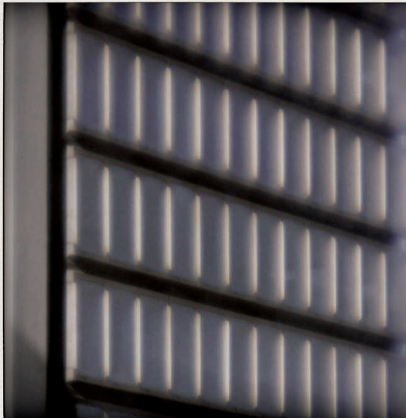
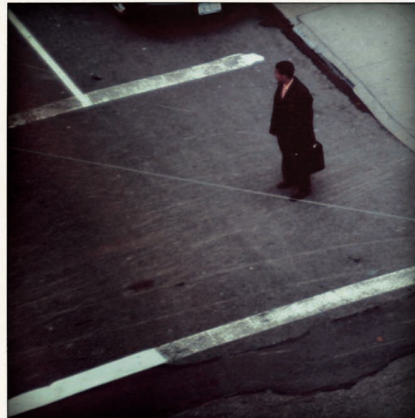


# Critical Perspectives on the European Mediasphere



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# Exit, Voice and Loyalty: Public broadcasters and their publics in post-Communist societies

Janis Juzefovics

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Following the collapse of Communist regimes across Central and Eastern Europe, abortive attempts were made to replicate Western European-style public broadcasting systems. The transition from state to public broadcasting was not as smooth as initially hoped, and 20 years on public broadcasters on the eastern side of the Iron Curtain, exhausted by insufficient funding and political pressures, struggle to secure the levels of public support and demand that are crucial to a healthy public broadcasting system.

While broadcasting laws were rewritten soon after the fall of Communism, echoing Western public broadcasting ideals, the implementation of these principles in practice was, and continues to be, turbulent. Consequently, what we have today are in fact quasi-public broadcasters, or unsuccessful replicas of Western public broadcasting institutions. As Richard Collins has summarised:

*public service broadcasting has not yet been implanted successfully in Central and Eastern Europe [...] PSB has not, it seems, been able to do much more than figure as an ideal to those working to (re)establish democratic and pluralistic societies east of the Elbe (Collins, 2004: 33).*

The gap between public broadcasting institutions and their publics in post-Communist societies manifests itself vividly in the modest results public broadcasters (particularly television) deliver in their ratings battles with commercial market players, and in the huge difficulties public broadcasters face in collecting licence fee payments.

Even in Poland, where by regional standards public service television has atypically high viewership figures and a strong position in the market, audiences are reluctant to pay their licence fees. Bajomi-Lázár, Örnebring and Štětka report: "*Of the thirteen million households in Poland, 12.8 million own at least one television set, but over 4.6 million did not pay the fee in 2006, and an additional 2.8 million were legally exempt from paying it*" (2011: 13). As Klimkiewicz has concluded, the loyalty of audiences "*did not stretch as far as a willingness to pay licence fees*" (2007: 317) and "*the financing of PSB solely from licence fees appeared unaffordable in Poland*" (2007: 299). "*Alongside political dependence, programming commercialization seems to be an equally important factor which undermines the idea of PSB in Polish society,*" Stepka (2010: 242) explains.

Current research into the demise of public broadcasting in post-Communist societies has attempted to explain the phenomenon mostly by pointing to the political and economic realm, and less attention has been paid to socio-cultural factors. In previous studies on media reform in Central and Eastern Europe, politicisation and commercialisation have been identified as key characteristics of emerging post-Communist media systems. Accordingly, the failure to put public broadcasting ideals into practice has mainly been attributed to political and economic conditions. First, the political pressuring of broadcasters by post-Communist, pro-democracy political leaders has had a negative impact on editorial independence. Second, insufficient funding has made public broadcasters financially unstable and uncompetitive in their battles with commercial players (Jakubowicz, 1996, Sparks and Reading, 1998, Gross, 2002, Mungiu-Pippidi, 2003). However, the fiasco with the introduction of public broadcasting in post-Communist societies cannot solely be explained by political and market factors.

According to Jakubowicz, "*the lack of social embeddedness of the idea of public service broadcasting and the lack of a social constituency willing and able to support public service broadcasters and buttress its autonomy and independence*" are common characteristics of public service broadcasting systems across post-Communist countries (2008: 117). In order to shed additional light on the peculiar interplay between public broadcasters and their publics in former Communist bloc countries, I will draw on Albert Hirschman's influential theory of 'exit, voice and loyalty' (see Hirschman, 1970). Hirschman's concepts have previously been utilised to examine individual and collective reactions to system failures, including public services, for instance, unsatisfactory public school systems (see Elis, 2006, Di John,

2007, Healy, 2007). Nevertheless, to date his concepts have not been used to examine the actions taken by audiences in their relationship with public service broadcasters, though it has been increasingly used in broader citizenship debates (for an overview see Flew, 2009).

Hirschman's theory offers an analytical framework for understanding the complex interplay between exit and voice and further explores the tangled nature of the concept of loyalty in the light of what appear to be unsatisfactory public broadcasting systems in Central and Eastern Europe.

## 2. HIRSCHMAN'S 'EXIT, VOICE AND LOYALTY'

According to Hirschman's theory, there are two options for how individuals and groups can respond to decline in the performance of institutions or, in a broader sense, how they can respond to the failure of a system: exit (leaving, escaping from the failing system) and voice (various forms of protest and action in the hope that the system is able to recover). As Hirschman argues, "*loyalty is a key concept in the battle between exit and voice*" (1970: 82). For Hirschman, 'loyalty' is an attitude, defined as "*a special attachment to an organization*" (1970: 77) that determines behaviour: exit and voice option. The main point of Hirschman's approach is that, in the absence of loyalty, exit will be preferred and exit itself will be costless and silent.

Hirschman's theory has been extensively used in marketing research to study consumer behaviour. His approach has, therefore, often been misperceived as market-driven and consumer-oriented. Hirschman's theoretical framework for analysis of the relationship between consumer/citizen and product/organisation has, however, also been utilised in other fields outside business studies (e.g. psychology, political science, cultural studies), thus proving the validity of Hirschman's concepts when it comes to the analysis of social and political phenomena, the exploration of the citizen realm and public good.

Being a development economist and bringing together economic and political theory, Hirschman himself has argued that his concepts of 'exit, voice and loyalty' should be "*applicable not only to economic operators such as business firms, but to a wide variety of noneconomic organizations and situations*" (1970: 1).

### 3. HIRSCHMAN AND PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTING

#### 3.1. HIRSCHMAN AND THE LATVIAN PUBLIC TV

In this paper I will advocate the validity of Hirschman's approach in examining the relationship between broadcasters and their publics against the backdrop of declining post-Communist public service broadcasting systems. Using the Baltic country of Latvia as a case study, I will demonstrate how the analytical tools of Hirschman's theory can inspire examination of publics' responses to the deterioration of public broadcasting systems. It should be noted that I am currently at an early stage in my research project and the fieldwork has yet to be finalised. Therefore, my reflections on Hirschman's theory will be based on theoretical assumptions rather than on empirically-based evidence.

During the political breakthrough at the end of the 1980s, state radio and television in Latvia, as in other Baltic countries, supported the struggle for freedom and, as Brikše and others put it, "*enjoyed enormous trust and even love from the audience*" (2002: 69). In January 1991 people even built barricades around radio and television buildings to guard journalists against a possible invasion by Soviet security forces.

Twenty years on, statistics indicate that audiences are exiting in their droves from public television, the successor to the former state television, and migrating to commercial platforms, be they Latvian-language or Russian-language, national or foreign commercial channels. The audience share of Latvian Television has been dropping steadily over the last two decades, and in 2010 amounted to just 13.6% (both channels combined).<sup>1</sup> Only five of the 40 most popular TV programmes in the country in 2010 were aired on Latvian Television. Ratings data reveal that, for many Latvians, the only experiences they have of public TV are the annual Eurovision song contest, regular coverage of ice hockey games and special programming during the national holidays.

The historical context of Central and Eastern European countries makes 'the battle between exit and voice' around public broadcasting in these societies even more complex. The origins of public broadcasting in post-Communist societies are fundamentally different from those of Western European countries. Accordingly, loyalty towards public broadcasting has different implications when it comes to former Communist bloc countries.

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1

TNS Latvia data

While in Western European societies the introduction of public broadcasting is often characterised as a paternalistic enlightenment project (see Ang, 1991, Briggs, 1965, Scannell, 1989, 1990, 1996a, 1996b, Scannell & Cardiff, 1991), in societies on the other side of the Iron Curtain, the arrival of public broadcasting was part of a system change that took place several decades later. Furthermore, the transition from state to public broadcasting overlapped with the introduction of commercial radio and television. Flourishing commercial broadcasting provided choices for television viewers and thus made the exit mechanism from the recently established public television available, a mechanism which had been a very limited option during the era of state broadcasting under the totalitarian Communist media systems. Thus, contrary to the deep-seated (or imposed, one could also argue) loyalty towards public broadcasting in Western European societies, in Central and Eastern Europe there has never been a strong public broadcasting tradition and therefore exiting from public broadcasting can be expected to be rather costless and silent.

Poor audience figures and significant audience losses during the last two decades clearly signal a disengagement between public service television and the Latvian public. As in Western societies, rejecters of public broadcasting are mainly found among young people and ethnic minorities. Correspondingly, the more loyal audiences for public television are to be found among the ethnic Latvian majority and among older people.

However, at least two factors make the post-Communist story different from the Western European case. First, commercial channels attract sizeable audiences not only for entertainment output, but also for news and current affairs programming, which has traditionally been seen as a core business of public broadcasting. For instance, in Latvia the most popular *prime-time* news programmes are on commercial channels, not on public TV. Second, public TV is being rejected by an economically active audience: those with higher incomes and better education. Audiences for public TV in Latvia are overwhelmingly old and less well-off.

While the absence of loyalty seems obvious (given the massive exit from public service TV), relying purely on quantitative audience measurements such as ratings and audience socio-demographics can be misleading in making judgements concerning public support towards and demand for public broadcasting. This point has been made very evident by Raboy and Abramson in their analyses of media policymaking processes. To Raboy and Abramson, audience statistics indicate 'market demand' ("*what the*



*public is interested in*"), but fail to reflect 'social demand' ("that which society needs") (1998: 336, 340). Raboy and Abramson instead call for citizen involvement through qualitative audience studies when defining the meaning of the notion of public interest: "[...] *democratic governance in the cultural realm demands the involvement of members of the populace in the production of their cultural selves, of their desires, of their identities*" (1998: 351-352).

My main interest here concerns understanding whether rejecting the programming output of public television also implies exiting from the values or normative ideals attached to the public broadcasting model. My assumption here is that, while withdrawing from what is on offer from public television, audiences can still remain loyal to the idea of public broadcasting, whatever definitions of public broadcasting they may have. In other words, personal experience (the rejection of public service television channels and a preference for commercial broadcasting) should not automatically imply denial of public broadcasting as a set of values (the normative ideals of public broadcasting as a public good).

In line with the normative Western European public service broadcasting model, public service broadcasting makes a crucial contribution to the democratic process (mainly because of its potential in the formation of the modern public sphere), and therefore deserves the status of a public good (see Dahlgren, 1995, 1999, 2000, Garnham, 1983, 1986, 2003, Raboy, 1996, Scannell, 1989, 1990, Splichal, 2006).

As Hirschman argues, only a partial exit from 'public goods' (contrary to 'private goods') is possible. "Actually, of course, a private citizen can "get out" from public education by sending his children to private school, but at the same time he cannot get out, in the sense that his and his children's life will be affected by the quality of public education," he explains (1970: 102). If public broadcasting as a system is seen as a set of values rather than consisting only of public broadcasting institutions, we can make a similar argument: a full exit from public broadcasting is hardly possible.

It is, therefore, crucial to make a distinction between public broadcasting as an institutional embodiment and public broadcasting as a set of values. Accordingly, broadcasting reform in the Central and Eastern European region cannot be seen as an exclusively institutional transition (from state to public broadcasters), neglecting the current state of the idea (values) of public broadcasting in post-Communist societies today.

### 3.2. EXIT

Detaching the idea of public broadcasting from public broadcasting institutions allows us to further elaborate 'exit' as a concept. In current media landscapes across Central and Eastern Europe, commercial television channels are 'close substitutes' - to use Hirschman's vocabulary - for public television. That is, it is not just public broadcasters that act as social and business institutions while at the same time mimicking the programming strategies of their commercial rivals. Commercial broadcasting often provides high-profile journalistic output (news, current affairs) that can qualify as public broadcasting provision. Hence, in the post-Communist media environment one cannot expect audiences to make a clear distinction between commercial and public broadcasting, and an exit from public television should not automatically lead to an exit from public broadcasting. The popularity of high-quality journalistic content on commercial platforms in Latvia can be seen as a manifestation of loyalty towards public broadcasting values, even if it is being offered outside of traditional public broadcasting institutions.

Given the blurred boundary between public and commercial broadcasting, the audiences' roles as citizens and consumers could be seen as dynamic rather than fixed. Thus, migration from public service television to commercial channels does not equate to an abandoning of public broadcasting ideals and a rejection of the role of a citizen. My argument here is that the role of a citizen can also be realised outside public broadcasting institutions, and that commercial broadcasting can provide a popular platform for interplay between the roles of a citizen and a consumer.

The overall media scene, across Europe, has changed fundamentally. Today it is hard to draw a clear demarcation line between the programming strategies and funding models of public broadcasters and commercial channels, and therefore the identities of citizen and consumer should be seen as overlapping and complementary roles of the public, rather than as clear-cut concepts in constant tension with one another. Through qualitative audience research I hope to gain an understanding of what it means 'to be a citizen' or 'to be a consumer' within everyday media experience, against the backdrop of a weak public broadcasting system and a flourishing commercial television sector.

### 3.3. VOICE

For the successful realisation of voice mechanisms in official (institutional) contexts, a strong tradition of civil society should be in place. As a rule, due to the Communist legacy, societies across Central and Eastern Europe have weak non-governmental sectors. While a platform for public participation in broadcasting policy-making in Latvia is formally available, its implementation has been rather turbulent. The Public Advisory Council, which consists of representatives of non-governmental organizations and functions under the auspices of the National Electronic Mass Media Council, can easily define the interests of particular social groups, but struggles to elaborate the public service remit, where consensus should be reached on broader public interests. Apart from the Public Advisory Council, other institutional forms of feedback and public participation in the governance of public broadcasting are few and far between. For this reason, the realisation of voice-type reactions is limited to speaking up outside official platforms, where day-to-day domestic family structures play a key role.

### 3.4. EXIT AND VOICE INTERPLAYING

Exit and voice options are not mutually exclusive, and the exit option itself can be seen as a voice-type response. The rejection of public service television is itself a form of protest: withdrawal from a deteriorating public broadcasting system can serve as an instrument for the expression of dissatisfaction and for an insistence on improvement. In other words, even if one does not stay within public broadcasting organisations, one can still not only remain loyal to the idea of public broadcasting, but also realise the voice option.

As already noted, television audiences in Latvia are not only divided across lines of age. Ethnicity/language also plays a key role in setting demarcation lines. Ethnic Latvians and the large Latvian Russian-speaking minority have strikingly different television viewing habits. I suspect that the Russian minority in Latvia ignores public service television and prefers Russian-language channels transmitting from Moscow, not only because of linguistic barriers (public service TV provides only small volumes of programming in Russian, and older Russian-speakers in particular have a poor command of the Latvian language) and the wide range of available alternatives (plenty of Moscow-based Russian-language TV channels are available in Latvia), but also because of the problematic national identity construction processes over the last 20 years since the break-up of the Soviet Union.

I assume that, among ethnic minority groups, public service television is seen as oriented towards the ethnic majority: that is, 'Latvian public service television' is translated as 'public service television for Latvians'. Besides, I suspect that, given the alienation many Russian-speakers feel towards the government of the day, the same sentiment is echoed in their relationship with public television. That is, public service television is to a great extent equated with state television in the sense of representing the official world view of the ethnic Latvian majority.

My argument here is that an exit strategy- rejection of public broadcasting and migration to Moscow-based Russian-language channels- serves as a voice mechanism for the expression of resentment and protest among the Russian-speaking minority. In other words, detachment from public broadcasting among ethnic minorities should not be seen merely as an expression of discontent towards the offer from public broadcasting, but should instead be discussed in the broader context of unsettled ethnic relations in the Latvian society.

#### 4. APPLICATION OF HIRSCHMAN'S THEORY

I will use the design of my research project to demonstrate how Hirschman's approach can be used in empirical research. Through qualitative audience research the study aims to gain empirically based knowledge on what forms of action audience members develop as a response to public service television. The study aims to understand how the relationship with public service television is negotiated and how audiences' responses towards public service television fare in a spectrum of actions ranging from exit-type to voice-type reactions.

The goal is to explore what mechanisms to realise exit (escape/withdrawal) are available and how they are applied: e.g. rejection of public broadcasting as an institutional embodiment (product, service) or public broadcasting as a set of values (ideals). Similarly, the study will explore what mechanisms to realise voice (participation/protest) are available and how they are applied: the expression of grievance in everyday or official (institutional) contexts.

Besides, the project seeks to explore interpretive repertoires applied to discuss the ethos of public service broadcasting and understand how audience members perceive the idea of public service broadcasting and what their definitions of public service broadcasting are: that is, how do they

define meaning of concepts such as 'public interest' and 'public good'? Finally, the project seeks to understand how individuals use and experience public service television in everyday life and how this has shaped their articulations on public service broadcasting.

Focus group interviews with television viewers will be combined with participant observation within everyday family environments.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Through an empirical enquiry into the relationship between public television and its publics in post-Communist Latvia, I hope to elaborate further the concept of loyalty that lies at the heart of Hirschman's theory. My underlying aim is to understand how dis/loyalty towards public broadcasting, seen as both public broadcasting institutions and the idea (values) of public broadcasting, is formed; how a range of socio-cultural factors influence the absence/presence of this 'special attachment'; and, last but not least, how the concept operates within the day-to-day practices of media use. Such data should bring new insights and a fuller understanding of the phenomenon in general and its articulation within a post-Communist context in particular.

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