



## Lab 11 – Can democracy survive public service media?

*Sponsored by the European Broadcasting Union*

*Moderator:*

Mr Matjaz GRUDEN, Director of Policy Planning, Council of Europe

*Initiatives:*

BBC's coverage of Brexit campaign by Mr Richard SAMBROOK, professor of journalism at Cardiff University, former BBC director of news (United Kingdom)

Poland's control of the public broadcast media by Mr Stanislaw JEDRZEJEWSKI, professor at Kozminski University, former vice-chairman of European Broadcasters Union Radio Committee (Poland)

*Discussants:*

Mr Jean-Paul PHILIPPOT, President of the European Broadcasting Union, administrator-general of the Radio Télévision Belge de la Communauté Française (RTBF), (Belgium)

Ms Uduak AMIMO, Journalist, TV host of "Cheche", Citizen TV, (Kenya)

Mr José CEPEDA GARCÍA DE LEÓN, Member of Parliament and Member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, (Spain)

## The lab in brief

Media has become one of the main battlefields between populism and democracy. Public Service Media (PSM), that are still the most relevant source of information in many European countries, are more and more exposed to pressure by their governments at times when their independence is crucial for effective fact-based information and for debunking the growing impact of the so-called “fake news”.

The lab analysed the two-way relationship between public service media and populism: how populism affects public service media and, vice-versa, how PSM can counter populist strategies and propaganda.

Most of populist parties claim to have exclusive representation of the will of “the people”. In their name, they delegitimise other groups and refuse any democratic control. Critical and better media can counterweight these arguments. PSM are, therefore, one important safeguard for democracy. In fact, PSM were created and developed across Western Europe when democracy became the norm after the World War II.

Populists oppose PSM because they believe that diversity is a problem for society, while PSM have portrayed more balanced views on the matter. Journalists and mediators are a target for populism which tries to dismantle checks and balances once at power. Today, PSM’s main challenge is to engage with the citizens.

Two years ago EBU carried out a study on correlations between PSM and other factors and ascertained these linkages:

- Higher trust in media is usually accompanied by more freedom of press.
- More sustainable PSM funding is linked to higher freedom of press.
- The bigger the market share for PSM, the lower the penetration of extreme right parties.
- The higher the market share of PSM, the lower the corruption.

## About the initiatives

### The British example

The campaign on the British referendum was very polarised with a country divided almost exactly down the middle on a question of huge social significance.

The country’s national PSM, the BBC had a clear responsibility to report the campaign impartially, but with no agreement on the “facts” of leaving the EU – how could this be achieved? Delivering trusted impartial information in this climate requires complex and nuanced management – not simple or easy balance. BBC made significant efforts but some judged them still insufficient.

### The Polish example

Since December 2015, the new government and the parliamentary majority initiated a series of actions aimed at placing PSM under its close control. A provisional law of December 2015 gave the minister of state treasury the power to appoint and dismiss PSM’s managers. Another law transferred the competencies to a new body: the National Media Council, financially dependent on the Parliament’s Chancellery, and where members’ nomination follows a controversial procedure in absence of any public scrutiny. There was also a big staff shuffle with 232 journalists and editors who have been fired from Polish PSM. The main effects of this reform have been lack of diversity in opinions, less pluralism and less impartiality.

The Polish case is not isolated. The same issues affect other countries, as for example the Netherlands, where various governments have curtailed the independence of PSM through systematic budgetary reductions. Hungary and Greece have even closed some of their national media, cutting their budgets and reopening them with fewer resources.

## Key points issues by the debate

The role of Public Service Media nowadays. Non-traditional actors populate today the media landscape. Internet has become one of the main sources of information. As a growing part of the public debate takes place in new media outlets, politicians invest more time and resources on them. Populism uses social media to diffuse its own truth. Such scenario questions at the same time the role of PSM and the profile/profession of journalists. Who is a journalist today? What distinguishes journalists from those who simply insert data on line using the same technologies?

The rules of PSM are constantly challenged. Clear standards on quality journalism exist, but the challenge today is to make sure that these standards are respected and to find a way for PSM to adapt to an environment deeply changed by populism and to a declining demand for a journalism based on fact checking.

PSM still have a fundamental role in serving the public interest, spreading fact-based information and tackling any propaganda. It is the subjective perception and the manipulative use of the concept of public interest by populists that undermines this role. Fact checking is essential, just like shared validated data is. It is the duty of traditional media to check facts but they cannot do this job alone. The Internet Giants also have a clear responsibility in stopping fake news to spread.

Ethics and education in journalism. Governments can change over the time. The key point is which model of journalism will prevail and has to be followed over the time. Schools of journalism have been created and their students have been trained with clear ethical principles and codes of conduct for this profession. Diplomas certify who is a journalist, but is this sufficient in the present reality? Should journalists remain neutral when fundamental values are attacked, or do they have the moral and professional responsibility to be the activists and guardians of democratic values?

The funding challenge. In some countries, the funding system for PSM is at risk and in others it is very fragile and complex. There is growing criticism on paying the license fee for public service media, but people still affirm that they prefer to pay for quality media. How can the financing schemes of PSM be reinforced for general interest?

Cooperation between different countries. In some countries, journalists are in very critical situation and there are considerable threats to fact checking and impartiality. However, the Panama and Paradise Papers prove that transnational cooperation is possible and needs to be explored.

## Recommendations

### PRECONDITIONS TO BE INSURED:

- ✓ To reinforce the editorial independence and the financial sustainability of public service media broadcasters, also by strengthening the vigilance on the respect of the related standards.
- ✓ To reinforce the independence of the independent regulator for audiovisual media in accordance with the international standards on freedom of expression.
- ✓ To ensure full conformity of national law with international standards on freedom of expression, including the protection and promotion of pluralism and diversity.

### SHORT TERM SOLUTIONS:

- ✓ To counter the spread of deliberately misleading information and restore trust in journalism and media in general and PSM in particular, to promote trans-border cooperation (following ICIJ example), to reinforce the professionalism and recognition of journalists.
- ✓ To strengthen the cooperation between new distribution platforms and traditional media in the fight against fake news at European level and in supporting and promoting fact checking and evidence-based journalism (e.g. using tools such as Open data platform to verify news at European level, fact checking platforms lead by professional media and funded by intermediaries)
- ✓ To enhance the obligations of PSM for transparency of its editorial and policy's decision making process, by recreating a link of trust with the audience, especially in situation of crisis.
- ✓ To promote and preserve diversity, promoting trans-border cooperation on pooling resources, for investigative and bottom up journalism.
- ✓ To reinforce the professionalism of journalists and to ensure better remuneration for their work, to strengthen their autonomy in the newsroom.

### LONGTERM SOLUTIONS:

- ✓ To create links and bridges between PSM and educational systems towards a lifelong-learning experience, especially by strengthening and updating history knowledge and media literacy courses.
- ✓ To offer experiences that do not pass only through "hard news" but also through the other slots of programmes scheduled by national broadcasters.
- ✓ To promote slow news and constructive journalism vs. sensationalism and fast unverified news.
- ✓ To guarantee adequate financing of PSM in order to preserve its independence, by asking EU to verify and punish any eventual overfunding, to establish adequate and reverse mechanisms to measure and penalise any eventual underfunding (because it is a restriction of independence).
- ✓ Engage in and contribute to a broader discussion and progressive democratic response to populist attempts to redefine the European social and political models, including the notions of community and public interest (responding to identity politics, nationalism, nativism).