

Histories of Public Service Broadcasters on the Web

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Introduction: Histories of Public Service Broadcasters on the Web

Thematic Concerns

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An Invitation to Discussion

Histories of Public Service Broadcasters on the Web challenges members of its readership to rethink their existing ideas of public service broadcasting and of the World Wide Web. We offer this collection of histories as an open invitation to further discussion: for instance, we leave the definition of ‘public service broadcasting’ open. There have been many previous attempts to define ‘public service broadcasting’ (Broadcasting Research Unit, 1985; McKinsey & Company, 1999, p. 36), and, as Maureen Burns has argued elsewhere, such attempts at definition may limit the possibilities for rethinking public service broadcasters (PSBs) in an online environment (Burns, 2008, pp. 51–64). In the current volume we are more concerned with recognising difference and providing space for discussions than with affirming similarity. Similarly, the book lays no claim to representativeness nor comprehensiveness of nations, regions or regulatory frameworks. Instead we offer a number of probes into ways that organisations which understood themselves as PSBs actually developed web services.

Public Service Broadcasters and the Web

In the following chapters we analyse dynamics between the World Wide Web and PSBs in various parts of the world. Instead of regarding World Wide Web services as mere ‘add-ons’ to pre-existing television and radio services, *Histories*

of Public Service Broadcasters on the Web details actual instances where the technologies, practices and ethics of the World Wide Web melded and/or collided with the technologies, practices and ethics of public service broadcasting. In many cases such collisions altered the very organizations in which they occurred: in all cases the intersections were richly productive.

Histories of Public Service Broadcasters on the Web explores the ways that new questions were raised when public service broadcasting confronted the World Wide Web in particular, or the global digital media environment more generally. PSBs had to reimagine what it meant to be a PSB in a global digital environment. They confronted such questions as: How does one operate as a national organisation in a global environment? How does one justify the public costs of public service broadcasting when there is a proliferation of information and entertainment media available on the web? and: How does a broadcaster enter a pre-existing internet environment comprised of a variety of actors and with almost no regulation?

Although there were elements of public service ethics, ideals and principles that were a perfect fit for World Wide Web services, there were also ways that expectations of the internet were challenged by the intersections of the World Wide Web and PSBs. Notions of audience participation and engagement—long a goal of the public service broadcasting tradition—were similarly valued in World Wide Web environments. But intersections with PSBs raised some questions: Is the web really best described as a many-to-many medium in most instances? How can one create a many-to-many relationship in a public service environment? How does one give a voice to the users, and not only the broadcaster?

In the following chapters these questions are examined from a historical perspective. Both public service broadcasting and the internet had separate, diverse and long histories before they intersected—and they continue to develop separately afterwards. But what interests us in this volume is when and how the existing—but separate—histories of public service broadcasting and the internet interacted, from their first meetings onwards.

Despite much of the hype, the move from a broadcast world to a World Wide Web world was not as simple as the shift from a one-to-many communication environment to a many-to-many communication environment. Nor was the shift linear (from broadcasting to the World Wide Web). The diverse histories detailed in the following attest to the fact that this is a complex and dynamic field.

The interactions differed depending on a number of factors including the national setting: there were different histories of PSBs, different histories of the internet and different histories of their interactions in each country.

In the responses to our call for chapters we identified five recurring themes that crossed national boundaries, and it was these themes that we have used to structure the separate histories in this book. This structure enables us to openly explore the richness and variability of media systems, financing models, and theoretical perspectives without being limited by typologies.

Five Recurrent Themes

Differences in funding models and media contexts are so fundamental to PSBs that it is not (or is no longer) useful to refer to a norm, or even norms, to which specific broadcasters conform or from which they diverge. This is another reason that we group the following histories thematically rather than by nation or funding model. In this, the first foray into a field we foreground the *variability* and *complexity* of media contexts, regulatory frameworks, and finance models. *Histories of Public Service Broadcasters on the Web* is neither a summary of policy positions nor a direct intervention in present policy debates. We leave it to future scholars to schematise the many regulatory and policy approaches that are mentioned in this collection, and instead we offer separate histories, organized into five themes. Each chapter will focus on a particular theme, on the understanding that there are often overlaps between themes—ethical matters might arise in many chapters, as might the intersections between commercial and public service goals, for example.

What's New about Online Journalism?

Part One: 'What's New about Online News?' relates actual stories of online news practices at PSBs. Because PSBs often have less commercial pressure than other news services, there is also more opportunity to innovate and take risks. Some of those risks are successful and some not, but from each we might learn more about what is new about online news, and which previous practices can be successfully adapted and applied in a new environment.

In their chapter "When Public Service Is the Name of the Game: The Evolution of British and Spanish Public Service Broadcasters in Online Journalism" An Nguyen and Alberto García compare the online migration of PSBs with that of commercial news media to argue that the former's public service remit itself—based on a relative freedom from commercial concerns—was a crucial contributor to their remarkable and distinctive online news successes. The authors explore the key moments, decisions and strategies of two of the biggest European PSBs—the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and Radio Televisión Española (RTVE)—in the history of their online news operation. The BBC and RTVE have two very different funding models and had

two notions of what a PSB should be, and they therefore experienced quite opposite trajectories in the online news environment. Both, however, enjoyed quick successes after their launch, thanks to their underlying public service principles.

Einar Thorsen's chapter, "The Second Digital Wave: BBC News Online, Embedded Video and the iPlayer," focuses on some of the defining moments in the BBC's use of online video. The BBC had experimented with online audio and video since the mid-nineties, and was therefore well equipped for its second digital wave in 2006. Some early audience-produced online video helped to create both a drive for user generated content, and a change in the acceptance of its accepted form and aesthetics. These experiments received little public attention—perhaps because they resulted from individual innovation rather than specific corporate strategy. This chapter recognizes these early experiments, and considers how the Corporation's continued push into online video may influence distribution of public service broadcasting in the future.

Nikki Usher, Patricia Riley and Vikki Porter's "NPR Online: Public Service Communication at the Center of National Public Radio" examines the evolution of public service broadcasting online in the U.S. through an analysis of National Public Radio. The authors describe NPR's internal history of change, and then explore the news organization's efforts at creating the digital strategy that made NPR a pioneering news organization in the U.S. The chapter uses the idea of a "digital change capacity," according to which organizations may be change-ready through the combination of leadership, strategic communication, systems thinking, and an accountable culture.

Commercial vs Public

Part Two: 'Commercial vs Public' details histories of the tensions that exist across various registers between commercial and public pressures at different PSBs. This part of the book reiterates some of the commercial/public intersections that have been tried at various PSBs around the world, some of which have been successful and some which have not.

Maureen Burns' chapter, "Protecting the Brand: A History of ABC Online News—as-Commodity" is a history of the ways in which ABC news online has, since its inception, been a part of commercial strategies at the ABC. In the early nineties in Australia the new medium of the World Wide Web was hailed for its potential commercial possibilities as much as for its potential to engage with audiences in new ways. The web was also seen as one way to address a perception that the ABC was too centralised in Sydney and Melbourne. The launch of an online commercial news service in Brisbane was not successful in

its own right, but led to the highly successful ABC Online news, the content of which later came to be sold via the ABC's commercial division. Given this history, Maureen Burns asks: Is it time to reconsider whether the commercial/public service distinction remains a valuable way to think about PSBs?

Kenneth Murphy's "RTE Online: Public Objectives and Commercial Imperatives" offers an overview of the political, economic and institutional factors that shaped the development of RTE, i.e., in the period 1996–2007. It argues that underfunding, policy vacuums and commercialisation strategies all shaped the development of RTE's online content and services. These contexts have affected the design and content of RTE's website—privileging remediation and redistribution of broadcast content as a necessary strategic dynamic. It also argues that during this period, policy towards the public broadcaster placed pressure on RTE to support national solidarity in its output as a *quid pro quo* for its institutional survival. This narrowing of autonomy from the corporatist state affected RTE's ability to reflect pluralistic and critical aspects of the culture. This in turn was reflected in RTE's online output.

Hallvard Moe's chapter, "Between Public Service and Commercial Venture: The Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation on the Web 1994–2000," deals with tensions between public and commercial funding in the early development of web activities at the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK). When the NRK moved into the online world from the mid-1990s, it argued for the public service value of internet activities. However, late in 2000, the NRK introduced commercial banner advertisements on its publicly funded website. Although this change at NRK was atypical of PSBs internationally, the practice was to continue for a decade. The chapter scrutinizes the process behind the decision to use banner advertising.

A Perfect Match?

Part Three is 'A Perfect Match? Ideals, Policies and Practices of Public Service Broadcasters on the Web.' Many of the ethics, principles and practices of public service broadcasting were ideal for the World Wide Web environment. Issues of access and the need to address mass and niche audiences had long exercised PSBs. But the advent of the web also meant that PSBs had to rethink their remits. There were also consequences for how one could think about the World Wide Web. In this section the authors examine histories of the intersections between ethics and practices of public service broadcasting and the practices of the World Wide Web.

Niels Brügger's chapter is titled "The Idea of Public Service in the Early History of DR Online." One of the most interesting issues of the history of PSBs online is the intersection between the self-understanding of the PSB and