



## **PSB 3.0**

### **TV and the Digital and Global Challenge**

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# PSB 3.0

## *TV and the Digital and Global Challenge*

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Public funding for culture, film and media in general has been a strong element in what we understand to be at the core of the Scandinavian welfare state. It became a crucial part of Scandinavian cultural policy in the 1960s, and in the political philosophy of the Social Democrats and their political allies, the cultural arm of policy became important as a means to secure a diverse and inclusive public sphere. The birth of modern, visual media like film, radio and television became instruments in a political, social and cultural dialogue across social and cultural differences and barriers. They became a central part of what constitutes an “imagined community” (Anderson 1983) as carriers of those stories, narratives and communicative forms that constitute our everyday lives and feeling of belonging. Social and political issues, conflict and debate are central to modern mediated societies and public spheres, but so are deeper social and cultural stories of our present and past. News and documentaries are vital for our understanding of being national citizens as well as citizens of a global world, but TV drama and other forms of fiction are just as important for our ability to understand the contemporary and historical dimensions of society and culture. Fiction can speak to our deeper emotions and collective social feeling of being connected. In this sense, fiction, documentaries and other factual programmes are all part of a well functioning public sphere. For those many European countries that created the modern forms of public support for culture, PSB media were crucial for the diversity of culture and debate in the public sphere. A balance between market forces and public funding was seen as necessary to create the kind of cultural inclusion and democratic culture needed.

### **From scarcity and control to abundance and choice**

The classical PSB culture from the 1930s onwards was a culture of scarcity and in many ways also control. The control was about securing a certain level of cultural quality, a control not really neutral to questions of elite culture and popular culture. There was also control of everyday life in the sense that in many countries there was little choice, and only a few dominant channels available. As Paddy Scannell has argued in his inspiring phenomenological history of *Radio, Television & Modern Life* (1996), radio and televi-

sion were so integrated in the routines of everyday life that they almost disappeared as a specific activity. Radio and television defined the national communicative space in a very dominant way and as such they came to define what was talked about in both the private and the public space. For radio in Scandinavia this was gradually changing already in the 1960s. Borders could not stop airwaves, when new, mobile transmitters arrived. For television this came later in Scandinavia and many other European countries, when monopolies started to fall and new PSB competitors or commercial channels gained some ground. But even though competition set in and the number of channels has increased considerably, the traditional and historically very strong main PSB channels have survived and still have a very central position in the present media culture. It seems that Benedetta Brevini is right, when she states in her book, *Public Service Broadcasting Online. A comparative European Policy Study of PSB 2.0* (2013), that the present digital challenge is just one in a long history of challenges, to which PSB media have managed to adapt:

Throughout its history, the PSB model has showed a remarkable resilience in Europe, PSB institutions have adjusted to ever changing social and technological changes (...) If the new digital scenario could on the one hand constitute a threat to PSB, on the other hand it also offers new opportunities for PSB to realign their democratic role by fostering online participation and new ways of social interaction, as well as exploiting online delivery mechanisms for traditional content. (Brevini 2013: 4-5).

## **A digital and global agenda**

The core function and core values and activities for PSB broadcasters today are in principle not different from their historical tasks. In Denmark the Broadcasting Act of 2002, the first to include the internet as a new online platform to be developed, still speaks of the basic PSB goals in a way that goes way back, although now in a slightly modernized and updated form:

The overall public service activities shall, via television, radio and the Internet or similar, provide the Danish population with a wide selection of programmes and services comprising news coverage, general information, education, art and entertainment. Quality, versatility and diversity must be aimed at in the range of programmes provided (Television and Broadcasting Act of 2002, § 10).

The inclusion of the Internet is new and important and in the Media Agreement of 2007 we find for the first time more strong emphasis on digital platforms and online activities as an integrated part of PSB obligations.

Platforms and technologies change, but the task is still pretty much the same, although in a much more competitive environment. In Denmark, the two main television stations, with variations, are now two of the largest web publishers. In the national Danish context, excluding major sites like for instance Google, the two PSB stations DR (dr.dk) and TV2 (tv2.dk) carry a lot of traffic, because they also function as news sites. In many ways they are now also both online TV stations and traditional TV stations, many programmes on radio and TV are both broadcast traditionally and as online products.

If we look at the channel strategies of the two main PSB channels in Denmark (DR and TV2) it is however very clear that PSB in relation to online existence is in a transition period. DR has increased its flow channels to six (DR1, DR 2, DR 3, DR K, DR Ultra and DR Ramasjang), and the channels target different audience groups. DR1 is the main channel for a broad audience, while DR2 targets a more intellectual audience with documentaries, news and more experimental film and fictional programmes. DR3 is trying to get in contact with a young audience, the kind of audience quickly moving towards different forms of digital media platforms. DR K (Culture) is very dominated by historical documentaries, film and fiction, and probably mostly appeals to a slightly older, more educated audience. Finally both DR Ultra and DR Ramasjang have programmes made for young and older children, respectively. TV2 has a different but similar strategy with channels like the main channel TV2 and the 24-hour news channel TV2 News and TV2 Charlie, targeted at an older audience, and TV2 Zulu targeted at a younger audience.

When it comes to the online platforms, DR has dr.dk (a general news and information site) with a 24-hour news alert service and a click service to dr.tv and dr.radio where live and recent programmes can be viewed. These services are free of charge, whereas TV2 has a pay TV service called TV2 Play. With this on-demand service TV2 is in direct competition with other streaming sites nationally (Viasat, YouSee) or with international players like Netflix and HBO Nordic (Lai 2015). DR on the other hand is developing a quite large archive of programmes, some of which, especially the foreign film and TV drama productions, disappear after a rather short time. We seem to be moving towards a new television culture, where you can basically watch many DR programmes when and how you want on your smart TV, your tablet or your mobile – but only for a certain period, and with foreign programmes often a very short period. The online abundance and free access to all sorts of programmes is thus still more a future promise than an actual reality. There are copyright limits even for national programmes and access to international programmes is still very limited, and it is precisely here the big international players like Google, Amazon, Apple, Netflix and HBO are stepping up the global reach for audiences all over the world.

DR and other broadcasters in Europe have a huge back catalogue of programmes that have for a very long time been impossible to access for national viewers, except for occasional re-premieres of especially attractive classical content. In the new, digital online culture such archives of content are just as valuable as classical film archives, however, national or broader European solutions for release of this content are still far away. DR has an online site for older material, Bonanza (<http://www.dr.dk/Bonanza/index.htm>), a kind of heritage site for mainly older DR TV programmes. But few know about it or use it as part of their daily media consumption. So how and when we will see national PSB sites with a stronger and more varied content easily available for the ordinary viewer, or some European equivalent, is difficult to say. It seems that at least at present the international online services are taking the lead. It should be noted, however, that DR especially has a very active online strategy for background material for programme series, both factual and fictional. For instance, TV drama series have information on the making of the series, but also social, cultural and historical background material. Such sites can stimulate the cultural and social debate around programmes as was last seen with the historical series *1864* which generated thousands of comments from ordinary viewers and blog comments from professional critics and historians (Lai et al. 2016).

PSB TV in Denmark and in other countries is clearly taking on the new digital challenge and moving into the new platforms where it is anticipated that future viewers will be very active. But PSB stations all over Europe are at the same time also clinging to the traditional forms of broadcasting. They are strategically clearly riding two horses, because both the technology and the audiences they are serving still watch a lot of TV the old way at the same time as they are embracing new online services. The argument for this double strategy is that there is still a considerable audience for that kind of television, at least on the main channels, especially in the 55+ age groups. But the move towards a dominant digital media culture is not just raising the question of how to reach the audience and on which platforms, it is part of a wider global challenge where the European dimension plays an important role.

It is often said that in the new, digital media culture, content is more than ever king. Audiences are getting used to accessing content when, how and where they can, and those providers with the biggest back catalogue will take the largest share of the audience. PSB providers like DR in principle have a huge advantage here, because audiences often prefer local content. But the new digital media culture also intensifies a national and global conflict, which can be seen in the attacks in most European countries from newspapers and commercial media on PSB online activities, and which is also visible in the competition between national global online services. On the national level in Denmark DR and TV2 as online content providers are just as big as the largest newspaper corporation, Politiken/JP. Many newspaper corporations in Denmark and the rest of the world are not just moving online with news stories, but also with their own audio-visual productions. Since DR and other PSBs have developed strong news sites with added radio and TV programmes, they are moving into a stronger head-to-head competition than ever before. The private commercial media have therefore declared war against the PSB online activities and they have approached the politicians to take this out of the PSB remit.

Anyone should be able to see that, if such a political reduction of PSB activities became a reality, it would seriously damage the function of PSB channels in society and the public sphere. The argument goes against the logic of our converging media culture, and the role of digital platforms as probably the most important link between media and audiences. The national and commercial pressure on PSB channels is further strengthened by the global reach for local markets. Streaming services like Netflix and HBO Nordic have already established services in most of Europe, and will probably soon be followed by initiatives from big players like Apple, Google and Amazon. The different pay model for such global services could lead to changes in the funding of PSB channels. We could move from a universal service to a pay by use model. Liberal parties would welcome such a model and the potential dwarfing of PSB channels with a much more narrow focus on specific genres that do not compete with commercial interests. We have seen such attacks in the UK on the BBC and similar ideas have been aired in Denmark by certain political parties. In Denmark and the rest of Scandinavia there has until now been a rather broad consensus on cultural policy and the role of PSB, but with the challenges and changes ahead this may change.

## The European challenge

In many Scandinavian countries, including Denmark, we find a rather strong scepticism against the EU. The EU is seen as a system furthering liberal attitudes and strategies, including in media and cultural policy. Nevertheless there has always been a tension in the EU policies that is pretty similar to national policies, between those in favour of strong liberalisation of culture and media and those in favour of a balanced public intervention. At the same time it seems that the EU in collaboration with the national partners has gradually developed a much stronger policy position on the importance of media and culture. The new programme, “Creative Europe”, pulls together all strands of cultural support and clearly underlines the importance of culture in a global and digital world. If there has been some scepticism towards the cultural support models in Europe and the PSB channels earlier on, this is no longer very visible in the EU cultural policy. But the EU policies like national policies are balancing on a razor’s edge in the global combat between digital and global players and the always rather intense battles in connection with, for instance, GATT negotiations. However, it is difficult to see how individual nation states could navigate better in a global and digital world than the collected EU does.

Overall the understanding and position of PSBs in the EU have been gradually strengthened since 2000, as Brevini (2013: 8ff) has demonstrated. Ever since the publishing of the Protocol of the System of PSB in the Member States (1997) a number of initiatives and documents have confirmed the democratic and cultural value of PSB as part of the EU. In this annex to the Amsterdam treaty, it is expressed like this: “The System of public broadcasting in the Member States is directly related to the democratic, social and cultural needs of each society and to the need to preserve media pluralism” (quoted from Brevini 2013:4). This general policy statement has been further developed in a series of documents since 2000. This positive evaluation of the role of PSB for the diversity of media culture is also taken up in some of the many documents from both the EU parliament and the Commission looking at the digital and online activities of PSB channels. In a Communication on PSB state aid (European Commission 2001) the Commission stipulates with some caution: “The PSB remit might include certain services that are not ‘programmes’ in the traditional sense, such as on-line information”. The EU parliament, on the other hand, in a declaration from 2004 (European Parliament 2004) is much more outspoken on the same issue: “to promote cultural diversity in the digital age, it is important that PSB content reaches the audiences through as many distribution networks as possible; it is therefore crucial for PSB to develop new media services.”

Despite widespread political support in the EU for PSB and PSB online, competition rules and commercial interests from national and global players create dilemmas. There are global competition and trade agreements (GATTs, UNESCO and WSIS) where the EU fights to minimise corporate media power but where it is also under pressure from free trade mechanisms. Both on a national level in the EU and also at the EU Commission level, the support for PSB online is mixed and lobbying from commercial players to reduce PSB online is increasing. As Brevini has pointed out (Brevini 2013: 11f), there is a tension between the European parliament on these issues and the Commission and the Council of Ministers. The European parliament has more directly supported an unlimited online activity of PSB channels (see European Parliament 1996; 2004), whereas the European Commission and the Council of Ministers have expressed more limited

views, which could potentially go against the open interpretation of the PSB remit in the 1997 protocol quoted above. Putting limitations on PSB activities online could however seriously undermine the principle of universality that has from the beginning been central to the function of PSB.

In 2009 the EU Commission seemed to change its former support to unlimited PSB access to launch online activities. According to Brevini (2013: 109), this change may have come as a result of the heated discussion in some member states, especially in the UK on the future role and size of the BBC in the digital media culture. In comments on the BBC case, the EU Commission expressed three EU principles for acceptance of PSB online activities:

- Online activity must be closely linked to core PSB activities offline
- Online activity must be distinctive from and complementary to services provided by the commercial sector
- PSB online activities must be declared in advance to make it possible for commercial competitors to respond and readjust

Following this an EU Commission statement on Broadcasting Communication (European Commission 2009) stated the following:

In order to ensure that the public funding of significant new audiovisual services do not distort trade and competition (...) member states shall assess (...) the overall impact (...) on the market, relevant aspects include, for example, the existence of similar substitutable offers, editorial competition, market structure, market position (...) and potential impact on private initiatives.

### **PSB 3.0 – the digital PSB**

If this document from 2009 is what Brevini in her book calls the European PSB 2.0, caught between, on the one hand, a recognition of the universal value and importance of PSB channels to the cultural diversity and democratic culture of Europe, and on the other hand a restriction based on commercial principles of the same PSB on digital platforms – then we are in dire need of a national and European PSB 3.0. If PSB as we know it is to survive in the digital and global development racing ahead around us, European PSB channels need a much greater freedom to develop as a ‘digital commons’ for all citizens (Wittell 2013). PSB stations in Europe are already starting to co-produce much more than before, and we see new patterns of distribution (see Bondebjerg 2016; Bondebjerg, Redvall & Higson 2015) starting to create a sort of common space for European TV. We even see a transnational European TV heritage project like EUSCREEN (see <http://www.euscreen.eu/>). If the national, digital PSB platforms start shrinking this will have serious consequences for European culture as a whole.

The problem with a greater European PSB collaboration – not just the Eurovision Song Contest, not just the kind of collaboration the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) has encouraged from time to time – is that fundamentally PSB stations and cultures act within a national framework. While Netflix, and probably soon other global online players, establish themselves in the whole of Europe, creating one single platform for all Europeans, PSB stations in Europe work on a national and regional basis and on a

case by case logic of co-production. It is very difficult to see how European television should have the will and power to create a European, creative digital common, a platform making 60 years of European television programming available. “From all of us to all of you” is a Disney slogan, one that Americans work under; Europeans do not.

Andreas Wittel may be a little too romantic and optimistic in his defence of digital commons in general, but politically this is a very important fight, a fight for cultural diversity and for universal democratic values:

The digital commons (...) is a new frontier for struggles over commodification. It is a space that enables counter-commodification – not just on a personal, but on a global level. It demonstrates how creative work can flourish without the chains of intellectual property regulations. (...) The fostering of all parts of the digital commons is a political question. This is about the creation of spaces in which alternative social practices and alternative forms of work can develop in the best possible way. (Wittel 2013: 330)

The concept of digital commons is not just a concept for intellectual work, it also has to do with the free access to film and television, produced in a public service context. However, nothing is for free, so to create a European PSB public commons, an open digital platform, or even just a commons and platform on a national level, will be costly and will demand a common effort in Europe, a Europe which is right now suffering from many problems other than the cultural.

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