

Distilling the value of public service media: Towards a tenable conceptualization in the European framework

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Abstract

This paper problematises the difficulty of defining the public value of public service media. Through a double qualitative methodology, a series of components are identified and assessed in order to propose a tenable conceptualisation in the European framework. First, a qualitative analysis of the main legislations in force (n=44) and the grey literature public service media organisations display on their websites (n=14) was developed to extract, on an exploratory basis, the common constituent components of public value. Based on this, we developed a guided focus group of experts (n=15) to help us build a conception of public service media's value that can retain its validity for a long period of time in the multiplatform era. The results highlight the problems in proposing a single definition given the socio-political diversity of the spaces in which public service media operate and the uncertainty of a constantly changing audiovisual context.

Keywords

Public value, public service media, public broadcasters' mission, multiplatform context, media policy

Introduction

The term public value has been a widely contested concept, subject to multiple definitions, understandings and uses, depending on the field of study and/or the objectives of the agents embracing it. Despite the laudatory efforts of extant research (Mazzucato, 2018; Moore, 1995; O'Flynn, 2007), it is not possible to conceptualise it in a unique way, so this contribution tries to better understand the notion in the specific framework of European public service media (PSM). Specifically, we aim to propose a sustainable conceptualisation over time and allow for adaptation to the changing audiovisual context in which PSM organisations are losing ground to transnational audiovisual platforms (Debrett, 2009; Martin, 2021; Suárez-Candel, 2012).

Based on a double qualitative analysis methodology (documentary analysis and a focus group of experts), our study contributes to shedding light on the current debate on the survival of PSM in the multiplatform audiovisual context. We seek to provide a baseline conceptualisation, for both policymakers and practitioners, that improves their understanding of PSM's public value and guarantees the fulfilling of their intrinsic

missions. The results section first discusses and explains the components of PSM's public value. Second, attention is paid to the relevance of each of them by proposing an internal hierarchy as well as highlighting the difficulty of reaching a consensus on the definition. Third, our results identify the challenges that the multiplatform context adds to the already known difficulties in conceptualising PSM's public value.

What we mean when we talk about public value

Public value became popular in the field of public administration and public policy due to Moore (1995), who triggered the development of a new public sector management paradigm: public value management (Liddle, 2017; Sedlačko, 2020). In his seminal work, Moore does not provide a clear, normative definition of public value, but rather understands it as the goal towards which public managers should aim, and he states that they create public value even though 'the problem is that they cannot know for sure what that is' (Moore, 1995: 57). In view of this uncertainty, Moore understands public value management as a triangular strategy that should align (a) a conception of public value produced by public managers using the assets entrusted to them, (b) sources of legitimacy and support for that conception and (c) the operational capacity required to produce it (Moore, 1995: 71).

From Moore's proposal, O'Flynn (2007: 358) constructs a clearer (although still elusive) definition, whereby public value can be understood as a 'multi-dimensional construct – a reflection of collectively expressed, politically mediated preferences consumed by the citizenry – created not just through outcomes but also through processes which may generate trust or fairness'. This dynamic definition remarks on the constant adaptation of public value considering society's changing needs and fluctuations in policy goals and political objectives and addresses two main issues: the need to boost innovation and the perspectives of different stakeholders (Crosby et al., 2017; Torfing et al., 2021).

The latter have permeated Mazzucato's work (2014, 2018) who, from an economic field viewpoint, argues for the redefinition of the public sector's role in the creation of value, in boosting new markets and in the promotion of collaborations with the private sector. In Mazzucato's view, 'when organized effectively, the State's hand is firm but not heavy, providing the vision and the dynamic push (...) to make things happen that

otherwise would not have' (Mazzucato, 2014: 5). The public value thus becomes a paradigm where governments are urged to 'think big and differently' (Mazzucato, 2018: 269) in order to better fulfil existing and emerging needs within the societies they serve.

Public value as a defence narrative for PSM

PSM organisations adopted the notion of public value in the context of the digital transition triggered in the early years of the 21st century (Lowe and Bardoel, 2007). This transition was defined by the increasing attacks from commercial media against PSM. The complaints that the European Commission had been receiving since the 1990s against the funding of PSM started to argue that public funding allocated to PSB's new media services constituted illegal state aid because they were not explicitly covered by their public service remit, in the face of EU rules that, despite the efforts of the 2001 Broadcasting Communication, were still not clear enough to fit in the digital environment (Brevini, 2013).

In this context, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) was the first broadcaster that embraced public value as a core concept in its 2004 Charter Manifesto (BBC, 2004). The British government had been working on the implementation of public value within its public sector (Kelly et al., 2002), and the BBC saw the opportunity to apply this 'buzzword' (Moe and Van den Bulck, 2014) to its narrative of self-defence. In this vein, Lee et al. (2011) argue that public value was used at the BBC under a rhetorical purpose, as a rationale to prompt operational changes (namely the BBC's online and digital expansion) while responding to criticism from commercial media.

The BBC thus stated that it 'exists to create public value' (2004: 7), which it understands as the sum of three components: its value to people as individuals (individual value), its value to society as a whole (social value) and its impact on the communications market (net economic value). The BBC also disaggregated public value into five categories directly linked to its public purposes: democratic value, cultural and creative value, educational value, social and community value and global or international value. Moreover, the BBC's public value definition was further elaborated on in the PublicValue Test, an ex ante evaluation that the corporation was required to apply to new media services as a sine qua non for their approval since 2007 (Michalis, 2012), recently rebranded as the Public Interest Test.

Even though the BBC, being the first PSM organisation to work with this notion and often misleadingly considered the ideal PSM (Donders, 2021), has had some influence in the expansion of public value, other broadcasters have built their own approach (Gransow, 2018). For example, the Austrian public service broadcaster, the Österreichischer Rundfunk (ORF), established the ORF Public Value Kompetenzzentrum, where a new definition of public value was drafted and from where it engages in dialogues with its stakeholders around its mission. The Flemish Vlaamse Radio – en Televisieomroeporganisatie (VRT) has also listed the different ways in which it creates value for the society it serves. For its part, the German Arbeitsgemeinschaft der öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunkanstalten der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (ARD), were initially reluctant to embrace the public value narrative as they were afraid of the possibility that ‘the term used by the European Commission could mean restrictions for public service broadcasters’ (Gransow, 2018: 219) but have started working on their own public value strategies more recently.

Thus, public value has become a key issue when defining the mission of PSM in the changing audiovisual scenario, emphasising ‘the assessment of the benefit that a certain content or service will provide the citizenry with’ (Suárez-Candel, 2012: 54). However, despite the efforts made by supranational organisations, such as the European Broadcasting Union (EBU, 2012), and extant research (Donders and Van den Bulck, 2016; Lowe and Martin, 2014; Túnuez-López et al., 2021) regarding the distinctive public value of PSM organisations, there is no agreement on how this should be defined, into which categories it should be disaggregated, and which strategies are more efficient in terms of creating public value.

This research attempts to fill this research gap by providing a normative, explorative definition of public value within PSM. Therefore, we aim to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: Which core components define the basis for PSM public value in Europe?

RQ2: To what extent does PSM’s public value have to face the challenges of the multiplatform media context?

Data and method

To answer the prior RQs, this study applied two methodological qualitative techniques. First, we carried out a documentary analysis around the ideation of public value in the prevailing PSM legislation in Europe (see Appendix A). On the one hand, we conducted a review of the state-level laws (n=17) of Spain, Portugal, Italy, France, Greece, Ireland, the United Kingdom, Germany, Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands and Sweden. As the analysis was carried out during 2020, we included the United Kingdom, still part of the European Union at that time, since it is a benchmark for the European PSM model. However, we did not study Central and Eastern European countries as the development of their heterogeneous PSM systems has followed a different path from the Western European's (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2019).

Moreover, according to the regional particularities of Spain, Belgium, Germany and Ireland, where diverse cultural identities coexist, the analysis was extended to the legislation of the sub-state territories of these countries (n=27). Altogether, we studied the regulations and grey literature of 13 state broadcasting operators and 26 regional ones, allowing us to identify and contrast the value components legally assigned by national and regional governments and parliaments to PSM as well as those deemed key by the PSM organisations themselves, from a more corporate and legitimising perspective.

We also analysed the grey literature of PSM national broadcasters to check how the philosophy of public value is reflected in the external and internal narratives of these organisations. We reviewed the accountability reports, public value reports and corporate communications available on their own web pages (n=14) (see Appendix B). To systematize the data obtained from this documentary analysis, we coded and identified the main common components of public value referred to in the literature. Hereafter, we configured a unique corpus that we confronted with the legislation as a whole to assess its validity. Once checked, we named and defined each component so that its conceptual particularity was both independent from and complementary to the rest.

Second, after having defined the components that makeup European PSM's public value, during January 2021, we developed a focus group to enhance our proposal and

provide external qualitative insights (Krueger, 1994). The selection of participants was made on the basis of previous contacts and composed of both academics and practitioners in the field of European PSM, which eventually resulted in a diverse sample of 15 experts comprising a variety of people in terms of professional experience, gender and age. When defining the sample, prior knowledge of each of those invited to participate was key in ensuring the fluidity of the dialogue, as we, the researchers, assumed the peripheral role of facilitator and avoided intervening in the discussion to ensure the quality of the results. The session was digitally recorded and manually transcribed verbatim in order to implement an analysis of the data.

Seven days before the meeting, participants were sent the following key questions around which the discussion would revolve: (a) What is the concept and definition of the public value of PSM? (b) Do PSM organisations provide distinctive value that is higher or lower than that of private ones? (c) What is the public value that PSM should provide in the current digital ecosystem? and (d) How do you assess PSM's public value management? Likewise, participants were given the list of components identified in previous documentary analysis so that they could subjectively rank them according to their current importance. To systematise the data obtained from this focus group, which were combined with the emailed responses regarding the value rankings, we applied a thematic analysis in which we followed the six-step procedure proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): data familiarisation, codification, themes identification, revision, themes naming and the report's production.

Results

Core components of European PSM's public value: Shared essence but territorial specificities

Through the documentary analysis carried out, we identified 12 components of PSM's public value, with a greater or lesser presence at the state and regional levels, in line with the diverse tradition of European public service broadcasting (Donders, 2021). Following previous nomenclatures (Donders and Van den Bulck, 2016; EBU, 2012), these components are named and graphically expressed in Figure 1.

Some of the components identified have already been part of previous conceptualisations, such as the one drafted by the Broadcasting Research Union (BRU) in 1986. That is the case, for instance, of universality, independence, excellence or diversity.

Moreover, what the BRU (1986) calls ‘service to the public sphere’ is composed in our analysis by both social engagement and social justice. Our proposal also matches some of the components proposed by the EBU (2012) around the expectations on how PSM organisations should operate (accountability) and about their positive impact on the media market (innovation). However, other components identified in our analysis had not been included within previous conceptualisation, such as media literacy, territorial cohesion, cooperation or citizen participation. The conceptualisation is explained below.

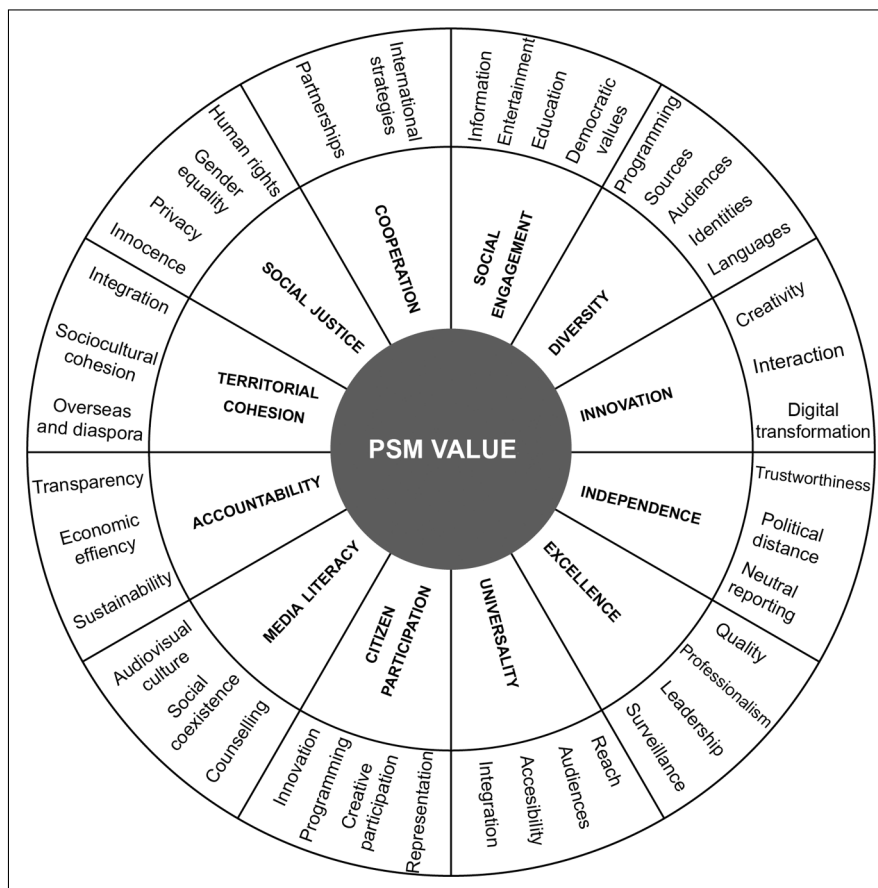


Figure 1. Core dimensions of public service media (PSM’s) public value identified in the analysis.

Social engagement. This component consists of satisfying the audience’s information, entertainment and education needs. Putting citizens at the centre of PSM’s mission, it is especially relevant capturing the attention of young audiences, as well as the promotion

historical dimension is particularly relevant, as demonstrated by the condemnation in Belgian law of any type of programming that apologises for Nazism.

Diversity. This component is reflected in a multidimensional way, linked to programming but also to the production sources or the audience. Diversity brings into play the importance of reflecting on territorial identity and culture, whilst attention paid to the specific needs of culturally differentiated citizens and the guarantee of pluralism are key. References to it are common in regulation due to its link to democracy and the guarantee of offering citizens the tools to form their own opinions. Likewise, in territories where several languages with different legal statuses cohabit (such as Spanish regions), linguistic diversity takes on a specific dimension within the variety of content. At the regional level, this component is highlighted in line with the proximity inherent in regional media.

Innovation. In a context of constant technological development, innovation is linked to the promotion of the information society, the development of creativity and useful interactive services, the implementation of new techniques, and the promotion of new forms of participation. Moreover, its importance is noted in grey literature, where it is conceived as a more practical than theoretical position and as being pivotal for corporate development in the current multiplatform context. At the regional level, however, it loses its flow and is only fully identified in the Irish and Belgian cases.

Independence. Preeminent at the state level, although not at the regional one, this component is supported by the concept of trustworthiness. Its conceptual key resides in ensuring that PSM's action is free of the power exercised by external agents, especially political or governmental ones. Beyond this premise, it is difficult to specify its definition due to the amplitude of conceptions detected. For instance, some laws specifically associate this component with informative content while others allude to the fulfilment of the overall tasks of PSM corporations. The last-mentioned, undoubtedly, provides greater added value and allows the linking of independence with another component, excellence.

Excellence. This component encompasses the greatest number of elements in its definition, all of them attached to work praxis. Excellence is embodied in quality, professionalism, leadership and surveillance. First, quality refers to the nature of the

broadcasted content in terms of its shape and background. Second, professionalism is a characteristic of the human capital of public broadcasters and refers to the motivation level and training of workers, but also to issues of professional ethics (e.g. confidentiality or commitment). Third, leadership is expressly mentioned in the regulations of eight countries, which decreases its importance. Finally, surveillance is present only in the Swedish case and alludes to the classical Laswellian function.

Universality. This component is made up of a double dimension. First, it refers to a technical issue: the requirement that the supply of audiovisual content is guaranteed for the entire geographical space. Second, it seeks to reach as many audiences as possible in terms of message decoding. Hence, it goes beyond the physical dimension and is built according to the structural conditions of citizens (in particular, economic conditions literacy or sensory capabilities). In terms of integration, its residual presence, in the case of German ARD broadcasters, which only refer to barrier-free accessibility to broadcasting, is highlighted as negative.

Citizen participation. We conceptualise this component according to its importance in shaping PSM in the current interactive digital context. Therefore, although it is absent from some regulations, PSM corporate literature does recognise its importance when linked to programming and the component of innovation because its emphasis is placed on citizens' right to participate in the process of the creation and broadcasting of content. Accordingly, within this component, the explicit mention of the participation of all social groups in programming plays a key role, in terms of representation but also regarding the configuration of social opinion.

Media literacy. This component is attached to the dissemination and promotion of knowledge, with a focus on the promotion of audiovisual culture. Moreover, in most regulations, it is associated with the social engagement component since it highlights the fact that PSM should facilitate the understanding of citizens concerning essential issues for social coexistence. Thus, media literacy adds to the already mentioned triple function a fourth task, counselling, which is defined as the intention to share knowledge and advise citizens on certain key issues in social and cultural development to facilitate their understanding of them.

Accountability. This component, decisive in the grey literature, includes a guarantee of transparency and economic efficiency—the control of public spending and an economic boost for the creative economies of the territories—but extends it with a sustainability strategy. This emerging proposal, which currently only appears in the German and Finnish cases, requires the design of production procedures that are more respectful of the environment and could become fundamental in the short run. The case of the Flemish regional operator is also highlighted, which conceives this component as a guarantee that PSM activity does not pose a threat to competition in the market.

Territorial cohesion. This component refers to forms of non-discrimination and the integration of the various social communities, with the aim of achieving a common identity cohesion that goes beyond the physical territorial borders. Thus, its main role is the social and cultural structuring of the territories. It pays special attention to the inclusion among its audience of communities that inhabit overseas territories (the French case) or reside abroad (diaspora). This component is especially considered in territorial spaces where the regions have broad legal powers (e.g. Spain or Germany).

Social justice. The understanding of this component depends on the context, but a general consensus is detected in the universal defence of human rights. A special focus in regulation is identified regarding the issue of gender equality and the protection of victims of any type of violence – with the explicit mention, in some cases, of male violence. Likewise, it is common to bring up the protection of individual rights, such as the right to privacy or the principle of the presumption of innocence. Despite its importance, it is striking that neither the British nor the Danish cases refer to it.

Cooperation. This component expressly mentions the development of business strategies involving institutions or other broadcasting organisations and audiovisual enterprises. Cooperation is particularly relevant in the case of the public services offered by regional PSM in Spain and Germany. The role of these operators as economic drivers of the audio-visual industries in their territories is highlighted as one of the main reasons for their existence. Moreover, in the German case, cooperation is also built on the idea of collaboration between Länder's public broadcasters.

Looking for a definition: From complex conceptualisation to dissenting views

From the common insight that the public value of PSM ‘implies a series of benefits’ (P6) and must ‘meet society’s needs’ (P14), our participants seem to be clear about what they expect from PSM. However, our findings highlight the difficulty in conceptualising this. As noted by Participant 2, ‘trying to objectify it is the crux of the matter’.

Consequently, the majority of the participants do not dare to propose a canonical definition of public value, although a consensus is identified mentioning that the systemic operating principle towards a definition should be ‘associate functions and values’ (P1).

The vast majority of our participants acknowledge that the definition ‘has to be linked to the degree of social utility’ (P10). Nonetheless, based on the list of components that were given to them for ranking, there is no agreement on how. This is demonstrated by the fact that only 73.3% ranked all the components given. Even among those who did so, there were comments on the breadth of the sample to be sorted ‘because many of them are interconnected’ (P2). This raises the question of grouping the components into a numerically smaller corpus with extended significance.

When it comes to ordering the proposed components, no clear pattern can be identified among our respondents. Moreover, they consider it inappropriate to make a hierarchical ranking of components ‘as it depends on the social, political and economic contexts of each media’ (P14). Participant 3 states that ‘it would be more interesting to make blocks of value’. Germane to this, it was suggested grouping them into three differentiated levels of importance: essential value, important value, and interesting value (from most to least relevant).

This observation encourages us to recognise that ordering by level rather than by ranking seems to be the most appropriate solution (Table 1). Thus, according to the experts, those components whose presence is preeminent in the leading positions of the ranking are considered essential. The components with important value are, of the remaining, those having the predominant presence up to position 8 of the ranking. The remaining ones are conceived as adding interesting value.

As in the case of regulation, diversity, especially linked to the issue of pluralism ‘or the broadcasting of contents that transmit the culture of a region’ (P6), is positioned as pre-

eminent by the participants. Excellence also stands out. In this case, experts are more concerned with the professionalism dimension than the general quality of the service or the leadership. Linked to this, independence is also considered essential, specially understood as the ‘non-intervention of the political power’ (P4) and the ‘guarantee of unbiased information’ (P10).

Table 1. Proposed composition of public service media’s (PSM’s) public value according to experts.

Essential value	Important value	Interesting value
Excellence Independence Diversity	Innovation Social justice Social engagement Citizen participation Accountability Universality	Media literacy Territorial cohesion Cooperation

It is noteworthy that in the context of the multiplatform society, innovation is not considered essential, even though it is at the top of the list of important components. In this regard, it is understood that it is crucial that PSM ‘adapts to the current demands of the public and also to new technologies and new forms of communication and digital inter- action’ (P13), linking it to citizen participation. Two components that are particularly important in the regulations but hardly considered a priority by the experts are social engagement and universality. However, during the focus group, several participants pointed out how the universality of access is key, especially with regard to information:

I think it’s essential to universalise access to information. We have forgotten about it, but we cannot speak of a free citizenship and a solid democratic system if access to information is not guaranteed. I’m referring to truthful, credible and trustworthy information, which can only be guaranteed by public services in a context of privately managed media that have become true echo chambers. (P4)

Moreover, it is also highlighted that although accountability is key for grey literature, experts do not prioritise it. However, this is in line with its scarce historical presence in European legislation. Our results also show the little relevance given to media literacy, despite the fact that several of the participants point out that PSM ‘should not lose their

main function of supporting the learning of citizens of any age' (P13). In the same vein, they echo new forms of digital consumption and their risks (e.g. disinformation and fish memory). Finally, regarding the components that are considered less relevant, there is an agreement in relegating territorial cohesion and cooperation to the last position. In the case of the latter, support for audiovisual production is curiously not considered a priority despite regulations refer to this dimension to legitimize PSM's mission.

Given this disparity, it should not be surprising that no single definition can be proposed for Europe as a whole. Participant 14 poses a metaphor to better understand it: 'if public value were a soup, its ingredients would be different depending on the social reality and the territorial priorities to be solved'. The key is to find the right recipe not only in terms of ingredients but also in terms of measurements since, as another participant points out, 'when talking about value, you can't leave one component out, because if one fails, then absolutely everything fails' (P15).

PSM distinctiveness in an unfavourable context: Non-competition, social commitment and continuous seasoning

As seen throughout our testimonies, there is general agreement in assuming that the distinctive mark of PSM has to be 'the services they provide to the citizen, compared to what the private media do' (P11). In Participant 14's words, 'because of the responsibilities that they have acquired and that they set themselves as objectives, PSM necessarily have to be different and complement the private offers'. Accordingly, another participant recognises 'seeing this differentiation with respect to the private media very attractive' (P5), mainly because the interests of the owners become decisive when offering value:

Public media offer distinctive values that are superior to those of private media. While the latter are beholden to their shareholders, the former are beholden to the citizens as a whole, who are the ones paying for the public service. (P2)

Regarding European PSM, there is unanimity confirming that the existing broadcasters provide distinctive value. For instance, Participant 13 refers to the fact of 'covering topics that are considered fundamental for the whole society and that are not covered by

privately managed media’, while another participant mentions the case of VRT as ‘a means of accelerating the industrial ecosystem in which it is inserted’ (P14). Several experts also allude to the dangers of the current context of misinformation and PSM’s role as guarantors of credibility. Thereon, there is a shared feeling of worried agreement that defining public value ‘is even more necessary than before’ (P2) in the online multi-platform context. As reflected on by another expert, this is paramount:

Thinking in terms of conventional audiovisual and the traditional value of conventional audio-visual incapacitates us. New realities must be put on the table, such as the role of digital public audiovisual media in e-governance. (P1)

Echoing this perspective, Participant 3 explains that ‘in the digital society scenario, there are new attributes and values that must be taken into account’. In this vein, another participant confirms that ‘PSM public value is still necessary and interesting but needs to be totally rethought’ (P15). However, as a rule of thumb, most experts consider that its components should not change, even if the context changes: ‘what must be done is to incorporate other new ones that are additional to those that are traditional’ (P7). If we return to the culinary metaphor previously mentioned, this updating is understood as a continuous seasoning, depending on the contexts.

Participant 1, for instance, believes that public value ‘must be adapted, for example, to new forms of citizen participation’, but he also alerts us to the fact that these forms involve some ethical issues referring to the privacy of citizens: ‘These new control procedures and new metrics are sometimes extraordinarily aggressive, not to say that they directly collide with the concept of citizenship’. Another participant clarifies that ‘public televisions, such as the Swedish one, do not accept collecting data from their users’ (P14).

Universality must also be rethought as a priority, not only in terms of technological access but also in terms of the structural gap brought about by both the normalisation of payment business models and the possibilities of personalisation. Here, again, the ethical dilemma of data collection arises, and Participant 15 claims that ‘artificial intelligence must be at the service of PSM public value’. This participant also points out the need to articulate supranational collaboration to compete with the GAFAM’s (Google-Alphabet-, Amazon, Facebook -Meta-, Apple and Microsoft) power and warns

of the danger of blurring PSM's brands when sharing their contents throughout external platforms, such as YouTube.

Overall, our participants agree that the redefinition of PSM's public value must be based on social commitment: 'In the end, what's at stake is our status as citizens' (P1). Hence, this commitment should govern the public organisation as a whole. As illustrated by Participant 12, 'we should not only think of public value as the end result of management, but also as an expression of organisational culture', and this conception 'must be transferred to society' (P10), which is why communication is key. As Participant 2 complains, 'there's no good management nor is there good communication from PSM on how the service is being provided'. He goes on to explain that, at the same time, 'private media manage communication very well, investing a lot of money and often selling themselves as the public service that they are not'. This need to communicate their value becomes especially relevant in a context where the financing of PSM is being questioned, which means 'a huge risk' (P8). In this regard, another expert concludes:

If the value of PSM and what their role is in an ecosystem in which there are multiple channels of access to information are not well defined, decisions regarding financing can hardly be justified, debated and made. (P9)

In addition to this challenge, there is the requirement of developing international collaboration among media or implementing a corporate policy in line with the objectives set out in the 2030 Agenda, the action plan adopted by the United Nations to ensure a more sustainable world. However, the main claim, shared by all the participants, is the need to develop indicators related to the public value of PSM:

If it is not measured, we do not know what compliance is, and it is difficult to demonstrate to society the effort we are making with regard to public broadcasting, whether in a traditional context or in a digital one. (P12)

For this purpose, it is essential that supranational public policies setting standards to be shared internationally are adopted, whose priority is to 'encourage public service corporations to have the ability to compete in the digital space' (P14). As another participant rightly stated, 'if not, it is very difficult for a PSM organisation to survive in

a context where the rules of the game are dictated by the new intermediaries (i.e. the private platforms)' (P1).

Discussion and conclusions

This article aimed to shed light on a complex issue: the conceptualisation of the public value of PSM. Prior scholars have traditionally attempted to define the concept of public value from the perspectives of various areas of research (Gransow, 2018; Mazzucato, 2018; Moore, 1995; O'Flynn, 2007; Túnñez-López et al., 2021), but there is still a gap in this respect. As far as PSM organisations are concerned, the dynamic of a lack of agreement is repeated (Donders and Van den Bulck, 2016; EBU, 2012; Lowe and Martin, 2014; Moe and Van den Bulck, 2014). This lack of a unique definition is not entirely striking given both the diversity of perspectives on the conception of the public sphere and its links with the respective territorial space, in policy and market terms (Donders, 2021). Nonetheless, this gap, if already important in previous stages, becomes remarkably critical in the multiplatform context within which threats to public broadcasters have increased (Debrett, 2009; Martin, 2021). Accordingly, we provide two theoretical contributions to this line of enquiry.

First, our findings are in line with extant research, which suggests a particular difficulty in proposing a single definition. In this regard, we contribute with a proposal for a conceptualisation of PSM's public value based on its components. We believe that this is an important theoretical contribution based on the already mentioned perception that public value is like a soup made up of different ingredients, each one with a flavour. If one is missing, the soup neither tastes good nor nurtures. Therefore, on the basis of the previous proposals, we identify a core of 12 components that are repeated in the corpus of legislation and grey literature analysed for this research. We come up with an extended conceptualisation compared to the previous ones.

On the one hand, our proposal allows sustainability over time since it conceives each component as a mutable value, adaptable to the contextual realities of each media. For this purpose, each component is broken down into different dimensions. For instance, diversity includes not only the question of cultural representation in public service contents but also that of promoting local production. Likewise, excellence is linked to

the quality of the content offered but also to the degree of professionalism of the workers, among other dimensions.

On the other hand, the components of PSM's public value are categorised according to their relevance. In this regard we propose a present-time categorisation of these components into three levels: (a) essential value, (b) important value and (c) interesting value. First, essential components include excellence, independence and diversity, all of which are relevant not only in European legislation and grey literature but also in prior research. Second, innovation, social justice, social engagement, citizen participation, accountability and universality are recognised as being important. We highlight the relegation of components directly linked to the digital reality in which PSM operate (such as innovation, citizen participation or universality) to second place. We consider that this fact evidences the debilities of PSM when adapting to the new media market reality dominated by the consumption trends implemented by technological platforms (i.e. multiscreen, personalisation and on demand). Something similar happens with media literacy, which is included in the group of the least relevant components despite the fact that, contradictorily, experts point out that it is crucial in the fight against the prevailing disinformation. Finally, territorial cohesion and cooperation are also considered to be interesting components, as is the case revealed by both legislation and grey literature.

Beyond this, as a rule of thumb, our evidence also confirms that the global key of PSM's public value lies in its social utility, linked to the context in which each PSM operates, which will set the tone. Consequently, although we are aware of European PSM's diversity, which will inevitably modify the proposed hierarchy in particular contexts, this is the first step towards a tenable conceptualisation. We believe that it is important that both public policymakers and the PSM professionals themselves start from this premise in order to face the challenges of the future.

Our second contribution lies in the examination of how PSM's public value has to face the challenges of the multiplatform media context. In this regard, our study agrees that PSM's value is distinctive with respect to private media. A commitment to citizenship, regional economic promotion and the guarantee of credibility are highlighted as key factors. Furthermore, our findings emphasise that, in a context in which the above aspects are threatened, defining and applying public value is more important than

before. Unfortunately, PSM organisations are not sufficiently prepared. On this basis, the conceptualisation of PSM's public value must be adapted to new realities, always bearing in mind that the adaptation is constant.

Moreover, our evidence illustrates the need to think of public value not only as the ultimate management result, but also as an expression of the organisational culture of PSM. This last finding provides further support for the assumption we advocated throughout the manuscript: the urgent need for the development of a tenable conceptualisation.

In conclusion, our results are in line with previous studies that have consistently identified the definition problem as the main impediment to understanding the public value of PSM. We also underline the need to develop communication strategies to transmit this value to the public, which will undoubtedly legitimise European PSM. Accordingly, from the proposed conceptualisation, future research may consider further exploring the development of indicators that not only allow the public value to be computed objectively but also facilitate its understanding by civil society. Only if the latter is aware of the importance of European PSM as guarantors of the common good will their survival be guaranteed in the near future.

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Appendix A. Legislation regulating the activity of PSM broadcaster consulted for the analysis

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Appendix B. Corporative websites of PSM broadcasters consulted for the analysis

ARD (Germany): <https://www.ard.de>

BBC (United Kingdom): <https://www.bbc.com>

DR (Denmark): <http://www.dr.dk>

ERT (Greece): <https://www.ert.gr>

FR (France): <https://www.francetelevisions.fr>

NPO (Netherlands): <https://www.npostart.nl>

ORF (Austria): <https://orf.at>

SVT (Sweden): <https://www.svt.se>

RAI (Italy): <https://www.rai.it>

RTÉ (Ireland): <https://www.rte.ie>

RTP (Portugal): <https://www.rtp.pt>

RTVE (Spain): <https://www.rtve.es>

YLE (Finland): <https://yle.fi>

ZDF (Germany): <https://www.zdf.de>