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**Guest editors of the special issue**

**"Regional Public Television in  
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## Introduction: Regional public television in the face of the digital society

### **Deterioration of public service broadcasting during the crisis**

Regional television stations have traditionally been successful through their important commitment to "latest news, culture, and institutional representation" (Olmo & Navarro, 2015). However, the financial and economic crisis of 2008 has had and continues to have remarkable consequences in the delivery of public service broadcasting, whose quality has significantly declined in recent years. This trend mainly affects the European continent, and more specifically southern Europe and Spain.

In the international context, extreme cases stand out, such as the closure of the Greek public service broadcasting (ERT) that occurred on 12<sup>th</sup> June 2013. Subsequently, it was reopened in May 2014 as NERIT and restored as ERT on 11<sup>th</sup> June 2015. This fact was officially related to the Greek State funding crisis and also to the failure of the Greek Government of Samaras in managing a necessary and profound structural broadcasting reform. This government also sought to control the broadcasting system from a political point of view. In Germany, the broadcasters that provide public service broadcasting—the ZDF Federal Channel, and the ARD channel, which includes regional public service broadcasting—are being forced to reduce their online offer due to the pressure of private operators, which threatens their business capacity (Lowe & Steemers, 2012).

Recently, even the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), the most respected public broadcaster at the international level, went through a process of revising its mission as a public service (the known BBC Charter Review, which takes place every ten years) and found that its structure and size were being threatened, because the current Conservative Government had proposed a significant budget constraint in order to obtain a considerable annual fee reduction. Initially, in July 2015, a great part of private media organizations of the United Kingdom were favourable to the intentions of the Tory Government, thus showing a clear alignment between political power, economic power, and the media. The strong response of the BBC, the academia, international organisations—such as the European Broadcasting Union (EBU)—and numerous citizens' associations against this drastic reform of the BBC forced a turn in the initial plans of David Cameron's government, whose budgetary adjustment seemed to be much lower than initially established.

For years, and despite their missions of providing public service (Suárez-Candel, 2012), public television stations have been the focus of non-Keynesian economists and most conservative, liberal, and socio-liberal politicians responsible for the management of public services. The economic crisis has been faced by means of an increasingly more

dramatic reduction of annual budgets of public television stations. These adjustments have hindered the quality of the programming of these services, as well as their ability to compete with private television. At the same time, older regional public television stations (TV3, EITB, TVG, Canal Sur, Telemadrid, RTVV) consist of large corporate structures—especially in the human resources section—that have hindered their adaptation to the current digital stage, characterised by fierce competition with private television stations, an almost infinite Internet offer, and an increasingly fragmented audience. In addition, these television stations have become less attractive to the most powerful advertisers, whose media planning has tended to be concentrated in little state-level support.

In Spain, public television stations have suffered dramatic budget cuts during the past five years as a result of the significant reduction in subsidies from public administrations and the drop in advertising revenues. However, the problems of public television stations in Spain do not end here. They face a serious reputation problem, which has a direct relationship with the loss of credibility of public service broadcasting in the eyes of the audiences. The Spanish Radio and Television Corporation (RTVE) has declined from being the broadcaster with the highest ratings in 2011 to being behind Antena 3, Telecinco, and La Sexta in 2016, i.e., the main private broadcasters nationwide. National Radio of Spain (RNE) has also lost about a million listeners during that period.

The situation of regional television stations is only slightly different. There is a twofold problem in all cases. On the one hand, there is a lack of adequate funding and, on the other, there is fragmentation and mutation of the audience, increasingly eager for online and on-demand content. This fact reduces the desired dimension of audiences and causes maladjustment to this new type of audience that looks for more personal content and interaction (Zallo, 2016: 108-127).

However, in the second aspect, private stations are not ahead regional public service media. On the contrary, they are behind, because the regional media explore more ways of relationships with the audience. On the other hand, with respect to funding, the gap is growing despite the budgetary turning point of public services, which has begun to occur in some communities (small increases in grants during 2015 and 2016, and also improvement in the advertising market). Therefore, an added factor should be found to explain the lack of interest of part of the population in public service broadcasting. The lack of independence from political power—which affects some broadcasters more than others—should be added to the fact that television programming is not adapted to what different audiences want. In short, there is a high degree of governmentalisation in some public service broadcasting systems.

In the context of crisis, in which basic services with more coverage and quality are claimed (health, education, and social services), citizens' perception about the role of public television is increasingly negative. This perception has been induced by private companies media that question the role of television stations and public service media, and regard them as an expense that our administrations cannot afford in the current context. In addition, it also reflects the apathy of the authorities in revaluing public services as intangibles, such as information or television programming. In this way, it is not surprising that this scenario has been considered by many as a kind of 'perfect storm', which has led to the discrediting of some public service broadcasters.

The most common formula that public television stations have adopted to cope with budget cuts during the last five years has been the outsourcing of production, i.e., the privatisation of a substantial part of their television programming. In Spain, there are some very notable examples of privatisation based on the modification of the General Law of Audiovisual Communication (6/2012 of 1<sup>st</sup> August) approved by the People's Party government.

The Murcia Public Broadcasting (7RM) has embraced the model of "indirect management" and is entirely managed by the Secuoya group that has subcontracted the services of several producers and local television stations of the region of Murcia. They produce up to 60% of content with a distinctly local nature. The management model of 7RM represents the most ambitious privatisation among those performed in the state of autonomies, surpassing the model of Aragón TV, a public service broadcasting which is also based on this outsourcing model. This public company maintains a minimum staff of public workers who manage information services and coordinate all the outsourced production. However, the company has a significant audience share of around 10%. The model of the Public Radio and Television of the Canary Islands (Law 13/2014 of 26<sup>th</sup> December) is similar, but with much lower results (5-6% of audience).

It is not usually heard that: (a) the lowering of production costs through "outsourcing" is mainly achieved by affecting the salaries of private producers workers; (b) the control of the purposes of public service is lost; and (c) quality depends on private business profitability.

Thus, the scenario of regional broadcasters is characterised by serious threats and weaknesses that create uncertainty. In this context, the closure of RTVV is a real milestone in the history of European public broadcasters that deserves to be studied, especially due to the number of lessons that this painful experience can provide to improve the Spanish media system.

### **The closure of RTVV: an example of malpractices and corruption**

The abrupt closure of the Valencian public service broadcasting was not caused by the financial inability to face the readmission of 1,200 dismissed workers by court conviction of the Valencian Community that nullified the Downsizing Plan in 2012. In that case, the cure was worse than the disease. Since the cessation of RTVV broadcasting on 29<sup>th</sup> November 2013 until the present time, the liquidation process has cost more than 250 million Euros. It is necessary to pay broadcasting rights to sports events and films, rental fee of the RTVV site in Alicante, maintenance of Burjassot headquarters, and maintenance of the RTVV documentary holdings each month. On the other hand, the Court of Justice and the Prosecutor's Office continue investigating numerous irregularities in the management of RTVV, especially during its 10 years of operation.

Almost three years after RTVV closure, it is clear that the end of public service broadcasting has had devastating effects on the Valencian audiovisual and communication sector. It has not only resulted in the loss of thousands of direct and indirect jobs, but has especially brought serious consequences for the Valencian society which, among other aspects, has been deprived of a public service that offered local information. It was an essential means of communication for the dissemination and promotion of the Valencian community, a fundamental instrument to restore the Valencian territory and identity. It was also crucial for the audiovisual industry and a communicative window to invigorate social and cultural activities. In short, the absence of RTVV underlines its "strategic relevance" (Soler & Marzal, 2015).

As explained by Bustamante (2015), "the closure of "Canal Nou" unambiguously illustrates the ultimate consequences of a public broadcaster being subject to systematic partisan manipulation and, by the same token, to an irrational and corrupt public service management".

In this way, RTVV represents the quasi-archetypal model of what the "malpractices" that any public service broadcasting should avoid would be, namely: the absolute lack of editorial independence, resulting from tight government control over the management of the television stations; the absence of programming with a content based on the principles

of ideological pluralism and cultural diversity; and the lack of adequate sustainable funding and the most elementary principles of transparency in management.

RTVV has been a sort of mirror—certainly distorting and hyperbolic—in which public service broadcasting companies should be reflected, because it makes us rethink the role of public media and the quality of our democracy in the current context.

In this aspect and in the Valencian case, it is worth mentioning the contribution of the Sectorial Committee of the Valencian Audiovisual System —platform integrated by entrepreneurs (producers), professionals, and representatives of universities— who claim the restitution of the public service broadcasting. It is also worth mentioning the contribution of the Committee of Communication Experts of Valencian Universities that have proposed a strategic plan for the Valencian audiovisual system (MESAV, 2016) and developed the basis for the renewal of the Valencian communication space and the restitution of public service broadcasting (CECUV, 2015). Those proposals have been central texts for the development of the new Law of the Regional Public Service Broadcasting. The approval of this project is scheduled for 2016 and it would create a new Valencian Media Corporation with the consequent opportunity to reconstruct the Valencian audiovisual system.

### **The digital context**

The decline that have occurred during this period in public support, the advertising market, and audiences represents a significant problem. The most determining factor in the medium term for the future of regional broadcasting systems is the answer to ongoing techno-social changes.

There are different factors that change the context of the whole communication system, including the regional broadcasting companies, namely:

- There is a general fragmentation phenomenon, with a globalisation that is hyper-concentrated in few platforms, and a social horizontalisation of the communications map that dispute the centrality of television stations, including the regional ones. The audiences of regional broadcasting companies have been decreasing as a consequence of the competition from new ways of entertainment, which are not only based on the dominant open and paid private television system, but also on the social media, peer communication, information commons, free culture, amateur videos (YouTube), and social networks.
- Access to the Internet is generalised with the use of screens (television, personal computer, smartphone, tablet) and the configuration of complementary virtual communities for the families or individual users in detriment of radio stations, newspapers, and traditional magazines which, on their part, react by means of digitalisation. The hybridisation between television and the Internet offers different opportunities (on-demand broadcast, television set as terminal equipment, on-demand streaming video in different formats, over the top videos) which combined with thematic television and the restructuring of all television stations by offers of payment, altogether, displace the role of open and regional television stations.
- Although at a later time, radio stations have also initiated a process of digital convergence that will force them to redefine their programming and combine the content with other textual and visual expressions. Online and on-demand radio programmes prone to interactivity and regionalism have also increased, with a further step beyond the capacity of ubiquity that they already had.
- There are cheap and effective online media systems and new preparation methods for news agendas, among them cyber-journalism and channels of citizen information, which emerge in response to the unsuitability of journalism and the

information provided to today's society. These new media systems gain ground and encourage conventional media to remedy the lack of professional, entrepreneurial, independent, and committed journalism, thus revealing that information has been controlled in many public media systems.

- Rather than expanding the demand for paid content and information, the fragmentation of services has currently accelerated the crisis of the press, and radio and television stations, including public companies. According to the Spanish National Institute of Statistics, the number of companies with "cinematographic, video, and television programmes" has decreased from 7,704 in 2009 to 6,952 in 2015.

### **Challenges and opportunities for regional broadcasting companies**

The new digital society poses some challenges that will characterise the future evolution of public service media. Firstly, digitalisation with its convergences (digital terrestrial television [DTT], Internet protocol television [IPTV], web environment, platforms, applications, mobile devices) and interactive applications should be seen as an opportunity for regional public services especially focused on culture, identity, and regionalism, since they can explore the advantages of all possible media, interactive, and face-to-face communication, provided that there is a refoundational institutional commitment. Social and participatory empowerment can also be strongly linked to sub-state areas, because the transparency and supervision of political processes become easier.

Secondly, a real separation between the political power and the administration of these public companies is essential to ensure the credibility and quality of broadcasting companies, which should have editorial and financial autonomy (political) without being dependent on governmental decisions. These companies should be an example of transparency in management, which implies developing a different governance model. Through the analysis of "indicators of public value" and other methodologies, these companies should seek the maximum efficiency in management and be subject to permanent supervision to accomplish their mission as public services (Campos, 2012).

Thirdly, their contents should reflect the ideological, social, and cultural plurality and diversity of the society in which they operate. This process goes through the design of informative, cultural, and entertainment content capable of reaching all audiences, including the youngest individuals. These companies should count on feedback, which means taking into consideration the digital platforms as the central core of public service broadcasting.

Fourthly, public broadcasting companies should be aware of their relevance in promoting the audiovisual industry of the territory and encouraging the development of cultural industries, which are the central axis of a knowledge-based economy. Public service broadcasting is essential to boost regional languages in the territories that have a language other than Spanish.

Fifthly, although each media type is particular, public broadcasters have much in common, namely: more or less intensive purposes of public service; the need to adapt the open television to digital terrestrial television; the effort to be present in the web and mobile services and innovation in formats (experimentation with transmedia television); rationalisation of expenditure and channels, even forcibly (removal of a multiplex data transmission system). This is why implementations in common between regional companies and the Spanish Radio and Television Corporation would be interesting.

Finally, it is often forgotten that public service broadcasting is an essential and indispensable tool, not only to strengthen cultural identity and encourage innovation and social change, but also to promote the territory beyond its borders at national and even international level. As any company in the private sector would never refuse to invest in

communication if it hopes to compete in the global market, authorities and regional governments should not refuse to inform about their services internally and externally if they want to be relevant in today's world.

### **Structure of the special issue**

The present issue of *Communication & Society* addresses the situation of the regional public television in Spain from different perspectives. Firstly, from an economic perspective, Miguel Angel Casado del Río, from the University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU), Josep Àngel Guimerà i Orts, from the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB), and Juan Carlos Miguel de Bustos, also from the University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU), propose an analysis of the effects of the budgetary adjustments performed by the *Corporació Catalana de Mitjans Audiovisuals* and *Euskal Irrati Telebista* in the audiovisual sectors of Catalonia and the Basque Country, whose cuts are substantially affecting the turnover of the studied companies and the number of workers, and are also weakening the independent companies faced with multinational content suppliers.

From this same economic perspective, Eladio Gutiérrez, Marc Espín and Isabel Fernández Alonso, from the Autonomous University of Barcelona, discuss and analyse the future implications of the removal of one multiplex channel per community (Andalusia, Catalonia, Balearic Islands, and Navarra) for the regional digital terrestrial television, as a result of the release of the digital dividend that will be devoted to provide greater bandwidth to the growing mobile communication service.

Secondly, the monograph presents several studies that analyse the challenges faced by regional public broadcasters from the perspective of the governance model. On the one hand, Mercedes Muñoz Saldaña and Ana Azurmendi, from the University of Navarra, propose the analysis of the "Charter for Multilevel Governance in Europe" approved by the European Committee of the Regions in 2014, and the review of the regional audiovisual laws of the Basque Country, Catalonia and Galicia, showing the need to update it in accordance to the general framework of multilevel governance.

For their part, Andrea Valencia-Bermúdez and Francisco Campos, from the University of Santiago de Compostela, study the strategies of accountability of three regional broadcasters (EITB, CRTVG, and IB3) through the analysis of indicators of public services (the "Public Service Values", formulated by the European Broadcasting Union in 2014), i.e., financial, management, and governance data in their corporate websites and respective annual reports, showing a serious lack as accountability to the audience.

Accordingly, Miguel Ángel Sánchez de la Nieta and Carmen Fuente, from Villanueva University Centre, address a theme also related to governance. In this case, they study the role of the Bylaws and Drafting Committees as internal and professional instruments to promote objectivity, balance, and accuracy of information contents through in-depth interviews to members of those committees at TV3, EITB, and Canal Sur.

Thirdly, two studies discuss some issues relating to the evolution of regional public broadcasters in the context of media convergence. The first study, conducted by Pablo Gómez Domínguez, from Pompeu Fabra University, assesses the adaptation of TV3 and BBC One to the model of social television analysing their web platforms, mobile applications, and social networks, which allows becoming aware of the long path that still remains ahead in order to increase citizens' participation and the interaction of the audience.

For her part, Ainara Larrondo, from the University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU), assesses different transmedia experiences at Euskal Irrati Telebista (EITB) and at the Corporació Catalana de Mitjans Audiovisuals (CCMA), in the context of multimedia convergence and active audiences. This is a great help to understand the importance of multiplatform strategies that point to the emergence of a new broadcasting model.

Finally, with respect to a topic linked to cultural diversity and protection and promotion of minority languages, Estitxu Garai and Patxi Azpillaga, from the University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU), show the difficulties (in this case EITB) faced in standardised sociolinguistic use in communicative spaces (such as advertising) when the goal is to acquire financial resources in addition to other values.

Without a doubt, these are high quality scientific contributions. They help clarify the confusing panorama in which regional public television stations are inserted and propose paths for the future.

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