

# AUDITING PUBLIC BROADCASTING PERFORMANCE: ITS THEORY AND PRACTICE

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## Abstract

In most West European countries public service broadcasting (PSB) is in a state of flux, if not in crisis.

Across the board, organisations are loosing their audience, particularly among the younger viewers, they are confronted with a critical and sometimes hostile political environment, and the self-evidence of their financial support or even their *raison d' être* is put into question, not least by their competitors. In short: they are often fighting for support and struggling to survive.

What's been going on here in the last ten, twenty years that merits such lamentation and is prompting a discussion about its mission and responsibilities? Do

PSBs still deserve their preferential treatment in the broadcasting market, what responsibilities does that then entail, and how are they held to account for their "public" performance? A short overview is an introduction to a special issue on the theoretical grounding of, and empirical experiences with, auditing public broadcasting performance.

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There are at least five, related, trends and developments that can help explain PSB's plight and at the same time the ways in which it is responding to this crisis. Firstly, there have been dramatic changes in the broadcasting market. Till the mid 1980s, public broadcasting in most West European countries had a near or full monopoly position; at the moment all countries have a dual system with commercial and public channels uncomfortably living side by side. Luxembourg is still the odd one out with a pure commercial system. Though public broadcasters still achieve a substantial audience share, in most countries the majority of viewers spend more time watching the light enter- and infotainment of the commercial stations than the more heavy variety of informative, cultural, educational and relatively few entertainment programmes of the public broadcasters. These changes in the TV landscape have prompted competition over viewers, financial resources, talent, imported programmes and costly genres like sports. Programmatic convergence of the two systems has only happened sporadically, but most public broadcasters are reconsidering (often labelled as strengthening, sometimes as redefining) their remit and a relative decline of their traditional programmatic supply is certainly one of the options. This raises the question what then makes the PSB's so socially responsible that they claim prerogatives with regard to their continued existence, financing and favourable treatment?

That, among other things, has led, secondly, to a legitimacy or identity crisis of public service broadcasting. Outside, but also inside the organisations it is being questioned what, actually, its "publicness" does stand for and what is so special that it should have a preferential position. Its public good character – financed and guaranteed by the state – demands a public interest function; but what that entails, in who's interest it is and how it takes shape in actual programming is either vague and undefined or open to different interpretations and contested. Market failure – the argument that competition is no guarantee for and might even negatively effect diversity, range, quality and accessibility – has always been a central justification for supporting PSB, but one that gets more and more under fire (Blumler 1993). Commercial stations complain about paternalism and favouritism, while, as they so modestly claim: "we are the real public channels, because we give what the public wants." And though the audience is certainly not totally abandoning PSB, they have an "exit" option. Paying a licence fee for programmes that one did not ask for is no longer taken for granted. This changed opinion climate is strengthened by arguments favouring market ideology; the traditional commitment of the political elite is waning and the question is being raised whether PSB is delivering an added value worth the money?

Thirdly, public broadcasters in many West European countries suffer also from a crisis of authority. They are blamed for being politically biased and cynical; for moving from a descriptive and informative journalism to interpretative framing; for emphasising the failures and not the accomplishments of politics; for over-focusing on scandal, conflict, the negative and the personal; for hyping a self-constructed reality and, by doing that; for misusing their powerful and independent position. The Kelly case in the UK, where the BBC in the summer of 2003 was attacked by the government for misusing information leaked by a whistleblower and for unsubstantiated blaming of the Labour government for "sexing up" the information on which it went to war in Iraq, was a case in point. At the same time it is an example of the declining trust between politics and broadcast journalists in

particular and of the political reaction to an acclaimed *media logic* in which the parameters of political communication are set by the culture and production rules, the selection criteria and desires of television. Since they are publicly financed institutions, public broadcasters in many West European countries are not only blamed for not being responsible, but also for not being accountable: power without responsibility and without accountability. Journalists, on the other hand, criticised for their performance, emphasise their independence and point to the freedom of the press, like diplomats showing their passports when caught by the police while drunken driving.

Fourthly, public broadcasting has financial problems. License fees are at best indexed and advertising on public channels is limited: the EC Directive *Television Without Frontiers* has set a maximum of 12 minutes of advertising per hour throughout the day. Though the commercial sector is suffering more from the recent economic downturn and the consequent decline in advertising revenues, being mostly dependent on license fees is no financial guarantee for survival. Programme making, programme import, employing star reporters, anchors, talk and entertainment show hosts, buying and paying for sports and film rights, starting digital services, it all has a price tag. And the price rises as competition increases. Raising the licence fee is not a political option and the income from advertising has to be shared with a growing number of competitors. The question is whether under such conditions public broadcasting can fulfil its expectations of providing high quality information and culture, whether it can keep on tickling and provoking the mind and be innovative all at the same time, or that they “go for the cheap” and aim for large size audiences?

But it is exactly with the public that, finally, we witness changes that further affect the position of public broadcasters. Individualization is probably the key variable here. On the one hand we notice the growth of the self-assured citizen, more interested in life politics, self-actualization and what’s in it for him. On the other hand we see the turned-off voter/consumer, more interested in the private sphere of non-committed pleasure or in the shared experience and virtual community of Big Brother type game shows. Neither of the two are much interested in or at best ambivalent towards notions of public interest or cultural obligations and responsibilities, both so strongly linked to the notion of public service broadcasting. Most public broadcasters are struggling to hold or win back a young audience. Moreover, the crisis of authority and trust is not only one between politics and media, but also between the media and their audiences. The killing of populist politician Pim Fortuyn in the Netherlands in May 2002 was by large segments of the population not only blamed on the arrogance of the political elite, but also on the assumed “demonising” by journalists of a man “who said what he thought and did what he said.” The traditional trust in public television news as reliable, independent and necessary is waning.

## Responsible, Responsive and Accountable

When public broadcasting still had a monopoly, it claimed a sense and even had an air of social responsibility and of responsiveness to the public. The former meant that the organisations lived by a cultural-pedagogic logic, an obligation to society, in which an informed and rational citizenry participates in the process and

well being of democratic politics. Television was to inform and culturally enrich the viewers, to challenge them with the new and the critical, and to educate them so they could perform their role in and enhance democracy. A socially responsible broadcasting organisation *speaks* to the people from a position of “knowing” what the public needs in order to participate fully as democratic citizens. Information in this discourse is not merely a commodity but also a social or “merit” good that should be accurate, diverse and of high quality.

Responsiveness meant that broadcasting organisations both took account of and were accountable to the public. A responsive organisation is sensitive to the diversity of needs and wishes the public might have. It takes the audience more as a starting point; it speaks less and *listens* more to the public and thus comes close to the commercial discourse. Both responsibility (as an obligation to the public) and responsiveness (as taking account of the public) are grounded in a belief in the malleability of society, the changeability of human nature and the establishment of the ideals of the Enlightenment. It assumes that broadcast media are instrumental to social orientations of citizens and to social cohesion in society (Bardoel and Brants 2003). Ownership of public media under these terms is a public trust in which the content producers should be independent from state and market forces, but at the same time accountable to the public in order to avoid power without responsibility (Blumler and Hoffmann-Riem 1992).

The two positions – being responsible and responsive – don’t live easily together. Responsibility is associated with independence and creative autonomy, and responsiveness and accountability more with regulation or even control, be it usually as a means to guarantee that the organisation lives up to its expectations and obligations. It was for this double role that PSB got a preferential treatment. As they claimed: where private stations are after the audience’s money, we are after their well being; where the other emphasise television as a pleasure machine and produce more of the same, we hail its meaning production through the presentation of a plurality of views and opinions; where the commercial stations give what public wants, we give what it needs; where we are the embodiment of the Enlightenment ideal, the commercial stations are the epitaph of post-modern culture, et cetera.

So far the PSB’s own rhetoric. The reality, however, has often been responsibility as an excuse for only a minimal form of accountability; accountability itself being more of a symbolic nature; and responsiveness the victim of high cultural paternalism. Now, this picture may not hold for every Western European country in every way and it is probably somewhat overly sombre in its enumerative simplicity, but that the long-term future of Europe’s PSB is uncertain is an understatement. The five developments of the last twenty years and the coinciding issues confronting public broadcasting – increasing competition, a legitimacy, authority and financial crisis, and a (young) audience less interested in the obligations of the Enlightenment ideal – have prompted a (further) need for clarifying or redefining one’s mission, for improving one’s performance and for a more transparent and realistic form of accountability. But it is a need filled with uneasiness about and sensitivity to the paradox of independence and responsiveness. It is aimed at improving quality and efficiency, bringing what is in the public interest more in line with what the public is interested in, but with the risk that it takes the form of autonomy limiting regulation.

## From Accountability to Audits

This special issue is about auditing as a specific form of holding public broadcasting organisations to account *vis-à-vis* the quality, efficiency and relevance of their performance. It is the outcome of what started as an expert meeting on this topic in June 2002 in the residence of Dutch public broadcasting, Hilversum<sup>1</sup>. All contributors to this colloquium developed their ideas further into the articles that now constitute this special issue.<sup>2</sup> Both that meeting and this issue show a confrontation or, to put it more mildly, a meeting between normative theories, abstract notions, and concepts of accountability and auditing on the one hand and on the other the empirical realities, the practices, promises and problems in a number of countries.

Denis McQuail disentangles the knot which characterises the use of the specific normative concepts dominant in the discussion about the ins and outs, pros and cons of auditing public broadcasting performance: responsibility, obligation, accountability, liability, answerability, and the inherent tension between media independence and accountability. In a way he dropped the first brick in the quiet pond of academia with his seminal *Media Performance* (1992) and he recently closed the circle with *Media Accountability and Freedom of Publication* (2003). He argues that, different from regulation and control, being accountable for what is expected from or entrusted to public broadcasters is not necessarily a threat to media freedom, it could even be beneficial to it.

From a media management perspective, Robert Picard is more practical and straightforward than normative and all encompassing in his discussion of the different ways the financial and operational effectiveness of public broadcasting can be assessed. He complements McQuail's questions of content and quality performance with a richly illustrated exploration into the economic and managerial approaches to assessment of public broadcasting organisations. He also shows that these measures can shed a completely different light on taken-for-granted assumptions about the plight public broadcasting in Europe is in.

Four articles describe, analyse and assess the actual practices of different forms of accountability. First Karol Jakubowicz places audits within the context and blurred definition of public broadcasting, the discussion over its remit and its change in discourse and policy from a cultural to an economic paradigm. He takes the bird's eye view in looking at and comparing several countries while at the same time taking a closer look at the EU level, the way the remit is defined there and the effect this has had on the national level. The picture he sees does not really enthuse him and he doubts whether the different forms of accountability and the expectations with which they are often introduced do really solve the problem of public broadcasters in dire straights. Instead of being challenged by them, PSB's may end up in a niche that turns out to be a dead-end street.

For a non-British audience the BBC is often considered the flagship, the ideal-type, may be even the mother of all public broadcasters. In Georgina Born's contribution, written before the Kelly affair in which the Board of Governors took a surprising strong stance *vis-à-vis* government pressure, it is as if this dream has become a nightmare. In an analysis based on numerous interviews, in-house observations and ploughing through heaps of official documents, she fillets the "armoury of audits" which has flooded the BBC since John Birt took over as Director General

in 1993 till his departure in 2000. The verbatim reproduction of internal group meetings about different performance assessments at the work floor are entertaining as well as telling and shocking and lead the author to the conclusion that the form accountability has taken at the BBC has resulted in *institutionalised reflexivity* which is unproductive, disciplines the work of independent journalists and suffocates creativity.

Jo Bardoel on the Netherlands and Olof Hultén on Sweden are clearly less pessimistic. At the eve of the first Dutch audit Bardoel is even hopeful. He treats audits as the logical outcome of recent trends in broadcasting policy and changes in society, and he more or less welcomes this form of accountability. Though he recognises the risks of bureaucratization, he contends that these assessments may well become a useful and necessary instrument for internal quality control and external legitimation. Moreover, it is a possible way of restoring the link between broadcasters and their audience, as it once typified the social and political bonds in the Netherlands under the old *pillarised* system.

As Bardoel's prudent optimism may also be explained by his participation in the official Dutch assessment commission, Hultén's position as a senior policy advisor at Sveriges Television seems to give him the opportunity of a close insight in the annual self-audited public service reports as well as a more distanced evaluation. He observes that the reports so far fulfil two purposes: that of providing material for a political evaluation of the publicly funded services and enhancing internal performance discussions. But they clearly fail in another: to stimulate a public discussion and go beyond political accountability only. Public broadcasting may have legitimacy problems; the annual audits have not placed the issue on the public's agenda in Sweden.

## Final Observations

On the basis of these four studies at least three observations can be made. Firstly, that accountability comes in different forms and guises. Sweden can clearly be characterised as a country with a *light regime* of accountability: the format is that of self auditing; the scale and scope are limited; no clear demands are made or targets set; and the repercussions are vague if not non-existent. The BBC, on the other hand, represents the *tight regime* model which is characterised by an intensive scale and wide scope: there are different forms, formats, levels and moments of assessment; it has become part and parcel of the production culture, to the point of clogging it up; though penalties are not clear, in the end the future of the licence depends on it. For the Netherlands (and other countries starting similar audits) it remains to be seen where it will end. Judging from Bardoel, it will try to sail between the Scylla of the light and the Charybdis of the tight regime.

Secondly, the assessments of the usefulness and risks of these audits and intense PSB debates differ substantially. Both Jakubowicz and Born sketch a very dark picture in which audits are merely suffocating the organisational freedom and creativity of culture producers in a process of over-the-top bureaucratization. In the end they fear that this form of accountability is just another word for control, and detrimental to and not helpful for an organisation that is struggling to survive. Bardoel and Hultén, on the other hand, see it as a useful instrument for internal quality control and performance discussion, and a way of bridging the

gap between broadcasters and their public. There seems to be no sailing between Scylla and Charybdis here. The two positions are not simply the result of where one stands in the polarity between creative freedom and governance, or between a tight and a light model. In the end only comparative empirical research, which takes into account differences in the political and the media system, could give us the answer. But by that time public service broadcasting as we know it may be dead and buried.

This leads, finally, to the question of principle of power and control. Part of the public broadcasting debate and the demand for accountability measures is about the organisations' declining responsibility and increased power. In a political communication culture of *media logic*, broadcasting is assumed to have the power of sense making, of framing blame and shame, a power without (sufficient) accountability. Apart from the fact that there is no or very little unambiguous, comparative and longitudinal proof of an increasing and negative media logic and declining responsibility in Western Europe, the danger of government or state induced interference looms. If that argument and discourse becomes the dominant impetus for introducing and strengthening a range of accountability forms and measures, and not a more balanced need for making public broadcasting more responsive to the public's wants and desires and strengthening social responsibility, accountability runs the risk of functioning merely as a means of controlling media performance. The media, as a public watchdog, are expected to control the powers that be, but now voices are raised for the executive to get a stronger hold on the public media. Who is controlling whom here? Certainly, power, control and independence live uneasily together. But so they should.

## Notes:

1. The meeting was sponsored by the Dutch public broadcaster NOS, the public regulator Commissariat for the Media, and the Amsterdam School of Communications Research (ASCoR) of the University of Amsterdam.
2. All contributors to this issue are grateful to the critical and constructive comments of two anonymous reviewers.

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