1 *When Public Service Is the Name of the Game*

The Evolution of British and Spanish Public Service Broadcasters in Online News

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Introduction

Web–based news, has been around for more than two decades, purported to serve democracy in a better, more efficient and effective way thanks to a rich range of socio–technical advantages. But up until a few years ago, it was still not much more than what was seen in other media: many of its much–touted exclusive features—such as immediacy, multimedia, interactive participation—remained scarce or underdeveloped on even the biggest newspapers and broadcasters' news sites (Nguyen, 2008, 2010). As an American news executive observed when discussing how to harness broadband technologies in 2006:

> Rather than getting starry–eyed about fat–pipe applications, I'd rather see us focus on doing a better job of the basics. The amount of local breaking news on many newspaper sites is abysmal. Their weather maps lack depth and dynamism. Their sports are boring. And their functionality—from search to calendar to recruitment databases—is barely passable. We should be ashamed of how poor our sites compare to Yahoo! and Monster in basic areas. (As cited in Finberg, 2006)

This failure to exploit online news has been traced to "the fear of marginalization" (Hermida & Thurman, 2008, p. 347) or the long–established fear–driven innovation culture of the news media. In the 1990s, as the web penetrated daily life with an impact measured by Negroponte at "10.5 on the Richter scale

of social change" (as cited in Dizard, 2000, p. 5), it was quick to become a nerve–wracking medium to journalists and news executives. Threatened by the possibility of being driven out of the market by the "all too powerful" web, they hastily established online presences to ring–fence markets and ensure they had a future in the internet era. But because they were established as low–cost place holders to protect traditional market positions, most early news sites were allocated inadequate resources to harness the potential of the medium, thus offering little more than content repurposed from traditional products. In addition, being too obsessed by the potential disruptive power of the new medium and left with little time to pause and think, the traditional news media adopted online strategies that were "checkered with visionary action, misguided concepts, and curt dismissal" (Stovall, 2004, p. 23). As scant attention was paid to the web's possibilities, online news was shoe–horned into the same old static, one–way, text–and–picture model that is largely at odds with its uniqueness.

Here and there in this not so brilliant picture, however, were a number of illuminating points, namely the online news services of public service broadcasters (PSBs). Although PSBs constitute a tiny group of news providers, many of them have long gone far beyond the basics online, with some—such as the BBC in the UK, DR in Denmark or the ABC in Australia—being listed among the most innovative online news services in their national and/or international contexts. BBC News Online, for instance, has been ranked among the world's top news sites and been an oft–mentioned model in research and text books on online journalism around the world. The prominence of PSBs in the online world is in stark contrast to the fact that most of them have had to develop their new media ventures, in Fiona Martin's words, "on the smell of an oily rag" due to the lack of extra funding (as cited in Jacka, 2006, p. 348).

This invites an intriguing question: How could PSBs be so superior to their commercial rivals in the online news world? This chapter sets out to argue that the public–service remit itself, based on a relative freedom from commercial concerns, has been a positive contributor to the success of PSBs in the online news world. In order to do so, we explore the key moments, decisions and strategies of two of the biggest European PSBs—the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and Radio Television Española (RTVE)—in the history of their online news operation. These PSBs are based on two very different funding and regulation models, with two notions of what a PSB should be, and therefore experienced quite opposite trajectories in the online news environment. Both, however, enjoyed quick successes after their launch, due to their underlying public service principles. The implications for the future of online news will be briefly discussed in the context of recent commercial

media's attacks on what they call the unfair competitive advantage of PSBs in the online world.

Public Service in the Evolution of BBC News Online

"And now for the news—at last" is the headline with which the *Times* greeted the launch of BBC News Online on November 4, 1997. "Finally, it's the BBC's turn," wrote the *Times*. "Yesterday Auntie launched its own news web site, months—if not years—after its commercial rivals in Britain and abroad." At a time when the number of traditional news organisations with a web presence went steeply up from virtually zero in 1993 to more than 12,000 in 1998, such a late arrival of the BBC in online territory was quite difficult for many to understand. The £3–million site itself seemed to have been an artefact designed in a hurry, being given 16 weeks that represented, in the words of its first editor, a sudden shift from a "stop–stop–stop" to a "go–go–go" mood (Smartt, 2007). As Brandon Butterworth, the man who registered the bbc.co.uk domain name in 1991 and looked after the site's technical infrastruture, recalled: "With an October deadline, there was no point continuing with meetings. A committee wasn't going to make it. A ninja squad was needed. I got a small bucket of cash and got told to do whatever was needed."

These facts provoke questions: Why did a leading news organisation that has historically functioned to inform democracy and citizenship and has acted as a technological pioneer migrate to the web so late and in such a rush? Was it a failure of a "dear old Auntie, always regarded as a little dotty" (Withworth, 1997), in building a strategic, provident vision in the early days of the web?

A strategic delay

Indeed, it was not a late hasty rush into an unknown territory at all. Ten years after the launch, Mike Smartt (2007) commented that the no–hurry embracement of online news by the BBC was "probably a good thing when there are big sums of public money at stake." Our research suggests that it was a strategic delay, representing a correct online approach that distinguished the BBC as a PSB from the commercial media from the outset. At the very least, its freedom from commercial pressures helped the corporation not to fall into the trap of the "This will kill that" climate that swept commercial news media into the massive but uncertain and half–hearted online migration of the 1990s. Instead, it calmly but rigorously experimented with the various possibilities associated with the new medium: by the time of the above launch, there had been on bbc.co.uk a 1995 budget news site, a 1996 budget news site, a 1997 election

and general politics site, and, most importantly, a hugely successful tribute site on the tragic death of Princess Diana in autumn 1997 that finally "convinced everyone that the internet would be big and that the BBC would be there—properly" (Butterworth, 2007). Everything was done cautiously until the last minute, with "the start being more like a swimmer carefully inching into icy waters than an ocean liner proudly splashing in a spray of champagne" (BBC News Online, 2007). These years allowed the BBC to have more time to assess different options for harnessing the potential of online news and to arrive at many proper decisions that were to have a lasting impact on BBC News Online and the standards it set for news sites around the world.

The most fundamental of these came from the top: the decision not to commercialise BBC news on the web. The medium entered daily life when the BBC was under mounting pressures to exploit new media for commercial purposes (Thorsen, 2010). The pre–launch years of BBC News Online saw numerous debates on whether and how to commercialise the BBC, including its news, online. In those years, according to Smartt (2007), "MSNBC might have been MSBBC" if a potential deal with Microsoft had not been turned down after the software giant expressed its wish to have a voice in editorial matters. According to Thorsen (2010), this led news to become part of another commercial operation called beeb.com, a joint venture between the BBC and a computer company. "At the eleventh hour" in December 1996, however, the then–Director General of the BBC, John Birt, "withdrew news and sport from the equation, deciding instead to make them public service offerings" (Connor, 2007). Whether it was "a madcap moment . . . that saw Birt act on impulse" (Connor, 2007), it was to make history. As Bob Eggington, BBC News Online's project director, acknowledged: "He's not my cup of tea, but had he not brought his determination and authority to the internet, it just wouldn't happen" (as cited in Connor, 2007).

Birt's bold move was probably rooted, at least in part, in his fear that a digital divide was widening in an environment where people increasingly had to pay for their media. This is echoed in the various speeches that he made to justify the public service of BBC Online. "We may see," he warned in a New Stateman lecture, "the emergence of an information–rich and an information–poor—an underprivileged knowledge underclass, denied access to the quality of information, insight and entertainment enjoyed by the richer members of the community" (BBC News Online, 1999). This, for Birt, could only be addressed if a universally accessible public service exists with proper funding to cater for everyone's information needs. This was formalised in the BBC's submission to the license fee review panel in 1999, when its online operation continued to be under external pressures to go commercial (Thorsen,

Allan, & Carter, 2010). Of the six stated core objectives, the provision of news and information came first, with two of the other five concerning fostering citizenship via building coummunities surrounding BBC content.

Along with these developments was a strong determination to proactively explore and exploit the potential of online news. Whereas its commercial rivals positioned the internet as an intruder into the news landscape, the BBC saw a horizon of new opportunities, embracing it as a "third broadcast medium alongside radio and TV" (Smartt as cited in Thompson, 1997). As Edward Briffa, then the Controller of BBC Online and Interactive, declared:

> The BBC reinvented itself once, when television was invented. And now we feel we have got to do it again. It's not that radio and television are going to diminish, but it is that people's time is going to be taken up, in increasing amounts, with this third opportunity. (As cited in Thorsen et al., 2010)

Thus, in stark contrast to the defensive ring–fencing strategies on commercial news sites, BBC News Online set forth as an aggressive opportunity seeker, with an overt ambition to expand its influence online. "We have one aim: to be better, broader and richer than everyone else," said Tony Hall, the chief executive of BBC News in *Inside Multimedia* (1997).

The innovative news site and its meteoric rise

These developments at the top generated a generous space for the much needed enthusiasm and freedom to think outside the box among the early BBC News Online team. With more time than their commercial colleagues to prepare for an online migration, the team found news to be "one of those things ideally suited to the new medium" (Eggington as cited in Venes, 1999), wholeheartedly recognising and endorsing its unique capacity for multimedia, immediacy and depth. Not less importantly, they understood that this unique capacity could only materialise when fresh and, if necessary, expensive approaches were taken. Thus, instead of following the cheap and safe route of repurposing news content from traditional outlets like most in the commercial world, the BBC was committed to pouring resources into developing an innovative news site. While taking advantage of the BBC's vast amount of content and its natural edge in breaking news, for instance, it refused "to regurgitate anything that wasn't highly suitable for the medium" (Eggington as cited in Venes, 1999). In areas that are not its traditional strengths such as text news, it did not hesitate to recruit journalists from outside. Or at the time others were asking journalists "to write code as well as stories," the BBC found it to be a "madness" and "a single wayward backlash," developing a content management system that made journalists using HTML "a sackable offence" (Smartt, 2007).

Open to new possibilities, BBC News Online was able to go beyond traditional news qualities, finding that the web was not just about multimedia, depth and immediacy but also about interactivity and its associated capacity for public participation in news and current affairs. The "we publish, you accept" mindset that did not start to leave the mind of those running the commercial news offering online until the mid–2000s (Nguyen, 2008) was questioned by BBC News Online right from its early experiments (Butterworth, 2007). For instance, the sheer volume of public responses to its trial site on Diana's death in 1997, according to Eggington, "was a huge revelation to me that people wanted to participate and what they wanted to read was what they, not the BBC, had written" (as cited in Thorsen, 2010, p. 217). Thus, one of the only five sections of the launch site was the opportunity for readers to make their voice heard, a forerunner to its Have Your Say later (BBC News Online, 2007). [The other four were UK & World News, Business, Science & Technology, and Sports.] In this context, it is perhaps not surprising that BBC was the first news organisation in the world to establish a separate editorial department, called the UGC Hub, to handle user–generated content, in 2005.

With all this, BBC News Online did not wait long to become "better, broader and richer than everyone else["22"] as Hall declared above. Immediately after the launch, the news site was praised for its innovativeness by supporters and critics alike. Drawing one million hits on the first day, BBC News Online quickly established itself as a leading news site in the UK, with its page views reaching 5.3 million in January 1998 and 24 million one year later (Reevel, 1999). It won a significant number of prestigious awards in its first year and prompted a scramble to offer more substantive online news services among major national and international outlets—from portals such as AOL, Yahoo!, Excite and MSN to traditional providers like CNN, ABC, ITN and Sky (Venes, 1998). BBC News Online, and the whole bbc.co.uk that was launched a month after it (December 1997), enjoyed such a quick success that as early as January 1998, John Birt was confident enough to declare: "If there is a better web site than the BBC's on the internet, I have yet to find it. It is informative, imaginative and beautifully designed—and already Europe's largest" (BBC News Online, 1998). Reflecting on this success in 1999, Eggington pointed to the fundamental element of the creative liberty underlining its public funding model:

> We're funded largely out of the license fee, which makes a tremendous difference as you don't have to worry about your revenues. The BBC brand is also a huge advantage, and we don't have to use any of our real estate to give up to ads onscreen. (As cited in Venes, 1999)

In reality, this freedom from commercial concerns has been acknowedged as a key contributor to the innovative online news services of not only the BBC but also other PSBs around the world. In Australia, for example, the ABC's Managing Director recently echoed Eggington when telling an audience of journalism educators that "it's easier to innovate at the ABC compared to Fairfax. We don't have to ask 'will we, and when will we, make money?'" (Scott, 2010).

It should be noted, however, such freedom was necessary but insufficient for BBC News (or ABC News and the like) to succeed online. In the case of the BBC News Online, there was a strong commitment to public service, as we have seen. And not less importantly, there is a regulatory system that, although increasingly hostile to the BBC, is still favourable to the exercise of such commitment. This point will become clearer by comparison in the next section, where we examine how the BBC's Spanish counterpart, RTVE, has struggled, survived and thrived in the online news world as its regulatory system went through a recent fundamental shift from being unsupportive to supportive of PSBs.

Public Service and the Unusually Late Emergence of RTVE News on the Web

At the time of writing, the website of Radio Televisión Española (RTVE) is a leader on the Spanish web. It was one of the six most visited sites in Spain by the end of 2009, with unique users amounting to 7.7 million in April 2010. As of June 2010, according to OJD (the "Spanish Nielsen"), it attracted a total of 213,834,484 pageviews, a number far ahead those of its major competitors, antena3.com (167,836,262) and telecinco.es (126,673,974). By comparison, in June 2008, telecinco.es collected 83,200,388 pageviews per month, antena3.com 23,809,873, and rtve.es only 17,188,252. While specific news traffic figures are not available for this chapter, critics have attributed much of the site's position to its innovative offerings in news and current affairs. As García and García (2010) commented:

> Rtve.es offers the best online selection of news and information: the enormous volume of its digital archives, the magnitude of its human resources, the possibility of seeing live news broadcasts 24 hours a day, as well as the large number of exclusive news stories drawn from the web, make it the standard bearer for the Spanish television network's transition to online services. (p. 260)

Looking it at its shape and success today, however, few would imagine that only a few years ago, it was no more than an also–ran news site in Spain. Unlike most

major news organisations around the world, RTVE was unusually late in embracing online news opportunities. Up until 2006, the online news strategy at RTVE had been to have no strategy at all (Llorens, 2008), with the site offering no more than a shortened four–minute version of its television bulletin and a collection of items from its teletext service (Salaverría, 2007, p. 356). All this came to an end in May 2008, when the site went through a drastic revamp and then quickly gained the status of a leading online news site in Spain. This was thanks to a number of political and structural changes that saw a perception of RTVE's nature as a PSB being renewed and prevailing. Our interest here is, again, how this renewed public–service ethos came about and contributed to the quick evolution of rtve.es from a mere corporate site to a leading news site in Spain.

From political dependence and financial difficulties to a strong public service ethos

RTVE declined rapidly in the first fifteen years of the web. With an administration instability associated with constant changes of directors and a primary reliance on advertising, RTVE faced an era of increasing media competition with the worsening of two already perennial problems: an ideological dependence on whichever political party was in power; and a progressive debt that reached an alarming 7.5 billion in 2006 (Arriaza, 2008). Added to this was an indifference to online opportunities among RTVE's top managers, who seemed to be more interested in news as a political weapon than a public service (Llorens, 2008). In their eyes, online news was an investment for a too distant future, offering neither short term profit nor immediate political influence. As Bustamante (2002) wrote, "RTVE is so seized with its political, administrative and financial crisis in the analogical world that it is hardly capable to face, in a planned and coherent way, the digital challenge."

Changes, however, started to take place after Zapatero's Socialist government was elected in 2004. As the Amsterdam Protocol on the System of Public Broadcasting had created a stronger perception of public service and led to a fundamental transformation of the television landscape in every European state (Azurmendi, 2007), RTVE's mounting problems forced the new government to commit to a series of profound reforms. Inspired by a Green Paper ("Review of the BBC's Royal charter: a strong BBC, independent of Government") and a White Paper ("A public service for all: the BBC in the digital age") by the British government, it appointed a "Committee of Sages" to re–think the structure, mission and the public entity of RTVE. The resulting 2005 report provided the justification for undertaking dramatic changes so that the network could be more competitive, more efficient and of better service to the public. With news at the centre of its recommendations,

the report specified seven public service principles for RTVE: (a) communicative functions for citizens, not consumers; (b) social, not economic, profitability; (c) independence from government; (d) a new mixed funding mechanism (so that RTVE is no longer primarily relied on advertising revenues as it had done throughout its history); (e) democracy, peace and plurality; (f) quality and innovation; and (g) contribution to the information society as a leader on the internet.

This served as a launching pad for the revamp of RTVE Online in 2008 and its quick advancement in the Spanish online news realm. The new public–service ethos paved the way for a constant interest in and an obligation to being innovative (Fernández, 2010). On the first anniversary of the revamped site, RTVE's president claimed that "rtve.es wants to be the avant–garde of innovation in interactive media" (as cited in Menéndez & Plaza, 2009). Another, probably more important, outcome of the new remit was the ability to stay away from commercial pressures, with the revamped site being less obsessed with revenues and more concerned with serving the public. Rosalía Lloret, the Director of Interactive Media for RTVE until April 2010, explained the fundamental change at the site as follows: "We used to have a corporate web, directed outward from the Corporation to the user; now we are doing things the other way round: we are focusing on the user" (Varela, 2008). This allows rtve.es to be able to commit fully to building a universally accessible news outlet of public benefits rather than of commercial profits. As Lloret explained:

> All of our (online news) initiatives are guided by the intention of offering the maximum accessibility . . . for every Spanish citizen, the real shareholders of RTVE, so that they have a chance to access every piece of our content—even if they are late at home or if they are abroad—and to comment on that content and participate in the debate over it. (As cited in Nielsen Online España, 2009)

The strategic vision and leadership of Luis Fernández between November 2006 and November 2009 was fundamental to the process of materialising that citizenship–oriented philosophy. A man who, in the words of Eduardo Matilla at Multimedia Corp, "wrestled a civil and political consensus about the need for a certain ideological neutrality" (as cited in Hopewell & Pablos, 2009), Fernández shared many values held by John Birt and others at the BBC, particularly the belief that "it is a public and essential service to offer an open, free and on–demand access" (as cited in RTVE, 2009). In order to achieve it in the online world, he made a strong commitment to expending resources on developing its online news operation. While cutting RTVE's staff by a third early in his presidency, for instance, Fernández increased the online team from just 12 people in 2005 to a team of 35 at the time of its relaunch, 27 of whom

were journalists (Marcos, 2009). And since news was at the centre of his public service vision, the number of people serving its online news site almost doubled from 27 to 50 within one year of the relaunch.

The resulting innovative news site

As a result of all this, rtve.es offers a rich range of expensive news services, including many that will probably not make money but are important for public connection to the news. The news site diferentiates itself from its commercial rivals in three main ways:

First, with millions of hours of programming in storage, rtve.es is the first Spanish news site that builds an archive to offer an increasingly abundant amount of audio–visual local and international news; it is an added value for the viewer and allows him/her to catch up missed programmes or retrieve old news whenever he/she wants. As of 2009, according to Marcos (2009), news services on rtve.es offered "more images than the rest of Spanish television networks" and took advantage of having a local/regional station in almost every major city to both produce original content and to repurpose network content.

Second, to put the internet's immediacy to use, rtve.es embeds a live stream of its 24–hour channel in the sidebar of the News home page. In addition, updated textual and audio–visual blogs are run by a solid network of news correspondents around Spain.

Third, rtve.es is now the most advanced site in Spain in terms of multimedia storytelling and is showing the most serious commitment to presenting the news in a web–specific manner. With "one foot in television and the other in radio" (Marcos, 2009), they have experimented with enriching some of their news with podcasts from their radio channels and, as mentioned above, utilised their news archive to make the news more thorough and complete.

Thus, although much more—such as the opportunities for public participation—remains to be done on rtve.es, its two years of innovation have led it, as mentioned, from being an also–ran to being recognised as the best news site in Spain.

Public Service under Attack: Implications for the Future of Online News

Through the two different cases of the BBC and RTVE, this chapter has demonstrated that a relative freedom from commercial interests and an obligation to serving the public have been a, if not *the*, fundamental driver of PSBs' generally more innovative and substantive adoption of online news technolo-

gies. Both, despite being late in their respective online news landscapes for peculiar reasons, established their leading positions within a short time thanks to their primary commitment, from the top to the grassroots level, to citizenship and innovation, not economic profits.

Ironically, the public service remit and the associated creative liberty that constitute these successes have been a reason for the commercial media to threaten the rationale for the existence of strongly funded PSBs in the new media landscape. While admitting the innovativeness of online news services by PSBs, the commercial media have been dismissing them as little more than an inevitable outcome of an unfair competitive advantage that needs to be removed. In 1998, in response to the quick rise to prominence of BBC News Online, Garron Baines, the New Media Director of ITN (the BBC's key domestic rival), said:

> The BBC has £24 million of public money supported by the government to develop a site. I have the support of shareholders and directors of ITN but that support is contingent on me making a profit for them on cross promotion. (As cited in Venes, 1999)

Meanwhile, Hugo Drayton, the Marketing Manager of the *Electronic Telegraph*, put it more bluntly:

> I'm pretty pissed off with them, to be honest. If you chuck millions of pounds of tax payers' money at something, of course, it will work. There is a distinct disadvantage to us, because with so much tax money and huge amounts of staffing, they can have a far superior service by having access to the best journalists in the country—they are able to deluge on volume. (As cited in Venes, 1998)

Today, as the commercial media continue to face tremendous financial problems and are yet to find a good way to make money from their online operations, similar attacks on PSBs are being intensified. In Spain, the recent reform and quick rise to prominence of RTVE, both online and offline, reheated a decade–long campaign by its commercial rivals, led by the Association of Spanish Private Television (UTECA), to call for a stop to what they call an unfair system of mixed funding (i.e., a combination of public funds and advertising revenues). The campaign came to fruition in May 2009, when the government, without consulting Fernandez, announced that RTVE would remove all advertising from its broadcasting programs and website from 2010 to become fully publicly funded. The decision was believed to lead Fernandez, who led RTVE to achieve full independence from political meddling, to resign and left the PSB at risk of falling back into the pre–reform control of the government (Hopewell & Pablos, 2009). Meanwhile, in the UK, News Corporation and others have campaigned for a significant reduction in the

license fee so that the BBC does not become "too big." The "chilling" prospect, of the BBC becoming too big, said James Murdoch in 2009, would allow a distortion of the online news market and harm to the independence and diversity of journalism. According to Murdoch, a dominant BBC would inhibit commercial news providers from investing in and charging for online news (BBC News Online, 2009). It remains to be seen where this campaign will lead us but, as of writing, the new Murdoch–backed Conservative government, in its austerity plan, has frozen the TV license fee while diverting part of BBC's budget to operations that used to be beyond its financial responsibility (most notably the World Service that was formerly funded by the government). This "austerity measure" was announced just several months after the BBC had dropped a number of its services, including some online non–news operations, to save costs.

Given what has been discussed in this chapter, these recent developments might not provide good news for the future of online news. It is clear that PSBs have set high professional standards and forced their commercial rivals to innovate and to strive for excellence in online journalism. Without a continued strong presence of PSBs in the online world, there will be little to ensure that, as technologies continue to evolve fast in the years ahead, the public will be offered online news services that are pertinent to the internet's expanding socio–technical potential.

Acknowledgments

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