

Citizen Participation in Public Service Media: What It Really Means

Participación ciudadana en los medios de comunicación de servicio público: lo que realmente significa

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Palabras clave

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Abstract

In a converged media system where the public is more than ever in control of what, when and where to consume content, public service media must put citizen participation at the heart of their strategies. That means giving the audiences more control over funding of public media, increased participation of civil society in the governance of these media outlets and more meaningful involvement of citizens in their content production process. This paper summarizes recent trends in how

media companies in general engage with their audiences in the digital economy and explores opportunities and models of citizen participation in the public media of the future. The paper argues that without adjusting to the realities of the digital economy, which would mean first and foremost building audience centric networked platforms of content distribution, public service media will have a hard time to attract new followers, especially among younger audiences, and risk alienating their already declining audiences. In a media ecosystem populated by a growing number of content producers that are all fiercely competing to capture people's attention, public service media can gain a competitive edge only if they engage citizens in innovative, meaningful ways. Without the citizen participation element, they risk becoming a marginal player or, worse, a thing of the past.

Resumen

En un sistema de medios convergente donde el público tiene más que nunca el control de qué, cuándo y dónde consumir contenido, los medios de servicio público deben situar la participación ciudadana en el centro de sus estrategias. Eso significa dar a las audiencias un mayor control sobre la financiación de los medios públicos, una mayor participación de la sociedad civil en la gobernanza de estos medios y una participación más significativa de los ciudadanos en su proceso de producción de contenido. Esta investigación resume las tendencias recientes sobre cómo las empresas de medios en general se involucran con sus audiencias en la economía digital y explora oportunidades y modelos de participación ciudadana en los medios públicos del futuro. Este artículo sostiene que, sin ajustarse a las realidades de la economía digital, lo que significaría construir plataformas de distribución de contenido en red centradas en la audiencia, los medios de servicio público tendrán dificultades para atraer nuevos seguidores, especialmente entre las audiencias más jóvenes, y arriesgarse a alienar a sus audiencias ya en declive. En un ecosistema de medios poblado por un número creciente de productores de contenido que compiten ferozmente para captar la atención de la gente, los medios de servicio público pueden obtener una ventaja competitiva solo si involucran a los ciudadanos de maneras innovadoras y significativas. Sin el elemento de participación ciudadana, corren el riesgo de convertirse en un actor marginal o, peor aún, en algo del pasado.

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Audience participation: the backbone of digital economy

As the internet use has become ubiquitous and much of people's lives has moved online, the past two decades have fundamentally changed how people interact, communicate and get informed. In more recent years, algorithm based platforms have appeared and grown at a rapid pace, disrupting and forcing most of the industries to adjust to the new digital economy.

The media industry has been part of these massive shifts. Media outlets across the world have been struggling to adjust to the new realities, testing new business models and trying to find innovative ways to repurpose their online operations to better serve their audiences. Some of them, especially those that anticipated the changes early on, but also newly emerged players, managed to design business models and outreach formats that are fit for the digital age. Many others, slower in investing in and adopting the latest technologies, are lagging behind, losing their competitive edge and, with it, market share and revenue. Many of these players had to downsize their operations or fold altogether.

Of the many factors that have influenced the transition of all industries to the digital economy, one stands out as particularly important: audience participation.

Digitization has totally changed the relation between the providers of goods and services and their clients/customers/audiences. The media and communication field has been especially affected. The economic success of the world's technology behemoths, companies such as Facebook, Apple, Amazon and Google, has been fueled first and foremost by their ingeniousness in capturing audiences on their platforms. All these companies have channeled most of their energy and investments into building accessible, user friendly, technologically powerful platforms that people can use to access goods and services from anywhere in the world. A big part of their investments goes into garnering intimate knowledge about their audiences, information that is way more detailed than the usual demographic information media companies were used to. These audience data include information about people's attitudes, thoughts and tastes, real time data about places people visit or other people they have met or are going to meet as well as invaluable information about people's connections, be they friends, professional groups they belong to or serve, or other networks or affiliations.

It is the amount of data about their audiences (clients, customers, subscribers or followers) that makes companies competitive today. Access to or possession of such data not only helps companies improve their marketing and targeting strategies, but also provides them with essential material to develop intelligent machines that can automatize much of their interaction with audiences as well as that empowers them to cater to the needs and expectations of their audiences with a degree of anticipation and precision never seen before.

But to reach this level of audience related knowledge and be able to tailor products and services according to the needs and wants of the audience, one element is key: audience participation. Building such knowledge is practically impossible without the active participation of the audience (Malinen, 2015). Participation is the main concept that differentiates between the *old* web, based almost entirely on one way communication, similar to a certain extent to the analog media, and the «new» web, with social networking and engagement at its heart; Effing, Hillegersberg and Huibers, 2011).

One useful categorization to explain the social media phenomenon describes the various stages of user involvement in the online space as following: eEnabling (consisting of access given to citizens or users), eEngaging (a more advanced stage where people interact with the organization and engage in a dialogue) and eEmpowering (where citizens that are members of an online community are given responsibilities and tasks to substantively collaborate with the organization; Macintosh and Tambouris, 2009).

Through these forms of participation, social media have dramatically changed the role of the public from a passive observer and consumer of content to an active participant (Lee, Hosanagar and Nair, 2018) that becomes part of the content production process (Dolan, et al., 2019). It is this shift in the relation of users with the online platforms that, coupled with the enhanced power users have over content, has fundamentally altered the media consumption logic and the nature of communication.

Taking a step further, the understanding of the many shades of audience behavior is crucial in comprehending the audience participation dynamics in today's online communities, either the forms of active participation (creation, contribution and destruction of content) or passive participation (that can be mere consumption, dormancy and detachment; Dolan, Conduit and Fahy, 2016).

Behavior is also closely linked with motivation, which is probably the most useful piece of information in the online participation model. Knowing how users behave online is important, but even more useful to know is why they behave so. Using motivation as a criterion, social media content can be classified into rational content (that includes information, educational content and current events information), interactional (that includes exchanges of experiences, personal relations, interaction with the employers or customer relationship), and transactional (that involves remuneration, sales and promotions; Shahbaznezhad, Dolan and Rashidirad, 2021).

Gan explained the motivations driving participation in social media through four types of needs for gratification that include the hedonic gratification (the use of entertainment content), affection gratification (that satisfies the need to show appreciation for others), information gratification (associated with consumption of

news content), and social gratification (that encompasses the forms of engagement aimed at boosting the network of social connections; Gan, 2018). These forms of gratification appear in various combinations on different social media. YouTube, for example, meets three of them (information, hedonic and sometimes social; Haridakis and Hanson, 2009) Other social media meet fewer. But the aim of most social network platforms is to achieve all four as the best recipe for responding to users' needs. Another set of factors that boost the popularity of social media includes perceived mobility, security, connectedness, system and service quality, usefulness, attitude and flow experience (Kwon, Park and Kim, 2014).

All this audience data is the backbone that supports the participatory model sitting at the heart of today's digital economy. «When the reasons or motivations of participation are clearly known, better decisions can be made,» wrote Mahmood Laeeq Khan (Khan, 2017). Companies from almost any industry that use the digital chain to communicate with an audience, either small, close communities associated with a specific company or industry groups, or larger, mass communities built around and served by providers of services or goods, have fully embraced the participatory model. One extremely relevant example is Amazon, a global retail colossus, which has put user generated content at the center of its business. The body of information generated by its users in the form of reviews of products bought on the platform, opinions about books read via Amazon's reading devices or exchanges with other clients is vital to the company's business (Hazari, Bergiel and Sethna, 2017). The use of customer data coupled with the algorithmic personalization is the engine of Amazon's business model (Albrechtslund, 2020).

How do commercial media react?

To adjust to the digital logic, commercial media have also been forced to embrace the participatory model. In broadcasting, the largest influence was exerted by the video streaming service Netflix. From the early days of the transition to the digital economy, Netflix understood the importance of the on demand element. The company had anticipated the rules of the digital media economy where consumers of audiovisual content would progressively move away from linear broadcasting (programs and shows aired according to a time bound schedule created by broadcasters to fit the daily routine of its audience) to increasingly adjust to consumption patterns tailored to their own preferences.

Already in the late 1990s, the rise of the on demand business sounded the death knell of linear broadcasting. Understanding that, Netflix built a business model fully anchored by audience participation and networking. Focused on the hedonic gratification (Gan, 2018) as a base, Netflix has fully embraced the audience centric model that has also fueled the success of social media and other tech companies during the past two decades. Netflix's content, mostly drama and entertainment, is

produced, targeted and distributed according to a continuously improved algorithm that follows the audience's moves on the platform.

The Netflix model has been embraced by a growing streaming industry, which has in time badly eroded the profitability of the traditional broadcast sector. Platforms such as YouTube and Amazon Video (which offer audiovisual content) or Spotify (focused on music) have replicated the model, with great success, especially among young audiences many of whom were practically born with the on demand model. «They represent not only a new technological option for the distribution of content, but also new ways of financing and licensing that content, for acquiring audiences and communicating with them, for charging for content, and for the creation, categorisation, and consumption analysis of content,» wrote Fagerjord and Kueng (Fagerjord and Kueng, 2019).

As it is the case with other digital platforms, the Netflix model takes most of its power from the algorithms used to follow and map the audience preferences. The rise of what scholars called «algorithmic audience» (Burroughs, 2018) where on demand platforms use algorithms to build and organize audiences around viewed content and vice versa has been posing serious competition to traditional broadcasters, forcing many of them to follow suit and design similar models. In July 2020, the Comcast owned NBCUniversal group that runs the NBC television chain launched Peacock, its own on demand streaming service (Solsman, 2020). A few months earlier, HBO, an American owned pay television network, launched its own streaming service that was made available in dozens of countries worldwide (Leswing, 2020).

The model is also gradually being adopted elsewhere. Faced with increased competition from the global streaming services as well as internet websites, national broadcasters all over the world are racing to set their own on demand services in an attempt to protect their audience from the newly emerged competitors. Central European Media Enterprises (CME), an American owned broadcast group that has been operating for 25 years across Central and Eastern Europe, launched the on demand streaming service Voyo in 2011 (Winslow, 2011). On demand streaming services have also proliferated elsewhere. In 2019, Iflix, a Malaysia headquartered streaming company, was already operational in 26 countries across Africa, the Middle East and Asia (Russell, 2018).

The participatory model has also been consistently adopted in various forms by newspaper publishers. Faced with declining revenues as tech companies and many other online advertising intermediaries have eaten into their market share, over the course of the past decade print media companies have been beavering away over testing monetization models that would help them create a business model better fit for the digital times. Although there are still many media companies whose yearly revenues come mostly from advertising sales, the income generation model based on audience participation (meaning audience paying for news) seems to be the most

viable solution for the newspaper publishing industry. Although revenues from subscription cannot guarantee alone the sustainability of the print media (in most cases, media outlets need additional sources of revenue to remain profitable), the audience based financing models (be they subscriptions, memberships or various forms of paywall) seem to be the most viable business model for the publishing industry (Hansen and Goligoski, 2018). The Media Influence Matrix research project run by the Center for Media, Data & Society (CMDS) found subscription based models to also be the form of financing that ensures the highest resilience against media capture as well as the sustainability of media operations (Media Influence Matrix, 2017-2020).

How do public service media react?

But how do public media respond or should respond to these challenges? Commercially driven media companies offer lessons and models of user engagement in the digital sphere, but public service media, fundamentally different organizations, cannot follow these models to the full extent for a number of reasons.

First, public service media are funded from public funds, either governments subsidies or levies and fees (such as license fees that households are legally obliged to pay). Such fees for public service media are radically different from the subscription fees. In the case of subscription, the decision to pay for content lies entirely with the citizen who can choose from a range of media services. In the case of the license fee, the payment is officially required by authorities (sometimes it is attached to utility bills such as electricity).

The difference in funding stems from the different missions that commercial and public media have. Public service in the media is not a commercial product, but a universal service of guaranteed quality programming and news created for the general public. Hence, calls on public service media to adopt the Netflix model are totally out of place. Public service media is first and foremost about news and current affairs programming, as well as other types of less commercially attractive programs, which most streaming services do not offer. But although the Netflix model is totally unfit for them, public service media have to somehow adjust to the pay on demand model that represents the centerpiece of today's media ecosystem. Creating subscription based services to supplement their funding (or even as a way to subsidize their public service operation) could be one option. Unfortunately, public service media are slow in embracing such funding models. In 2019, there were 919 pay on demand services in the European Union, according to the European Audiovisual Observatory, a research outfit in Strasbourg. Of those, just 2% were owned by public service broadcasting organizations (O'Halloran, 2020).

Secondly, public media organizations are to a large extent government controlled outlets. State authorities have the power to appoint the governance structures of the public service media. This form of governance doesn't sit well with audiences

that seek free, politically unbiased content. To gain credibility, public service media need to find ways to involve civil society more in their governance as a way to reduce the political influence over their operations.

Finally, the structure of most public service media prevents these institutions from nimbly engaging with audiences. Most of these broadcasters were established last century as massive state run bureaucracies built on politically aligned hierarchies, a form of organization that hardly encourages innovation and experimentation. In contrast, most of the successful digital platforms born after 2000 were supply operations centered on audiences (users or members) who were given an active role on their platforms. Social media networks, including Facebook, Twitter or YouTube, have been entirely built on content created and shared by users. (How these platforms use that content today is a different story.) Amazon generates its funding from sales of goods and products, but the active participation of users on the platform, either passive, through search of products and services, or active, through reviews of used products and services, provides key data to Amazon to improve its service. Netflix generates much of its revenue through subscriptions paid for access to its movies, but the participation of users in viewing, reviewing and scoring content provides the company with an unmatched source of data to better communicate with their audiences and keep them on the platform.

Almost all digital platforms in any industry today, be they educational portals, online stores, event ticket sellers, medical facilities, travel booking platforms, fitness clubs, sports apps and many others, use the audience participation model to beef up their competitive edge: they strive to persuade people to sign up, participate in discussions and exchanges, use apps, make bookings, do anything that helps these platforms to better know their users and improve communication with them as a base for their commercial success.

Although public service media do not, cannot and should not follow to the letter the commercial logic of user engagement, their only chance to remain relevant (or, in many cases, even survive) is by developing their own audience centered networked platform based on a community gathered around the public service media values, principles and content.

Public service media have always professed their citizenry serving role. Statutes of public service media across the world proclaim the centrality of audience and pledge to put citizen participation at the heart of their strategy. However, very few of them meaningfully engage with citizens.

Citizen participation in public service media: three focus areas

Citizen participation has become the new mantra for strategists and managers working for public service media. Numerous scholarly articles have been devoted

to this topic in recent years. But in reality, examples of strong engagement between public service media and their audiences are still rare or weak.

Citizen participation in the media can be discursive (consisting of comments to news articles, blog and forum posts, or feedback submitted through various digital tools that allow users to express their opinion); and creative (consisting of active engagement by audiences with content, leading to user generated content; López-Cepeda, López-Golán and Rodríguez-Castro, 2019).

In recent years, public service media have focused on both discursive and creative citizen participation. Examples include photo sharing galleries hosted by public service media where people are invited to send their own images (in countries ranging from Spain to Finland to Denmark to Ireland to Estonia); blogs hosted by public service media such as RTVE in Spain, RAI in Italy, YLE in Finland, BBC in Britain, or BNT in Bulgaria; and online forums as we have seen on ARD in Germany, SVT in Sweden or RTVS in Slovenia. On top of all these types of citizen interaction, public service media have also boosted their presence on social networks. Most of them have an account on the main social media networks with a much larger following than five years ago (Sehl, Cornia and Nielsen, 2018).

However, in an environment populated by powerful, competitive digital media platforms where the fight for eyeballs and user participation is getting fiercer by the day, these forms of public participation are becoming insufficient, if not obsolete. Public service media especially have to find strategies to be closer to the public to justify their existence.

Many public service media organizations already have a strong basis to build on. Public service media have traditionally been the most trusted news outlets, particularly in Northern European countries where they have a long tradition of independence (Newman, et al., 2020). However, criticism of public service media, usually initiated by extremist, anti elitist groups, has been hurting the overall trust in public media in many countries. «[...] Though trust remains high, distrust of public service media is growing and is often higher than for many other news brands» (Newman, et al., 2020).

This erosion of trust is further proof of the gaping disconnect between public service media and its public, a sign that public service media need to reassess their citizen engagement strategies and adopt a more articulate approach to citizen participation that should take into account three principal areas: funding, governance and content.

Funding

The most common forms of funding public service media are government subsidies, public contributions (license fee) and commercial revenue. Government funding

consists of state budget allocations that must regularly be approved by various state authorities. The license fee, the most common form of public financing in public service media, is a regular financial contribution that all households in a country are legally obliged to make. Commercial funding consists of revenues generated through commercial activities, primarily advertising, sponsorship or product placement (Dragomir, 2018).

In most cases, public service media finance themselves through a combination of the three. Very rarely public service media fund their operations from one source of funding only. Exceptions include the BBC or the public service media in Germany that are financed mainly from license fee revenues. But even in those cases, broadcasters generate additional, albeit small, amounts of funding from other sources.

On top of these three sources of revenue, public service media generate additional revenues either through provision of services (transmitter maintenance, leasing facilities, rental of studio facilities) and content monetization (program royalties, merchandising and sale of goods, distribution of third party content for commission).

Along the years, all these funding models have come under critical scrutiny. State funding is often criticized because it is used by governments as a tool to control the editorial line of the public service media. Especially when state funding accounts for more than 50% of the outlet's total budget, the state is in a position to influence the editorial coverage of the outlet. In most of the countries where public service media are majority funded by the government, they operate almost as a government agency, fully aligned with the government's interests. In some cases, they even operate out of the headquarters of a ministry or other state body.

The disproportionate role of the government in funding the media, without accountability and oversight mechanisms that would prevent authorities from interfering with their editorial independence, poses significant threats to the independence of the media. In 15 countries ranging from Western Europe to Central Asia to Central and Eastern Europe to South Asia canvassed by the Media Influence Matrix, the government is by far the largest spender in the media. Most of this funding usually goes to the flagship state media (Nussipov, 2019; Holdis, 2019). State authorities channel money to media in three main forms: public funding for state administered media (such as revenues collected by state bodies from license fees or public media funds); state advertising (money spent on buying advertisements for state bodies or state owned companies) and state subsidies (direct allocations by government bodies to media outlets) (Dragomir, 2018).

When pulling in revenues from commercial activities (especially advertising) public service media are also criticized because advertising forces public service media to commercialize their content, transforming these outlets into increasingly commercial media outlets, which are often indistinguishable from their commercial competitors. Nevertheless, fewer and fewer public service media rely on advertising

to fund their operations either because legislation prevents them from carrying advertising, their programming is not commercially attractive for advertisers or the ad market is so fragmented and controlled by various tech intermediaries that public service media have a difficult time to access commercial funding.

Of all the funding models, it is the license fee, which is common primarily in Europe (Warner, 2019), that has been seen as the most appropriate form of financing public service media for two reasons: one, because it helps insulate the public service media from political pressures, and two, because it creates a bond with the audience, the license fee payers.

But although it was seen as the most stable form of funding for public service media, the license fee is becoming a less viable financial model in the digital economy. Determined according to ownership of a specific technical device (i.e. television set or any other gadget that can play audiovisual content) or imposed as a blanket taxation, license fee is becoming an obsolete form of funding media content in the digital economy context where people have full control over what content they choose to pay for. Hence, cases of citizens refusing to pay the license fee mostly for these reasons are multiplying (Dragomir, 2017).

Such trends are exploited by populist political groups, especially those allergic to independent, critical journalism, as well as private media outlets who have historically tried to uproot the public service media structures. In the U.K., for example, since late 2019, privately owned media have been relentlessly slamming the BBC, expressing their support for government plans to reform the British public service broadcaster. These plans include the decriminalization of the license fee non payment (which would mean that households not paying the license fee would not be prosecuted anymore). Although these plans have not been implemented yet, encouraged by the anti BBC campaigns, a total of 82,000 households ceased to pay the fee in the five months to March 2020. By September 2020, that figured trebled (Martin, 2020).

Thus, faced with repeated attacks from commercial media and dwindling audience support, public service media need to overhaul their financial model. Some of them are turning to the state to replace the revenue from license fee with state funding. That would hardly solve the problem because state funding is not stable and comes with numerous strings attached, as explained above, transforming these media into state controlled propaganda channels (Paun, 2016). Other public service media propose levies on technology companies or manufacturers of audiovisual devices as a source of funding, which could be a solution, but that depends on the size and competitiveness of the country's economy.

None of these models, however, will solve the longterm financial sustainability of public service media. They need to put the citizen at the center of their funding model. That means building a financing model based on financial contributions from citizens who should have more say over how that money is spent. Subscription

based models have been discussed (Waterson, 2019). However, they would rather pose threats to the integrity of the public service media than provide them with a solid financing base. A license fee based model is still attractive for most public service media, but it has to be tweaked to give more power to citizens over how this revenue is spent. Italian scholar Tiziano Bonini proposed the «civic crowdfunding» model where citizens will be able to decide in which programs they want to invest a quota (of 20%) of the license fee (Bonini, 2017). Not only that such a financing model would guarantee the financial stability of the broadcaster (as the revenue from the fee would still come to the media outlet) but it would also give citizens the choice to support the programs they enjoy, or need, the most.

In conclusion, the main shift that has to happen in the public media funding model is from a mass focused approach to a more individualistic consumption pattern where individual citizens are the main financial contributors and have at the same time the power to decide what programs their financial contribution (or at least part of it) should cover. A comparative analysis of public service media in 17 European countries found that «broadcasters with stronger public income achieve higher market shares, stronger relevance as an information source, and greater trust in independence from external constraints.» Substantial budget cuts or the abolition of public funding are likely to worsen the audience performance and dent into the relevance of the public service media, the study showed (Saurwein, Eberwein and Karmasin, 2019).

Failing to rebuild their operation on a solid public funding model will most likely further estrange the audiences of public service media and jeopardize the financial stability of these media.

Governance

In addition to funding, citizen participation in the governing of public service media is crucially important.

Numerous scholarly articles and NGO reports about the necessity to involve civil society organizations in the governance of public service media appeared already in the early 1990s as a raft of state media in the former communist countries of Eastern Europe were embarking on ambitious reforms to transform themselves into public service organizations. Calls for increased involvement of civil society in the governing structures of the then newly emerging public media were mainly a reaction to the excessive politicization of their governing structures as the post communist political class could not jettison its habit of treating public media as state controlled institutions.

In 1996, Polish scholar Karol Jakubowicz argued that public service media governance needed a more participatory model based on principles that are si-

milar to those of participatory democracy (Jakubowicz, 1996). The idea behind Jakubowicz's model, which he called «representative participatory communicative democracy» is that, because not every individual can actually broadcast, citizenry can be fairly represented in the public service media through the organizational structures of these media «to facilitate maximum participation by all members in influencing policies and decisions and fixing goals.» (Jakubowicz, 1996).

This idea has since been reinforced many times by various activist groups and even intergovernmental organizations (such as the Council of Europe). It is even more relevant today as public service media need the voice of citizens in their governing process to legitimize their public service role.

Nico Carpentier divides citizen participation in the media into content related participation, which refers to participation in the production of media output (see *the section Content below*) and structural participation, which refers to participation in the organizational decision making of a media outlet (Carpentier, 2011).

During the past decade we have seen attempts to involve civil society in the governing structures of public service media, mostly in Europe. For example, the boards of ARD and ZDF, Germany's public service media, are appointed according to a set of rules aimed at ensuring proportional representation. These governing boards consist of representatives of political parties, trade unions, business organizations, churches, universities, cultural institutions and NGOs (Rodríguez-Castro, Juanatey-Boga and Campos-Freire, 2017). Another example is the Dutch system, one of the most advanced forms of civic governance in the public service media. The broadcast time and resources of the Dutch public service system are distributed among broadcasting associations that represent the country's main religious and socio political groups (locally known as *pillars*). Their number was reduced to those that are truly representatives of the Dutch society (the largest ones) following a media reform package introduced by the government in 2016 (Hitters, 2018).

In Eastern Europe, there are only a few examples of public service media that involve civil society in its governance in a meaningful way. One of them is LRT, the public service broadcaster in Lithuania. Its supervisory body, the LRT Council, whose main tasks are to supervise the implementation of the LRT's mission and approve the annual budget of the broadcaster, consists of 12 members, four of whom come from civil society (Lithuanian Science Council, Lithuanian Education Council, Lithuanian Creative Artists Association and Lithuanian Bishops' Conference). Attempts in recent years by Lithuanian authorities to change this appointment model have been sharply criticized (LRT, 2018).

But in spite of such attempts to include civil society in the process of governing public service media, most of these bodies remain politicized, which is by far the main obstacle to improving the citizen participation in public media. A wider consultation process that would allow for a more inclusive citizen participation in de-

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cisions about the organization's personnel, programming, budget and other issues should complement the direct participation of civil society groups in the governing bodies of the public media to strengthen the dialogue with the citizens. While broadening the conversation with the public was rather difficult in the analog era, today's technology allows for much easier forms of interaction and communication.

Content

Finally, citizen participation in content production is equally important for a healthy, trustworthy relation between the public service media and their audience.

Faced with an extremely dynamic and competitive content production field, all media companies today are investing enormous resources into following, knowing and capturing audiences. Understanding how people perceive and react to content, namely their awareness of quality, their information needs and entertainment tastes, and their motivation to choose one content provider over another one, is essential for any media outlet. For the public service media, even more so as they already receive public resources to produce content.

Public service media are indeed increasingly engaging with their audiences in content production. Citizens are regularly chatting with reporters online, can submit feedback on online forums or comment on stories posted by media on social networks. In some countries, the cooperation between public service media and their audiences has been formalized to ensure that feedback from the public reaches program producers, journalists and the top management. Canal Once, a state funded public television broadcaster in Mexico has a Citizen Council whose main mission is to analyze the content on Canal Once and make recommendations to the management to improve the channel's editorial independence. IMER, Mexico's public radio broadcaster has a similar council whose main mission is to represent the civil society in IMER as a way to ensure the editorial independence of the station, citizen participation and the ideological, ethnic and cultural diversity in the 18 stations run by IMER.

While such formal structures of citizen participation are extremely important, public service media have to more vigorously and creatively involve citizens in its content production process. Using Carpentier's typology of participation, public service media have to move from the minimalist media participation (characterized by focus on control by media professionals, participation limited to access and interaction, and focus on a homogeneous audience) to the maximalist media participation (characterized by balancing control and participation, multidirectional participation, and focus on heterogeneity; Carpentier, 2011).

«In minimal forms, media professionals retain strong control over process and outcome, restricting participation to access and interaction, to the degree that one wonders whether the concept of participation is still appropriate. [...] In the maximalist forms, (professional) con-

trol and (popular) participation become more balanced, and attempts are made to maximize participation.» (Carpentier, 2011)

While there is an abundance of examples of minimalist citizen participation, maximalist forms of engagement are still rare in public service media. One such example is *En la brecha*, an interactive documentary about the gender gap in the working environment, produced by Spain's public broadcaster RTVE, which allowed women to join the platform and tell their stories. Another example is YLE, Finland's public broadcaster, which has created a section on its website where the public can send proposals of topics to be covered by the station. A similar initiative is SVT in Sweden, which receives proposals for documentaries from its viewers (López-Cepeda, López-Golán and Rodríguez-Castro, 2019).

Such forms of public engagement are salutary, but more proactive participation of citizens in content production is needed to create a true public service community that engages with content on a regular and informed basis. That could mean opening up the newsrooms and integrating the audiences into the decision making process related to content production, giving the public more space to interact with individual journalists or creating a space where the public can participate without any barriers in the flow of content produced by public service media, something akin to the communities formed around content distributed on social networks, with the difference that this space would be governed by public service media values.

Conclusions

The discussion about the need for more meaningful involvement of the citizens in public service media dates back to the 1990s when public media all over the world began to stress and boast about their role in serving the citizenry rather than slivers of audiences targeted according to commercially designed criteria. However, operating through massively bureaucratic and hierarchical organizations, with highly politicized governing structures, public service media have only rarely managed to create that close relation with their public.

But with the new technologies allowing people to communicate and interact in myriads of forms, the relation of media with its public has substantively changed during the past decade. The digital economy we live in is fully reliant on the participation of the public to thrive. People produce content and data that are essential for companies' competitiveness in almost any field today, even more so in the media, an industry whose very mission is to provide content to its users.

Although public service media cannot and should not blindly copy the audience centric models that drive successful commercial media, they have to import parts of these models but also develop their own citizen engagement mechanisms to

mix them into a meaningful citizen participation model whose main characteristics should be: financial reliance on citizens and participation of citizens in decisions about financing, governing and content strategies.

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