

Public Value and Liberal Democracies: the potential of Public Service Media as *Islands of Trust* in the Digital Public Sphere

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Public Value and Liberal Democracies: the potential of Public Service Media as *Islands of Trust* in the Digital Public Sphere

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Abstract: Digitization and platformization have aggravated the problematics that have traditionally been linked to the functioning of the public sphere and, thus, for healthy liberal democracies. As the digital environment brings their own complications to the table, in this chapter it is argued that Public Service Media should pursue their recognition as *islands of trust* within the Digital Public Sphere, that is, a key source of information for all citizens and a reliable actor that can help the public navigate the news environment. First, the problems that have been part of the discussion on the public sphere are presented and transposed to the digital realm. Second, by applying a public value approach, it is argued how the ideal of PSM can contribute to reinforcing the public sphere. It is concluded that for the ideal of PSM to materialize, greater external consensus and internal efforts have to be addressed.

1. Introduction

On April 24, 2024, Spain's Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez posted on his X account a letter to the public in which he cancelled his public agenda for five days to reflect on his continuity in office. The reason behind this unprecedented decision stemmed from news received that same morning: a court had initiated proceedings against Begoña Gómez, the president's wife, following a complaint filed by the far-right union Manos Limpias, accusing her of influence peddling based on unverified information published in minor

digital media¹. Five days later, Pedro Sánchez announced that he would stay on as Prime Minister, while lighting the spark of a national debate on disinformation and fake news, on the need to develop policies to fight against defamation campaigns that influence the political debate and the public sphere, and what is even more interesting, on the very definition of what a news media outlet is.

Many reflections can be drawn from this exceptional event –such as the responsibility associated with a high-level public office or the expression of emotions and vulnerability by political representatives. However, one of the most pertinent debates regarding this episode, also emphasized in the Prime Minister's speech, is the challenges posed by today's fragmented and increasingly polarized digital public sphere, and how these pose a threat to the sustainability of healthy and robust democracies. In times when disinformation spreads in social media and in disputable news media outlets, it becomes increasingly difficult to find and identify reliable news and, thus, separate the wheat from the chaff.

Against this backdrop, in this chapter it is argued that Public Service Media (PSM) should pursue their recognition as *islands of trust* (Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2008; Nissen, 2006; Sørensen et al., 2021; Urbániková & Smejkal, 2023), that is, a key source of information for all citizens, a lighthouse that could help the public navigate the news environment and empower citizens in the digital public sphere. To this end, the ideal of public service media should be materialized both in theory and in practice, ensuring the functioning of these public entities is guided towards the creation of public value, rather than moved by political capture.

First, the problems that have been part of the discussion on the public sphere are presented and transposed to the digital realm. Second, it is argued how the ideal of PSM

¹ For more information on this event, see Ramírez (2024) in *The Guardian*.

can contribute to reinforcing the public sphere by adopting a public value strategy. It is concluded that for the ideal of PSM to materialize, greater external consensus and internal efforts have to be addressed.

2. The digital public sphere: old problems, new challenges

The public sphere is one of the most contested and tricky concepts in social sciences (Rauchfleisch, 2017). Departing from Habermas' (1962) conceptualization and drawing from later theoretical developments of the concept, Fuchs defines the public sphere as “a realm of society that stands in-between, mediates, and interfaces the economy, politics, and culture” (Fuchs, 2021a, p. 211). Thus, the public sphere provides a space for human communication “about matters that are of public relevance – that is, concern the many” (Fuchs, 2021a, p. 211). This definition integrates the sociological approach started by Habermas, who revolutionized the notion of the public sphere by contextualizing it within a wider political, cultural, and social context and advancing previous theories that only dealt with the public sphere in relation to public opinion (Habermas, 2023).

The approach outlined by Habermas is of particular interest when studying the relationship between media systems and deliberative politics, the foundation of liberal democracies. The communicative spaces that structure the public sphere mediate political communication and shape the opinions of citizens, who participate in these spaces and gather information about political, economic, and social issues that affect them (Fuchs, 2021b). The digital public sphere, understood not as “a separate sphere of society, but a dimension and aspect of the public sphere in societies where digital information and digital communication are prevalent” (Fuchs, 2021b, p. 13), still faces the same problems as the traditional notion of the public sphere when it comes to materializing its ideal version.

The issues that hamper the perfect functioning of the public sphere have been narrowed down by Price (1992) to five major constraints of the public: 1) lack of competence, 2) lack of resources, 3) the tyranny of the majority, 4) susceptibility to persuasion and 5) the dominance of elites. Next, we will delve into each of these questions, updating them to the dynamics of the digital environment.

The lack of competence of the public refers to the idea that it cannot be expected that citizens are politically active and involved in all public issues that affect them, either because there is a lack of interest or a lack of energy. Under this presumption – which could be interpreted as quite condescending and paternalistic—, democratic theory would ask citizens for more than they are able and willing to give, resulting in partial or inaccurate information shaping the public opinion. This rooted understanding of citizens' lack of competence and interest in public issues is reflected nowadays in the trend towards intentional news avoidance, that is, “low news consumption over a continuous period of time caused by a dislike for news” (Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020, p. 463). Along with the dislike for news, intentional news avoidance has also been linked to news reporting being too negative, to low trust in news and to news overload (Goyanes et al., 2023; Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020), the latter being a consequence of the increased media offer available in the digital realm and incidental news exposure (Schäfer, 2023), as citizens might encounter news when using social media or being online for other reason. The intertwine of these intrinsic features of the digital public sphere (incidental news exposure, news overload and intentional news avoidance) hamper its realization, thus eroding the function of liberal democracies.

A second problem pointed by Price refers to the lack of resources, as in the public lacking the knowledge and literacy required to understand, analyze, and interpret the topics that affect them. The adaptation of this problematic to the digital public sphere

adds another level of complexity: the lack of resources to distinguish which sources of information to trust. The aforementioned expansion of the media offer implies that news media now share space and compete with other sources of information that operate under logics different from journalistic ethics as well as with direct sources of disinformation. As Serrano-Puche et al. (2023) argue, trust in digital media is now mediated by the blurring of the traditional boundaries of journalism, the hybridization of classical and digital logics and, again, the broadening of the media offer that leads to increasing competition among digital agents for the public's online attention. In addition to the threats of disinformation streams, misinformation practices undertaken by individuals who share false or inaccurate information without being aware also contribute to this low trust atmosphere in the digital realm. As trust in news is deemed "a requirement for any democracy to function properly" (Holtrup et al., 2024, p. 159), the lack of resources of the public to navigate the information environment becomes a major threat for a correct functioning of the public sphere.

Third, Prince mentions the tyranny of the majority, that is, the risk of silencing minority opinions that might not be as popular as mainstream perspectives or tastes, in line with the spiral of science theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Even though the spread of social media was initially seen as a new means for individual and collective expression in digital public forums (Benkler, 2006), the intertwine of the logics of digital capitalism and algorithmic recommendation led to a different scenario. In the digital public sphere, the automation of content suggestions and recommendations strengthen the dynamics of the spiral of silence and lead to the increase of self-censorship (Cheong et al., 2022; Hoffmann & Lutz, 2017). Moreover, the rise of cyber-aggressions in general (DeMarsico et al., 2022), and online harassment to journalists in particular (Holton et al., 2023) add

to the factors that erode a plural and diverse public sphere where different approaches and perspectives can be freely debated.

In strong connection with this, algorithmic recommendation and personalization in digital media, along with increasing political and social polarization (Yarchi et al., 2021) exacerbates the public's susceptibility to persuasion, the fourth concern listed by Prince. Such vulnerability, as argued by Prince, is especially strong when persuasive communication is emotional and not rational. In the digital realm, the formation of echo chambers and filter bubbles through news personalization and selective exposure has led to dissonant public spheres and, as stated by Gil De Zúñiga et al. (2023) the polarization of the public prompts greater resistance to political persuasion and changes of opinion. Therefore, while the public becomes more influenceable by information that confirms their own perspective, their resistance to new or different approaches hampers the ideal notion for the public sphere, for which openness to contrasting diverse viewpoints is crucial.

The final problem identified in the literature by Prince is the dominance of elites, who control the dynamics of the public sphere and influence democratic debate. In the digital public sphere this problem is accentuated by intensified media concentration levels and platform dominance (Knoche, 2021). As tech giants expanded globally and diversified their business areas –social media, news outlets, entertainment– their market power became undisputable and their control over the public debate intensified. The role of digital platforms in the digital public sphere and their influence in liberal democracies requires new regulation that is adapted to platform logics, such as the European Union's Digital Markets Act and Digital Services Act. As proven by extensive research (Badr, 2021; Hendrickx & Van Remoortere, 2024; Masduki & D'Haenens, 2022), media

concentration hampers diversity and pluralism, thus once again constraining the public debate within the public sphere.

3. Public Service Media as *islands of trust* in the digital public sphere: a public value-based approach

Public service broadcasters are key agents within national media systems and thus have traditionally played an important role in the shaping the dynamics of the public sphere. After their transition to public service media organizations and the legitimization of the expansion of their public service remit to the digital realm (D'Arma et al., 2021; Donders, 2019; Lowe & Bardoel, 2007), PSM organizations are struggling to retain their long-standing relevance in the digital public sphere, where global online platforms owned by powerful tech companies concentrate most market power (Martin, 2021), both in terms of revenues and, what matters most for public service media, in terms of audience reach.

However, considering the problematics that characterize the digital public sphere, the strong presence of an agent that treasures and promotes democratic and civil values, rather than commercial interests, is key for sustaining a balanced and fair public debate and, thus, healthy liberal democracies. In line with other authors, such as Fuchs (2021b), we will argue that Public Service Media should reinforce their compromise with a public value strategy so that they become *islands of trust* in the digital public sphere: a recognizable, independent, and public interest resource that citizens can rely on. The theoretical proposal that will be described in this section departs from the ideal conception of public service media. It should be noted that, in practice, these media organizations operate under diverse sources of pressure, such as political capture (Media and Journalism Research Center, n.d.), budget constraints (EBU-MIS, 2024) or attacks from far-right agents (Holtz-Bacha, 2021), among others, that hamper the realization of this PSM ideal.

This ideal version of Public Service Media has been shaped lately by the goal of public value creation. Public value has its roots in the management theory that was first developed by Moore (1995) with the aim to renovate public sector management and promote innovation and collaboration within public administration. Since then, this approach has permeated to the field of European PSM, where the notion of public value was used to legitimize the expansion of public service broadcasters' activities beyond traditional broadcasting and into digital services. Although there is not just a single definition of what public value is, as public managers should develop their own according to the needs of the stakeholders and the organization's operational capabilities, this approach has been useful in the delineation of the values that public service media should adhere to in order to fulfill their public service remit in the digital environment.

Thus, recent approaches led by the European Broadcasting Union (2012), but also by PSM organizations individually (like the ARD in Germany, the Austrian ORF, the BBC in the United Kingdom or the VRT in Belgium) and scholars (Chivers & Allan, 2022; Gransow, 2018) have attempted to conceptualize the public value of public service media. For the purpose of the argument that is being developed in this chapter, we will depart from the adaptable conceptualization of public value undertaken by Cañedo et al. (2022), where the authors identified twelve public value dimensions for public service media: social engagement, diversity, innovation, independence, excellence, universality, citizen participation, media literacy, accountability, territorial cohesion, social justice and cooperation.

Through the reinforcement of these public value dimensions, public service media could become *islands of trust* and contribute to strengthening a healthy public sphere, as specific strategies linked to these principles can partially counterbalance the problems that had been explained in the previous section. Table 1 illustrates the main points of this

argument, summarizing how the traditional problems of the public sphere, along with the new layer of casuistic that is brought to the table by digitization and platformization, could be approached by public value-based solutions undertaken by PSM.

Table 1. Theoretical approach to PSM’s contribution to strengthening the digital public sphere

Problems in the materialization of the public sphere	Complications from the digital public sphere	Public value-based solution
Lack of competence	Incidental news consumption, news overload, intentional news avoidance	Excellence, universality
Lack of resources	Disinformation and misinformation, low trust in news	Media literacy, excellence, cooperation
Tyranny of the majority	Algorithmic recommendations, self-censorship, online harassment	Diversity, independence
Susceptibility to persuasion	Polarization, echo chambers, selective exposure	Independence, territorial cohesion, social engagement
Dominance of elites	Market concentration and platform dominance	Citizen participation, social justice

Source: processed by the author.

The lack of competence of the public exacerbated by news overload, incidental news consumption and intentional news avoidance could be soothed by reinforcing excellence and universality within PSM. Excellence is here understood as the aggregation of quality, professionalism and leadership. Only by providing high quality content –specially news– and by sticking to the highest professional standards in journalistic practice can PSM content be relevant for their public. Moreover, PSM are in a good position to innovate in their journalistic practices and formats such as constructive journalism, that has been identified as a good means to fight against news fatigue produced by the excess of *bad*

news (Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020). The Swedish public television SVT, for instance, has been working with constructive journalism since 2009 (McIntyre & Gyldensted, 2017) and considers part of its public service remit to provide information that is encouraging and solution-based, while still reporting on hard news.

Universality, on the other hand, refers to the obligation for public service media to provide a service that is accessible for everyone, regardless of their location, their media competences, their abilities, and their media consumption preferences. Due to their public funding, public service broadcasters have always had to provide a universal service, but in times of media change, universal access also translates as being able to provide media content through different platforms. This means that PSM organizations should rethink their distribution strategies in order to be able to provide quality content in their own platforms, but also through third-party platforms. While this entails greater risk for brand erosion and implies giving away part of the control over the content monitorization and monetization, PSM have to be present in those platforms where the public is, ensuring that public value content is also part of the digital diets of their audiences – even if it is *incidentally*. Some PSM organizations are already exploring this strategy. For instance, the Flemish VRT distributes informative content adapted to young audiences with their brand *nws*, that not only relies on its own website, but also –and mostly– on its Instagram and TikTok accounts (Hendrickx, 2023).

To tackle the lack of resources of the public, considering the waves of disinformation and misinformation and the declining levels of trust in news, PSM should endeavor to promote media and digital literacy, cooperation, and, again, excellence. Excellence because the first step in the process of regaining the public's trust in the news is to strengthen the informative mission of PSM by safeguarding the provision of high

quality, plural, critical and independent information (Rodríguez-Castro & Pérez-Seijo, 2024).

Media literacy, along with digital literacy, have become key public value dimensions. Public service media should “facilitate the understanding of citizens concerning essential issues for social coexistence” (Cañedo et al., 2022, p. 594) and embrace a counselling function that would imply sharing knowledge, advising citizens on public issues and empowering the public so that they have the tools and the competences to navigate the current media and digital environments. If effective, media and digital literacy strategies could contribute to lessen the spread of misinformation and to develop greater public resistance to disinformation.

Moreover, cooperation, understood as the development of coordinated strategies involving institutions and/or other media outlets, becomes a transversal requirement in the current media environment, that demands coordinated and supranational actions that tackle global needs. In this regard, PSM organizations have traditionally been keen in the development of coordinated strategies and the creation of networks that operate under shared values. One recent example is the EBU’s initiative *A European Perspective*, a project based in the cooperation among the digital newsrooms of public service broadcasters that promotes the exchange of national news that are then featured in each outlet’s news services websites (Rodríguez-Castro & Arriaza-Ibarra, 2023). With this collaboration, not only a European public sphere is promoted, but also disinformation on what happens in neighboring countries is undercut with the distribution of trustworthy, reliable news.

Third, the tyranny of the majority, propelled in the digital environment by algorithmic recommendations, self-censorship, and online harassment, could be mitigated by strengthening two core values of PSM: diversity and independence. Diversity and

pluralism entail the integration of different perspectives and giving voice to minorities, that might find it harder to have their viewpoints included in other mainstream media. By providing a safe space for the expression of different perspectives and compromising with plural newsmaking, public service media could offer content that would make every citizen feel represented. In the digital realm, some PSM organizations have adapted the diversity principle to their algorithmic recommendations, that are designed to provide a diverse media diet, rather than a personalized experience based on reinforcing user preferences (Helberger, 2015). In addition to this, as public service broadcasters are expected to be independent from political and commercial pressures, they are the most suited media actors for embracing internal pluralism, as no bias should affect the selection of journalists and media professionals.

In connection to this, the public's susceptibility to persuasion, intensified by polarization, echo chambers and selective exposure, could also be subdued by ensuring diversity and independence in public service media, as well as territorial cohesion and social engagement. If PSM organizations regain the trust of the public with reinforced independence, thus becoming *islands of trust* that all segments of audience find trustworthy, polarization could be tackled. Previous research has pointed out that public service media news consumption reduces political selective exposure, which leads to greater cohesion in fragmented public spheres (Bos et al., 2016). To this aim, PSM should operate under the value of social engagement, that is understood as their mission to put citizens at the center of their actions and satisfy the public's information, entertainment and education needs. This would be a prerequisite for them to become *islands of trust* and should penetrate all other public value dimensions.

Lastly, the elites' dominance of the public sphere, exacerbated by increasing levels of concentration in the media market and platform dominance could be

counterbalance by reinforcing citizen participation and social justice within stronger public service media. Citizen participation entails both participation in content production and in governance practices and decision-making. As public value management relies on the participation of stakeholders, namely citizens, PSM should aspire to become open and participatory media organizations, thus enhancing their democratic contribution to the public sphere (Grünangerl, 2012). Some PSM organizations have already embraced this principle and engage in public debates about their role with the public. That is the case, for instance, of the Austrian ORF, that regularly organizes *Dialogforums*, open forums for citizens and other stakeholders to express their viewpoints on different aspects affecting the public service broadcaster. If the insights from the public are included in the PSM organization's decision-making, this would result in more democratic and citizen-oriented media services.

In the same, operating under the principle of social justice, that entails the traditional defense of human rights, but also emerging values such as the right to privacy in the digital environment, is crucial in the process of public service media becoming *islands of trust*. In times where digital platforms sustain their businesses with the commercialization of users' data, PSM should provide a safe space for citizens to move online with the guarantee that their data will be handled according to ethical values (Sørensen et al., 2021).

4. Conclusions

In this chapter we have argued that the materialization of the ideal conceptualization of public service media, operating under public value logics, could contribute to the revitalization of the public sphere by addressing the problematics associated with its fulfilment and the difficulties added by digitization and platformization. This

argumentation is in line with previous studies that point to the potential of strong public media in sustaining a stronger, more democratic, and healthier public sphere (Fuchs, 2021b; Fuchs & Unterberger, 2021; Nikunen & Hokka, 2020; Thomass et al., 2015). It is not the purpose of this chapter to argue that public service media are the only agents that could approach this mission, nor that they should do it on their own. In this sense, it is also important to note that the ideal of PSM does not always materialize, as even the BBC, traditionally considered the paradigm of public service broadcasting, operates with imperfections (Freedman, 2019).

Instead, it is argued that these organizations should lead the way in public value creation and thus become *islands of trust*, so that citizens know that they rely on them for the fulfillment of their communication needs. To enable the realization of this ideal version of public service media, external and internal action are required. Externally, greater efforts must be made in order to safeguard PSM's independence. The European Media Freedom Act has made some advances in this regard by establishing guidelines aimed at reducing political interference in PSM's editorial decisions, but it is still too soon to assess the impact that this new regulatory framework.

On the other side, public service media should embrace public value strategies and act under the principles that have been discussed in this chapter. To do so, public service media organizations should benefit from the implementation of innovative practices –such as advancing in the use of Artificial Intelligence in the public interest– as well as from cooperation with other media agents and institutions that share the same values and purposes. By promoting stronger and more accountable public service media, a healthier and more robust public sphere is encouraged as well.

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