

# CHAPTER 28

## Researching Public Service Broadcasting

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### INTRODUCTION

Public service broadcasting is in no sense a precise analytical term.<sup>1</sup> It was originally used to describe the state broadcasting corporations set up in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s, of which the BBC is the most well known example. Since then, the term has been used to describe a variety of institutions, regulatory arrangements, social obligations and types of programming.

In this chapter, the term “public service” is used in a rather general sense, referring to forms of political intervention into the media market with the purpose of ensuring that broadcasters produce programs deemed valuable to society (Syvertsen, 2003, p. 156). Most governments intervene into the media market in some way or another, but the degree and type of intervention vary. On the basis of several recent classifications of broadcasting systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Hoffman-Riem, 1996; Humphreys, 1996; McKinsey & Company, 2004; Mendel, 2000), we can identify three main types of public service broadcasting arrangements:

*Broad interventions, strong public service broadcasting systems:* Although Western Europe historically has been the heartland of traditional public service broadcasting, the support for it varies from north to south. Its traditional stronghold is in Northern Europe: Scandinavia, the UK, Germany, Belgium and The Netherlands. In these countries governments intervene on a broad front, public broadcasters are reasonably well funded and have a strong position. Most of these countries have retained the licence fee as a way of funding public service broadcasters.<sup>2</sup> In this category we may also place Japan and its broadcaster NHK, which is perhaps the best funded public service broadcaster in the world (Mendel, 2000).

*Some public service intervention, usually in order to stimulate domestic programming, a lower level of public funds available for public service broadcasting:* In several countries the main purpose of government intervention into broadcasting is to secure a high level of domestic production. In countries such as France, Australia, Canada and South Africa, substantial regulation is imposed to secure programming that reflects national cultural and social issues, but the level of public funding remains low. In Australia, Canada and South Africa there is no licence fee; public service broadcasters are funded through public grants and varying degrees of advertisement, and the services are perpetually underfinanced (Mendel, 2000).

*Minimalist intervention, low level of public funding, marginal public service broadcasters:*  
In some countries public service broadcasters are mainly seen as a supplement to commercial

services, and not as core national broadcasters. In southern European countries like Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain, as well as in New Zealand and the United States, there is a lower degree of public intervention, a low level of public funding and considerably less public support for public service broadcasting. In Greece, public service broadcasting is funded through a tax on electricity, and both Portugal and Spain have abolished the licence fee (Mendel, 2000). It seems unlikely that public service broadcasters will regain a strong position in any of these countries without substantial regulatory intervention.

Since public service broadcasting is dependent on decisions within the political realm, it should come as no surprise that much research have focused on political issues, whether in the form of regulatory questions, or broader issues of democracy or nation-building. In this chapter we identify four different strands of research on public service broadcasting. First, there is a strand of *policy* studies: analyses of the changing conditions for public service broadcasting in the wake of increased competition, new technologies, privatization and globalization. Second, there is the related strand of *institutional* studies; studies of how traditional public service companies have responded and adapted to changing circumstances. A third strand focuses more explicitly on the role of public service *in social and democratic life of modern nation-states*. Fourth, and more tentatively, we wish to suggest that there is an emerging strand of *post-modern* approaches, which are critical of the modernist stance prevalent in most public service broadcasting studies and more explicitly inspired by the transformative potentials of new communication technologies.

We begin by outlining the origins of public service broadcasting and broadcasting research. Next, we in turn discuss the four strands of research, concentrating on the merits and limitations of different approaches. Throughout, we draw particularly on literature from Scandinavia, the UK and German-speaking countries, but also include key works from other countries with distinct public service broadcasting traditions. The discussion leads us to point to remaining tensions, and suggest directions for further research.

## THE ORIGINS OF PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTING AND BROADCASTING RESEARCH

The growth of *research* on public service broadcasting must be understood in relation to the development of public service broadcasting *institutions*. The first public service corporation was established in Britain in 1926, and the BBC and British researchers have since played a prominent role in research and debates about public service broadcasting. This position is also due to John Reith, the first Director of the BBC, and the influence of his broadcasting ideology—later to be called “Reithianism.” In his 1924 book *Broadcast over Britain*, Reith takes stock of opponents claiming broadcasting should give people “what they want”. Few know what they want, and very few what they need, Reith proclaimed, and continued to say that “our responsibility is to carry into the greatest possible number of homes everything that is best in every human department of knowledge, endeavour and achievement, and to avoid the things which are, or may be hurtful” (Reith, 1924, p. 34).

Public corporations were set up all over Europe in the inter-war period, and in most cases, retained their monopoly positions until the 1980s. In the 1950s and 1960s television was implemented into this structure without much change, except in Britain, where a so-called Independent Television (ITV) network was set up alongside the BBC in 1955. However, ITV was also subject to public service content and ownership restrictions. In this period there was little actual research on public service broadcasting (cf. Moe & Syvertsen, 2007). Notwithstanding some studies of

the history of the original institutions, such as the early history of the BBC (e.g., Briggs, 1961), research did not flourish until the late 1970s and 1980s. At that time, media research institutions began to be set up in response to increased social demand for knowledge about media influence. The last two decades have seen a tremendous change in the broadcasting market and a corresponding expansion of research. Although the process of change is continuous, two distinct waves can be identified. The first wave was in the 1980s and early 1990s when the monopolies were broken, and traditional broadcasters met competition from commercial operators. The second wave is linked to digitalization and convergence in the late 1990s and 2000s. In this era competition has been increased on all platforms, prompting public service broadcasters to venture into new markets and explore services beyond radio and television broadcast.

## POLICY STUDIES

The first strand of studies may be labelled *policy studies*. Over the last two decades there has been a range of studies on the changing broadcasting market and the responses to these changes by policy makers and governments. Many studies—whether comparative or case studies—have tried to grasp the complex interplay of technological, economic, political and cultural forces that separately and together have produced a new situation for public service broadcasters. The studies are similar across national boundaries, often discussing the changes in policy and the challenges to public service broadcasting under broad headlines such as new technology, globalization, privatization and commercialisation.

The Euromedia research group, with members from all over Europe, has shown a persistent interest in this field since the early 1980s. Since their first book appeared in 1986, the group has published a series of comparative, as well as country studies, on the “new media order” in Europe (McQuail & Siune, 1986, p. 197; see also McQuail & Siune, 1998; Truetzschler & Siune, 1992). The group has painted the challenges to the public service broadcasters with a relatively broad brush, portraying them mainly as cultural institutions threatened by the expansion of “the market”, and discussing in detail the many different policy challenges they have encountered over the years. This kind of general cultural policy approach contrasts somewhat with the more specific studies of broadcasting regulation emerging from the fields of political science and law. One prominent example is Wolfgang Hoffman-Riem’s (1996) comparative study of the licensing and supervision of broadcasting in six countries, which go more into detail on the nature of actual government interventions (see also Levy, 1999). Hoffman-Riem’s study also identifies a move from “culture” to “market”, or more specifically: “(f)rom special culturally based broadcasting regulation to general economic regulation” (p. 344), but he also pinpoints contradictory tendencies. After surveying two decades of regulatory change, he concludes that the public service philosophy “continue to be praised” (p. 356) and that there are many examples of public service regulation “that were maintained despite considerable resistance by the broadcasting industry” (e.g.; advertising restrictions and production quotas) (p. 355).

Those studying the changes in European media policy increasingly reflect over the role played by the European Union. Since a common market for television was set on the agenda with the establishment of a trans-European television directive in 1989, the European Commission has concerned itself with two policy issues that both remain highly relevant for public service broadcasters. These are the on-going concern to develop an information economy in Europe, and the recurring conflict between private and public service broadcasters over whether the licence fee constitute a form of illegal subsidy (Levy, 1999). Although studies agree that these issues have significant implications, they differ as to whether they see the actions of the EU as detrimental

to or supportive of public service broadcasting. On the sceptical side is Jakubowicz (2004), who argues that the Union has allowed the agenda-setting role to be taken by opponents of public service broadcasting. Papathanassopoulos (2002) argues that the EU (among others) "only rhetorically support the real future of public broadcasters" (p. 86), while Coppens and Saeys (2006, p. 261) state that the EU, along with private broadcasters, "have taken the lead in the latest upsurge in fault-finding" with regard to public service. David Ward (2003), on the other hand, takes a more positive view of the EU's role in policy making. Ward's analyses of the cases where private broadcasters have challenged the privileges of public service broadcasters suggest that "the commission has generally been supportive of public broadcasting and their perceived role in public and democratic life" (p. 248).

Based on close reading of both comparative and case studies, it seems clear that both national and EU policy makers remain divided over the issue of public service. On the one hand, the social role of public service broadcasters is acknowledged and supported, but on the other hand, policies are put in place intending to limit their range and scope. This is not least seen in studies of how policy makers approach the issue of convergence and digitalisation (cf. Donges & Puppis, 2003; Marsden & Verhulst, 1999). Moe's (2008) comparative study of public service broadcasters' Internet activities shows for example that Western European governments differ profoundly in how far they are willing to go in letting the corporations develop services on digital platforms, and that the EU takes a rather restricted view. Nevertheless, as Storsul and Syvertsen (2007) point out in their study of European convergence policies, the pro-public service broadcasting lobbies in the EU have been gaining strength over the last decade, and restrictive policies are as a rule met with counter-actions from public service supporters. Not least due to skilful lobbying from the public service broadcasters themselves, there is strong support for the view that publicly funded corporations should be allowed to diversify their activities in the digital age (Levy, 1999, pp. 95–97; Siune & Hultén, 1998, pp. 34–35).<sup>3</sup>

In general, policy studies often portray public service broadcasters as vulnerable to pressures from competitors and regulators. However, there is much to be gained from a perspective that perceives broadcasting institutions as active, resourceful and adaptable to changing circumstances. As we shall see in the next section, the public service broadcasters have over the last decades taken the challenges to their existence very seriously indeed, and have done a great deal to improve relations with policy-makers, industry and the public at large.

## STUDIES OF PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTING INSTITUTIONS

The new and difficult climate brought on by the technological and political transformations of the 1980s meant that public service broadcasters had to change. After an initial period of resistance and confusion, the 1990s became a decade of massive reorientation within the original corporations. New transformations followed from the late 1990s as public service broadcasters increasingly began to define themselves as multi-media conglomerates. The second strand of research deals with these changes within the public service institutions.

From the early 1980s, public service broadcasters in Europe and elsewhere have been facing increased competition from private and commercial channels. Many viewers and listeners were dissatisfied with the public service programming policies, and welcomed more choice and, in particular, more entertainment. Public service broadcasters were fearful of losing audiences to the new services, and responded with changes in programming and scheduling. This again led to discussion about whether the public service broadcasters were becoming too similar to their commercial counterparts and losing sight of their public service mission.

These (political) questions were quickly picked up by media research. In the 1994 article *Public service television and the tendency towards convergence*, Hellmann and Sauri revitalised a method originally used by Raymond Williams (1975)<sup>4</sup> to determine to what degree programming on commercial and public service broadcasters was becoming more similar. Hellmann and Sauri contrasted two hypotheses: one of *constancy* (programming on the two types of channels would remain distinct) and one of *convergence* (programming on different channels would become more similar). The authors found both hypotheses to be confirmed: while the overall composition of programming remained quite stable, the public and commercial broadcasters were clearly becoming more similar in prime time. Prime time "has become a set of rules," the authors concluded (p. 63), an observation that pointed to the fact that although public service broadcasters continued to show more factual, cultural and serious programming, they had adopted similar scheduling principles to their commercial competitors.

These findings were largely replicated in other countries, for example in Denmark (Søndergaard, 1994), Sweden (Edin, 2000) and Norway (Syvertsen, 1997; Ytreberg, 1999). Indeed, the finding that the public service broadcasters were changing, while still remaining distinct from commercial services, also permeated studies of individual programme genres. A range of comparative studies of journalism have shown, for example, that competition has led to more human interest, less foreign news, more crime and sport, shorter news stories and more formats mixing news and entertainment. Nevertheless, as Hjarvard (1999, pp. 253–258) summarises after having reviewed comparative news studies from several countries, differences in content and style remain between commercial and public service channels.

Studies of programming and scheduling mainly use (simple) quantitative and qualitative analysis, often combined with analyses of documents and interviews with broadcasters. Much rarer is the use of observational methods, especially the kind of long term fieldwork that characterises anthropological studies. Georgina Born's comprehensive study of the BBC, *Uncertain vision* (2004), is one astute example of a study that uses ethnographical methods to dig deeper into structural changes within the broadcasting organisations. The study paints a detailed picture of the changes that have taken place in many public service broadcasting institutions over the last decade: the adoption of new public management principles, the creation of larger organisational units, the amplification of audience research and commercial scheduling principles, and the strengthening of planning, branding and customer relation functions. Born perceives the combination of external and internal pressures to be exceedingly harmful for the BBC, and characterises the situation in the late 1990s as "widespread cynicism" and "a devastating erosion of morale and of belief in management's commitment to, and its ability to secure, the BBC's public service purposes" (p. 109). Although Born is critical of the strategies adopted, particularly under Director-General John Birt, the picture she paints contrasts sharply with a view of public service broadcasters as passive and vulnerable. Born rather suggests that the corporation was becoming "over-managed" (p. 6), being so eager to adjust to external expectations that creativity was compromised.

A similar picture of pro-active and strategy-driven institutions emerges in studies examining how public service broadcasters are meeting the digital challenge (cf. Donges & Puppis, 2003; Lowe & Jauert, 2005). Studies have in particular pointed to four areas where public service broadcasting has been eager to expand the use of digital technology. This is first the area of *distribution* where the organizations' pro-active stance in the so-called switch-over (to terrestrial digital networks) has been analyzed in several national contexts (cf. Brown & Picard, 2004; Galperin, 2004). The second is the creation of *thematic channels*, where the aim has been to exploit the increased distribution capacity on digital channels and create bonus services within news, film, sport and children's programming (Papathanassopoulos, 2002). The third strategy is to ex-

pand to *new platforms*, including online media such as the Internet and mobile telephony. Studies have identified a move among public service broadcasters to proclaim the Internet a “third pillar” in addition to radio and television services, although the regulatory basis for incorporating this new platform remains unclear (Degenhart, 2001; Moe, 2008). The fourth area represents a combination of the above; there has been a number of attempts to *combine platforms*—television, Internet, mobile phones—in order to enhance choice and create richer and more participatory broadcasting services. In an interview survey with Norwegian media executives, Maasø, Sundet, and Syvertsen (2007) demonstrated that the three main motivations cited for combining traditional and new media were to increase customer loyalty, establish new sources of revenue, and create new spaces for experimentation and innovation. These motivations cut across commercial and public service media, although the public service broadcasters remained more concerned about establishing services where audiences could participate also in a non-commercial setting.

The move to digital has brought out a fresh round of pessimism concerning the future of public service. In his study of television in the digital era, Papathanassopoulos (2002, pp. 79–80) claims that “public broadcasters face the most difficult challenge in their long history.” Digitalisation will, in his view, lead to a further fragmentation of the audience, increasing costs, loss of revenue, and additional competition because of the commercial actors’ capacity to acquire and derive direct benefit from rights to popular programming such as soccer and films. Richeri (2004, p. 192) echoes this sentiment, claiming that “it is unlikely that public broadcasters will be able to maintain the same investment and quality standard of scheduling when audience size declines.” He believes that “in the past few years a number of different factors have been coming together in a way that creates a crisis in public television services and also marks the beginning of their final marginalization or their end” (p. 178). While these two authors, both from Southern Europe, may well be accurate in their dystopian visions of some public service channels, others are more optimistic. Writing from Britain, Born shows, for example, that the BBC’s Internet and new media services were launched to almost universal acclaim, and cites figures showing that the BBC’s Web site rapidly became the most visited non-portal Web site outside the United States (p. 9). In her view, the BBC’s digital strategies show “subtle and imaginative thinking about the digital future and the BBC’s role in optimising that future for contemporary Britain” (p. 482).

The massive changes in public service broadcasting over the last decades imply that the traditional services have moved quite some distance away from their origins. Nevertheless, in many countries, the commitment to publicly funded broadcasters remains strong, and this is reflected in public support, government funding and viewer statistics.<sup>5</sup> In countries with less strong public broadcasting traditions, however, support is less forthcoming. Here, researchers remain more pessimistic about securing a sound base for public service interventions in the future.

## PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTING, DEMOCRACY AND SOCIAL LIFE

Above, we have argued that many viewers and listeners were critical of the paternalist policies of the original public service institutions. The institutions were, however, also criticized from a different angle, that of Marxist theorists and radical activists. Among these were several of the young media scholars that entered the scene from the late 1970s onwards. Inspired by Marxist thought on ideology and Gramsci’s concept of hegemony, cultural studies pioneers like Stuart Hall attacked the idea that public service broadcasting represented a neutral force in society. Rather, Hall (1977, p. 346) argued, public service along with other media performed “the critical ideological work of ‘classifying the world’ within the discourses of the dominant ideologies.” Hall’s argument was echoed by others, among them the young political economist Nicholas

Garnham, who called for a fundamental reshaping of the British public service system. In 1978 he wrote about the ITV and the BBC:

What in fact we have is a system in which two powerful institutions responsible not to the public but to the real, though hidden, pressures of the power elite, government, big business and the cultural establishment, manipulate the public in the interest of that power elite and socialise the individual broadcaster so that he collaborates in this process almost unconsciously. (p. 16)

These criticisms were voiced in the late 1970s. In only a few years, however, much more powerful threats were coming to public service broadcasting from new media moguls and the economic liberalist governments of the 1980s. As these interests made public service broadcasters one of their main targets, radical critics began more explicitly to defend public service. A strand of thought developed from the mid-1980s and argued more explicitly in favour of public service broadcasting as a key democratic force in society. Among the contributors to this third strand of public service research were Nicholas Garnham, Paddy Scannell, Graham Murdock, and John Keane; Nicholas Garnham being perhaps the most outspoken convert from the earlier critical perspective. In a much-cited 1986 article, Garnham confronted a view of public service broadcasting commonly held by leftists as either a "smokescreen" for "the coercive or hegemonic nature of state power," or as "occupied from within by commercial forces" (p. 40). Garnham wanted to change the situation whereby the Left had merely provided "mealy-mouthed support" for public service (p. 40), and set out to reformulate its value base by way of the concept of the public sphere.

In his *Habilitationsschrift*, Jürgen Habermas ([1962] 1989) described historically the rise and decline of a public sphere in Western European nation-states. In this sphere, detached from state and market, men could deliberate freely over politically relevant issues, aiming at reaching consensus. In Garnham's (1986, p. 41) reading, it was a "space for rational and universalistic politics" which in modern societies could only be embodied by public service broadcasters, removed as they were from direct state or market control. In his defence of public service broadcasting, Garnham wanted to "build upon the potential of its rational core" (p. 53), while still suggesting improvements in terms of higher accountability, better training of journalists and more participation from the public.

Garnham's defence should be understood in the context of a concerted political and industrial attack on public service broadcasting. The same backdrop is crucial to understand the contribution of another key figure, Paddy Scannell. His interests lay in the history of radio and television and in the role of broadcasting in everyday life. Like Garnham, Scannell (1989, p. 136) attacked arguments from the left that devalued broadcasting as "a form of social control, or of cultural standardization or of ideological (mis)representation." Also building on Habermas, Scannell argued that radio and television had made available a new kind of access to the public sphere for all citizens: "By placing political, religious, civic, cultural events and entertainment in a common domain, public life was equalized in a way that had never before been possible" (p. 140). Broadcasting had profoundly contributed to democratization from its inception, Scannell argued, and pointed to public service broadcasting as "perhaps the only means" by which common knowledge in a shared public life as a social good for all could be maintained (p. 164). "As such," he concluded, public service broadcasting "should be defended against its enemies" (p. 164).

Academic analyses of the relationship between public service broadcasting and democracy have been carried out in several countries (e.g., Langenbucher, 1990; Lucht, 2006; Skogerbø, 1996). Nevertheless, the British contributions stand out as key works, and have had a significant

influence on both broadcasting research and political thought. These contributions introduced continental public sphere theory to Anglophone broadcasting research, and in so doing, helped to bridge the gap between media studies and political theory. While the policy studies (above) were normative on a more implicit level, these latter studies provided an outspoken defence for public service and had significant impact on actual policy discussions in a period of tremendous change. By extension, the early contributions yielded a line of elaborate and sophisticated studies in the years that followed, several of which comprised scrutiny of media outside broadcasting (e.g., Blumler, 1992; Curran, 2002; Garnham, 1992; Keane, 1991). Later studies of broadcasting and democracy also offered original input to public sphere theory itself (e.g., Dahlgren, 1995; Gourd, 2002). Still, this strand of broadcasting research has been criticised; the main points of this criticism can be discussed under the heading of post-modern approaches.

## **POST-MODERN APPROACHES TO PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTING**

The three above approaches are fairly easy to identify and separate from each other. Finally, and more tentatively, we wish to include a fourth strand of research which we have labelled post-modern. Here we have included rather diverse contributions from recent years, which reach beyond the rationale of the original broadcasting institutions and explore new options and conceptions of public service. The studies placed under this—admittedly wide—heading are in part critical of the modernist pro-public service stance of the above approaches and in part inspired by the potential for playing, participating and embracing the popular which new technologies and platforms make possible.

While the public sphere/public service approach spearheaded by Nicholas Garnham has been influential, it has also had its critics. The application of abstract normative theory to actual media practices is a daunting task, and the leap requires an operationalization of the ideals which is not always properly undertaken. Further, the early Habermasian public sphere concept had its problematic sides even as an ideal type, and these have been pointed out repeatedly by critics ranging from feminist theory and popular culture to globalization studies (cf. Calhoun, 1992; Crossley & Roberts, 2004; Habermas, [1992] 1996). The somewhat limited focus on rational thought and discourse, found in the early studies, could be seen to neglect the importance of other forms and modes of communication, and the approach seems “at times oddly removed from the everyday sociological realities” (Dahlgren, 2004, p. 16). The early contributions portrayed public service broadcasting as the “institutional guarantor and instrument of the modern public sphere”, in the words of Richard Collins (2002, p. 66), but practices of public service broadcasting have historically never corresponded to the ideal public sphere, nor do they automatically fit a future realization or approximation. Finally, and crucially, there was a tendency to perceive the market and public service as incompatible principles of organization. Especially early works by British scholars stressed market organization as irreconcilable with democracy (cf. Collins, 2002, p. 69), but such a stark dismissal is highly problematic.

Concerned with the development of the Australian public service broadcaster ABC, Elizabeth Jacka (2003, p.178) has declared the public sphere-based defence—represented by Garnham’s work—as sounding “more and more tired” (see also Nolan, 2006). Her alternative builds on cultural studies scholar John Hartley’s (1999) notion of post-modern television, and also refers to political theorist Chantal Mouffe’s concept of agonistic democracy. According to Mouffe (2005), the ideal of deliberation in the public sphere in order to reach political consensus is both undesirable and impossible; instead, the public sphere should provide channels for expression of collective passions and confrontation between hegemonic political projects. On this basis, Jacka

positions herself in opposition to Garnham's Habermasian stance, which, in her view, remains too focused on consensus-building, the superiority of state- over private-owned broadcasting, and the primacy of high modern journalism in the media mix (Jacka, 2003, p. 179).

In Jacka's view, Garnham's position neglects the key contributions made by commercial media to modern democracies—such as distribution of information, fostering of identities and provision of arenas for public debate.<sup>6</sup> Many other contributors have pointed to popular journalism and commercial entertainment formats as crucial for individual well-being and collective experiences in modern societies. For example, Stuart Hall has hailed the advertising-funded public service broadcaster Channel 4's remit as "a genuinely novel and original way of rethinking the 'public service idea' outside of the BBC," and claimed that Channel 4 enfranchised the audience and granted representation to marginalised groups (Hall, 1992, p. 30). Others have pointed to the historical role that entertainment and popular genres have played in legitimating public service broadcasters, and claimed that it is time to embrace the popular more explicitly as part of the public service remit (Enli, 2008; Syvertsen, 2004; van Zoonen, 2004).

Contributions within this strand of thought also explicitly address the fragmented and pluralistic nature of the audience, and the failure by traditional public service broadcasters to address it fully and adequately. In the 1992 article titled "Which Public, Whose Service" (above), Stuart Hall claimed that the united national public has always been a construct and that public service could only survive if it adapted by "pluralising and diversifying its own interior worlds" (p. 34). Broadcasting needed to be turned in to "the open space, the 'theatre' in which this cultural diversity is produced, displayed and represented" (p. 36). This call seems to be at least partly answered by the recent endeavours of public service broadcasters to involve more audience activity. Enli (forthcoming) has pointed to how early public service broadcasting was reluctant to involve common people, but that this is changing with the onset of digital technology. In a survey of Scandinavian, British and US public service broadcasters, she identifies public participation and the inclusion of user-generated programming as a key strategy for public service broadcasters to regain their position as a national arena in a highly competitive situation.

Critics within this strand of research have also positioned themselves against the "crisis discourse" which has characterised much of the literature on public service broadcasting (cf. Enli, 2008, p. 2). Pro-public service-scholars have had a tendency to view all new developments with suspicion as the beginning of a new and sharp decline for public service, but in reality, the broadcasters have often managed to use new technologies to revitalise their services and address new audiences. Rather than seeing current developments in public service and democracy as a recurrent set of crises, it is argued that these may represent fruitful starting points for new—and more inclusive—understandings of public service and democracy (Jacka, 2003, pp. 181–183). A similar point is made by Geoffrey Craig (1999). Establishing that the Australian ABC exists in a state of perpetual crisis, he suggests embracing conflicts as the best defence: public service broadcasters should "generally provide spaces for, and in turn articulate, the ongoing 'crisis' which always constitutes the public life of a society" (Craig, 1999, p. 113)—a public life "characterised by difference and incommensurability" (p. 112).

Craig's argument is explicitly located within an agonistic model of democracy, and according to him irreconcilable with a Habermasian model. One might argue that such a rejection is neither necessary, nor desirable: it is possible to conceive public service media as a meeting point for conflicting ideas and perspectives also from a Habermas-inspired public sphere approach. Nevertheless, the value of an agonistic model is its focus on the ever-present issues of exclusion, as well as a richer understanding of the range of communicative modes and features present in the public sphere.

## LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER DIRECTIONS

As pointed out in the introduction, much research on public service broadcasting has focused on *political* questions—partly questions of policy, organization and management and partly questions of democracy and the public sphere. While the two first strands comprise studies that are mostly descriptive and analytical, studying changes within and around public service broadcasting, the latter two comprise more normative approaches. The key emphasis within these latter two strands is on the question: What exactly is the point of public service broadcasting in modern societies?

On this count, research on public service broadcasting and actual broadcasting debates converge. The positions held by scholars mirror the divisions in the debate over the future of public service broadcasting in society. Almost a decade into the 21st century, three main positions can be clearly identified both in the academic and public debate:

The first position holds that public service broadcasting is rapidly becoming an anachronism. Following those enthusiastic on behalf of the democratic potential of the new media (e.g., Coleman & Gøtze, 2001; Froomkin, 2004), public service broadcasting appears to be both unnecessary and outdated. If the Internet facilitates direct dialogue between citizens, as well as an abundance of differentiated content, why continue to pour large subsidies into state-owned broadcasting institutions?

The second position is at the opposite end of the scale, holding that public service broadcasting is more important than ever before. As the public sphere gets more fragmented and it gets increasingly easy to exclude information, opinions and perspectives inconsistent with personal likes or conceptions, observers fear a “balkanization” of public debate (Sunstein, 2001). In this situation, some call for sustaining and strengthening the traditional national broadcasting systems “for they preserve the principle and practice of a common public life against all those contemporary forces that fragment it” (Scannell, 2005, p. 141).

The final position is closer to the second, but may be seen as an attempt to carve out a compromise, a third way. The idea here is to reformulate the traditional concepts of public service to make it less restricted and limited. Graham Murdock (2005, p. 227) has, for example, sought to redefine public service remits within what he calls a “digital commons”: “a linked space defined by its shared refusal of commercial enclosure and its commitment to free and universal access, reciprocity, and collaborative activity.” The space is imagined as potentially global in scope, built on computer-mediated communication, where public service broadcasting institutions making up “the central node” in the network.

This third approach may seem attractive to many observers, since it attempts to combine traditional values with new applications. Nevertheless, in order to develop such a position academically and intellectually, some thorny questions remain. One question concerns the *centrality* of traditional public service broadcasters in the years to come: What is really meant by the suggestion that public service broadcasters should make up a central node in a larger network, and what are the implications for structure and funding? How does it relate to the idea proposed for example by the British regulator Ofcom (2007) to set up a “Public Service Provider” to cater for new media content outside the established institutions?

Another issue concerns the *distinctiveness* of public service broadcasters in the digital era. Public funding rests on the idea that public service broadcasting to some extent remains distinct from commercial services, and it continues to be a task for researchers to demonstrate exactly how distinct these services are. Research may also be able to validate whether there is any truth to the claim that public service functions might as well be taken care of by other

institutional arrangements, including institutions more akin to community media (Harrison & Wessels, 2005).

A final issue concerns the relationship between ideal conceptions of public service broadcasting and the historical specificity of actual institutions. A large majority of the works reviewed in this chapter relates to very particular situations: the transformation of specific institutions at a certain point in time. The reasoning is far from universal, and may only with great caution be transferred to other contexts. Too often, arguments in discussions about public service broadcasting are lifted without due consideration from one setting to another—disregarding the role of concrete media systems’ historical developments, the specificity of language areas and demography, or the size and structure of different markets. This poses a great challenge for researchers, and should stimulate efforts to carry out more comparative studies. One may also learn from historians whose studies demonstrate that large public organizations as a rule are surrounded by internal and external tensions, and exist within a web of conflicting interests. A case in point is Burns (1977, p. 9) who claims that the establishment of public service broadcasting was visible as “a superb example of accommodatory politics, spreading satisfactions and dissatisfactions fairly evenly among the interest groups concerned.” This may indeed be the best public service can hope for also in the years to come.

## NOTES

1. Many studies have pointed out that “the concept of public-service broadcasting” is “extremely difficult to define” (Feintuck, 1999, p. 66), that it “is not a precise scientific term” (Kuhn, 1985, p. 4), that “[t]here is no easy answer to the question of what public service broadcasting is” (Raboy, 1996, p. 6). There have been several attempts at eliciting a list of public service principles such as “the broadcasting institution is a public body,” “the service is provided to all [...] in return for a basic initial payment, usually in the form of an annual license fee” and “a commitment to balanced scheduling across the different programme genres,” to mention some of the criteria listed by Kuhn (1985, see also Scannell, 1990). As Raboy (1996, p. 7) points out, however, “The real problem around ... is not to improve the list but rather how to apply any such set of principles.” Syvertsen (1999) points to the number of definitions and argues that the term public service broadcasting is “too vague to be used successfully as an analytical term” (see also Bolin, 2004). Others claim that the similarity across institutions makes it possible to identify core public service values (Born & Prosser, 2001; Moe, 2003).
2. The license fee has recently been abolished in the Netherlands and the Flemish community of Belgium. A public grant has replaced the fee (European Audiovisual Observatory, Press release, Strasbourg 9. April 2002. Retrieved March, 16, 2007, from: [http://www.obs.coe.int/about/oea/pr/service\\_public.html](http://www.obs.coe.int/about/oea/pr/service_public.html).)
3. See for example, the EU’s so-called Amsterdam protocol on public broadcasting, which acknowledges national governments’ right to determine the funding and mandate of public service broadcasting in their respective states (EU, 1997, protocol no. 32).
4. The method was developed by Williams in order to discuss the differences between US and UK programming.  
Programming was divided into two main types in order to determine the proportion of typical public service programming on each channel.
5. In the countries identified above as having strong public service traditions, public service television have, as a rule, retained more than one third of the viewing time. (Figures by email from EBU/Nordicom, table 22.4.c)
6. In a reply, Garnham (2003) agrees to the value of commercial broadcasting, while maintaining that the British system had advantages over the American. He argues, however, for a more conservative definition of politics as being about making decisions that affect us as citizens. His main concern is to ensure that the decisions made—the effect of politics—are in the best way possible controlled by the people:

"within a structure of representative democracy informed by a widely accessible public debate" (p. 196). Public service broadcasting remains a guarantor for this debate.

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