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HOW DO MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT VIEW THE PUBLIC VALUE OF PUBLIC SERVICE MEDIA? THE CASE OF LATVIA

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Abstract

The Development of public media in Latvia as a post-communist country has essentially been influenced by politicians. The political community has had consensus that certain reforms are necessary to ensure the development of public media given the changes in the communication space and its role in the facilitation of the strengthening of democracy, yet during the last fifteen years the political elite has not been able to come to a common agreement and to make decisions on systemic reforming and the development of public media. Since the communication environment has changed post digitalisation of television, the question about public media development and legitimisation has become increasingly topical.

The aim of the study is to explore how the members of the parliament of Latvia (Saeima) position public service media (PSM) in Latvia and assess the public value of PSM. The theoretical framework for the research is based on the concept of public value „strategic triangle” (Benington & Moore 2011), which consists of three main elements: public value outcomes, the authorising environment and operational capacity.

The study is based on qualitative research methods including 18 semi-structured interviews conducted with members of the Saeima in 2012 and 2013. The acquired data has been analysed by the principles of thematic analysis (Attride-Stirling 2001). Analysis of the interviews show that members of the Saeima recognise the need for public media to be independent whilst at the same time supporting a model in which public media is not supposed to have independent funding and they will continue competing with commercial media in the advertising market. High competition and resentment are characteristic features of the political elite in Latvia that apparently would also in future hamper the making of such decisions about public media that will facilitate their high-quality. Results of the research show the tendency for members of parliament to lack the necessary knowledge to formulate their opinion and to modulate relations of public media with society and their place in the overall media system in Latvia.

Keywords: public media, media policy, public value, parliament, Latvia

Introduction

Creation of public value has been developed as one of the theoretical approaches of how to analyse the activities of public media, its significance and positioning in the new communication environment (Moore 1995, Collins 2007), as public media must be capable of increasing and more specifically motivating the legitimacy of their activities, whilst at the same time competing for audiences in the digital communication environment.

Latvia has a small population (approximately 2 million, of which 40 percent are not Latvians and the majority of them communicate in Russian in their everyday life and use

Russian media), a small advertising market (in 2012 the advertisement market in Latvia was below 71 million EUR) and remaining weak public media traditions. Public media in Latvia is financed from the state budget but at the same time they also operate in the advertisement market. This increases tension and criticism from society inasmuch as public media, in particular television, gets commercialised, it also causes objections from the side of commercial media that the market is being distorted.

Although certain consensus exists amongst the stakeholders in Latvia about making the decision that fundamental reforms in public media are required, the approaches for their implementation are diverse. The Saeima (parliament) in Latvia is the fundamental institution that makes decisions about the trends of development in public media. Therefore, the decision makers' understanding of the role of public media in democratic Latvia is important, as well as their political will to facilitate the adoption of such legislation that would ensure the genuine independence of public media and their capacity to be significant and influential actors in the public sphere. Peter Dahlgren singles out two approaches to legitimisation of public media policy: (1) the market demands legitimisation, where public interests are characterised by the contents in which society is interested and (2) social demand legitimisation, which is characterised by media culture context. It includes society's interests that in a broader sense are based on the implementation of civic participation (Raboy, Proulx & Dahlgren 2003).

Developing a new Electronic media law to transpose in the national legislation provisions of the Audiovisual media services directive, due to the pressure from society and experts, the National Radio and Television Council (from February 2012 "National Electronic Mass Media Council", henceforth: Council) and the committee of the Saeima were forced to examine in more depth the issues for the future development of public media.

In 2011, a new concept of public media development was elaborated and it received considerable criticism. The basis of the approach for establishing a new medium was the concept of public value. The concept of public service media (merging Latvian Radio and Latvian Television and developing a new internet platform) was approved by the Council in January 2013. The draft was discussed by the government three times and it was supported by the governing coalition parties, but in June the government turned down the concept of PSM and proposed to have further discussions of the draft in the sub-committee of the Saeima.

The goal of the paper is to explore and analyse how members of the parliament of Latvia position and interpret the role and meaning of PSM in the digital age. The study includes two main research questions:

RQ1: how are the functions and characteristic features of public media understood and interpreted in the political environment of Latvia?

RQ2: what are systemic and structural preconditions of Latvian PSM in creating public value?

The theoretical concept of public value provides an opportunity to analyse PSM in three basic dimensions:

(1) theoretical understanding of public media,

- (2) development of the principles of the reforms of public broadcasting and
- (3) these issues have been topical in Latvia since 2009 when:
 - (a) under the impact of the economic crisis funding allocated from the state budget for PSB decreased;
 - (b) overall competition in the electronic media market increased;
 - (c) discussions about the influence of political forces upon public media are becoming more topical;
 - (d) due to the wide offer of programmes by cable and satellite television the audience became more fragmented and public TV lost its leader's positions;
 - (e) as a result of the fast and fairly expensive implementation of digital television, time share of cross-border TV channels increased, in particular of Russian TV channels.

Theoretical background

In general terms, Mark Moore characterises public value as *what the public values* (Moore 1995), where inhabitants are seen as citizens and not consumers or customers. But in practice the concept of public value is to be rather defined as a process which is determined by the mutual interaction of the basic elements of public value. M. Moore and John Benington put forward three concepts and called them „a strategic triangle” (Benington & Moore 2011, 5–6):

(1) public value outcomes: visions, missions, the defining of specific strategic goals and results, understanding them not only in the narrower sense of achievable *outputs*– for example, specific programmes, but also in a wider sense as *outcomes* or *social outcomes*;

(2) the authorising environment: creating support and trust between all the parties involved in decision making and supporting the parties involved legitimises the creation of defined public value, as well as its re-defining to adapt to the changes in environment (Moore 1995, 70-71; Benington & Moore 2011, 5);

(3) operational capacity: such a use, mobilisation, the increasing and development of internal and external operational resources of an organisation that are necessary in achieving certain results and outcomes of public value. Operational capacity is a dimension by which it must be demonstrated that developed public value is also practically achievable.

This is a framework of initial criteria and has been developed and improved by looking for approaches in ways to adapt it and evaluate it in different sectors, different countries, political and media systems and cultures.

J. Benington also interprets public value as an instrument for the consolidation of society, a provider of maintenance and enrichment of the public sphere when public sector organisations create and provide “what the public values”. The concept of public value does not mean identical or unified insights for the whole of society but rather competition between identities and differences in a dialogue understanding what it means to be part of a wider public sphere in time and space (Benington & Moore 2011, 49). Thus he reformulates public value as part of a deliberation process that is rooted in the democratic public sphere in which it is possible to debate and develop negotiations about competing

interests and values, which also depends on the publics' awareness of the significance of dialogue and the capacity for society to get involved in this dialogue (Benington 2009).

Developing the conceptual framework, Moore has not only been focusing on empirical or normative approaches, hence the public value concept can be used in public media studies both as an empirical (interpretation of data obtained during the research), as well as normative framework (study and analysis of systematic reforms of the public broadcasting system and media assessing their activities before the introduction of public value management approaches and later implementation of reforms) (Moore 1995; Kelly, Mulgan & Muers 2002; Alford & O'Flynn 2009; Coyle & Woolard 2010).

All in all there exists a certain mutually necessary interaction between public media and the political system because public media functions in a political system in which political intervention and control, given certain conditions, is unavoidable in ensuring and monitoring the fundamental values of democracy and *public service* in the interests of society. On the one hand, this interaction should be restricted in order to guarantee the independence of public broadcasting and the articulation of public interests according to democracy, but on the other hand, the political system defines the advantages of public broadcasting that provide the opportunity to achieve the defined duties that are necessary for society as a body (Jakubowicz & Sükösd 2008; Aalberg, Aelst & Curran 2010).

Methodology

The study is based on qualitative research methods including 18 semi-structured interviews conducted (2012–2013) with the members of the Saeima (number of members:100). The selection includes all members of the Human Rights and Public Affairs Committee (its

Figure 1. Representation of parties and deputies in the Saeima (sampling and coding)

Committee/ parliamentary group	Number of members in Saeima	Number of respondents	Codes of respondents
Human Rights and Public Affairs Committee	9	9	MS2, MS5, MS7, MS8, MS11, MS12, MS13, MS14, MS16
Concord Centre parliamentary group (opposition)	31	5	MS8, MS9, MS14, MS15, MS16
Unity parliamentary group	20	4	MS1, MS2, MS3, MS8
National Alliance of All for Latvia! and For Fatherland and Freedom/ LNNK parliamentary group	13	3	MS6, MS7, MS12
Reform Party parliamentary group	16	3	MS5, MS17, MS18
Union of Greens and Farmers parliamentary group (opposition)	13	2	MS10, MS11
Unaffiliated members of parliament	7	1	MS4

competences are media issues) and it has proportional representation of members of the Saeima of all the parliamentary groups and unaffiliated members of parliament.

The acquired data has been analysed in accordance with the principles of thematic network analysis (Attride-Stirling 2001): systematizing the extractions (1) on the level of basic themes, (2) organising themes and (3) general (conceptual) themes.

Basic themes: characteristics of PSM in Latvia; conception for reformation of PSM; factors influencing the content of PSM; role of politicians in electronic media development; quality of journalism and media in Latvia and expectations of public needs in media.

Organising themes: functions of PSM, content of PSM and characteristics of PSM qualities.

General (conceptual) themes: PSM relations with the public; role of PSM in sustainable development of the media environment and the public value of public media in Latvia.

Coding, categorising, grouping by theme and analysis of the data were done by using qualitative data analysis and research software: *Atlas.ti* 7.1.6.

Findings

The analysis of the collected data in the present article will be focused upon 5 aspects: (1) PSM functions and content (organising themes) and (2) public media relations with public general (conceptual) theme, to show politicians' awareness and expectations of public media; (3) public remit and funding, that define the nature of public media and also the practical possibilities of implementing their tasks; (4) reformation of public broadcasting (basic theme) to demonstrate the readiness of politicians to make specific decisions and (5) public value understanding which shows insights into the achievable goals and tasks during the process of public media transformation.

Functions and content

Members of parliament know the functions of the media and use them when characterising public media, however, the emphasis they put on different functions is varied.

The informative function by respondents is linked with a necessity to create an information space that provides access to information. All the respondents indicate that public media's mission is to ensure independent information that is neutral and as objective as possible, as well as promoting a balance in the information space. Respondents also see a close link with the informative function and the place of public media in the overall information space:

“It is really important for media to be public – not by their name but by providing neutral and unbiased information” (MS1);

“National or public medium must be the one to be able to provide neutral analysis of public processes” (MS10).

Formation of cultural space and its maintenance as function is mentioned by all the respondents and it is understood as the mediation of cultural contents and processes in a public medium.

The educating function is described by respondents less than the informative function, but they recognise it as the basic function of public media. Comparatively weaker is the orientation towards forms of cooperation and the involvement of society and creating a dialogue and common understanding about the world we live in.

The entertainment function is mentioned by respondents not as the fundamental function but as a function that is manifested through a certain contents or format that is necessary and can be combined with informative and educating functions.

Among functions it is also possible to include the construction of national identity and the facilitation of the sense of national belonging, which is linked with language and culture. This function is intermingled with a similar one: the society integration function, which the majority of the members of the Saeima relate to the function of national identity construction for the Latvian audiences, but the integration function: to the Russian and other minorities' audiences:

“The question is if we should spend more time of the public media for strengthening identity or for integration” (MS10);

“With one fishing programme where Latvians speak Russian we do not integrate anything [...] It is a strategy. It is politics. It cannot be only one programme” (MS7).

Respondents, emphasise that the public medium should also focus on the part of the people who have gone into economic migration, thus the national information environment should be viewed as wider than the borders of the state.

Assessing the role of public media in performing society's integration function, the issue of more extensive broadcasting in Russian is mentioned in order to create a sense of belonging to Latvia, a common national information space and consolidation of society. Representatives of all the political parties indicate that the actual situation in Latvia should be taken into consideration, where an inhabitant who speaks no Latvian when quality national information contents are not offered, lives in a different information environment and becomes potentially estranged with no sense of belonging to the state:

“If we are thinking about integration of Russian speakers there must be at least news programmes in Russian” (MS10);

“It is the question if at all or to what extent the public media should be in a foreign language. My private opinion is yes, to a certain extent, yes, but under the condition that it must be clearly seen that the resources invested into it facilitate society integration, facilitate greater understanding by those inhabitants whose native language is Russian, that it promotes a bigger understanding and sense of belonging to the state of Latvia” (MS6).

In separate judgements of the members of the Saeima one can also find indications of the mobilising function, indicating that media must facilitate the strengthening of self-esteem and the capacity to act (MS4).

As for the identification of public media functions, the position of all the members of the Saeima can be characterised as inclusive, certain functions are not denied as unfit for

public media but are analysed and critically assessed. The functions are also compared with commercial media.

The understanding of media content is linked with several aspects: theme, genre, format and so on, diversity and professionalism of journalism, emphasising objectivity of information and analytical character and so on. Quantitative and qualitative characteristics of the respondents are analysed and explained in relation to public remit and funding.

Participation of public media in the creation of a high quality and analytical information environment has been assessed as „weak”, „weakened”, „of bad quality”, „unprofessional”, and the respondents explicitly separate the performance of Latvian Radio and Latvian TV admitting that LR performance is of higher quality.

Analysing particular content which is important for public media, one of the issues mentioned by the majority of respondents is the lack of analytical and investigative journalism which includes not only news and analytical programmes but the contents of public media at large, associating this mainly with television.

Respondents see the thematic choices of public media linked to the interests of the people: one should be thinking about public media in the same way as about a joint stock company, “where each inhabitant has one share” (MS17) and whose interests must be represented by the public medium, it should be a perceived mirror “for everyone to see their reflection in it” (MS17).

Several respondents emphasise that content quality is also linked with diversity, mentioning as examples public media programmes and journalists (MS6), the necessity of providing different view-points, for example, in news programmes and various contexts (MS7).

Public media and the public

Members of the Saeima, as the answers demonstrate, have no problems in distinctly identifying the essence of public media, and it certainly creates difficulties for analysing and assessing their relations with the public. Respondents try to hide the issues that are not clear to them by referring to the public:

“There is not always clarity in society what public medium is. It is more like a certain habit we have got used to it that it is representation of the state. The state as if speaks to us via this medium. This is like something, forgive me, from the soviet times but to a certain extent I think that there are no problems in legislation. There is a formulation. Another question is if it is done the same way as it has been written down [in the law]” (MS2).

Members of the Saeima describe relations with the public from two aspects. Firstly, public broadcasting must be accessible to the population (MS1), besides: to “*as large segment of society as possible*” (MS4), which has to do with regional accessibility (MS7). Secondly, information must be available. Yet in both cases the understanding of the process is still characterised by a common linear approach that is more focused on broadcasting issues; and the users are allocated rather a passive and not an active role: the media must be “accessible”, it has to embrace as big an audience as possible and to “reach out” to every single inhabitant.

In view of the fact that over the past few years the audience of Latvian Television has considerably decreased, one can conclude that politicians are not evaluating the specific conditions in Latvia but in an abstract way rely on the fact that the population must use public media because of its importance in facilitating the ability to make judgements about issues of significance for society.

Opinions about public media relations for society are very diverse and dispersed and they can be systematised as:

1. proprietor: company relations:

“[...] unlike the commercial media, public media are those that belong to society”(MS8);

2. educator: the one to be educated relations:

“[...] It must be so that society receives what it wants but there is also the position that we educate society in certain directions, which are still in the interest of the state: it can be achieved through good journalism. But you must be master in that” (MS5);

3. provider: consumer relations:

“It is important that people would receive in an accessible way the information they need” (MS1);

4. responsible communicators relations:

“Every person deserves high-quality information space and I assume that this is the way it can be defined that those are public media that provide me with analytical, high-quality information space” (MS7).

Respondents admit that public media has a certain identity yet weak, but it could be one of the instruments in forming an understanding of what the public medium is, both in society as well as in the medium itself. Stronger identity would provide an opportunity to create more focused relations with society (MS5).

Public remit and funding

Characterising public remit respondents explicitly refers to the law (public remit has been stipulated in Electronic media law (2010) in 25 articles).

A typical evasiveness when expressing an opinion or comment about the issues of public remit and their execution is that “*politicians could be involved here least of all*” (MS7).

And several of them also identify the problem as: there is no clarity in what public remit is but they do not relate this lack of knowledge to the Saeima or politicians in general:

“Everyone says we need public remit but perhaps they do not entirely understand what it means” (MS4).

A member of parliament working at the Saeima confesses for the first time:

“I have never analyzed that concept at all. I cannot assess something that existed previously but as for the public remit, it should have a clear task – what we want with this public remit” (MS5).

Opposition members of parliament also explain public remit in the context of political competition criticising the governing party coalitions:

“There is no public remit any more. There is one party remit. Remit of one ideology [...] And then these media that are not public media any more will just croak” (MS14).

The funding available for public media (as in general all the members of parliament admitted) is insufficient. The responses showed the explicit opinion that the scope of funding must be linked with the achievable results and with transparency: providing accounts on its expenditure (MS4, MS6, MS17). But respondents' opinions are divided concerning the funding model for public media: “some kind of separate tax or payment must be introduced or additional pay for electricity” (MS4); “funding from the budget as the basis plus also I think that the public medium should leave the market” (MS8). MPs of the Saeima also support the idea that public media must remain in the advertisement market because they see in it “one good indicative measure – the public medium shows what the quality of its work is” (MS4).

In addition, the members of the Saeima who support subscription fees or a media tax admit that they cannot be introduced in the present situation, mentioning three reasons: the low rate of the welfare of the population, lack of understanding amongst the population about public medium and the low ratings of Latvian Television. It is characteristic that the members of the Saeima stressed that they expressed their own and not the party's or parliamentary group's opinion.

As for the question about advertising in the public medium, the members of the present Saeima in general represent the same views expressed in the previous two decades when this question was discussed: the risk that a subscription fee or some form of co-payment might be negatively perceived in society.

Reformation of public broadcasting

The majority of the interviewed respondents were of the consideration that media policy has not been purposefully implemented in Latvia since the renewal of its independence.

The conception of the public medium of Latvia that envisages merging Latvian Radio and Latvian Television, additionally creating a powerful portal, archives and so on as a result of its implementation of the media environment in Latvia, particularly that of the electronic media, will cardinaly change. A new public medium concept has been evaluated and responses can be grouped as supportive, evasive and denying. Members of the Saeima supporting establishment of one single public medium see in it as a more efficient use of resources, a possibility of strengthening the status of the public medium etc. Respondents explain their evasive views by the fact that they are not specialists in

the media area that they have not studied the concept sufficiently carefully or they have doubts about the draft:

“Apparently a year ago I would have a strict opinion that yes, we need one single public medium, but the more I go into it, the more I see drawbacks and I do not see all those many positive things” (MS7);

“I see risks in it at the same time admitting that theoretically such a construct would be correct. But given the fact how things are often done at our stage of maturity of democracy I am really concerned that it can harm editorial freedom, and the information space can get more concentrated and it has bigger risks to get under influence of politics” (MS6).

Representatives of the negative opinions (MS5) have doubts about the usefulness of the great investments; risks are also possible in how electors will evaluate support for such great investments. One of the members of the Saeima with more than ten years of experience in parliamentary work explains it by the fact that public media has never had strong lobby in the Saeima (MS8). Therefore, it can be assumed that the political elite has not been interested in solving problematic issues and by the facilitation of public media development in promoting the development of information space in Latvia in general.

Public value

Members of the Saeima mention creation of public value as one of the basic conditions for activities of public media. Hence, it may be concluded that the respective approach or its elements can be used both as a practical instrument in order to plan, reform and manage the public media system, as well as a discourse that allows an explanation to society about the activities of public media.

Likewise it has been indicated that it is an approach that must be understood to implement in practice. It is also one of the questions that is theoretically emphasised by the public value creation approach, namely, that internal and external communication of an organisation and the culture of the organisation itself are important:

“It is something that is missing – to formulate very precisely what the goals are and to be able in any situation to measure to what extent these goals have been achieved. It all has to be done in the most open way” (MS6).

Precise understanding of strategic positions and goals among the involved parties is possibly one of the issues that hampers the adaptation of public television to new, unexpected circumstances or other changes. In the context of the creation of public value competences in management and decision makers are essentially significant so that they would be able to undertake commitments and also take risks when experimenting in compliance with the developed public value strategy. The involved parties indicate that at present it is one of the problematic issues: the inability to change rapidly or adapt once such a need appears (MS1).

Respondents express concerns that the planning of practical operational strategy and public remit of the public media are not done in compliance with public interests, needs and the defined goals in general but depends on the existing human resources (MS3, MS10).

Analysing the risks in creating public value in Latvia, the necessity is stressed to firstly reform the public broadcasting system in general and in particular, the supervision and management model (MS3) that also corresponds with Moore's approach.

Conclusions

On the one hand part of the members of the Saeima consider the public value creation approach as essentially necessary, but on the other hand: in the present situation they support a model in which public media is not planned to receive independent funding.

While planning the activities of public media in accordance with the so-called "market failure" comprises a contradiction in the context of public value theory. In its initial understanding the public value concept stipulates that the organisation must plan the anticipated public value that it will create serving the specific public that lives in a specific political, economic, social, cultural and historical situation. And it does not have to plan its operations proceeding from market conditions because there is a risk that market offers are not sustainable and do not embrace the whole of society. Likewise the market offer quality may not correspond to public value. If the performance of the market is still taken into account then it should not be a priority motivation of a certain activity (Moore 1995; Benington & Moore 2011).

All-in-all the political elite in Latvia is not ready to introduce such a system of public broadcasting that would eliminate risks of political and economic influence on the public media and that would facilitate the development of high-quality public medium in Latvia that would be able to provide public value, although representatives of political parties represented in the Saeima at a certain level support the need for strengthening the independence and quality of public media and the necessity for a certain reform.

Yet knowing comparatively well the problems of the development of public media, the majority of political forces are not ready to facilitate solutions to these problems, which can be explained by political interests, lack of responsibility and/or expertise.

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