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In Focus

Pandemic and Public Service Media: Lessons from Finland



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ABSTRACT

This essay discusses the global context of public communication during COVID-19, as well as some specific lessons learned from public service media (PSM), specifically from the Finnish Broadcasting Company (Yleisradio, Yle). We address the role of PSM as a national information channel during crises and as a sustainable element in the media system, points to the need to understand its role beyond news and to develop new interactive alternatives to global platforms, and calls for PSM organisations to address its audience – not as consumers – but as people with needs for information, entertainment, learning and meaningful interactions.

THE FRAGILITY OF PUBLIC COMMUNICATION

We live in fragile times but cannot blame the pandemic alone. COVID-19 not only has created, but also accentuated and revealed, many economic, political and cultural challenges in our societies. One of them is the state of public communication.

The problems of today's communication reality are fuelled by the marriage of two tendencies; that of diminishing trust in knowledge-producing institutions, and the viral spread of disinformation and misinformation. These phenomena existed globally before March 2020, developing over decades. The past months have made it clear, however, that if we care about functioning democracy we must act promptly and creatively to strengthen the currently fragile communication systems and practices.

Contrary to mainstream arguments about the redundancy of public service broadcasting (PSB) and its multi-platform variant, PSM; in an era of infinite content supply, we argue that it is high time to utilise the brand value, the (relative) independence and the creative talent much PSM possesses and can develop – if we are allowed and given the resources to do so.

We offer an overview of the global context of public communication during COVID-19, as well as some specific lessons learned by the Finnish Broadcasting Company (Yleisradio, Yle), to highlight the most important lessons for PSM. That is, the role of PSM as a national icon and as a sustainable element in the media system, the need to understand its role beyond news and to develop new interactive alternatives to global platforms, and the imperative of PSM to listen to its audiences not as consumers but as people with information, entertainment, learning and meaningful interaction needs.

GLOBAL INFODEMIC, FEW GLOBAL SOLUTIONS

General trust in social and political institutions, including legacy news media, has declined for years and, in some cases, for decades (Edelman 2020). Worldwide, governments are considered the least transparent and least ethical of all institutions, followed by the media. Yet, a functioning democracy is based on an informed and active citizenship that relies on public information, equally available to all citizens, to form opinions and to make decisions. While

spontaneous communities of care, connection and localised information have quickly grown online and in social media in the past weeks,¹ so have misinformation, hateful and xenophobic speech and confusion. Governments and specific groups are being blamed for the crisis all around the globe (Frenkel *et al.* 2020).

Alarms have gone off internationally. For example, the World Health Organization (WHO) has publicly noted how it has been battling the virus but also an ‘infodemic,’ including ‘the trolls and conspiracy theories that undermine [its] response’ (BBC 2020). Human Rights Watch (2020) lists cases where governments have failed to communicate transparently about the coronavirus and has stressed the importance of freedom of expression and access to the internet, as well as of ongoing in-depth and trustworthy information and respect for the privacy of health data. The Committee to Protect Journalists has reported on ongoing censorship of news of the pandemic and related threats against journalists around the world (Committee to Protect Journalists n.d.). The Council of Europe’s Human Rights Commissioner has urged member states to ensure that the forms of communication used are reaching all citizens (Council of Europe 2020).

Yet it seems there are few global solutions to the global infodemic. Global conspiracy theories about the causes and cures of COVID-19 spread, and metamorphose, like a virus (Paul 2020). Everything is being questioned. Even the accidental Facebook bug that censored legitimate COVID-19 news was quickly interpreted as a deceptive act (Peters 2020).

It is indeed ironic that while COVID-19 is a global crisis, the global platforms that were once hailed as great communication equalisers and harbingers of democratisation everywhere have become skilful ‘attention merchants’ (Wu 2016). Corporate self-governance measures – such as Facebook

and Instagram temporarily banning ads marketing false treatments or exploiting the demand for face masks (Lyons 2020), or Twitter deleting accounts related to the QAnon conspiracy theories (Conger 2020) – are not enough to restrict bad actors from distributing harmful, false information. As an outgrowth of their business models, the platforms continue to contribute to the infodemics, even when simultaneously trying to curb health misinformation with campaigns, grants, hackathons, international and national collaborations with governments and other stakeholders, and so on (Skopeliti, John 2020).

The above examples point to the ‘information disorder’ (Wardle, Derakshan 2017) and structural flaws of media systems in which no major social media platform is for the public interest or free from commercial imperatives. PSM that has been challenged by commercial and political actors, even in mature PSM countries (Dragomir, Horowitz 2020), now seem like the most obvious and sustainable remedy.

The first lesson from the pandemic era for PSM is by no means specific to Yle but pertains to structural solutions to the fragility of public communication in most media systems. We posit that PSM is not made obsolete by the current limitless and cacophonous media landscape but is a necessary counterpoint to chaos in that context. While the pandemic is global, countermeasures fall on national governments that are more or less transparent in their information dissemination. Accordingly, related reporting and holding those in power accountable are the responsibilities of national news outlets. But there is even more work for PSM. Lockdowns, resulting in virtual working and schooling, have proven the centrality of the classic Reithian public broadcasting mandates in our lives. Not only information, but also education and entertainment, are essential tasks of PSM organisations in serving citizens.

PSM IN FINLAND: AN IRREPLACEABLE BRAND

A closer look at the Finnish Broadcasting

1 See, for example, the global initiative: coronavirus-techhandbook.com. (n.d.). *Coronavirus Tech Handbook*. <https://coronavirustechhandbook.com/home>. (23 March 2020).

Company, Yle, reveals that the importance of PSM during the pandemic is not only a normative aspiration but is verified by impressive audience figures. An overview of news audiences from a total of 29 members of the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) shows that the average viewing share of PSM evening news was up 20 percent in March 2020 compared to the first quarter of viewing in 2019. Also, younger audiences started to tune in, with an average increase of 44 percent, from 2019. The daily online reach and PSM's YouTube reach peaked in mid-March, 2020 (EBU 2020.) Yle is no exception. Arguably, its significant role in public communication during the pandemic is a given, based on its central role in Finnish society in general. Yle hosts three television channels, one of which includes both the cultural channel Teema and the Swedish-language channel Fem. It also offers six radio channels as well as Yle Areena, a highly popular streaming service of its own. In 2019, Yle's television channels accounted for 44 percent of the yearly audience share (Finnpanel 2019), and 96 percent of Finns accessed one of Yle's services at least once a week (Yle 2019). The broadcasting and online news of the Finnish Broadcasting Company are considered to be amongst the top news brands in the country (Newman *et al.* 2020).

Yle is for all Finns, not only according to its mission statements, but also as verified by research. According to a recent study of public media news in eight European countries, most PSMs, including Yle, are successful at reaching politically diverse audiences (Schulz *et al.* 2019: 23). The success and quality of Yle's programmes and services is partly a result of its resources. Yle is still well-funded and its net turnover in 2019 was €478m, a high figure in a country of 5.5 million inhabitants. Moreover, Yle's funding level has not changed in recent years (Yle 2019).

In spring 2020, Yle held the attention of almost the entire population. News, live broadcasts and online articles on COVID-19 gathered the largest audiences. Online services grew significantly in popularity and

online news stories saw an increase in traffic of some 50 percent. Yle's own streaming service, Areena, also witnessed an increase of almost one third among the audience segment of under 45-year-olds.

A national survey on trust and the media in April – May 2020 (Matikainen *et al.* 2020) found that Finns trust traditional outlets more than social media for COVID-19 news. When it comes to official pandemic-related news and information, Finnish residents had high levels of trust in authorities. Confidence in legacy news media reliability was also strong, according to the survey. Roughly 60 percent of respondents said they thought news outlets were generally reliable, and an unprecedented 90 percent said the Finnish Broadcasting Company was either “fairly” or “very” reliable.

According to the study (Matikainen *et al.* 2020), the levels of trustworthiness that Finns assigned to scientists and doctors, the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, and the media in general were high compared to similar results from around the world (Nielsen *et al.* 2020). Even so, the trust in Yle as a specific media outlet is remarkable, especially when almost 25 percent of Finnish respondents noted they had encountered misleading information in the media [a figure close to that of the United States]. The nationwide legacy commercial news outlets closest to Yle's almost perfect reliability score were the Helsingin Sanomat daily (76 percent of respondents) and the MTV Uutiset outlet (74 percent of respondents) (Matikainen *et al.* 2020: 84–95).

Based on this data, the second lesson from the case of the Finnish Broadcasting Company is the enduring brand recognition of an established PSM organisation and the hunger of audiences during crisis to trust one source of information instead of shopping for facts from various sources. Recent studies suggest that such recognition is central to building the overall societal trust that is necessary in crisis management, as well as a contributing factor to resilience against disinformation (Hamerlees *et al.* 2020; Humprecht *et al.* 2020). Or, as Tony

Hall of the BBC put it in a speech in August 2020 (BBC Media Centre 2020):

The forces of disinformation and social media tend to feed on fracture and drive polarisation.

They're often specifically designed to exploit division for commercial or political gain; to unsettle societies or undermine democracy.

What we do, as a PSB, is a force in the opposite direction.

CHALLENGES: NEWS FATIGUE

It would be naive to argue that every PSM organisation is perfectly equipped to address all crises of public communication, even the well-established, well-resourced and much-loved Finnish Broadcasting Company. While the early months of the pandemic may have reconfirmed the value of PSM, it also highlighted the fragilities of these organisations. One pertains to the access to trusted knowledge in the times of a new, unknown crisis, and the other illustrates the new demands for bringing people together in the digital era of platforms.

As documented in a study on trust in Finnish media (Matikainen *et al.* 2020), the uncertainties of the pandemic have posed significant challenges to journalism because new discoveries and developments have occurred daily. When basic trust exists, even if information about the virus is changing, people are likely to trust the intent, the agenda, of an institution that is considered reliable (Hameleers *et al.* 2020). This seemed to be the case with Yle, at least.

However, focusing on excellence in news is a double-edged sword for PSM. At the beginning of the pandemic, audiences' hunger for news was insatiable. Increase in news audiences and impressive levels of trust in PSM in Finland, and in many other PSM contexts, were an initial result of the crisis. Even when a major competitor of Yle, national daily Helsingin Sanomat, praised Yle's coverage (Kanerva 2020), news fatigue

could not be circumvented, hitting Yle in April 2020. Studies show that the initial boom in COVID-19-related news consumption was followed by news avoidance (Baekdal 2020). This was seen in the UK and the USA, for instance, partly due to audiences' perceptions of politically polarising coverage (Mitchell *et al.* 2020). These tendencies went hand-in-hand with more general attitudes and actions to the extent that, in autumn 2020, the WHO became worried about Europe, saying that, along with rising infection rates in different parts of the world, there were also clear signs of 'pandemic fatigue' (Roberts 2020).

It may be no surprise that audiences grew tired of the constant news of infection rates and repeated reports of changing official responses to the crisis. Several international studies point to multiple reasons for this; that news about the pandemic tended to be depressing and often left audiences feeling powerless, and that many people simply find news – including COVID-19 reporting – sensational and misleading (Bedingfield 2020). This is echoed in a Finnish study of trust in the media (Matikainen *et al.* 2020) that revealed a firmly critical attitude by audiences regarding the commercial imperatives of news outlets which, some respondents of qualitative interviews feared, would force Yle to compete with similar values and clickbait journalism.

In the aforementioned survey of COVID-19 news in spring 2020, audiences found news media in general to be helpful in understanding the pandemic. At the same time, the majority of respondents also noted that the information they received on the official national approach was confusing. Even more worrisome was that 43 percent of Finns felt that the news media had exaggerated the impact of COVID-19 (Matikainen *et al.* 2020). While Yle may have received a record score in trust early in the pandemic crisis, growing desensitisation, disinterest and even distrust can spill over to even the most revered news source. The third takeaway, then, is that for news media and journalism outlets during a prolonged crisis, the challenge is not only in mere

trustworthiness, but in their ongoing ability to communicate news in new, engaging ways (Bedingfield 2020) without falling into the trap of clickbait journalism. PSM organisations are, at least in theory, in a position where such innovations can be made without consideration for audience ratings, the idea of public value can be seen as a measurement of success (Suárez Candel 2020).

CHALLENGES: NEED FOR INTERACTION

While Yle excelled in serving its news audience early on, like other media it faced the challenges of the lockdown. Information, diversion and uplifting content were also in demand. Restrictions to face-to-face, in-person interactions and work and leisure events intensified the importance of connecting via digital means. Unfortunately, global platforms and apps have been the winners of attention and use in this regard.

A report on internet usage changes during COVID-19 in the United States (Koeze, Popper 2020) illustrates the dramatic impact of the COVID-19 crisis in digital modalities of interaction. For instance, average daily traffic to Facebook, Netflix and YouTube increased by one sixth from mid-January to late March. Famously, despite various concerns over its privacy and security measures, Zoom became an extremely popular video conferencing app for replacing educational and workplace meetings. The user base of Microsoft Teams also increased rapidly in March. At the same time, daily traffic to Twitch.tv (a website that streams online gaming) and the TikTok video sharing app also grew significantly.

Although these statistics describe the situation in the US, the realities in many countries have, arguably, been similar. Social media won the popularity contest for public communication during spring 2020, and that poses a challenge for PSM. These sites and apps are global and commercial. Social networking and interaction sites offer limiting, almost uniform, ways of getting and staying in touch. Few alternatives are still inclusive, without a paywall. PSM

cannot compete. While some PSM organisations offer their own streaming services, they do not host specific platforms for interactions.

This is in part because, so far, PSM has been more of a buzzword and less of a specific model featuring public media organisations beyond broadcasting, such as providers of alternative social media platforms. PSBs that offer (and are able to offer) a variety of digital services have experienced a mixed bag of restrictions and support for digital innovations (Syvertsen, Aslama 2006).

To be sure, it would be difficult to compete with the reach of popular global platforms. Their reach is undeniable, especially (if not only) among young people (Schulz *et al.* 2019). Yet, PSM as a participant in the 'surveillance capitalism' (Zuboff 2019) of the global giants is problematic. The question is about the heritage concept of universalism (Savage *et al.* 2020). Today, it seems, universal reach can only be achieved by surrendering to the commercial imperatives of social media networks, including participatory modes geared towards data collection, and creating a PSM presence on TikTok and Twitter alike. A related challenge in Finland, as in many other countries, is that trust in social media platforms has decreased dramatically over the past decade (Matikainen *et al.* 2020). This signifies that audiences are getting healthily cautious but also, in relation to PSM, that their contents are confused with the latest hoaxes and other disinformation found in untrustworthy contexts online.

The fourth lesson, then, highlights the universalist mission and its ongoing importance; perhaps even the need for extension rather than narrowing the mandates of PSM. To us, it seems obvious that PSM as a model must be taken seriously, not only as a relic of the broadcasting era with digital presence limitations, but as a truly multi-platform organisation. Virtual interaction will most likely not cease, even if and when the pandemic does. There is clearly a need for the free, innovative and secure options for digital social interaction that PSM could

offer. The BBC, for instance, is experimenting with such ideas in its Public Service Internet project.

YLE'S COGNIZANCE FOR COMING TIMES

How did Yle specifically address the above challenges, and what strategies and tactics seemed to work? An internal analysis of content and delivery value from a user-needs perspective highlights the following aspects:

Audiences' demands shifted rapidly when the pandemic progressed. Information needs diminished when educational and entertainment needs grew. The lockdown created demand for educational content, and Yle responded promptly. Yle also added children's and music programming, as well as nostalgic hit programmes, into its offering.

Yet, perhaps unexpectedly, Yle's social media activities with interactive live presence and uplifting content were found to be the modality that truly met the needs for connection and togetherness. Radio offered plenty of programming with audience engagement, but not engagement between audience members. Similarly, TV programming used its means for inclusion and social cohesion, but those cannot replace peer-to-peer interaction.

The internal analysis concluded that merely adding volume to programming – whether informational, educational or entertaining – is not enough. Audiences/users demand ever-better and tailored content and services that position them as co-creators, not as passive spectators.

The fifth, strategic, takeaway is that PSM organisations must focus even more intensely on audiences' needs and be willing to act accordingly, and fast. The experiences at Yle align with general observations about newsrooms that have thrived during and after COVID-19 and other crises (Trewinnard 2020). That is, organisations with the agility to create new services according to audiences' needs, and with the commensurate ability to engage and keep those audiences, are the winners. For Yle, spring 2020 was

a test laboratory, an opportunity to rethink and innovate in a situation where the crisis is not over but creating a new normal, the details of which are still unknown. That is why PSM organisations should invest more proactively in content and services that provide interaction and collaboration with and among audiences.

COVID-19 AND CONSTANT CHANGE

COVID-19 may indeed be a stress test for many changes to come. Serious global problems abound. As Rasmus Kleis Nielsen of the Reuters Institute at Oxford University (2020) posits, regarding the BBC, the world has changed and is changing faster than the broadcaster. This is not only a challenge in terms of audience demands and ratings but also, more broadly, in terms of the value of PSM to society.

Robust PSM organisations counter societal fragility by supporting freedom of, and access to, information, sustainable forms of quality journalism, culture independent of market forces, and a robust, democratic media system as a whole. In the case of the US, it has even been suggested that the only way to rebuild trust in journalism is to create a true BBC-style PSM system in the country (Pan 2020).

In this essay, we have gone even further and argued that PSM must take its multidimensional role in public communication seriously. It must be the communicative first responder and change its course with the needs of the citizens. But, as Emily Bell of Columbia University (Hofseth 2018) declared a few years ago:

[R]ight now, there is almost nothing more important than having robust public service media available to citizens. (...)

Existing political systems and public service broadcasters need to be free to imagine the kinds of information ecosystems that they'd want at the nation/state level and then real freedom to

experiment with and find new paths to deliver that.

Much of the future of public communication rests on PSM organisations themselves. PSM organisations, even Yle, cannot remain comfortable and complacent due to their success during the pandemic. The shift from the licence fee to tax-based funding for PSM in many countries allows relatively easy changes to PSM budgets (Public Media Alliance 2019). Populism is alive and feeding on the pandemic, PSM organisations tend to be demonised by populist politics (Simon 2019), and indeed, past developments in countries such as Australia, Denmark, Switzerland and the UK indicate significant political hostility towards PSM. During these times of economic downturn, political volatility, and fierce global and national competition in media markets, PSM will be targeted.

Indeed, in June 2020, after all Yle's successes during the pandemic in spring, the Ministry of Transport and Communications proposed a new amendment to the law governing PSB. The Finnish Media Federation (an advocacy organisation for private companies in the media and printing industries) had filed a complaint in 2017

with the EU Commission, claiming that Yle's online textual content is in conflict with EU state aid rules. Three years later, the Ministry – after unpublicised discussions with the Commission – considered amending the Act on Yleisradio accordingly, to limit its text-based web content (Yle 2020). In practice, this would mean less competition to commercial online news providers, but also an old-fashioned understanding of the current multimedia ecosystem where, in practice, different formats merge seamlessly. It would also signify narrow services for certain linguistic and other minority groups. In other words, the proposal points to something quite different than supporting dynamic and innovative service to the public.

Research shows that PSM can, unfortunately, be politicised and used in various ways as a symbol, whether of bias, wasteful public spending or quality content and trustworthy information in the midst of chaos and crisis (Dragomir, Horowitz 2020). This is precisely why PSM must remain vigilant and maintain its image as a constant trusted partner for audiences' information, education, entertainment, interaction and open learning, in different formats and platforms – during and after pandemics.



Image capture: Unoccupied (Toimettomat) documentary series on Yle's own streaming service Areena followed young people's lives with the focus on mental health during the lockdown in Spring 2020.

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