

# **Introduction. The value(s) of Public Service Media in the Internet Society**

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## Chapter 1

### **Introduction. The value(s) of Public Service Media in the Internet Society**

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#### **Abstract**

Public Service Media organizations have been facing major challenges as digital platforms disrupt the media environment, consumption habits change, their funding models are reformed and attacks from political actors intensify. In this situation, the best solution for PSM to build a case for themselves and navigate the storm is to use their values as a compass. The combination of core, traditional values and new, emerging ones is key for PSM to adapt to the transformation of the current societies' communication needs and thus legitimize themselves in front of the citizens they serve. This book presents different ways in which PSM can create value for different stakeholders, in different contexts and through different means.

**Keywords:** public service media; public value; PSM values; PSM funding; digital challenge

#### **1. Public Service Media in the Digital Age: adaptation or survival?**

From the very origins of both radio and television broadcasting, public service organizations have been in charge of serving the communication needs of their citizens. Much has changed since the time when public service broadcasters operated under a monopoly regime, justified both in terms of spectrum scarcity and in relation to the importance granted to this kind of mass communication by national governments (van Cuilenburg and McQuail 2003), or with very little competition. Both the societies they serve and the market environment within which they operate have undergone major transformations that call for public service broadcasters to adopt new strategies in order to remain relevant, while enduring the core values that sustain a publicly funded media company.

Regardless of the size, market power or model adopted by a public service broadcaster in each specific context, these organizations experienced a quite challenging transformation since the mid-1990s, as online and digital media started to develop, changing the communication markets for good. Public service broadcasters then evolved into public service media organizations (Bardoel and Lowe 2007; Brevini 2010), a process that authors like Donders (2019, p. 1012) consider still a “work in progress”. Their traditional activity in the radio and television market was expanded and PSM organizations launched catch-up and on demand platforms (Rodríguez-Fernández et al. 2018), developed new ways to connect with their audiences through social media (van Dijck and Poell 2015), experimented with innovative narratives, including immersive (Gutiérrez-Caneda et al. 2020) and transmedia products (Franquet and Vila Montoya 2014) and exploited the

personalization potentialities posed by the new digital environment (Schwarz 2016; Vaz Álvarez et al. 2020). This digital expansion was also accompanied by major organizational reforms, affecting the organizations' charts and newsrooms (Larrondo et al. 2016), that had to be redesigned in order to adapt to new workflows of content production; its culture, which must evolve from protectionism to a partnership framework (Głowacki and Jackson 2019) and its funding models, which in some cases (such as the licence fee attached to the ownership of a television set) became unsustainable in the face of new consumption habits (Warner 2019).

In addition to the internal challenges posed by this digital transformation, public service media organizations also had to face remarkable resistance to their online project from commercial media. The traditional attacks from private broadcasters were joined by the print media sector as well, as newspapers and magazines were experiencing their own digital transformation too. In this context of adaptation streams shaping the media market, public service broadcasters' digital and online activities were seen by commercial media as a constraint for the success of their new business models. Thus, numerous complaints were filed to the Directorate General of Competition of the European Commission claiming that the digital expansion of public service broadcasters was not covered by their public service remit and therefore constituted illegal State aid that was distorting the market (Donders 2015). This resulted in the update of the Commission's State aid rules to public service broadcasting in 2009. In this new Broadcasting Communication (European Commission 2009), the Commission acknowledged the right for public service broadcasters to introduce their online activities within their mission, although it also recommended the introduction of an *ex ante* test that would counterbalance the public value and the market impact of a proposed new service in order to decide on its approval. Since then, over 10 countries have (diversely) introduced this kind of procedures (Donders and Moe 2011) to govern the digital expansion of their PSM organizations. The market approach adopted by the Commission (Brevini 2013) and materialized in this *ex ante* regulation added an extra layer of complexity to the PSM project across Europe, as public broadcasters had to ensure that their new services would not distort competition.

## **2. The need for legitimacy in a challenging environment**

All the above-mentioned challenges emerging from PSM's digital transformation have recently escalated as increasing competition from digital platforms, changes on funding models and different kind of threats from political actors are eroding PSM's legitimacy in the current media environment.

The dominance of digital platforms is disrupting all legacy media outlets. The new digital economy imposed by these technological companies is changing the way media outlets conceive their business models. Moreover, both private and public media organizations must reflect on the relationship they want to establish and develop with these tech giants, counterbalancing staying in control of their content (and its monetization) and missing the opportunity to reach wider audiences. In the online environment, the relevance of PSM organizations is still minuscule when compared with the presence, impact and gatekeeping power of digital platforms. Even the digital project of the BBC, which is deemed as one of the strongest PSM organizations worldwide, both in terms of market power and reputation, is still minimal compared to these tech giants. As summarized by Nielsen (2020a), "offline, the BBC is still a giant. Online, it is not". Of course, traditional radio and television services are still relevant (see, for instance, the increase on TV news consumption during the coronavirus crisis, in Newman et al. 2020), but in order to

maintain their legitimacy in the long term (and thus survive), PSM organizations must build and safeguard their own space within the digital realm as well.

One of the main reasons behind this urgent need for PSM to be relevant online lies in the changes of media consumption, especially among young audiences, who are increasingly accessing news and media content online. A recent research conducted by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism proved that “most PSMs struggle to reach younger audiences with news” (Schulz et al. 2019, p. 19), as this audience segment tends to use digital platforms such as Facebook or YouTube to be informed. Similarly, in the field of entertainment, audiences are also migrating from linear broadcasting to subscription video on-demand services, the main growth driver in the audiovisual market, according to the European Audiovisual Observatory (2019, p. 54). The consumption habits that young audiences are developing now are likely to become mainstream patterns of use in a few years (Reiter et al. 2018), so beyond the current implications for the universalism principle by which PSM organizations must attempt to reach all audiences, the problem might escalate in the future: if PSM does not reach young audiences when they are configuring their own media consumption habits, they might risk losing them for good.

This challenging task of engaging young audiences is being faced by most PSM organizations under insufficient financial conditions. According to the European Broadcasting Union (EBU 2019), PSM organizations within the European Union (EU) have still not recovered from the impact of the 2008 financial crisis and their budgets remain stagnated: in real terms (i.e., considering inflation), EU PSM institutions have lost on average 4.0% of their funding from 2014 to 2018. Beside budget constraints, PSM organizations have also experienced changes on their funding models. These institutions are mainly funded through public funds and, in some cases, also through commercial activities (such as advertising or the selling of their original productions). This mixed funding system is widely spread, although the way public funds are allocated diverges significantly from country to country. The licence fee used to be the most widespread funding stream, but it has experienced some adaptations lately in order to comprehend new consumption habits. In 2013, Germany moved to a household licence fee, the UK adapted its licence fee in 2017 in order to include the iPlayer, therefore not limiting its payment to households with a television set, and the Italian one was linked to electricity bills as a measure to fight evasion (Warner 2019). Other countries opt to fund their PSM organizations through direct grants derived from the State budget, as is the case of Spain. This type of public funding can be problematic as it may hinder PSM’s independence from the government.

Funding, therefore, can be an important weapon that governments and political parties can use to threaten or constrain PSM organizations, as demonstrated by the 2017 Media Pluralism Monitor, that considers that PSM funding represents an average medium risk in the EU (Brogi et al. 2018). But governments and political parties can exert pressure and erode PSM’s reputation also through direct threats and attacks targeting these institutions. The most straightforward of these attacks took place in Switzerland in 2018, with the celebration of a referendum on the funding of the Swiss PSM organization, SRR-SRG. The proposal to defund SRR-SRG was launched by youth associations of the two main right-wing political parties and was based “on the fight for advertising between public and private media, the need for greater monitoring of SRR and its lack of austerity and trust (Campos-Freire et al. 2020). The Swiss people supported the continuance of their PSM organizations on the polls, although there was great concern about the possibility of the removal of SRR-SRG from the Swiss media environment, considering its contribution to local, public journalism.

Different articulations of these attacks have been replicated in other countries. In Germany, for instance, the right-wing populist party “Alternative für Deutschland” has fiercely attacked the media during the 2017 electoral campaign and called for the abolishment of the licence fee that funds the German PSM organizations ARD and ZDF (EJO 2018). In Spain, the traditional attacks from the opposition parties against the political pressures exerted by the government party on the public broadcaster RTVE (Goyanes et al. 2020) reached a higher level of criticism when the extreme right political party “Vox” proposed to privatize regional PSM organizations, tempering its original proposal to shut them down (González 2019). Even the BBC has experienced a drop of political support in the past years, as the UK government suggested to replace the licence fee for a subscription-based funding model, which would entail major implications for the PSM organization in terms of focus and competition (Nielsen 2020b).

Considering all the challenges that have just been summarized, the endurance of strong, legitimate PSM organizations built on social support seems to be a path full of financial, political and disruptive obstacles. For PSM to be able to navigate that path, not just merely surviving, but managing to prevail as the cornerstone of democratic media environments, regardless of all the changes that these environments may experience in the future, these organizations must bear in mind the values that they traditionally stood for, as well as those that are arising and must be adopted as a consequence of evolving communication needs. PSM organizations should develop innovative strategies that consider these values as their compass, guiding their activity towards the contribution that they can bring to society in very different levels. Only through the reinforcement of its values will PSM be able to navigate the storm.

### **3. Ensuring core values, embracing emerging ones**

The value of Public Service Media has been widely discussed both by professionals and academics. Recently, as PSM organizations became the target of increasing scrutiny, they have been forced to prove and explain the value that they provide (Martin and Lowe 2014) in order to make a case for themselves. However, demonstrating value (or, rather, values) can be a slippery task. The value of PSM is difficult to define because of its multidimensional and even subjective nature. The content and the services provided by a PSM organization can be valued differently by different people (or by different stakeholders). Likewise, this value can also be understood differently from an individual or a social point of view, or from a market perspective or a cultural one. PSM organizations must be able to understand the different dimensions that their potential value can encompass in order to better fulfill its public service remit, because it is through the creation of value (and the demonstration of such value) that they legitimize themselves in front of the citizens they serve.

The digital transition of public service broadcasters came along with a handy term that aimed at encapsulating all these different dimensions of value. The notion of “public value”, originally developed by Mark H. Moore (1995) to renew public management through innovation and citizens’ engagement, was first transferred from public sector management to public service broadcasting in relation to the BBC as a way to legitimize its continuance in 2004. Since then, public value has been defined in diverse ways depending on the countries, stakeholders and interests behind such definition. Moe and Van den Bulck consider ‘public value’ a buzzword that can serve very different functions, as “for some, it is a new regulatory concept meant to discipline public service broadcasters, while others see it as a way to ‘defend’ and promote what public service

institutions do” (Moe and Van den Bulck 2014, p. 73). Spigelman (2014, p. 54) argued that this abstract feature of ‘public value’ can be beneficial when used as a synonym for “public benefit, public interest or public good”, or even when it is disaggregated into different types of values, as the BBC did by establishing five elements of public value (democratic, cultural and creative, education, social and community value). However, this abstraction can be detrimental in the *measuring* or assessment of public value, as the nature and complexity of PSM content and services does not allow for straightforward metrics.

Beyond this abstract sphere of public value, there have been other attempts to define and disaggregate PSM value. The original Reithian triad that guided the functioning of the BBC (and other public service broadcasters that looked up to the British corporation) almost since its foundation, based on informing, educating and entertaining the public, is still definitely relevant for any current PSM organization, although, at the same time, these three elements on their own could barely serve all the communication needs of today’s societies and should be complemented with other core values. The European Broadcasting Union developed a new framework of PSM core values, adapted to the digital environment. This framework (EBU 2012) established six essential values: universality, independence, excellence, diversity, accountability and innovation. Universality is understood as the commitment to reach all audiences through all platforms, not leaving anyone behind in order to contribute to shaping a public sphere where everyone can be included. Independence from political and commercial forces is key for operating autonomous organizations that can be trusted by citizens. By excellence, the EBU calls for PSM organizations to work towards professionalism, integrity, quality and the engagement of the citizens. PSM must also be inclusive and diverse, including, representing and giving a voice to all minorities that make up modern societies. As public entities, they must be transparent and accountable in its functioning. Finally, PSM organizations have to be committed to the development of innovation strategies in order to drive media change in the current digital and disruptive context.

EBU’s proposal has been extremely valuable for PSM organizations. These six values constitute a framework that all public service media should embrace in order to comply not only with their organizational responsibilities regulated by their respective media laws, but also with their audiences’ expectations. But as the media environment is characterized by its dynamism, so have to be the value that PSM organizations create. To better understand the potential benefits that can be provided by PSM, we can establish a distinction between the core values that have been part of this institutions’ mission since its origins, which would include EBU’s framework, and the ones that PSM organizations should be integrating as new communication needs emerge and new value systems are developed within the society. This second type of values can be contextual (i.e. developed during a specific period, as it could be the COVID-19 pandemic), but they can more often than not become part of PSM’s integral, core values. As societies grow and evolve, they become increasingly complex and so do their communication needs and their value systems. PSM has an obligation to keep up with this evolution in order to remain relevant and valuable for their public.

One example of a growing value within current societies that permeates PSM organizations is ecology and the concern for climate change. As PSM organizations are free from commercial pressures and, in principle, don’t need to fight for audience figures in the same way as commercial broadcasters do, they constitute a suitable platform for the representation, debate and understanding of climate change (Debrett 2017). Providing a space for the coverage of climate-related issues and doing so in such a way that can

raise awareness and educate on this increasingly concerning field are new tasks for PSM organizations. Moreover, some of them are taking this responsibility to another level by implementing green measures within the organization. The BBC, for instance, is developing a “greener broadcasting” strategy (2018-2022) based on the idea that, as a public institution, the corporation must implement sustainability measures that aim at reducing its environmental impact. By establishing sustainability as a value that governs the BBC’s production and supply chain, as well as by creating content that raises awareness on the need to stop climate change (see, for instance, the documentary *Blue Planet II*), the public corporation can innovate and find new ways to engage with an audience that increasingly cares about the health of the planet. This could even be a profitable strategy from a managerial point of view, as stated by the Director General Tony Hall: “reducing energy consumption and waste saves money which will enable us to spend more money on programmes and content” (BBC 2018, p. 3).

Some other values can be contextual, in the sense that they emerge during very specific times. The COVID-19 pandemic that stopped the world in the spring of 2020 provides an interesting case study in this regard, one that should definitely be the object of in-depth future research. By now, some reports have already highlighted the way PSM organizations have contributed to support citizens in these unprecedented times (see, for instance, EBU 2020). The pandemic drew the audiences to broadcast television and increased the consumption of news in general (Newman et al. 2020). But in the middle of this information abundance (as well as dangerous fake news and misinformation), PSM organizations proved to be reliable sources of information that citizens can trust, as proven by the increase on audience figures of PSM’s evening news on an average of 20% and the fact that the reach of their online news websites more than doubled (EBU 2020).

Beyond news and the special coverage of the pandemic, PSM organizations have also engaged in other actions to support citizens. For instance, as schools were shut down, PSM organizations such as RTVE, France TV or ORF developed and broadcasted educational programming to support both teachers and students. Staying at home also required some source of entertainment: RTVE launched the site “Somos Cine” (“We are cinema”), where an extensive catalogue of Spanish films could be freely accessed; the void left on sport programming by the cancellation of all events was filled with archived sports that were rebroadcasted by, for instance, RAI in Italy; and in the United Kingdom the BBC launched “Culture in Quarantine”, a virtual festival that offered diverse creative content, such as theater plays, performances and cinema to the British audiences. In Spain, where gyms were closed and citizens were not allowed to go out to exercise during the hardest weeks of the pandemic, RTVE launched the show “Muévete en casa” (“Move at home”), a daily half an hour of exercise with the professional trainer Cesc Escolà, aimed at people of all ages who wanted to avoid physical inactivity.

The COVID-19 pandemic thus proved that public service media is still a paramount agent within media ecosystems. In the midst of the crisis, PSM organizations were able to remain trusted agents that citizens turned to seeking reliable information and quality content, innovating in order to serve new communication needs that emerged in this unparalleled situation. This experience shows that the combination of core and contextual values is key for PSM organizations to remain committed to its original public service remit while innovating and exploring new ways to engage their audiences and contribute to society.

This book explores how public service media provides value to different audiences and stakeholders in the Internet society. The contributions gathered in this volume are structured in three main sections, approaching 1) PSM’s innovation strategies, 2) its

governance and regulation, and 3) its democratic reinforcement. The analytical framework applied by the contributors is mainly based on the triangulation of the theoretical foundations, policy documents and grey literature that enables the study of organizational strategies deployed (or that should be deployed) by Public Service Media in different international contexts.

In order to provide a better understanding of the current situation of Public Service Media, in Chapter 2 Manuel Goyanes and Tania Lestón-Huerta present the results of their review of the last years' research published on this object of study. According to this literature review, the authors identified four main areas that have been widely covered by communication scholars, namely the impact of digitization and new technologies on PSM, in relation to, for instance, convergence and audience participation; the funding and business models of PSM, focusing on their relation to the wider market, their effects on competition and the opportunities of mixed models; the policies and regulation that affect PSM, both in terms of national and supranational regulation (i.e. the European Union) and in relation to broader theories such as neoliberalism and multistakeholderism; and how PSM organizations can (or should) create public value and safeguard citizen's interests. Goyanes and Lestón-Huerta also suggest three research lines that could be interesting to delve into in further research: the provision of feasible strategies to PSM's current challenges, the quality and features of PSM's content, its relation to social media and widening the scope of the analysis in order to include cultural and artistic variables.

Part I starts with an approximation to the platformization of PSM. Tiziano Bonini Baldini, Miguel Túñez López and Almudena Barrientos Báez approach the relation between PSM and digital platforms from a political economy perspective. After providing a periodization of the evolution from public service broadcasting to public service media and the authors attached to each paradigm, in Chapter 3 the authors argue that PSM organizations must evolve into Public Service Platforms in order to keep their legitimacy in the face of greater platformization of both societies and culture.

In close connection with platformization, in Chapter 4 Jonathon Hutchinson and Jannick Kirk Sørensen explore the challenges and the opportunities posed by automated and algorithmic strategies in the production and distribution processes of media content. These AI and big data actions have been integrated by commercial media, digital platforms and social media, but PSM organizations must find their own algorithmic strategy where their core values, i.e. diversity and universality, are safeguarded. The authors argue that automated and algorithmic strategies can help PSM organizations demonstrate distinctiveness and redefine traditional gatekeeping roles.

Esteban Galán-Cubillo, María Soler-Campillo and Javier Marzal-Felici ask themselves in Chapter 5 whether PSM organizations are necessary in the transmedia scene. To answer this question, they delve into the case of the Valencian Community (Spain), where its public service broadcaster was shut down in 2013 and reopened in 2017 with the ambition to embrace the transmedia environment. Learning from the mistakes of its predecessor, *À Punt Media* is now playing a key role in maintaining a proximity media space for Valencian speakers and in providing cultural and educational content, especially for young audiences, who benefit from the transmedia strategy of the corporation. As the authors argue, this kind of innovation is essential for the sustainability of public service media.

In Chapter 6, Juan Carlos Miguel de Bustos and Jessica Izquierdo Castillo explore the possibilities that blockchain technology can bring to the field of PSM. Despite the fact that blockchain projects have been predominantly developed under market logics, this

transparent, democratic and secure technology has the potential to contribute to the several areas of PSM's value chain, from the management of contracts, to the identification of fake news, opening new funding possibilities through crowdfunding and increasing audience participation. Even though there are still no PSM experiences with blockchain, the authors consider that they should start experimenting with this new technology.

In the closing chapter of this part dedicated to PSM's innovation strategies the websites of proximity PSM organizations are reviewed by Ana María López Cepeda, Belén Galletero Campos and Vanesa Saiz Echezarreta. The authors study the way the websites of regional PSM in Spain, Germany and Belgium can provide value in different areas, such as technical innovation, accessibility, diversity, media literacy or citizen participation. The value provided by the websites of German and Belgic PSM is deemed greater than that created by the Spanish public broadcasters, although all of them contribute to the development of a regional and local public sphere through the promotion of co-official or minority languages and the support of content targeting children and young audiences.

In Chapter 8, Francisco Campos-Freire, Martín Vaz-Álvarez and María José Ufarte-Ruiz approach the different governance models that PSM organizations adopt in different EU member states, providing a solid background for the books Part II, focusing on governance and regulation. Drawing on the genealogy of the origins of public service broadcasting and the evolution of these institutions during the past century until now, the authors provide an overview on the different ways PSM is regulated, structured, governed and funded throughout Europe, and highlight independence as a core value that needs to be strengthened in PSM governance.

Chapter 9 takes the reader to Canada. Michel Sénécal and Éric George explore the evolution of the public policy on the broadcasting and telecommunications sectors in Canada, from an original interventionist and protectionist approach, to a neoliberal one since the 1980s. Such an evolution, especially with regards to new media, has created the perfect scenario for transnational companies such as Netflix, which are not subjected to production nor distribution quotas in the same way that other media and telecommunication companies are. In this context, the authors wonder which role should Canadian PSM play in the protection of the Canadian culture, identity and languages.

Marta Rodríguez-Castro, Catriona Noonan and Phil Ramsey approach public service media's market impact from a positive perspective in Chapter 10. The authors apply a risk frame to explore the way PSM organizations contribute to creating and shaping creative markets, identifying two main areas where PSM's activity is key: the creation of a supply base in different national and regional contexts, especially valuable as it sustains an important labor market; and supporting digital innovation, which contributes to advancing the media market as a whole. These two types of risk taken by PSM are examples of the economic and social value these organizations generate within the media market and the digital economy.

In Chapter 11, closing this section on governance and regulation, Pierre-Jean Benghozi and Françoise Benhamou tackle one of the key concepts affecting the economics of the Internet society: convergence between media and Internet Access Providers. As telecommunication and media companies become closer together, their business models and their objectives change. According to the authors, this situation disrupts both the media market and the regulators' work, as convergence can challenge some of the core values of European digital policies, such as net neutrality, diversity and innovation.

Minna Aslama Horowitz and Marius Dragomir open the third part of this book, dedicated to PSM's democratic reinforcement, and explore the extent to which PSM organizations are being captured by political and commercial pressures in five European countries: Finland, Spain, Belgium, the Czech Republic and the United Kingdom. Even though media capture is a phenomenon that can affect all actors of a media system, its impact on PSM organizations is especially relevant because it targets one of their core values: their independence. In Chapter 12, the authors delve into three main questions surrounding the capture of PSM in the abovementioned countries, namely the role PSM plays within its national media system, the public discourses that approach PSM and the structural factors that lead to capture.

Media and Information Literacy is the subject of Chapter 13, where José Manuel Pérez Tornero, Alton Grizzle, Cristina M. Pulido and Sally Tayie develop, first, an overview on the main initiatives developed in this field by the European Commission and the UNESCO over the past 25 years, and then explore three initiatives that link media literacy and PSM organizations: *Lumni* in France, *BBC-Bitesize* in the UK and the observatory Oi2 RTVE-UAB in Spain. The authors argue that both PSM organizations and media authorities have a major role to play in the development and monitoring of media and information literacy initiatives.

Iván Puentes-Rivera, Paulo Carlos López-López and José Rúas-Araújo establish in Chapter 14 a set of 50 indicators for the standardized assessment of the democratic quality of televised electoral debates. Considering these debates as powerful instruments for PSM to contribute to shaping the public opinion and to strengthen citizen participation in public issues, the authors explore key aspects in the organization and programming of electoral debates that create democratic value by balancing the need to engage large segments of audience with ensuring the credibility of the show.

In Chapter 15, Carmen Costa-Sánchez, Barbara Mazza and Ana Gabriela Frazão-Nogueira explore the strategies deployed by three PSM organizations (RTVE in Spain, the Italian RAI and the Portuguese RTP) in order to strengthen their relationship with young audiences, an especially difficult target for PSM. The development of digital platforms and multimedia, interactive and innovative content is deemed key by the authors. The three case studies describe different ways for PSM to attract young audiences, including educational content, reality television or brand projects that aim at getting closer to millennials and Gen Z in such a way that they are consistent with their public service remit and values.

The closing chapter of this book approaches the situation of PSM in Latin America. Natali Schejtman, Ezequiel Rivero and Martín Becerra point to two different developments of Latin American state media: expansionary processes, linked to the increase of resources and of content development alternate with others of retraction, when the budgets and productive capacity of these media organizations are diminished. The authors advocate for an active role of Latin American state-media in the development of a digital citizenship that strengthens communication rights such as the universal access to diverse and pluralistic content that enables dialogue with and among citizens.

All sixteen chapters contribute to a better understanding of the role that public service media plays in the current media systems, as key agents for the development of the public sphere and democratic societies.

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