CURRENT PERSPECTIVES ON COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA RESEARCH

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From PSB to PSM in local media.
The challenges for television stations in
their adaptation to the digital era

Aida Martori Muntsant

Abstract

In recent years, new goals have been added to the traditional functions associated with PSB, such as the need for innovation and interaction with the audience. How are local media adapting to the digital era? What challenges are they facing in this process? Are there more risks for them than for big broadcasters?

The goal of this chapter is to answer these questions, with two main objectives: to show how adaptation to the digital era is taking place in public local stations that offer a public service, and to explain the challenges that these media are facing in the process. Using a qualitative methodology based on consultation of official documentation, interviews, non-participant observation and a focus group, this chapter describes the situation of public local television in Catalonia regarding adaptation to the digital era.

Local stations have adopted some internal measures to adapt their structure and routines to new ways of producing and consuming content. It should be mentioned that they have integrated newsrooms, and that they have begun working with other innovation-linked projects in the territory. Despite these changes, the results show that local media have less capacity to respond to the challenges of the new age, especially due to lack of funding to develop new technologies and strategies.

Keywords: Public Service Media, local television, digital era, innovation, new technologies

1.   Introduction

There are many cases in Europe where adaptation of PSM to the digital era is taking place successfully, such as the BBC in the United Kingdom or TV3 in Catalonia (Spain). But how are local media adapting to the digital era? What challenges are they facing in this process? Are local television stations adapting successfully? Are there more risks for them than for big broadcasters?

This text has two main objectives: (1) to show how adaptation to the digital era is taking place in public local stations that offer a public service, and (2) to explain the challenges that these media are facing in the process. From a theoretical framework about Public Service Media theories and cultural proximity to argue the importance of the existence of local channels at the local level, we developed a qualitative methodology based on consultation of official documentation provided by the Catalan government about the licencing process of local channels, interviews with 13 managers of local channels, non-participant observation of these channels and a focus group with seven managers of local stations.

This text presents the situation of public local television in Catalonia regarding adaptation to the digital era. The status of Catalan local television is a relevant example of how this adaptation is taking place and could serve as an example for other cases. It is paradigmatic due to the abundance of local television channels and their aim to integrate into the digital landscape.

2.   Public Service Media: an approach to new functions of television

Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) has been analysed by many European authors (Brevini, 2013; Van Cuilenburg and McQuail, 2003; Dönders, 2012; Ferrell Lowe and Steemers, 2012; Bardoel and d'Haenens, 2008). Some academics have focused on the transition and adaptation to the digital era by broadcasters that offer a public service (Moragas and Prado, 2000; Trappel, 2010; Jankowsky, 2012; Iosifidis, 2007). In the last few years, new goals have been added to the traditional functions associated with PSB, such as the need for innovation and interaction with audiences.

Adaptation to the online environment is related to new technologies available for sending messages to citizens, but it also has an impact on the structure of these media. Regarding the first issue, Public Service Media (PSM) needs to be aware of new tools and must also research how to connect to audiences through social networks, apps and new formats. In terms of the second issue, media have changed

their way of working, for example through the integration of newsrooms and prioritising digital content (digital first).

With the growth of new technologies, Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) must be reformulated due to the multiplicity of ways to disseminate content and the need to insert itself into the digital era. Owen (1999) considers that the Internet can provide information and entertainment to compete with digital television, although it cannot provide a massive video-services market. Nowadays, online video consumption is constantly rising, while conventional television registers a decline in audience numbers. However, television is still the most consumed mass medium. We are all facing a paradigm shift in the audiovisual model, in which Public Service Media cannot be just broadcasters but must adapt to the new existing reality, reinterpreting its concept.

To update PSB to the digital era, we cannot overlook how technical developments have affected television and its functions. Traditional roles associated with PSB are related to education, culture, aesthetics, identity, political plurality, social issues, economics and development, humanism and moralising. The advent of the digital era has introduced new goals and, consequently, public television might now consider issues such as developing a communications strategy, guaranteeing universal access, mediating in the face of multiple sources of information and balancing and putting restraints on new oligopolies.

Moreover, the need for technological innovation and the aim of interacting with audiences might not be forgotten by Public Service Media, as Figure 1 shows. It must also act as the driving force to bring the communications sector and other social sectors together, among other things. As a result, new technologies must be taken into account when constructing theories on the role of public service in the digital age. The change in terminology from Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) to Public Service Media (PSM) stems from a technological evolution that has been influenced by political interests and social demands.

Given the diverse ways in which audiovisual public service providers can now broadcast, especially with the rise of the Internet, there was a need to update the terminology. Hence, the B (for broadcasting) was changed to an M (for media) because of various new formats and models of public communication, like the Internet. The digital era requires public service television providers to take on a new role, since they are now integrated into a more global system of public communication services.

Different media service providers can no longer be considered as independent from each other, rather it is more pertinent to look at how Information and Communication Technology (ICT) providers can develop as one and converge while communication platforms diversify. Technological development and social changes are related to each other, and technology is seen as a social product that can be democratically controlled (Smith and Leo, 1996).

According to a study edited by the Reuters Institute (Sehl, Corina and Nielsen, 2016), Public Service Media leading adaptation to the digital environment (the BBC in the United Kingdom and YLE in Finland) have common features: all are well-funded, work with different platforms in an integrated way, have a major level of independence from political power, and security through agreements concerning public service functions and funding. Social television, enhanced television and interactive television are good options to lead in this new scenario.

Regarding production routines, public mass media face challenges in their capacity to offer online news in an effective way. These include adapting to a new online landscape that is in constant evolution, and internal adaptation, such as building integrated newsrooms and being able to produce news in faster ways. New technologies facilitate citizen participation in the media, through the Internet and social networking sites, while allowing public service providers to diversify their distribution channels. With so many different information services now available, public media providers must adapt to this online environment, since they play a crucial role in the communications ecosystem and should provide a quality service that is diverse, pluralistic and representative. However, as we will see in a practical case in Catalonia, local media are facing several challenges in adapting their goals to the demands of the digital age.

Figure 1: Goals of Public Service Media in the digital era (original creation)
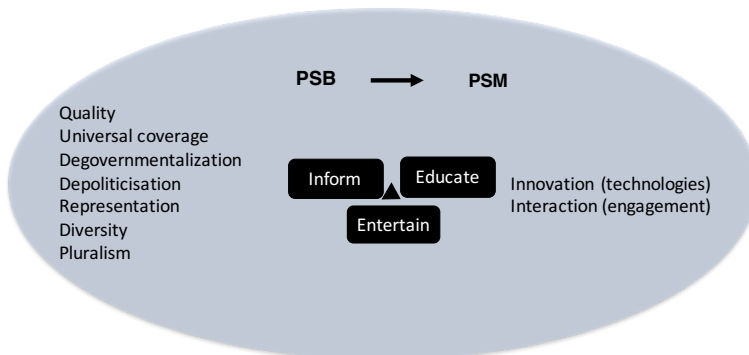
3.   PSM at the local level. What does it mean?

Most of the authors mentioned talk about the goals of Public Service Media in the digital era. Now we want to take a step forwards and analyse the challenges, not for broadcasters in general, but more specifically for those that operate at the local level.

According to Straubhaar (2007), individuals identify themselves on a variety of levels (multiple layers of identity). The identity of individuals has not only become global or transnational; rather, different layers of geographical identity coexist (local, regional and transnational) that are linked on the basis of cultural-linguistic and national regions (Anderson, 1983). Local television is popular because people live most of their lives in a local area and, consequently, want to remain well-informed about this area and also feel a strong identification with it (Straubhaar, 2007).

Cultural proximity explains the tendency to prefer local or national productions, and cultural products close to the identity of citizens. In the context of globalisation, where the Internet is an important platform for consuming audiovisual content, two parallel phenomena occur: the growth of big informative circulation and an increased need for programming reflecting local culture. Therefore, the different layers of identity represented in the media do not make local television disappear. This is a symptom of audiences' need to have communicative projects that reflect their different layers of identity.

With the multiplicity of new television outlets, local media play an important role in satisfying citizens' demands, in response to cultural proximity theories. Citizens look for their own signs of identity in their immediate community (Moragas, Garitaonandia and López, 1999), and local stations have as their mission offering local audiovisual content online, too.

Local television accomplishes the goal of representing local culture, traditions and politics, one of the pillars of Public Service Media. In that sense, reflection on the implications of digitisation at the local level brings a new approach to the situation of PSM.

Public Service Media at the local level are crucial to following-up on what happens in a small territory and illuminating the relevance of general news to the local area. These media can be more specific on local issues and explain them in greater detail than general broadcasters. To the role of covering local issues in-

formatively, one should add the goal of documenting and archiving local events. These media report stories, and also save all material related to the local area, and make them available online. New technologies allow cataloguing content in a more agile way, in order to preserve and transmit local culture.

As Figure 2 shows, there is a space where the need for proximity and the need for Public Service Media match, which is the representation of local communities by PSM.

Figure 2: Interaction of public service and proximity theories (original creation)

PUBLIC SERVICE

PSB

PROXIMITY

Cultural proximity

PSM

Local television
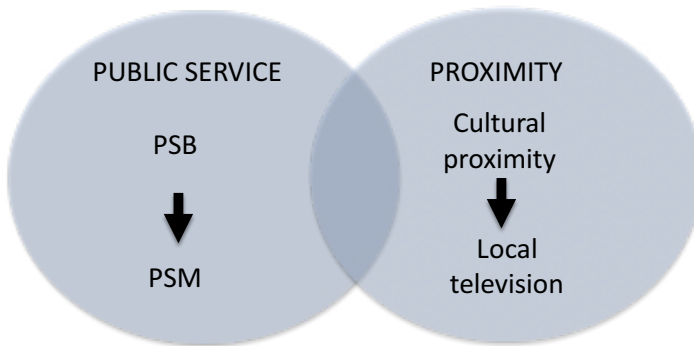
4. The adaptation of local stations to the digital era in Catalonia

In Spain (and therefore in Catalonia) the switch from an analogue signal to digital caused organisational problems in the structure of channels. As a consequence of the DTT spectrum distribution, municipalities have to share channels with surrounding villages, so stations become supra-local. This caused difficulties in terms of identification because audiences expect to watch exclusively local content on these channels.

Public service and identity construction are linked, taking into account the goal of representation. The identification of citizens with their territory is crucial to understanding and ensuring the functioning of local media. The importance of the local sphere explains that, in some cases, groups of municipalities introduced by DTT did not function. Fieldwork demonstrated that local identity, at least in the Catalan case, is not shared by different villages, and the situation is even more complicated if there are different regions – "comarcas" in their Spanish denomination – involved (Martori, 2014). For example, it is difficult for a citizen of a village or town to identify with the traditions of another village, and unlikely that he or she would be interested in a strictly local piece of news from another city.

This analysis has practical consequences, such as many city councils abandoning supra-local television projects because of policies implementing DTT in Spain. The economic crisis and the possibility to start cheap online projects, without any barriers or the need to request a spectrum on which to broadcast, favour this phenomenon. Moreover, Movistar TV, the main cable platform, decided not to broadcast every single local channel existing in Catalonia and, instead, invited La Xarxa – a network created to give support to local media in terms of content exchange, innovation and technical developments – to broadcast local content from each region in Catalonia on a common channel. This limited the presence of local stations in the digital environment and, consequently, damaged the representation of the local sphere.

One of the main problems of local media is restrictions on funding, based on subsidies from local government and its aim to promote these channels. Sometimes, because of the dependence on public economic resources, independence from governmental and political power is not guaranteed. Another consequence of the low funding is that many local media are unable to produce a large amount of local content, so they rely on content exchange with other stations, or use cheap methods to produce content that can affect the quality of programming.

The limited funding also affects the capability to innovate, one of the pillars of PSM in the digital era, as we have argued. Being more traditional and having fewer resources to commit to explore new technologies, local media need to work together and to receive help from La Xarxa. In fact, many projects related to innovation in local media are initiated by the network. To prevent a lack of innovation, we observed that local stations have, in recent years, begun working with other innovation-linked projects in the territory, such as universities and companies, usually start-ups.

There is only one local broadcaster in Catalonia that has started innovative projects in order to become a transmedia system: betevé, the local public broadcaster of Barcelona. In comparison with other local television channels in Catalonia, betevé has experienced the most development, particularly in terms of innovation, as it has benefited from a far larger budget. As an example, betevé has established ties with Pompeu Fabra University (UPF) to set up a project based on pilot shows that use new formats. Another significant project is being developed in collaboration with an innovation laboratory, BTV Media Lab, which acts as a business accelerator and a place for testing out different programmes for inclusion in the programming schedule.

Local stations have adopted some internal measures to adapt their structure and routines to new ways of producing and consuming content. It should be mentioned that they have integrated newsrooms, mostly to provide informative content to television channels, radio stations and websites. However, the results show that local television in Catalonia has not developed a solid online strategy.

All local stations have websites where they update the content once broadcast by DTT, some of it not made originally but using the platform provided by La Xarxa. But these platforms are not yet used to delivering breaking news. Informative routines are still based on offline linear broadcastingby DTT. Channels could work more as a multimedia channel, with audio, video and text on their websites when they update content, as generalist stations are doing.[1] Therefore, these websites are not providing content that then will be broadcast by television, a practice that could work to increase audiences.

Following this tendency, we observed the deficient use of social networks: Twitter and Facebook are tools mainly used to link content previously broadcast and then updated on the Internet, rather than platforms where local channels receive live feedback from audiences during synchronic transmissions, or a place to advertise programming. In that sense, greater audience engagement through social networks could be explored, as Figure 3 shows.

Figure 3: A proposal for the use of social networks by local television stations (original creation)

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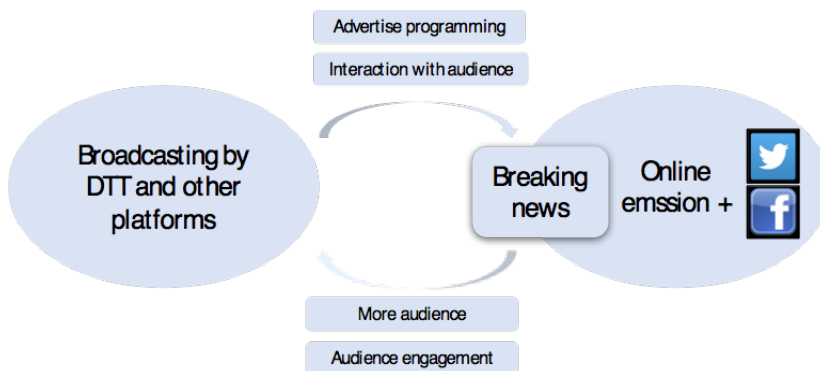
1   In Catalonia, an example is the website of the generalist broadcaster http://www.ccma.cat/324/, although the newsroom is not yet integrated. The BBC news website is an example of good practice. http://www.bbc.com/news

Despite the aforementioned, technological changes introduced by DTT have forced local broadcasters to work with a digital signal, which makes uploading content to websites easier.

Apart from the adaptation of traditional media to the digital era, we observed the creation of native online hyperlocal stations. Most of these media serve small geographical areas and are community-oriented. Described by many authors as hyperlocal, they broadcast original information, fill perceived information gaps (Metzgar, Kurpius and Rowley, 2011) and cover information of civic and cultural value, including news about local groups, events and council issues (Williams, Barnett, Harte and Townend, 2014). These online media, often less professionalised, coexist with traditional media and their websites and, as digital natives, are more advanced because they do not include analogue routines in their way of working.

Within a global flow of information, local media have a role in providing information about the layers of identity close to citizens, and their function is still – or even more – important in order to avoid a lack of information about local issues. However, we have seen that television stations need to better explore the possibilities introduced by new technologies.

Table 1: Challenges and proposals for the adaptation of local television to the digital era

Challenge	Proposal
Digitization of the signal has changed the territorial distribution of media and caused organizational problems in the structure of channels	Respect the previous local distribution of broadcasters and make plans according to the pre-existing reality regarding local television
Many distributors of content (cable platforms such as Movistar TV or global players such as Netflix) do not carry local channels	Establish policies that obligate all audiovisual content distributors to broadcast local channels in order to assure local representation in the online environment
Limited funding affects the quality of programming and the capacity to innovate	As is taking place in Catalonia, local channels should collaborate, exchange content and share technological innovations. Generalist public channels should transfer developments in innovation to local channels, which do not have the resources to do so
The need to optimize the integration of newsrooms, although the majority of channels work together with radio and websites	Change the telecentric view, from channel direction to the worker's level, in order to think about multiplatform and transmedia systems at the local level
To achieve prioritisation of digital first	Promote the better use of websites that show breaking news and advertising content, and more efficient use of social networks to interact with audiences, advertise content and show breaking news

5. Conclusion: challenges and opportunities for local stations

Local broadcasters have to accomplish a public service function, which has to be translated as the capacity to transmit true information and respectful content with political, social and cultural pluralism, and to reflect the territory of each area in a balanced way. Media have to be well-equipped in order to favour the disclosure of main political, social, economic, scientific or sporting events in the municipalities. But not only that, they need to innovate to offer this service using the technologies of the digital era.

Local media are related to the capacity to inform about local news, most of them without visibility in other channels. In promoting participatory spaces to enhance social cohesion in villages and cities, they could not only open the door to diverse local actors but also increase online interaction and feedback through social networks. The role of local stations is not only to broadcast content about what matters in people's daily lives, but also to increase the engagement of the citizenry with the local area and participation in social activities. Moreover, local media have not only to be focused on television but also to integrate all media, creating a virtual community at the local level.

PSM has recently faced challenges not only at the State and regional level, but also at the local level, where broadcasters have more difficulties in investing resources in innovating. Despite the increase in platforms to consume content and globalisation of the media landscape, there is a need for local content according to cultural proximity theories. In that context, results show that local media have a lower capacity to respond to the threats of the new age, especially due to a lack of funding to develop new technologies and strategies. Traditional television stations have not successfully adapted to the digital era, and online platforms are virtual sites to watch content previously broadcast by Digital Terrestrial Television (DTT), excluding local channels of cable distributors and connected television which do not have enough presence on these platforms.

Moreover, we observed a deficient use of social networks, where greater audience engagement could be explored. Being more traditional and having fewer resources to innovate, local media need to work together and receive help from La Xarxa, a network that is crucial for the functioning of local media and their survival. In fact, many projects related to innovation in local stations were initiated by La Xarxa. Besides the adaptation of traditional media to the digital era, there is a growing phenomenon: the creation of hyperlocal online stations that coexist with local stations.

In order to overcome new challenges, the local television system has to adapt. Despite the difficulties, television channels are trying to innovate and are looking for cross-media and (only some of them) transmedia, but investment in advertising continues to be concentrated on television. Therefore, a business model needs to be found in order to diversify sources of advertising revenues. Having more windows open does not have to translate into additional distribution costs, but it does mean there is a need for more economic resources with regard to technological development, e.g. the development of applications ('apps') for smartphones and tablets.

The Catalan model shows that digitisation has an impact on the model, causing some structural problems. In terms of not damaging the local nature of the system, this case could serve as example for other countries where this transition has not yet happened (especially in some countries of Africa, Latin America or Asia). The structure of DTT, and also connected television and online projects, should respect pre-existing context and policies and change them as little as possible in order not to provoke more stress, taking into account that internal organisation and routines have to address the digital environment.

This case study has allowed us to identify the status of local media in a moment when adaptation to the digital era is crucial to continue connecting with audiences. Television channels need to have enough ability to readjust in order to face new demands. It is also useful to show some challenges that traditional media have to face if they do not want to be left behind in the media landscape. In that sense, there is a danger that local communities can be underrepresented if PSM does not integrate these new technologies.

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Biography

Aida Martori Muntsant, PhD, is an Associate Professor in the Department of Media, Communica-tion and Culture at the Universitat Autonoma de Barcelona (UAB). Her work is centred on Public Service Media, local television, cultural proximity, broadcasting in the digital era and media poli-cy. She obtained a PIF scholarship to develop her doctorate at UAB. She was a visiting scholar to

the Centre for Cultural Policy Research at the University of Glasgow, and to the Institute of Communications Research at the University of Illinois. Dr Martori visited public television stations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ghana, Germany, Spain, the United Kingdom and the United States. She has presented her research at many international conferences and published articles about the topic. She is a journalist and holds a Master's degree in European Integration.

Email: aida.martori@uab.cat