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'Public Service' - in a globalized digital landscape

National public service media in Britain as well as in other European countries are in the process of transformation. Current industry debates as well as scholarly approaches are focussing on the complex practicalities of the convergence from the 'logic' of broadcasting to the 'logic' of the dynamics of the advanced digital ecology. Of course there are nuances within both discussions, however, overall, it can be argued that both see the transformation mainly associated with new strategic imperatives, such as the production of multi screen content formats, the embeddedness of interactive content components, the creation of sites for non linear 'catch up' content archives (keyword: 'iplayer') and linkages with shared platforms of social media scapes. It is also argued that in order to maintain a national centrality of public service media – as the BBC's recent public value test (2015) reveals – innovative combinations of 'linear' and 'online only' content genres are required to target the emerging divide of generational specific communication practices. Without doubt these are important issues in the lens of public service broadcasters. However, in order to sustain and fully adopt the public service model in an increasingly dense 'fluid' globalized digital environment in the future, we need to begin the debate of 'bigger' questions to identify the requirements of national public service media in the new discursive scopes of public 'civic' communication. In other words, it is necessary to begin to assess public service no longer in the normative national parameter of territorial 'boundedness' but as a much needed civic space within today's sphere of globalized public communication.

The term 'public service' originates from the time of terrestrial national broadcasting of the early radio days in the 1920's. The national boundedness is to a large extent related to the limitations of antenna reach in the early broadcasting era. In addition, the notion of 'public' service is also rooted in the Habermasian public sphere model of deliberation among citizens as the key component of national public spheres. However, both paradigms are – strictly speaking - no longer sufficient for assessing the public 'service' in today's non-national, non-territorial connected publics. We live in the age of multi-directional discourse spheres of globalized 'threads.' These globally accessible 'threads' are dis-embedded from territorial 'boundedness'. Furthermore, our communicative world is no longer divided into 'domestic' and 'foreign' communication, or a sphere of inter- or even trans-national communicatve 'extensions' but rather it is a digital universe, a communicative 'matrix' of discursive interdependence accessible simultanelously from anywhere in the world with Internet access. Although nation-states will not disappear, national public communicative space is - if we like it or not - already increasingly disembedded from national territory, seamlessly streamed between servers and screens, shared by peer-to-peer networks, especially among young generations. They understand communicative spheres no longer as territorial but rather as subjective spatial configurations, as their personalized micro-network. We also need to realize that this communication sphere seemlessly amalgamates modern nation states as well as other society types, involving so called 'failed' states and authoritarian states. Debates about public service media have to acknowledge these fundamentally shifting axes of communication flows - where national public service is only one 'node' among many - to identify a new role for public service communication in such a sphere.

However, it is surprising that the severe paradigmatic consequences of these spheres of civic communication are rarely surfacing in debates of public service media. In fact, globalized public spheres have rarely been addressed in debates of the public remit. For example, even satellite communication which can be considered as a first important phase of the emerging globalized communication landscape which targeted specifically European countries in the early nineties has – also in scholarly debates - not been incorporated into the paradigmatic debate of public service media in the 1990's. Instead, debates of satellite communication have mainly centered upon the launch of public service satellite channels, such

as 'Euronews' and ARTE (a bilateral German/French channel). However, the enlarged communication sphere, enabled by satellite footprints has not led to a revision of public service terrains. It is interesting to note that satellite communication remained on the periphery in the assessment of national public spheres despite the fact that thousands of radio and television channels in multiple languages, ranging from Ukrainian, Russian, Portuguese, French, Arabic, to Chinese, Albanian, Croatian, Korean and to English, simultaneously accessible in Europe as well as North Africa and the Middle East and have created a shared communication universe across these regions. Despite the reality of multi-cultural societies in European countries, and despite such a new dynamic of civic communication, public service media remained to a large degree embedded in a normatively defined national public sphere.

The need to at least enquestion the normative alignment to national imperatives is now even more important. At a time where commercial corporations, such as Google and Facebook constitute worldwide monopolies as new types of content provider and producer of new civic communication landscapes, we need to more fundamentally debate new terrains of 'public service'. These multilevel networks no longer operate in the realm of content and 'information' but – one could argue - provide 'public service' knowledge in completely new areas from 'web search', to virtual libraries to new areas of public service, such as navigation.

In addition, today's transnational terrain public 'reasoning' is situated within - and magnified - through a transnationally available spectrum of choices, loyalties and political alliances. Not only is it possible to engage with digital activism from almost anywhere with Internet access but this spectrum has become more 'horizontally' subtle: I can live in Australia, vote in Germany, follow by the minute on news resources from the US, watch streaming television from Kenya and engage in 'live' debates about saving the Amazon rain forest with NGO's in South America. These are the new geographies of public 'horizons' which are – and this is important to realize - no longer central to the democratic nation-state, they are also no longer central to other societies ! It is a shift towards a subjective axis determining and selecting engagement in a globalized interdependent public debate of chosen networked formations which has implications on deliberation and legitimacy – again - in a geographically 'horizontal' spectrum: in a way it is the new calibration of 'polis' and 'demos: 'my vote contributes to the election outcome in Germany, I take on roles in climate change communities in Australia which are no longer informed by local knowledge or the climate change agenda of national media or but rather by subjective public horizons.

It might be necessary to liberate the normative understanding of public service also from the nationally oriented 'broadcasting' sphere and begin a debate not mainly about the strategic alignment of content along the parameter of digital platforms but we need to begin to revise the entire public service remit in view of the needs of citizens communicating in the worldwide digital ecology. We require a new open debate of public service 'outside the box' and the national 'container' model in order to identify new public service approaches, for example to complement the corporate structures of 'web search' and social media communication.

Based on this discussion, it is not surprsing that the BBC's public remit is still embedded in a bounded conception of the nation. For example one aim of the BBC's remit is to sustain citizenship and civil society. However, given today's networked structures of communication, citizenship is also perceived as global citizenship, for example, vis-a-vis worldwide risks and conflicts and – in consequence – relates to not only national responsibilities rather to new responsibilities in a global civil society. The remit's aim to represent 'the UK, its nations, regions and communities' is also challenged as communication no longer relates to 'bounded' content but is embedded in individually produced networks which no longer 'bounded' but 'fluid'. Collective identity is no longer understood as a 'representation' but is 'shared' within subjectively chosen communities.

A third example is the BBC's aim of bringing 'the UK' to 'the world' and 'the world' to the UK. This aim assumes a dichotomy which no longer exists. As Saskia Sassen has pointed already a decade ago, the nation constitutes the "the site" of globalization and 'the global' and the national' are conceptually no longer mutually exclusive categories as globalization processes "take place deep inside territories" which are "largely" constructed "in national terms" (Sassen, 2006). So it might be necessary to refine the 'national outlook' within the dynamic spheres of globalized digital ecology.

In order to rethink public service in this ecology, it might be necessary to take a new approach. The Australian Media and Communication Authority (ACMA) has created a new paradigm for media regulation which moves away from the centrality of media towards the centrality of the citizen, embedded in chosen networks of communication. This paradigm is called 'the connected citizen'.

In contexts of public service media, we might also have to move away from the media/broadcasting/online/offline centrality towards towards a centrality of civic discourse spheres. A discourse centrality might open up new roles for public service. Within such a model, public service could provide a civic topography in the larger digital ecology, provide public agency, such as spaces for 'actors', spaces as critical 'reflector' of discourse or of linking debates as 'interlocutor' (Volkmer, 2014). Although this might seem a glimpse into the future - it is important to begin the debate !

References:

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