

Public Service Broadcasting in Latvia: Old images, new user needs and market pressure



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ABSTRACT: This paper represents a review of how public service broadcasting (PSB) has emerged and developed from the theoretical perspective in post-communist countries, also analysing the way in which these trends exist in Latvia. The development of PSB in Eastern Europe and the Baltic States has been affected to a great degree by the political culture. Parliament and the National Radio and Television Council are not focused on active dialogue with other social partners. Unprofessional management is also a problem in terms of the effectiveness and innovation of PSB operations. The author of this paper concludes that a fundamental necessity is to make note of European experience with culture and democracy, to take into account the experience of post-communist societies, and to react to changes caused by technologies. The point here is not to copy existing solutions, but instead to look for ones that are innovative.

KEYWORDS: public service broadcasting (PSB), post-communist transformation, media policy, political influence



INTRODUCTION

Public service broadcasting (PSB) is an important component in Latvia's media system, because the country, which has only 2.272 million residents (according to data from the Central Statistical Board in late 2008), has four public radio channels and two public television channels. There is, however, a great deal of uncertainty when it comes to the development and future prospects of these institutions, because policies related to the public media in Latvia, as in other post-communist countries, are two-faced – “proclaiming media freedom, but at the same time seeking to retain instruments of their control” (Jakubowicz, 2004, p. 66).

The tradition in Europe is to see PSB as “a social institution for which the state has serious responsibility” (Balčytiene, 2005, p. 41). In Latvia, by contrast, there has been no long-lasting experience in this regard. In Latvia, however, as in Western Europe in the 1980s and Eastern Europe in the 1990s, there was development of “dual broadcast markets as a typical European phenomenon” (Bardoel, 2007, p. 42).

Thus the public media, both television and radio, have faced a series of very contradictory challenges which the Western European media resolved gradually and over the course of a number of decades.

As tendencies toward individualism began to emerge in society, consumerism developed at an equally intensive pace. People became more inert *vis-à-vis* public and political processes. Collective interests became increasingly less important in the eyes of individuals (Brikše & Zelče, 2008).

At the same time, however, there are many people who are not satisfied with the fact that the public media fail to satisfy their expectations about active media involvement in public life (Brikše & Zelče, 2008).

The economic situation in Latvia deteriorated very quickly in 2009, with GDP expected to drop over the course of the year by as much as 12 to 13% or even more. This has led to a rapid shrinkage in the advertising market.

Advertising in January–June 2009, as compared to the 2008, dropped by 36% on TV, 54% in the newspapers, 59% in the magazines, and 35% on the radio (according to data from the TNS Latvia).

This increases the public need for a new understanding of PSB – a network of public and civil activities which are necessary because traditional media policies can be inadequate and useless in a rapidly changing society in which the development of public service media is of critical importance so as to strike a balance between society's cultural and economic interests, as well as to create a framework for the rapid development of high-quality journalism.

BROADCASTING: A SERVICE OR A MEDIUM?

If we look at the way in which public service broadcasting in Europe has shifted to a structure of public service media, then we absolutely must determine the theoretic frames for analysis of these processes in post-communist countries, because their experience with the media and with political culture is much different than that of the older member states of the European Union.

Jakubowicz (2004), in analysing the way in which post-communist societies, as well as media policymakers, react to transition processes, has identified three orientations – idealistic, mimetic, and atavistic.

The idealistic orientation is based on intellectual opposition which perceived the Communist system as unethical and “assumed the introduction of direct communicative democracy as a part of change of social power relations” (Jakubowicz, 2004, p. 57). Essentially, the new system stood in direct opposition to the old communist media system. State media had to be transformed into social media so as to ensure democratic participation, free access, freedom of speech, etc.

A mimetic orientation is focused on the understanding of ways of “achieving realistic approximation to ‘the West,’ including full liberalisation of the print media

world and creation of the dual system of broadcasting” (Jakubowicz & Sükösd, 2008, p. 18). Western European media policies and models can, in terms of this orientation, be directly imported into other public and media systems, and if “market forces which are part of the ‘western’ system are allowed to operate, they will by themselves reproduce many ‘undesirable’ aspects of western media” (Jakubowicz, 2004, p. 66).

An atavistic orientation emerges in post-communist societies after transitional processes in which the new power elites, which have been largely focused on the mimetic approach, instead decide that elements of the old system must be preserved so that the elite can undertake paternal responsibility over society, because individuals are not always capable of accepting the correct plans. In media development, then, social responsibility and manifestations of paternalism will emerge at various levels.

If the mimetic and the atavistic orientation contain successive idealistic orientation, then the arrangement of their elements can be diverse and blended between them.

The same trend can be seen in the development of all political cultures – something that has been defined by Vihalemm, Lauristin and Tallo (1997) in three stages – mythological, ideological, and critical-rational. The transition from the mythological to the ideological stage is very rapid, while the development of the critical-rational stage takes years. Typical in the ideological stage are processes of westernisation, where ready-made text and copied, ready-made institutions are put into place. These can be accepted by the political economic elite more quickly than is the case with the public at large. This process was clearly seen, for example, in the way in which a new law on Radio Latvia and Latvian Television was drafted and approved in 1995.

That is why the direct copying of Western experience in the media practices of Latvia or other post-communist countries would be a questionably useful direction. That is true for several reasons. First of all, media regulations in Europe are very diverse.

Secondly, the evolution of media systems is not a linear phenomenon – one in which it would be possible to identify all changes in logical succession, taking into account various side effects in the system itself and in society at large. Third, even in those societies in which PSB is based on long-lasting traditions of democracy and culture, media systems do not develop in a linear manner. Fourth, the “dualisation” of broadcasting forces us to take a new look at the two concepts upon which PSB is based: “the first concern was that a fully market-based start of broadcasting would not be viable, due to the public good nature of broadcasting. A second concern was that television would be dangerously influential and/or detrimental for moral values” (Van Dijk, Nahuys & Waagmeester, 2006, p. 252).

Identifying public broadcasting as public good nature is not simple, because “the role of PSB in the European context seems [...] wider than purely political,

including educational, social and cultural functions” (Harrison & Woods, 2001, p. 480).

In describing the three defining characteristics of PSB, Syvertsen speaks of a set of privileges, a list of obligations, and a control structure. These include universal coverage which the service must make accessible to the entire population; a set of content requirements in terms of programming having to be diverse, at a high level of quality, etc. and the need to protect and strengthen national culture and identity (Syvertsen, 2003).

If PSB is judged from the perspective of the audience, then we can emphasise pluralism, diversity, independence, quality and accessibility (Van Dijk, Nahujs & Waagmeester, 2006). If we analyse the relationship between the media and media users, however, then such characterisations cannot always be identified, because in the highly commercialised media markets of the present day, these factors often exclude each other.

That is why it is of key importance to appreciate the fact that there can be different relationships between a media outlet and its audience. In describing the relationship between television and viewers, for instance, Syvertsen points to four groups – citizens (people who are members of a democratic society), audiences (TV viewers), customers (people who are keen to consume products and services), and players (playful and resourceful individuals who are keen to participate in various activities) (Syvertsen, 2004).

Discussions about the participation of the public, citizens, community members, etc., in public communication are fairly diverse. Livingstone, Lunt and Miller, for instance, focus on the gap between “citizens” and “consumers,” because “the critical concern, in short, is whether the citizen has a voice in regulatory debates, or whether this voice is being subordinated to the market” (Livingstone, Lunt & Miller, 2007, p. 616).

Bardoel and d’Haenens, for their part, argue that many PSB outlets “have kept the people and civil society at a distance, while politics and the government proved to be the preferred partner” (Bardoel & d’Haenens, 2008b, p. 340). This approach reflects two traditional understandings of mass communications – striking a pose of paternalism in relations with the audience.

Changes in media technologies offer new opportunities for true media user participation, not least in the shaping of media content. Here the media operate as professionally established platforms which allow users to create and publish their own content. Accordingly, they ensure that they share the power over channels and their users. Online elements can ideally supplement radio and television with discussion forums, and this is one of the best examples of how the Internet can promote dialogue among citizens (Moe, 2008b).

Equal opportunities to reach communications channels or platforms also increase the likelihood that the content will be more independent of political or any other power-based influence.

We can agree with Bardoel and d'Haenens when they argue that “prospects for public service broadcasting in Europe are less bleak than they seemed only a few years ago” (Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2008b, p. 350). There are currently two criteria related to the further development of PSB: (1) effective linear and non-linear communications in the context of multimedia efforts, which demands that media outlets rethink their role beyond existing services and familiar modes and (2) the provision of more services to a broader audience (Bardoel & Lowe, 2007).

This means that a public broadcast outlet which wants to transform public service broadcasting into public service media must: (1) transform itself into a multimedia organisation; (2) offer its programmes on many platforms; (3) use new technologies to make the programme more attractive (Jędrzejewski, 2008) and (4) redefine their relations with the audience (Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2008b).

If this is to be possible, however, PSB outlets must define the needs and speak to the relevant legislative niches. As Gross argued in 2004, “one of the more glaring failures in Eastern Europe has been the lack of the definition of the role public service media are to play” (Gross, 2004, p. 123).

In the European PSB environment, there are three ways of using the Internet at this time: (1) assessing individual online services in isolation; (2) presenting online services as an appendix to broadcasting and (3) public broadcasters supplementing online efforts (Moe, 2008a). This has created a widespread spectrum of new opportunities, where applicability must be evaluated in specific national media environments. It is particularly useful to use these new opportunities with a focus on PSB functions in terms of promotion national culture, language and education, because they offer new chances to establish significant databases, ensure access to some, ensure the availability and popularity of cultural phenomena, and provide for active public participation.

PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTING IN LATVIA: DEVELOPMENTS AND UNDERSTANDINGS

The development of public service broadcasting in Latvia has been a rapid process, complete with various conditions and needs. These can be divided up into three periods: (1) transformation from monopolistic resources of Soviet-era mass information and propaganda to public broadcasting media, with fundamental participants becoming involved in the Latvian Awakening, which was aimed at restoring Latvia's independence while also allowing active citizens to take part in an arena of public debate and communications; (2) learning about the nature of democratic media, moving further away from direct participation and involvement in public processes while also re-focusing the understanding of goals and missions in relation to the establishment of a diverse arena for public debate and (3) commercialisation, particularly in television – something that reflects developmental trends related to other public media outlets in Europe.

The first period emerged in 1988 (Høyer, Lauk & Vihalemm, 1993), even though no official changes had yet occurred. Radio, television and the press were still subject to Soviet regulations in accordance with prevailing laws.

This period had a fundamental and long-lasting effect on Latvian Radio and Latvian Television, which were transformed into independent enterprises in 1990. This had to do with organisational culture and, logically enough, the content of these media.

Throughout the Soviet period, Latvian Radio and Latvian Television were monopolies which faced no competition. They did not face any manifestations of competition that did affect the printed press, albeit minimally and not in the context of an actual media market. There was some professional competition there. Both media outlets were based on the fairly strict assumption that the audience required content and formats that were defined by the editors of the public media and that the audience would automatically accept these.

All of these factors facilitated the development of a paternalistic understanding at the radio and television stations. The idea was that they were responsible for preserving social norms and order in society, that they could evaluate the correct and incorrect actions of individuals, that they could issue instructions about desirable behaviours, lifestyles, systems of views, etc. The discourse of paternalism is, to this very day, seen in the programmes of Latvian Radio and Latvian Television alike.

The second period began in the early 1990s, and the third one began in the mid-1990s. By that time, sufficiently powerful commercial radio stations had emerged. The cited periods are still continuing in many ways, although their tendencies are contradictory and interacting.

In the mid-1990s, there was a crisis in Latvia's electronic media market. The new public media outlets increasingly felt pressured by the presence of commercial media outlets in the market. They lost audience share, and they proved unable to attract sufficient amounts of advertising. Commercial radio stations presented formats similar to those of the public media, seeking to take over their audience so that the public media could be pushed out the market.

The new Radio and Television law that was adopted in 1995 had a fundamentally important role in terms of bringing greater order to the electronic media system and market. It defined far clearer regulations with respect to the public media.

The public broadcasting organisations that are Latvian Radio and Latvian Television are state-owned non-profit companies with limited liability. The two media outlets are defined in the law as financially independent institutions which are financed from the national budget, but also have the right to engage in commercial operations.

The law also defined oversight of Latvian Radio and Latvian Television – the National Radio and Television Council (NRTC) was charged with these functions. The council licenses the two public broadcasting organisations, and it issues licenses to the commercial media on a competitive basis.

The understanding of the public media, however, was basically a formality – one that was based on the experience of Europe’s “old democracies.” That is why there have been active debates about several aspects related to the operations of public service broadcasters – how to interpret the legal norms, and how to strike a balance between the public good on the one hand and the interests of the media market on the other. There are four key topics here: (1) the placement of advertising in the public media (commercial broadcasting organisations object by saying that this deforms the media market); (2) the debate as to whether the public media are needed in the first place, because the commercial media also provide news programmes, as well as shows concerning important public problems, but do not receive any state subsidy; at the same time, the public media do produce entertainment programming and enjoy the privileges of that subsidy; (3) the speculation that public media do not satisfy audience interests because their ratings are declining and (4) the introduction of the licence fee.

If we take an overall look at the actors in these discussions, then we see that they can be divided up into three groups. First of all, there are commercial broadcasters and representatives of their interests. They try to encourage the government to change the law so that the public media are turned into narrow cast media outlets which, in a predictable period of time, become marginalised and are distanced from the ability to attract the attention of a broad range of the public. Secondly, there are people in Latvia (academic experts, representatives of the intellectual elite, teachers, etc.) who believe that commercialisation of the media represents a risk against democracy, culture, national identity, public morality, etc. Third, there are folks who express specific consumer views that are partly in line with commercial broadcasters, and these are based on individual experience and taste. This means that judgments are based on the viewer’s interests, choices and gratification.

In these discussions, the Latvian cultural and artistic elite are basically mimetic orientated, though idealistic orientations pop up from time to time. The broader public represents the atavistic orientation, which involves expectations related to the public media and its journalists – they are supposed to “implement order,” fight against corruption and economic inequality, etc. This is a view which is typically represented by elderly radio listeners. The mimetic orientation of commercial broadcasters, for its part, is focused on “the West,” but this applies not to European practices, but rather to American ones.

The political culture of debate is distinctly ideological, and both the intellectual elite and commercial broadcasters make use of “Western models” to explain their positions. There is a lack of a critical-rational approach, but if one appears, then statements about Latvia’s situation and about possible models for development are usually criticised harshly, not discussed properly.

All in all, the public media are identified in binary opposition against the commercial media in public discourse: (1) different financing principles (advertising as a

source of financing for PSB can be interpreted as unjustified and inappropriate for the system and (2) different priorities in terms of content (if the function of PSB is to inform, educate and integrate society, disseminate cultural and similar values, etc., then pop culture and entertainment are unimportant for PSB). This limited view of PSB has substantially affected the development of its content, structure and finances.

TRENDS IN THE REGULATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE ELECTRONIC MEDIA

The environment of the electronic media has developed very rapidly over the last two decades. A few years after the law on radio and television was approved, there were signs to suggest that it was already out-of-date. The NRTC began to work on a new draft law, but it was only in 2003 that Saeima (Parliament) received the proposal. In 2005, Parliament gave first-reading approval to two new draft laws on broadcasting organisations – a new law on radio and television and another on public broadcasting organisations. On July 2008, the NRTC submitted a new draft law on audio and audiovisual media services to the relevant parliamentary commissions, but it was shot down and sent back to the council for further work. Saeima received the new version of the law on June 2009, but now under a different name – now it was a law on the electronic media.

The laws adopted in 1992 and 1995 were the result of considerable pressure from society and private business (Brikše, Skudra & Tjarve, 2002), but now the drafting of new laws is stimulated more by the need to implement the European Commission directive on audiovisual media services.

In 1992 and 1995, discussions about the law involved extensive public consideration, but since 2003, when the first version of the new regulations was submitted to Saeima, there has been comparatively little media attention, and the public have not been brought into the discussion. What is more, there are no discussions or viewpoints among representatives of the public media and other sectors. This confirms what Bardoel and d’Haenens (2008b) have written – that the people and civil society could be kept at a distance from any discussion of the problems which the electronic media face.

The critical-rational stage of political culture must be achieved in Latvia if PSB regulations are to be changed in cognisance of the new situation that is based on the rapid development of media technology, as well as to ensure implementation of the principles that are determined by EU directives and the realities of social development in Latvia. The way in which the relevant laws have been prepared, however, indicates that legislators and the NRTC are still at the ideological stage of political culture.

NRTC was made up of nine members approved by Saeima. Several members of the council have admitted over the course of the years that they have encountered both political pressure and pressure from other interest groups. They have also said that votes at the council are sometimes influenced by the positions that have been taken by the relevant political parties.

There have been a great many signals or informal pressure on management at various levels to affect content (e.g., TV journalists have been asked to pre-submit interview questions for politicians).

The draft law which was submitted to the Saeima, alas, maintains the dependency of PSB on the Saeima, which votes on the budget of public broadcasting organisations each year. There has been an entire lack of political readiness to identify a financing procedure that would ensure the independence of PSB, as well as sufficient resources to ensure high-quality content. Under an economic crisis, the financial dependency of the public media on the votes of the political parties may well increase.

Latvian Radio began 2009 with a budget deficit of approximately EUR 1 million. That was an unexpected surprise not only for the public at large, but also for the NRTC. The basic reason why the council cannot monitor processes in the public media is that members simply do not have the expertise that is needed.

In order to deal with Latvian Radio's financial problems, the NRTC turned to the Ernst & Young auditing company, which was hired to prepare an economically justified reorganisation and expenditures optimisation plan not only for Latvian Radio, but also for Latvian Television. It is expected that the two media outlets will be merged in June 2010. The report is not publicly available because of the contract between auditing company and NRTC.

In October 2009, Parliament set up a working group on the further development of the public media. Media experts were invited to take part in the group's work. The report that was eventually issued by the group was harshly critical of the way in which the public media have been managed and supervised. A series of very important proposals was made. The first was to improve the regulatory process in this area, making sure that all legislative acts in this area are harmonised with one another and have been prepared in cognisance of changes that have taken place in the relevant information environment. Second, the panel recommended a clearer and more transparent public service remit process, including quality criteria therein. Third, the working group proposed that the management and oversight of the public media be split off from the management and oversight of the commercial media. A separate oversight institution could be set up, and members for it would be proposed by public and professional organisations (not Parliament, as is the case at this time). Fourth, the panel called for greater independence of the content of the public media from sources of financing (barring situations in which sponsors directly finance the producers of broadcasts, or in which programmes are financed from the resources of government institutions). Fifth, the group proposed that the transitional regulations of the relevant new law call for independent financing for the public media so that, as the country's economic situation improves, such a system could be put in place (at this time most of the financing for the public media comes from the national budget). Parliamentary fractions and committees did not support most of these recommendations. The most important improvements to the draft law include a clearer sense of the public service remit, a slight shift toward greater

public representation in the selection of people for the oversight council, and the establishment of a public consulting council.

DOES SOCIETY REALLY NEED PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTING?

This is an issue which has typically been discussed in two frames in Latvia, and there is usually no search for linkage between them. The first are media ratings, while the second is media content.

Looking at the ratings which are drawn by PSB outlets in Latvia, many people argue that Latvian Radio and Latvian Television are unnecessary or at least not in line with audience interests and needs.

Studies concerning the structure and content of television channels that have been conducted by researchers and students at the Department of Communications Studies of the University of Latvia have shown that audience loyalty is very unstable. People switch channels during commercial breaks, in relation to programmes being shown on other channels, and because of other reasons – the structure and content of channels tends to be quite similar. Between 45 and 53% of news presented on the news reports of commercial stations is the same. The evening news broadcast of Latvian Television is less similar to those of commercial channels (around 40%), and there are more original stories prepared by the own journalists.

When it comes to the second issue – how to determine the utility of PSB in terms of public interests by looking PSB content, it is also not possible to come up with a clear answer.

For instance, we can evaluate audience attitudes toward the content of TV programmes, and here we see two trends: (1) views about some content are divided up proportionally in diametrically opposite views and (2) between one-quarter and one-third of respondents feel that there are insufficient numbers of broadcasts that are specifically the priority of PSB.

According to TNS Latvia, the overall amount of television watching is increasing stably in Latvia. In 2007, each Latvian resident older than four watched 3.5 hours of television, on average, each day. In 2008 the figure was up to 4 hours and 58 minutes, while in February 2009, it was 5 hours and 35 minutes (although this might possibly be explained at least in part by the fact that unemployment has risen rapidly in Latvia).

Viewing and listening habits in the capital are different than those in other parts of the country. Commercial channels lead the pack in Riga, while the commercial channel LNT (owned by News Corp. Europe till March 2010) and the first programme of LTV are at the top of this list nationally (partly due to the fact that those are the only two channels which can be seen nationwide).

The most popular radio programmes for quite some time have been Latvian Radio 2, which plays popular Latvian music, mostly songs, and Latvian Radio 1. Latvian Radio 2 is far ahead, attracting more than one-quarter of the total audience.

But in June 2009, the NRTC decided to turn Latvian Radio 2 over to a private enterprise on the basis of concession.

Budget cuts led Latvian Television to announce at the end of 2008 that it would no longer produce “The Cost of Foolishness.” The audience contributed more than EUR 40,000 to pay for future production, but this was not enough. The entire production team decamped to a commercial station, TV3 (owned by Modern Times Group). The conclusion here is that the audience of the public media want a wide range of content in various formats – content which makes it possible to recognise the realities of the lives of audience members in accordance with the construct of reality that is presented by the various shows (Brikše & Zelče, 2008).

The views of the NRTC and representatives of media management *vis-à-vis* the presence of popular culture in the content of PSB demonstrate both a lack of competence in evaluating the ability of the public media in a dual broadcasting market situation, as well as an atavistic orientation in terms of seeing public broadcasting as a public benefit. The point is that the public media will always lose in competition with commercial channels, and this will clearly change the way in which events, values and attitudes are portrayed in the media.

Latvian Television and Latvian Radio have managed to maintain their positions among other electronic media thanks to viewing and listening habits. Increasingly, however, there is a problem – these channels are not reaching people who are young and economic active. The Internet portals of both public media outlets are weak, new technologies are not used very much in creating media content, and when they are used, they are seen only as a supplement.

This means that the public media, particularly during the current economic crisis, face a serious risk of disappearing amidst the massive range of offers made by commercial channels. The threats are even greater if we remember the extensive availability of Russian television channels in Latvia, where most residents are bilingual.

Politicians in Latvia do not care about any public debate about the development of the public service media, nor are they interested in improving the operations of these outlets, which would create a platform for broad political debate. With so much competition in the media market, other media outlets are also not interested in the development of PSB, because they do not want any more competition in terms of audience share.

CONCLUSIONS

The development of PSB in Latvia has faced the same problems as seen in other post-communist countries, as well as in the “old” democracies of Europe. The lack of traditions in terms of democracy and culture, along with the very rapid development of consumerism, however, have caused even greater risks for the survival of PSB as it is transformed into public service media.

There is no conceptual understanding of such ideas as social demand and market demand, let alone any thought given to how these can be reflected in media policy. Experience shows that the direct copying of other countries' experience in this matter is impossible because of differing circumstances – democratic practice, the media culture, the economic situation etc.

Latvian politicians and members of the National Radio and Television Council have demonstrated astonishing ignorance of public opinion. Neither is interested in facilitating public debate about the positioning of the public media. There has been less and less reaction to public criticism and proposals. The main arguments are sought out not *via* a rational analysis of the situation or the hearing of conflicting views, but instead *via* reference to EU directives, the experience of other countries, etc.

There is a lack of innovative approach toward forecasting the future of the public media, but this is something that is absolutely necessary.

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