

*Public
Broadcasting*

Why ? How ?



Public Broadcasting Why ? How ?

Neither commercial nor State-controlled,
public broadcasting's only raison
d'être is public service.

It is the public's broadcasting organization;
it speaks to everyone as a citizen.

Public broadcasters encourage access
to and participation in public life.

They develop knowledge,
broaden horizons and enable people
to better understand themselves by better understanding
the world an others.

WORLD RADIO AND TELEVISION COUNCIL

Foreword

The importance of public broadcasting is far from self-evident. It took several decades to find its place alongside entirely commercial media and media controlled by the State. Today the unique contribution of public broadcasting is no longer in doubt and well-known examples, such as the BBC, are universally acclaimed: public service plays an irreplaceable role in providing citizens with information, education and entertainment free of commercial, State or political influences.

This brochure presents in a simple and direct style an entirely up-to-date summary of the basic concepts relating to public service, which is vital to the functioning of democratic societies. Public service must enable each citizen to become a stakeholder in society, participating fully in the life of the community to which they belong and actively involved in its organization. Public service must be free from partisan or State pressure: it aims to serve all in the quest for the common good. It must preserve its independence while at the same time having its long-term financial resources guaranteed. With all its own advantages and problems, it must adapt not only to what are at times very rapid technological developments but also to the modernization of regulatory standards.

From its inception, UNESCO has been entrusted – as stated in its Constitution – with media issues. Freedom of expression, freedom of the press and the independence of the media have always been among its special fields of action. A series of regional declarations issued at seminars held during the last decade in Windhoek (1991), Alma Ata (1992), Santiago (1994), Sana'a (1996) and Sofia (1997) refocused attention on the importance of freedom of the press and a pluralistic media. The international conference on public broadcasting, held recently in Rabat (May 2000), is part of the same perspective.

The summary presented in this brochure thus fits logically into the framework of UNESCO's efforts to promote free and independent media throughout the world and to foster the development of public service broadcasting which is genuinely in the service of the communities that it serves.

Claude Ondobo
Deputy Assistant Director General and
Director of Communication Development Division

Foreword

Organizations and persons devoted to the promotion of public service broadcasting throughout the world, especially in developing countries, often ask the World Radio and Television Council for an explanatory document.

Much has been written about public service broadcasting – books, essays, conference reports, legislation – but a clear, practical definition of this type of institution seems to be hard to come by, although models have existed in many countries of the world for the past seventy years.

At the request of the WRTVC, the Centre d'études sur les médias, affiliated to Quebec City's Laval University, undertook the preparation of a document we publish in cooperation with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

We wish to thank Messrs. Dave Atkinson, Researcher at the Centre d'études sur les médias, and Florian Sauvageau, Laval University Professor and Director of the Centre, for their cooperation, as well as Gaétan Lapointe, Director of International Relations, French Television, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

We also wish to thank the Société suisse de Radiodiffusion et Télévision and the Hosobunka Foundation for their support of this project.

Pierre Juneau
President of the World Radio and Television Council

Contents

Why public broadcasting ?	6
I. Public broadcasting, an original voice: background.....	9
II. Understanding public broadcasting	11
A. Principles	11
B. Mandate and missions.....	13
C. Financing	14
III. What programming for public broadcasting ?	17
A. Unbiased, enlightening information	17
B. General interest and service programming	18
C. Programs that leave their mark	18
D. In-house production	19
E. National content	20
IV. Reconciling freedom and responsibility	21
A. Organization of public broadcasting	21
B. Accountability.....	22
C. Evaluation	24
By way of conclusion: Public broadcasting in the digital era	27

Why public broadcasting?

Neither commercial nor State-controlled, public broadcasting's only *raison d'être* is public service. It is the public's broadcasting organization; it speaks to everyone as a citizen. Public broadcasters encourage access to and participation in public life. They develop knowledge, broaden horizons and enable people to better understand themselves by better understanding the world and others.

Public broadcasting is defined as a meeting place where all citizens are welcome and considered equals. It is an information and education tool, accessible to all and meant for all, whatever their social or economic status. Its mandate is not restricted to information and cultural development—public broadcasting must also appeal to the imagination, and entertain. But it does so with a concern for quality that distinguishes it from commercial broadcasting.

Because it is not subject to the dictates of profitability, public broadcasting must be daring and innovative, and take risks. And when it succeeds in developing outstanding genres or ideas, it can impose its high standards and set the tone for other broadcasters. For some, such as British author Anthony Smith, writing about the British Broadcasting Corporation—seen by many as the cradle of public broadcasting—it is so important that it has “probably been the greatest of the instruments of social democracy of the century”.¹

This paper attempts to explain the distinctive features of public broadcasting. It describes it by defining its underlying principles. From these principles flow specific missions, a particular mode of financing, distinct programming, and a specific relation with the “public.” The purpose of this paper, inspired by the abundant literature on the subject, is to present, concisely and in the space of a few pages, both the *raison d'être* of public broadcasting and its organizational model.

A historical review first enables us to place the public model by comparing it with the State and commercial models. This step is important to understand the reasons prevailing at the inception of public broadcasting. These reasons help us grasp the particular role still assigned to public broadcasters, despite the many changes that have marked the evolution of

¹ Anthony Smith, quoted by Graham Murdock and Peter Golding, “Common Markets: Corporate Ambitions and Communication Trends in the UK and Europe.” *The Journal of Media Economics*, Vol. 12, No. 2, 1999, p. 122.

broadcasting. The second part of the paper is devoted to the principles underlying public broadcasting and its mandate and financing. The subsequent sections deal with the programming, organization, accountability and evaluation of public broadcasting. In conclusion, we ponder the future of public broadcasting in the era of digitalization and audience fragmentation. Canadian Mark Starowicz considers the role of public broadcasting and its contribution to democratic life more important than ever. “Public broadcasting institutions,” he says, “are even more critical today as we see the disappearance of public space, and the atomization of audiences into special interest constituencies.”²

² Mark Starowicz, *The Great Media Shift. Television, Radio and Print In the 21st Century ; Speculations on the Impact of New Technologies*, First Annual Kesterton Lecture, School of Journalism and Communication, Carleton University, February 10th, 2000, p. 19.

I. Public broadcasting, an original voice: background

Who should be responsible for broadcasting? How should it be financed? What should be the State's role in this regard? What purpose should broadcasting serve? These were all issues raised in the early days of radio, when it was a new communication technique, little known and as yet unstructured. Three main models were developed, reflecting the societies that produced them, and in most cases still determine the evolution of broadcasting: the commercial model, the State model and public-service broadcasting, the latter born out of the weaknesses of the former two models and the concerns they raised, as well as the vision and the dreams some entertained for the new media of the day.

In the United States, after many debates, it was deemed that the public good would be better served if broadcasting were left in the hands of private entrepreneurs wishing to offer listeners, it was claimed, what they wanted to hear. The market principles governing other business sectors were generally applied to broadcasting. Supply and demand were expected to serve the interests of both the audience and private broadcasters. Advertising as a means of financing broadcasting, it was believed, ensured that private broadcasters would seek to meet public demand at all times—after all, the rate paid by advertisers for commercials was linked to the broadcaster's ability to reach the widest possible audience. And if the audience tuned in, it was assumed that the public was satisfied overall with the programs offered.

The commercial model, therefore, sprang from a strong belief in the ability of market mechanisms to respond to consumers' tastes, and an equally strong reluctance to let the State dominate a mass medium believed to have a great potential for information and influence. Direct State involvement in broadcasting was seen as dangerous.

This distrust of the State, like trust in market mechanisms, was not felt everywhere, however. In other countries, the State model developed in response to an interventionist concept of the role of broadcasting. Although the State could have exercised some control over private broadcasting, it was decided most often to entrust broadcasting to direct government responsibility. This centralized and monopolistic model of broadcasting rested on the notion that the State is justified in using the media for its own purpose. The State, in this context, was seen as the guarantor of public interest—an interest that the State itself defined.

The public-service model, while it stems from the vision some had for radio, was also based on mistrust: mistrust of the ability of market mechanisms to fulfill certain goals, and mistrust of the State's ability to achieve the same objectives, generally grouped under the broad expectations that still apply to public broadcasting today, that is, to inform, educate, and entertain. This vision of the role and importance of public broadcasting required a public organization, at the service of citizens, culture and democracy.

Some countries rejected the notion that public interest, in broadcasting, could be served by the interests of private entrepreneurs primarily looking for profit. At the same time, however, people were suspicious of the State in these countries. Because of broadcasting's social, cultural and political potential, it was felt that direct State involvement in a field related by and large to thought and expression was not desirable. This is generally the least obvious distinction between public and State broadcasting when the different models are compared. A basic notion reflecting this difference is well known in Great Britain, namely the "arm's-length" relationship between the State and the public broadcaster. Rather than putting broadcasting directly under State authority, it was decided to entrust it to an organization that would act in the public interest and enjoy sufficient independence to prevent political or bureaucratic interference.

The public-service model, then, was based on the idea that neither the market nor the State could adequately meet the public-service objectives of broadcasting and act in the public interest; indeed, it was felt that the public interest does not coincide either with private interests or the interests of the political powers that be.

These three models, developed in the early years of radio, carried on into the television era—with varying degrees of success. The commercial model has become dominant, while since the 1990s the State model has been losing ground. Public-service broadcasting, for its part, while faced with an increasingly commercial environment, is staying afloat. It remains widespread and the solution preferred by those concerned about the limits of commercial broadcasting.

II. Understanding public broadcasting

Public broadcasting rests on certain basic principles, defined in an era of general-interest media, long before the multiplication of channels and the era of specialization. These principles remain essential today and public broadcasting authorities must give them a meaning, reinterpret them in some way, in a world characterized by media fragmentation.

A. Principles

Universality, diversity and independence remain today, like yesterday, essential goals for public broadcasting. To these three principles must be added a fourth, particularly important when the public broadcaster exists side by side with commercial broadcasters: distinctiveness.

1. Universality

Public broadcasting must be accessible to every citizen throughout the country. This is a deeply egalitarian and democratic goal to the extent that it puts all citizens on the same footing, whatever their social status or income. It forces the public broadcaster to address the entire population and seek to be “used” by the largest possible number. This does not mean that public broadcasting should try to optimize its ratings at all times, as commercial broadcasting does, but rather that it should endeavour to make the whole of its programming accessible to the whole population. This does not merely involve technical accessibility, but ensuring that everyone can understand and follow its programming. As well as democratic, public broadcasting programming must be “popular,” not in the pejorative sense that some give this term, but in the sense that the public forum it provides should not be restricted to a minority. Thus, public broadcasting, while it should promote culture, should not become a ghetto constantly frequented by the same group of initiates. “The ghettoisation of public service broadcasting is a non-starter”³, as the 1996 report of the European Parliament Committee of Culture, Youth, Education, Sports and the Media (Tongue Report) clearly

³ Carole Tongue, *The Future of Public Service Television in a Multi-Channel Digital Age*, European Parliament Committee of Culture, Youth, Education, Sports and the Media, (adopted by the European Parliament, September 19, 1996), 1996, p. 9.

states, opposing the notion that public networks should broadcast only the type of programming scorned by the commercial sector.

2. Diversity

The service offered by public broadcasting should be diversified, in at least three ways: in terms of the genres of programs offered, the audiences targeted, and the subjects discussed. Public broadcasting must reflect the diversity of public interests by offering different types of programs, from newscasts to light programs. Some programs may be aimed at only part of the public, whose expectations are varied. In the end, public broadcasting should reach everyone, not through each program, but through all programs and their diversity. Finally, through the diversity of the subjects discussed, public broadcasting can also seek to respond to the varied interests of the public and so reflect the whole range of current issues in society. Diversity and universality are complementary in that producing programs intended sometimes for youth, sometimes for older people and sometimes for other groups ultimately means that public broadcasting appeals to all.

3. Independence

Public broadcasting is a forum where ideas should be expressed freely, where information, opinions and criticisms circulate. This is possible only if the independence—therefore, the freedom—of public broadcasting is maintained against commercial pressures or political influence. Later we will examine specific means for guaranteeing respect for this principle and ensuring the credibility of public broadcasting in the eyes of the public. Indeed, if the information provided by the public broadcaster were influenced by government, people would no longer believe in it. Likewise, if the public broadcaster's programming were designed for commercial ends, people would not understand why they are being asked to finance a service whose programs are not substantially different from the services provided by private broadcasting. This latter example, by the way, leads us to lay down another principle that is particularly important in countries where public broadcasting exists side by side with private commercial services.

4. Distinctiveness

Distinctiveness requires that the service offered by public broadcasting distinguish itself from that of other broadcasting services. In public-service programming—in the quality and particular character of its programs—the public must be able to identify what distinguishes this service from other services. It is not merely a matter of producing the type of programs other services are not interested in, aiming at audiences neglected by others, or dealing with subjects ignored by others. It is a matter of doing things differently, without excluding any genre. This principle must lead public broadcasters to innovate, create new slots, new genres, set the pace in the audiovisual world and pull other broadcasting networks in their wake.

B. Mandate and missions

Most public broadcasting services have a threefold mandate to inform, educate, and entertain. Many private broadcasting stations have also been offering information and entertainment programs for a long time. Should we conclude, then, like those who would restrict the public broadcaster to complementing the commercial sector, that the public broadcaster's sole responsibility today is to educate? Obviously not. This threefold mandate or these missions, for their true worth to be appreciated, must be understood within the general framework of the role and principles underlying public broadcasting. Public broadcasting, as mentioned earlier, must do things differently. We should also see related goals in these missions: Enabling citizens to be informed on a variety of subjects and to acquire new knowledge, always within the scope of interesting and attractive programming.

Depending on the country, particular missions may be entrusted to public broadcasting. One such mission, fairly frequent, is to strengthen national identity. This must be done cautiously. We should avoid assigning to the public broadcaster a polemical role that would undermine its credibility. Strengthen citizens' feelings of belonging, yes; propagate a particular or overly political concept of identity, no. The public broadcaster's independence must be assured at all times. In certain countries, like Australia, the Broadcasting Act specifically guarantees the public broadcaster's editorial independence.

It is also essential that the legislation, the charter or terms of reference defining the public broadcaster's mandate do so in general terms and avoid tying it down to instructions that are too detailed and exacting, so that programmers enjoy all the freedom necessary to their vital

independence. In the United Kingdom, for example, the Royal Charter sets out the BBC's objectives, internal organization and type of financing, while the agreement signed by the broadcaster and the minister responsible lays down its missions, in general terms, by emphasizing standards of quality, unbiased information, and diverse programming.

C. Financing

What type of financing should be favoured for public broadcasting? This question is important since the sources of financing may enhance or diminish the public broadcaster's ability to carry out its mandate and missions.

License fees—a tax linked to the ownership of receivers—have been the historical form of financing of public broadcasting. In principle, they create a direct relationship between the broadcaster and its public, the citizens. Consequently, license fees appear as the ideal form of financing. But, as European Audiovisual Observatory economist André Lange⁴ points out, while license fees remain the most widespread form of financing in Europe, at least, they are far from being the only one; none are levied in many countries, where public funds are instead allotted as subsidies. License fees are less widespread outside of Europe. In Canada and Australia, for instance, public broadcasting is financed out of the State's general funds. Indeed, a cursory examination of the various national situations shows a wide variety of situations; few countries rely on a single source of financing. The BBC and Japan's NHK, financed solely through license fees, are exceptions. We see more and more a mix of public and commercial financing. Thus, these past few years, many public television broadcasters have opened up to advertising or resorted to it more, created new subscriber services or launched wholly commercial activities to finance their main service.

Is reliance on commercial sources of financing acceptable for public broadcasting, considering it owes its existence to the desire to shelter this cultural sector from commercial pressures? The easiest answer perhaps, and also the most realistic, particularly as regards advertising income, is to say that it may be acceptable provided it does not interfere with the public-service obligations incumbent upon public broadcasting. But beyond a certain level, if the need for commercial financing becomes a dominant concern for the public broadcaster

⁴ André Lange, «Diversité et divergences dans le financement des organismes de radio-télévision de service public dans l'Union européenne» [Diversity and differences in the financing of public service broadcasters in the European Union], in *Communications & stratégies*, n° 35, 3e trimestre, 1999, p. 183-196.

and changes the nature of the programming, we should obviously be concerned. Others, to the contrary, warn against advertising phobia. A French Senate report points out that to the younger generation, the absence of advertising would seem suspicious, “a sign of something elitist, therefore boring, even square.”⁵ The report considers that advertising, “used in moderation,” prevents public networks from cutting themselves off from the rest of the audiovisual landscape, while showing their difference.

On the other hand, what may be harmful to public broadcasting is to be forced into a very competitive position and have to hustle for advertising revenue to ensure its survival. The temptation then is very strong to stray from public-service obligations and produce the same type of programming as private competitors. A detailed study commissioned by the BBC on the comparative situation of public broadcasters in 20 countries on four continents shows that “the higher the advertising figure as a proportion of total revenues, the less distinctive a public broadcaster is likely to be.”⁶ According to the same study, license fee financing, on the contrary, guarantees the public broadcaster the stable financial base it needs to plan, and also to take certain risks and devise more “distinctive” forms of programming.

The authors of this study have drawn from their research some characteristics that are essential to the financing of public broadcasting, if we want it to play the role intended by its designers:

- Financing must be substantial so that public broadcasting can be a counterweight to commercial services and not be confined to a marginal role.
- Financing must be independent from both commercial and political pressures; this is where licence fees come into their own; because of their automatic character, financing is not subject to the moods of government or economic fluctuations.
- Financing must be predictable; its stability and multi-year character must therefore be assured. If no mechanism guarantees the stability of public funding, for example, there is a

⁵ Sénat (France), L’audiovisuel public en danger. Rapport d’information fait au nom de la commission des Finances, du contrôle budgétaire et des comptes économiques de la Nation sur le financement de l’audiovisuel public [Public broadcasting at risk. Report on financing of public broadcasting] ; par Claude Belot, Paris, (Les rapports du Sénat, no 162), 1999-2000, p. 33, 36 et 37.

⁶ McKinsey & Company, Public Service Broadcasters Around The World. A McKinsey Report for the BBC, janvier 1999, p. 5.

real danger of seeing financing become a means of influencing or controlling the public broadcaster.

- Financing, finally, must be growing according to the broadcaster's costs, simple and equitable, in order to avoid political controversy. As the Tongue Report stresses, there is no perfect plan to finance public broadcasting. Nevertheless, we must insure that financing, like the mandate and missions entrusted to the public broadcaster, is in line with the principles underlying the existence of this broadcaster and, above all, guarantees its independence from the political and commercial pressures characteristic of State and commercial broadcasting.

III. What programming for public broadcasting?

What programming should public broadcasting offer? Of all the questions raised in this paper, this is probably the one that calls for the most nuances. We cannot ask all public broadcasters to adopt the same programming model. In television, for example, public broadcasters with substantial resources can produce expensive drama programs that others cannot afford. So the particular context of each public broadcaster demands that certain types of programs be given preference over others. For example, in a vast country inhabited by many different communities, there may be a need for more local or regional programs—a need that may not be felt in small countries. It is clear also that a distinction must be made between the public broadcaster's radio and television programs, since the resources required by production are not the same. Bearing in mind the principles linked to the very existence of public broadcasting and the threefold mission incumbent upon it—information, education and entertainment—this part of the paper seeks to clarify the question of public broadcasting programming.

A. Unbiased, enlightening information

Because of the status of public broadcasting, because it is financed by the public and intended to be at its service, expectations in the area of information are high and so are the requirements. Public broadcasters must provide information enabling listeners to form the fairest possible idea of events; if not objective, the information should at least be unbiased. Such information will allow the different viewpoints to be expressed and foster an enlightened understanding of current events. Between the frequent propaganda of State broadcasting and the often gratuitous polemics of some commercial broadcasting stations, public broadcasting must appeal to the audience's intelligence and understanding. The information broadcast by public broadcasting must be treated with a concern for in-depth explanation and examination to enlighten citizens on the issues at hand and, in so doing, enrich democratic life. It is often this ability to act as a reference in the area of information that brings the public to recognize the importance and role of public broadcasting, and identify with it.

B. General interest and service programming

For public broadcasting, information is not restricted to newscasts and public affairs programs; it extends to all programs enabling citizens to find out about different subjects of interest to them and to all those programs simply called “service programs” or “general interest programs,” which often deal with matters of current or practical interest to people. These programs, which address consumer or legal issues, give practical advice, discuss health issues, publicize community services, etc., make public broadcasting itself a service offered to the public. It is through such programs that the public broadcaster gets closer to people’s specific needs. In a certain way, with greater means and on a greater scale, public broadcasting must, according to needs, offer the kind of useful information that rural and community radio provide in part in many developing countries. Many of these radio stations were in fact set up for the explicit purpose of meeting hitherto unsatisfied development needs.

Community radio stations have multiplied in the past few decades. Neither commercial nor State-controlled, these radio or television stations, if not tied to any particular interests, make up a new element of and an original contribution to public broadcasting. Sensitive to the needs of the communities they serve, community media facilitate citizens’ access to the broadcasting system and their participation in public life. Their programming is perfectly consistent with the spirit of public broadcasting.

C. Programs that leave their mark

The relationship between culture and television is not simple, reflecting the bonds between the arts and communications. There is no single definition of culture. As Jacques Rigaud writes quite rightly, extolling the cultural mission of the audiovisual media is one thing, defining it in practical terms is another.⁷ French researcher Michel Souchon, who speaks of a “permanent misunderstanding,” cites the heritage culture sought by some, giving access to the great works of humankind, and the topical culture of others, enabling us to understand man and his world a little better.⁸

⁷ Jacques Rigaud, *Libre culture*, Paris, Gallimard (Le débat), 1990.

⁸ Michel Souchon, « Télévision et culture. Jalons et anecdotes pour servir à l’histoire d’un malentendu » [Television and culture. Some landmarks and anecdotes about a misunderstanding], in *Revue de l’Institut de sociologie*, Brussels, Université libre de Bruxelles, 1995/1-2, p. 165.

Rigaud distinguishes three levels of media action in the area of culture. Radio and television must promote the arts and culture, broadcast existing works and cultural products, and support the creation of original works: theatre, concerts, and also light music or variety programs. Public broadcasting, too, must feature entertainment programs intended for a wide public. But it must do so differently, distinguishing itself from commercial media. We can hope that public broadcasters' programs will leave their mark. It is possible to present game shows that are both informative and entertaining. Drama, even at a low budget, also provides an opportunity to deal with contemporary matters of interest to people; historical drama may serve to teach about the past and, therefore, enlighten the present. On the other hand, the educational mission of public broadcasting should not be exaggerated. We must bear in mind, says Jacques Rigaud, that the media, and television in particular, are not night courses.

D. In-house production

Public television cannot merely be a programmer. The particular ethics of public broadcasting demand that programs be designed with particular care. This requirement implies that the public broadcaster should also become involved in audiovisual production. While public broadcasters may buy or commission some programs, in-house production not only guarantees that programs will adequately meet the purpose of the broadcaster, but also ensures the perenniality of expertise—some would say a “culture” of creativity—particular to the public broadcaster. This is even truer of new public broadcasters, which must develop an identity, a “signature,” distinguishing them from other stations.

This approach, specific to public broadcasting, expresses itself partly in a concern for research, innovation and creativity. In-house production also makes it possible to establish the quality standards that public broadcasters must maintain and that will serve as a guide for other broadcasters. Rowland and Tracey describe this search for quality and the application of high standards by public television as follows: “From this perspective the nature of public broadcasting would be that any program offered, whatever the genres, should be the best of its kind, the best it can be.”⁹ Many public broadcasting organizations adopt internal policies that define the standards in the areas of information and programming. Public broadcasting should also ensure that the programs they commission are produced to the same criteria.

⁹ Willard D. Rowland Jr. and Michael Tracey, *Lessons from Abroad: A Preliminary Report on the Condition of Public Broadcasting in the United States and Elsewhere*, Joint meeting of the International Communication Association and the American Forum of the American University, Washington, D.C., May 27, 1993, p. 23.

E. National content

More than any other broadcasting programming, that of the public broadcaster must be national in content. This does not mean that foreign productions should be excluded; however, according to their role as a public forum, public broadcasters must first promote the expression of ideas, opinions and values current in the society where they operate. In this regard, it is of foremost importance to give priority to national programs. This general statement comes with one caveat, however. In some countries, there is a tendency to pay more attention to the programs' origin than to their content. We must guard against identifying quality with national content; they are not always synonymous!

This issue of national content obviously concerns television more than radio. With the exception of music, radio programs are in most cases national productions, when they are not regional or local. In television, the international program market is far more developed. In certain genres, like fiction, it is cheaper to purchase foreign programs than to produce one's own. However, the public broadcaster must ask itself whether these international dramas are essential to the programming it wants to offer and compatible with its missions. Most of the time, they should probably be considered complementary.

IV. Reconciling freedom and responsibility

How can the necessary independence of public broadcasting from government and its equally necessary accountability be reconciled? The question is complex. British researcher Nicholas Garnham sums up the matter as follows:

The search for an answer to the paradox of how to combine freedom for broadcasters from undesirable state control, while at the same time ensuring the necessary level of desirable political accountability. (...) In practice, of course, this circle cannot be squared, so that any structure and practice of accountability has to be a balance between the two.¹⁰

It is in this context that the arm's-length principle comes into its own and should serve as a guide for organizing the public broadcasting and its relationship with government.

A. Organization of public broadcasting

The first way of ensuring that public broadcasting has enough autonomy is to distinguish, in its administrative structure, between two levels of management: day-to-day business, on the one hand, and general policies and long-term decisions, on the other hand.

The board of directors is usually responsible for general policies. For example, it approves the budget and policies of the public broadcaster, and appoints its executive officers. The chief executive officer is responsible for the management of day-to-day business, whether it relates to human or material resources or programming decisions. To avoid political interference with the day-to-day affairs of public broadcasting, the CEO is accountable only to the board of directors. The latter usually reports on general activities to political authorities. In a certain way, the board of directors and its chairman act as a buffer between the CEO and the government. In Australia, the Board of Directors of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) even has an obligation to preserve the independence and integrity of the public broadcaster.

¹⁰ Nicolas Garnham, quoted in UNESCO, *Public Service Broadcasting : The Challenge of the Twenty-first Century*, Paris, UNESCO (Reports and Papers on Mass Communication, No. 111), 1997, p. 64.

If the appointments of public broadcasting officials were political, efforts to distinguish the roles of the chief executive officer and the board of directors would be pointless. If these appointments were made according to ideological affinities or as rewards to political friends, they would undermine the very credibility of public broadcasting. The managerial staff need to enjoy the utmost confidence of the public. Experience, broadcasting knowledge and the ability to act in the public interest are qualities required to occupy these positions in the public service. In some countries, mechanisms have been devised to guarantee the public broadcaster's independence and credibility. In Germany, for example, the boards of directors of the public broadcasters of the various Länder or states are appointed by the state's broadcasting council, made up mainly of non-government representatives of various political, religious, economic and cultural groups. The state's broadcasting council also elects the director of public broadcasting. In Great Britain, the chairman of the BBC and members of the board of directors, while appointed by the Prime Minister, themselves appoint the chief executive officer of the public broadcaster, who, for all practical purposes, manages the operations of the organization and is accountable only to the board for the day-to-day management of public broadcasting.

On the other hand, the length of mandates and terms of dismissal of public broadcasting officials need to be determined so as not to leave them at the mercy of government changes or the mood swings of politicians. The grounds for dismissing a board member or the chief executive officer must be set out very clearly to avoid any arbitrary dismissal.

All these measures can help public broadcasting maintain a degree of independence from government. Clearly, however, public broadcasters must also report to political authorities on their general activities. To whom and how?

B. Accountability

While it is difficult to conceive an ideal system applicable everywhere, because of the difference in political culture from one country to another, there are various means to provide public broadcasting with a degree of independence from government, while ensuring that it accounts for its actions. The goal is to make the relationship between public broadcasting and government as transparent as possible and discourage any attempt by government to interfere.

In theory, the public broadcaster should be accountable only to Parliament, not to the executive branch, at regular—usually annual—intervals. Public representatives should be able to evaluate, in the light of the annual report submitted by the public broadcaster, its general performance and use of public funds over that period. In practice, we know that in most cases, public broadcasting officials maintain contact with the executive branch, if only through representatives of the department responsible to Parliament for the public broadcaster. However, if these informal contacts become too frequent, they are contrary to the spirit of “arm’s-length management” and liable to undermine the credibility of public broadcasting.

Many countries also have a body responsible for regulating and supervising broadcasting activities. Given a mandate by the legislator to manage and supervise all or part of the broadcasting and telecommunications system, this body can also be another buffer between government and the public broadcaster. Indeed, it may be responsible for evaluating the public broadcaster’s fulfilment of its mandate. Such is the case in Canada, where the regulating body issues the public broadcaster’s licences and peppers its decisions with various comments on the way the public broadcaster should discharge its functions. Such is also the case in France, where the Conseil supérieur de l’audiovisuel evaluates, in its annual report, how the public networks have fulfilled the obligations incumbent upon them under the law or their terms of reference.

Some public broadcasters have also innovated these past few years to try and create closer bonds with their publics. In Canada, for example, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) has created the position of ombudsman. Citizens can thus make their viewpoints known to the ombudsman and submit their criticisms of the public broadcaster, in the journalistic field. It is a particularly interesting means for the public broadcaster to discharge its responsibility to the public.

A final remark is called for. We must avoid, above all, making the public broadcaster accountable to too many bodies. This could become embarrassing—instructions might contradict each other—and prompt the public broadcaster, in trying to satisfy everyone, to no longer account for anything.

C. Evaluation

As a rule, any judgment of the overall performance of the public broadcaster should take two elements into account: the fulfilment of its mandate and missions, on the one hand, and public satisfaction, on the other hand.

It goes without saying that the principles of universality, diversity and, where applicable, distinctiveness must be respected. A public broadcaster whose service is accessible only to a fraction of the population or which, over time, abandons certain segments of the public no longer respects its obligation to act as a public forum. Are certain audiences neglected by the public broadcaster? Does it offer all the different types of programs we would like to see offered by a public broadcaster: newscasts, public affairs programs, educational programs for youths or documentaries for the general public, cultural programs, variety shows? Are these featured in time slots that make it possible to reach the general public? In short, does the public broadcaster fulfil all its obligations in its programming?

We must design evaluation mechanisms for the public broadcaster suited to its obligations, which are not those of commercial broadcasters. This leads us to question ratings as a means of evaluation. While they are useful to set the rates to be paid by advertisers on commercial broadcasting stations, they are ill-suited for measuring the public broadcaster's success in fulfilling its mandates and missions. Because the public broadcaster's goal is not to attract the widest possible audience at all times, we cannot use this single tool to measure its audience. Ratings do not take into account, for example, the diversity of the public. Thus, a station may have high ratings, but attract the same audience at all times. While we ask public broadcasters to address the entire public, it is obvious that we cannot expect them to attract a majority of listeners or viewers for programs that are sometimes deliberately intended for only part of the public. The reach, that is, the number of viewers and listeners reached by public broadcasting in a given period, and the plurality of the audience are much more useful criteria for judging the public broadcaster's performance.

Finally, beyond ratings, we must be able to measure the public's satisfaction with public broadcasting. To the extent that public broadcasting manages to provide a service perceptibly different from other broadcasting offerings, it may be that, even for those who listen less to radio or watch less television, public broadcasting is perceived as different and necessary. It is important to evaluate the public's satisfaction with this service, because that satisfaction is in

the end what gives it legitimacy. Regular surveys are useful in this regard. Are people satisfied with the service they receive? Do they find that public radio and television are diversified enough? Do they trust the public broadcaster's information programs? Do they feel that the public broadcaster makes a particular effort to promote original creation, innovation in the genres and presentation of programs? Do people consider the public broadcaster necessary? We should know what people think about the ability of public broadcasting to carry out its general programming missions: information, education and entertainment. Finally, public and commercial broadcasting must be compared, to measure people's satisfaction with the public and private sectors.

**By way of conclusion:
Public broadcasting in the digital era**

The public broadcasting model has survived these past few years in an audiovisual universe otherwise dominated by commercial broadcasting. But the broadcasting world is changing quickly, very quickly. Will the multiplication of commercial services lead to audience fragmentation endangering general-interest public broadcasting, in that this fragmentation drives down ratings to such an extent that there is no longer any point in maintaining it? Should public broadcasters create specialty services, knowing their *raison d'être* is to serve the general public and not only particular audiences? Should they abandon certain types of programs, given the abundance of similar programs in these areas? Should they offer Internet services?

All these issues can finally be summed up in a single question: What is the place of public broadcasting in the digital era? The digital environment forces us to think not only of public broadcasting, but of all broadcasting, in a different light. The technical limits imposed on broadcasting in another era (the scarcity of frequencies for over-the-air broadcasting, in particular) no longer exist. Government intervention in broadcasting, therefore, can no longer be justified on technical grounds. To be sure, this raises questions about the future of regulation in this sector. It is already difficult to oblige commercial broadcasters to discharge certain public-service obligations. The convergence of broadcasting, telecommunications and Internet brought about by digitalization will in no way ease this situation, quite the contrary. In the field of telecommunications as on the Internet, we are instead seeing deregulation for the former and a reluctance to regulate the latter. If, as one might think, it is becoming increasingly difficult to regulate digital broadcasting services, the best way to ensure that public-service objectives are maintained will be the existence of a public body responsible for carrying out these missions.

The real questions that need to be asked, therefore, are the following: Does digitalization raise questions about the need for a universal service addressing people as citizens rather than consumers? Does digitalization eliminate the possibility of having broadcasting services different from the myriad commercial services on the market? Will it supersede the need for a public forum in which all are invited to take part, regardless of social status or purchasing power? Will the individualization of audiovisual consumption that digitalization permits and

the fragmentation it causes result in individuals losing interest in services that enable them to maintain a sense of belonging to a political community, to perceive themselves as citizens?

Unless we answer yes to all these questions, it is quite obvious that digitalization will not be an impediment to the maintenance of public broadcasting, quite the opposite. The democratic and egalitarian objectives inherent in it can still be invoked as justification. Thus, to the question of the future usefulness of public broadcasting, we can repeat Werner Rumphorst's answer:

[...] the future of public service broadcasting follows on from its mission, from its role within and for civil society. The more diversification and individualization of information sources there is, the more audiences become fragmented, the more important it will be to maintain at least one strong service which performs the function of a national point of reference and of national identification, and the role of the market place for opinion.¹¹

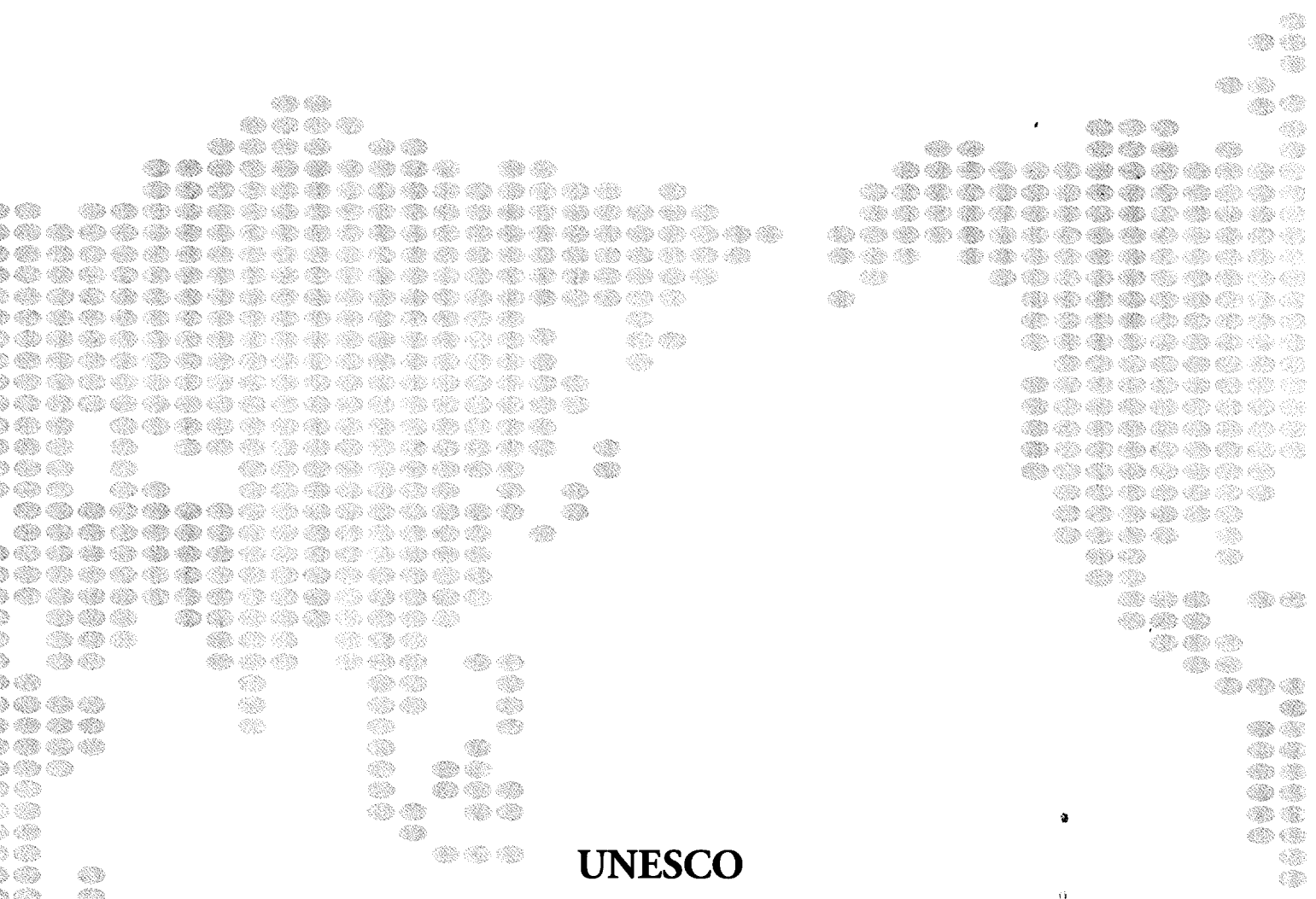
The challenge of the years to come, for public broadcasting, is to evolve and to adapt to the digital era the principles underlying its existence. Thus, the vast majority of public broadcasters already have a foothold in the world of specialty channels and Internet. What they need to do is to use these new technologies to improve and complement their public-service mission. They must proceed with caution, choosing sectors that follow logically from their *raison d'être*. In Germany, for example, public stations have created two theme channels to complement their basic offering: a news and documentary channel and a children's channel. These channels are fully consistent with a public-service mission.

On the other hand, the public broadcaster must not forget, as the French Senate Report points out, quoting sociologist Dominique Wolton, that its calling is really to create "social links." "Tomorrow," Wolton writes, "general-interest media, in a multimedia universe, interactive and cluttered with networks, will have an even more important role than yesterday, because they will be one of the few links in the individualist mass society.

¹¹ Werner Rumphorst, *Model Public Service Broadcasting Law with Introductory Note and Explanatory Comment*, 1998, p. 6, (unpublished).

The objective of general-interest television is to continue to share something in a strongly hierarchical, individualist society.”¹²

¹² Dominique Wolton, quoted in Sénat (France), *L’audiovisuel public en danger. Rapport d’information fait au nom de la commission des Finances, du contrôle budgétaire et des comptes économiques de la Nation sur le financement de l’audiovisuel public public* [Public broadcasting at risk. Report on financing of public broadcasting]; par Claude Belot, Paris, (Les rapports du Sénat, no 162), 1999-2000, p. 31.



UNESCO

**Sector of Communication and Information
Division of Communication Development**

1, rue Miollis - 75732 Paris Cedex 15

Phone : ++ 33 (0) 1 45 68 43 29

Fax : ++ 33 (0) 1 45 68 55 85

E-mail : c.ondobo@unesco.org

Conseil mondial de la Radiotélévision (CMRTV)

1400, boul. René-Lévesque Est, 10^e Étage
Montréal, (Québec)
Canada H2L 2M2

Phone : (514) 597-3902

Fax : (514) 597-4599

Courriel : cmrtv_wrtvc@radio-canada.ca