the United Kingdom, acting as a cultural voice for the nation. (Quoted in Barnett, 2006: 5)*

Scholars have extended this comprehensive list of public service requirements by the request to 'contribute to the creation of an informed, enlightened and democratic society' (Jarren and Donges, 2005: 179, my translation). Others underline the function of public service media to counterbalance the trends towards commercialization and concentration (Harrison and Wessels, 2005: 840).

All these public service features relate closely to the value of diversity. On the content level, quality and diversity are the key features together with requirements to respect minorities and foster national culture and identity (Syvertsen, 2003: 157), as well as the provision of news to enable citizens to participate in the democratic process in an informed way (Steemers, 2001: 126). Moreover, imaginativeness, the ability to illuminate controversy, authenticity, social relevance, expressive richness and integrity are considered important qualities of public service media (Blumler and Hoffmann-Riem, 1992: 212).

Diversity is a key value also at the level of ownership where public service media are considered to function as 'antipodes' (Kiefer, 1996: 26) against commercial media. A large variety of models are implemented to ensure a fair representation of citizens and society at large in public service broadcasting organizations. The Dutch model of representation of different groups in society as broadcasters and the Swiss model of civil society groups as factual owners of the public service broadcasters are just two examples (Brants, 2004; Meier, 2004).

Within the debate about the scale, scope and future of public service media, content diversity and ownership diversity have always been strong arguments in favour of maintaining this well-established governance model. With the arrival of new media outlets such as online media the question arises whether these values are equally or better safeguarded by other means and whether the traditional public service model is still meaningful. Online media might enhance both content variety and ownership variety by additional journalistic content features. Additional media entrepreneurs might exploit the opportunities to establish new media with a fraction of the required capital compared to setting up a broadcasting station or launching a new newspaper. In the next step of the analysis, the specific features of online media are described, followed by a more detailed look at the different models of institutionalization.

Characteristics and Performance of Online Media

Online media, defined as a social institution mainly concerned with the production and distribution of news and information for a widespread public, is clearly distinct from the internet as such. The internet is understood as a technical platform of interconnected computers, similar to the telephone and cable television networks. By its carriage services, the internet is becoming a 'commodity that provides little opportunity for product differentiation' (Javary and Mansell, 2002: 167). Seen from this perspective the internet as such has no editorial or journalistic meaning – it is an infrastructure.

Online media, in contrast, use the internet as their main distribution channel and provide news and information to internet users. What distinguishes online media from other internet content are the classic criteria for mass media: online media are centrally controlled by newsroom journalists and editors, there is distance in time and space between online media and online users, the communication mode is asymmetric and online media are non-exclusive and accessible to all internet users. Moreover, online media are produced within industrial structures and provide their services in permanence.

What distinguishes online media from other mass media is the number of new options, mainly made possible by the fully digital mode of production and distribution. Several scholars have established lists of these characteristics (Bardoel, 2002; Deuze, 2001; Deuze and Dimoudi, 2002; Jankowski and Van Selm, 2000; Lister et al, 2003; Neuberger, 2000) that can be briefly summarized as five features:

- *Digitality* and *ubiquity* refer to the universal availability of online media with no restrictions as to time and space.
- *Immediacy* refers to the permanence of availability and the absence of any format-determined deadlines. Online media therefore can provide information instantaneously.
- *Multimediality* refers to the integration of text, pictures, graphs, animation, moving image and sound on the same media platform.
- *Interactivity* refers both to the exchange of ideas between journalists and users and among users on the same media platform.
- *Hypertextuality* refers to non-linear narrative structures of texts, enabling users to construct their own, personal reading of texts.

These features, in particular multimediality and interactivity, might considerably enhance diversity at the content level. New and more elaborate modalities of journalistic output might advance the diversity of formats in the mass media.

The industrial set-up of online media requires a closer look at ownership. There are three dominant types of online media owners: mass media organizations, telecommunication operators and internet service providers (ISP). All three publish news and information on the internet (online media) and fulfil the above listed criteria. New or alternative providers of online media are rare. Only in exceptional cases do newly founded organizations manage to provide news and information on a regular daily basis. Most such initiatives closed down when the internet euphoria of 2000 and 2001 vanished.

In an attempt to characterize the contribution of online media to both content and ownership diversity, an empirical research was conducted in the three German-speaking

countries – Austria, Germany and Switzerland – in 2006. Some 30 market-leading online media were selected to analyse their use of online specific features and patterns of owner-ship and control. It was evident from the outset that all high ranking online media in terms of page impressions and page visits in all three countries were close affiliates of media companies, telcos or ISPs.

With a view to establishing the differences in content diversity, online media produced by newspapers, magazines, television stations, telcos and ISPs were chosen in each country (see Table 1). Following the examples of earlier research (van der Wurff, 2005), a content analysis of all 30 online media was conducted during a week (Monday to Friday) in summer 2006, this included not only the home page but also pages from all sections such as international news, politics, economy, regional news, *faits divers*. In total, some 2263 articles were coded. In addition, interviews were conducted with the editors of these online media in order to understand better the journalistic routines of this new medium as well as the institutional framework informing the online newsrooms.

In Austria, the online medium run by the public broadcaster ORF is by far the largest and most popular news website (www.orf.at). Those from the boulevard and forum press come second, together with online media produced by highly popular news magazines (networld.at). The Austrian telecommunication incumbent closed its news portal in 2005, despite high numbers of regular users.

In Germany, most online visits are attributed to Bild.T-Online.de, a joint online medium produced by the tabloid newspaper *Bild* and the online division of the tele-communication incumbent Deutsche Telecom (this cooperation ended in January 2007, the online medium was renamed Bilde.de). A close second is Spiegel.de, a subsidiary to the famous news magazine, followed by television and newspaper originated online media.

In Switzerland, the most popular online media are produced by the most popular press. According to their own accounts, the online edition of the daily free-sheet *20 Minuten* is the largest online medium, followed by the online edition of the tabloid

TABLE 1

Switzerland	Germany	Austria
20min.ch	AOL.de	AON.at
AZ-online.ch	Bild.de	Krone.at
Blick.ch	FAZ.net	Networld.at
Bluewin.ch	FTD.de	ORF.at
Espace.ch	Heute.de	derStandard.at
leMatin.ch	N-TV.de	VOL.at
NZZ.ch	RP-online.de	
Tagesanzeiger.ch	RTL.de	
Tagesschau.sf.tv	Spiegel.de	
TdG.ch (Tribune de Genève)	Tagesschau.de	
TSRinfo.ch	T-Online.de	
	Yahoo.de	
	Zeit.de	

List of selected online media.

newspaper *Blick* and the two broadsheet newspapers *Tagesanzeiger* and *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*. Public service broadcasting started its online news portal only in 2005 and did not publish visits and page impressions in 2006.

In all three countries, the dominant and market-leading online media are produced by well-established players. The contribution to ownership diversity is very limited with few and mostly marginal online media produced by independent owners. In Germany, the Netzeitung.de is the only significant online player who was not affiliated to one of the large media groups when founded in 2000. However, it lost its independence when it was taken over first by Lycos/Bertelsmann, then by the Norwegian Orkla group in 2005 and finally by David Montgomery's Mecom Group in 2007, which owns the *Berliner Zeitung* among other newspapers in Germany.

The content analysis shows that the text format of two thirds of all online articles are short news reports, and less than 20 per cent of the articles give additional background information. Interviews and in-depth reports are very rare (below 3%). The level of interactivity differs from country to country. In Switzerland, more than 90 per cent of all articles showed no option for users to interact, while in Austria almost half of all articles were open for user comments. Multimediality was particularly low in online media run by the press with just 3 per cent of articles illustrated by video or audio. Television-run online media illustrated some 39 per cent of all articles on the front page of the website with videos and 17 per cent on the second level of the website (see also Trappel, 2007b).

The research confirms findings of earlier work for the three German-speaking countries. Oblak found similar evidence in Slovenian online media (Oblak, 2005) and O'Sullivan reports an almost complete absence of links within stories in Irish online media. 'Full-blooded message boards, or forums, where most meaningful reader-to-reader and reader-to-publication discussions can occur, were also rare' (O'Sullivan, 2005: 55). He concludes: 'Is online journalism a "multimedia" phenomenon or is it a text-centred variation of print publishing and broadcast?' (2005: 62).

It can be concluded that online media have so far contributed little to enhance ownership and content diversity – although changes are to be expected and online media constantly improve their performance. In Switzerland, for example, the online medium run by the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* relaunched its news portal in July 2007 and included interactive features. Spiegel.de in Germany relaunched its website in late 2006 and now provides many more videos, many of which are re-broadcasts from Reuters.

Models of Online Media Run by Public Service Broadcasters

Public service broadcasters (PSB) are among the most prominent and most successful producers of online media in Europe. Their activities in the field of online media are heavily disputed with competitors from the private sector claiming undue overstepping of the public service remit by expansion into the online area. Hultén identifies two lines of reasoning. The conventional interpretation of public service holds that PSBs have no role to play in the emerging new non-broadcast digital services, such as internet and on-demand services (Hultén, 2007: 211). Scholars have warned that such a position would in the long run prevent PSBs from fulfilling their role in society and exclude them from future development (Hoffmann-Riem, 2006: 23).

The more widely accepted view holds that public service broadcasting has an import-
ant role to play in the new digital services. 'Internet users appreciate websites offered by
public broadcasters for the quality of news and information' (Hultén, 2007: 212).

This latter view has been confirmed by the European Commission in response to
claims by commercial television broadcasters accusing the public service broadcasters ARD
and ZDF in Germany of unfair competition practices. The Commission acknowledged in
its April 2007 decision that the principle of technology neutrality prevails and that public
service broadcasters are entitled to expand their activities to new media, as long as they
respect all other rules in place for television broadcasting.

Public service broadcasters have reacted quite differently to the opportunities offered
by digitalization and the internet. One group of PSBs established a distinct centre for
digital and online operations. BBC online is considered one of the most elaborate online
media and is used as an industrial benchmark by many other broadcasters. In 1997, the
Culture Secretary accepted the establishment of a separate business unit within the BBC
and since 2000 this unit has been providing online services that are independent from
BBC television and radio. This institutional model was similarly established in France and
Austria, where distinct business units are responsible for online activities. In Austria, the
business unit ORF ON is located in a building separate from radio and television in a
different district of the capital Vienna. Its operations are independent from radio and
television and financed by online advertising.

The second group of PSBs is characterized by close cooperation between television
and online newsrooms. This model is mostly practised by newspapers (for instance the
Daily Telegraph in the UK, *Die Welt* in Germany and *Tages-Anzeiger* in Switzerland) and
has become popular as 'newsroom convergence'. This model is less popular in public
service broadcasting, but in Switzerland, all three PSBs in the German, French and Italian
parts of the country follow this model. In Geneva and Zurich, broadcasting studios and
newsrooms also host the online newsdesk, which is also responsible for teletext services.
Unlike television, all these online media are free of advertising.

A third model – somewhat in-between these two – was implemented by the German
public service broadcasters ARD and ZDF, who run separate online newsrooms, but
collaborate closely with television and radio. ARD foreign correspondents, for example,
provide the online newsroom with texts and reports (mainly radio) on a regular basis.
Their online services are free from advertising.

The content analysis in Austria, Germany and Switzerland has shown that the degree
of institutional autonomy of online media corresponds quite well with success in the user
markets (page impressions, visits) and with a higher level of content diversity. Those online
media whose online newsroom is independent from newspaper, magazines or television
newsrooms show a generally higher level of interactivity, multimediality and hyper-
textuality. This result indicates that among these online media professionalization and the
attempts to distinguish online media from other mass media is more pronounced than
in more embedded online newsrooms. More diversity can thus be expected when there
is a higher degree of autonomy.

This finding is supported by the results of the interviews conducted with online
newsroom editors. As long as online media are considered marketing tools for the main
brand (newspaper, television and so on), little journalistic, editorial and content diversity
can be expected. When online media become economically independent (rare cases, e.g.

Spiegel.de) or are allocated global annual budgets (as is the case in the first PSB model mentioned earlier) by the media company, more emphasis is put on journalistic quality. According to several online newsroom editors one consequence of institutionalization – as subsidiaries within media companies – is that online media are developed only to the extent that they do not threaten the success and profitability of the other media products. Such drawbacks severely limit the economic and journalistic development of online media. Again, diversity is expected to rise with the degree of institutional autonomy.

Reasons to Extend Public Service Remit to Online Media

The main rationale behind online media provided by PSB is the basic consideration that the public service remit is not confined to a specific technology (like radio or broadcasting) but to a specific service. PSB therefore has to follow the audience to where they would access such services. 'The argument is that the internet is just another means of reaching the public and that taxpayers' money was used to produce the content that can now be made available again without too many costs' (Bakker, 2006: 9). This argument is complemented by considerations of maintaining a high level of quality and services.

Although the reasons were different in the 1950s, when public service television was enacted, a case for public service online media can be made. Contrary to the general assumption that barriers to market entry are generally lower for online media than for other mass media the analysis has shown that established media organizations and companies dominate online media markets. For more than 10 years market forces were in the driving seat developing this new online medium according to market rules. The result shows little increase in diversity, underdeveloped format and feature utilization and a high degree of ownership concentration.

Public service broadcasting was and is commissioned to provide high quality services for a wide variety of tastes and preferences. It should cater for minorities and functions as a counterbalance to overwhelming commercialism. The need for these values is equally evident in the field of online media. In particular, public service online media might become – and actually already are in the case of the aforementioned autonomous and in-between model – important elements and benchmarks for quality and diversity. In this respect, online media do not differ from television and radio: public service media represent an additional voice within media markets that have strong tendencies towards concentration. And online media developed by media markets do not relieve the overall media landscape from ownership concentration.

Conclusions

Audience research and usage figures show that online media consumption is increasing and for some groups in society online media has become the prime source of information. Younger people as well as those with longer internet experience are among these groups. In Switzerland, for example, 42 per cent of online users confirm that the internet is their preferred source of news and current affairs. This rises to 64 per cent when asking those online users with more than 10 years of internet experience. For them, the internet is the prime source of information, well ahead of television (46%) and newspapers (49%) (AG für Werbemedienforschung, 2005). Therefore, online media have become an important

supplement to the existing mass media. Their first decade of existence, however, did not provide the overall landscape with additional quality and diversity. Online media rather reinforce existing market and power structures. However, higher degrees of institutional autonomy promise better editorial results, albeit originating mostly in traditional media companies and organizations.

Online media produced by public service broadcasters play an important role in counterbalancing dominant trends such as concentration and commercialization. Attempts to limit PSB activities to radio and broadcasting would eliminate these online voices to the detriment of competition in quality.

Olof Hultén sketched two directions for the further debate.

One is that the present vision of public service is taken as a model for the wider spectrum of new media services. The analogy is that pluralism and diversity are important goals for them as well as for traditional public broadcasting, in a future where most people are subscribers to interactive, on-demand broadband services. (Hultén, 2007: 219f.)

The other strand of reasoning is that markets continue to perform under the guidance of self-regulation. It follows from the foregoing analysis that diversity and quality-oriented online media, defined as news and information services distributed mainly via the internet, require benchmarks that go beyond self-regulation of market forces. To this end, online media produced by public service broadcasting within its remit and controlled by the public at large is a meaningful concept.

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