

# Networking Citizens

## *Public Service Media and Audience Activism in Europe*

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### Abstract

This chapter investigates public service media ‘challengers’, understood as audience activists who support and critique public service media. The research looks at selected European countries. Challenger initiatives represent a broad spectrum from individual opinions and informal initiatives to well-informed, organised groups. Public service media challengers aim to promote public debate about public service media issues and influence governance. This chapter introduces and operationalises the public service media challenger concept, drawing on document analysis, desk research and four semi-structured interviews with activists. Although the results are not generalisable, the research found two main types of highly-active networking groups that matter to the future of public service media in a networked society. One group are well-informed and organised public service media challengers who favour strong public service media and enunciate concrete recommendations. The other are civil society activists who are primarily concerned about public values and consumer-oriented issues, prone to be instrumentalised by neoliberal and populist interests.

Keywords: public service broadcasting, public service media, participation, civil society, media governance, viewers’ associations

### Introduction

In networked societies, public service media (PSM) must adapt to major demographic and technological shifts. Young people’s internet affinity, as well as digitisation and convergence, are forcing PSM not only to adapt content but also to translate public service values for better alignment with the internet era. Otherwise, PSM will fail to fulfil its democratic role (Lowe 2008a; High-Level Group 2013; EBU 2014). A key adaptation involves building and consolidating partnerships with pluralistic audiences in order to ensure a diverse, functional and sustainable media system (Bardoel & d’Haenens 2004, 2008; Jakubowicz, 2008). Media users are confronted with a multiplicity of media providers. Content is no longer inherently congruent with quality and plurality (Infratest 2017) – if it ever was. The Web 2.0 facilitates more participatory forms

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of media usage, but demands a willingness from media institutions to constructively shape public debate and build networks with ‘producers’ (Jenkins 2006).

Readiness to engage in dialogue with its publics and facilitate content co-creation will be crucial for addressing young people, especially. In a multi-stakeholder approach, building partnerships with cultural and educational institutions would enable PSM to develop public value through audience collaboration (Raats et al. 2013). However, this chapter assumes that content co-creation and audience collaboration alone will not be sufficient to meet current requirements. PSM institutions must facilitate audience participation on multiple levels, including governance. Here, governance is an analytical term that reflects networked decision-making processes between state and non-state actors, regulated and self-regulation respectively. At the same time audiences must perceive themselves to be stakeholders and act as such – not simply consumers of PSM. This is needed to develop a “culture of common responsibility” (Jarren 2007)

The challenger phenomenon is facilitated by networked communications and online media and can be seen as a key feature of networked societies (Castells 2005). This chapter conceptualises the idea of ‘PSM challengers’ by scrutinising activists aiming to promote public debate about these institutions, or to influence PSM governance – or both. This analysis requires mapping existing activist initiatives in Europe to identify the main goals, public communication methods and networks. The author assumes a wide range of opinions about, and activities relevant to, public sector institutions, in this case PSM, among European audiences that have yet to be explored and merits study given growing demands for discursive opportunities and public participation (Schweigert et al. 2011).

The chapter demonstrates how activists position themselves in relation to PSM *outside* institutionalised structures by focusing on media governance, content and social dimensions. It provides a theoretical overview of a proposed ‘PSM Challengers Model’ and describes the operationalisation and methodology that grounds it before reporting on empirical insights on audience activism initiatives in selected European countries. These initiatives are systematically reviewed on the basis of objectives, methods and networks, with a specific focus on networked communications.

## Public service media challengers

Citizens have a key role to play in modern communication networks because of “the interaction between the new technological paradigm and social organisation at large” (Castells & Cardoso 2005: 3). Every participant in a networked society is a node, theoretically able to influence others, while anyone who refuses to participate is a “non-entity” (ibid: 14). The networked society “decentralize[s] performance along a network of autonomous components”, empowering actors outside the state or business communities to influence public affairs (ibid: 7).

The PSM challengers concept amplifies the notion of ‘cultural challengers’ keyed to Efrat Daskal’s (2016) study of the cultural dimensions of media complaints. Daskal

analysed audience dialogue with SATR, the Israeli regulatory body for broadcasting media, about the content of entertaining TV shows and found audience activism takes the form of complaints on four dimensions: moral, political, aesthetic and realist-rational. The latter targets “misleading presentation on factual information” (ibid: 788). The ‘challenger’ idea is used here for examining dimensions that activists target for demanding *structural* participation in PSM – audience engagement with, scrutiny of and influence on PSM as institutions and as a system.

While PSM mandates for audience participation and participatory opportunities are debated (Livingstone & Lunt 2011; EBU 2014), the claim that PSM wants to foster partnerships with the public is still rather rhetorical (Lowe 2008b). As Livingstone and Lunt (2011) demonstrated, the ‘implied audience’ in strategic goals and media regulations prioritise customer identity even for PSM. This is striking because PSM mandates and their ‘intrinsic values’ suggest that audiences *should* be treated as stakeholders and the public is their core stakeholder (Lowe 2016).

The Council of Europe (2012) proposed a three-tier model to promote public values and partnerships in PSM: 1) *structure* of media governance (independence and accountability), 2) *management* of PSM, and 3) *cultures* of governance, meaning transparency, openness, responsiveness and responsibility. Public access to information is a prerequisite for participation in democratic societies, so PSM must be careful about treating users as consumers rather than citizens and failing to support democratic activity in their own institutions (Collins & Sujon 2007). Normative assumptions about audience participation in media governance concentrate on the user-as-citizen narrative (Webster & Phalen 1994; Hasebrink 2011), and advocate audience demands to have a say and be part of decision-making (Puppis et al. 2007).

Although rare, empirical studies on audience participation in media governance contest normative approaches. A 2004 study from the European Association for Consumers of Television (EACTV) adopted a broad definition of participation, including informal audience-led initiatives and institutionalised representation in broadcasting councils, and did not discriminate between commercial and public service broadcasting (Eilders et al. 2006). While identifying an astonishing variety of participatory methods and models, decision-making participation is rare outside formal structures (e.g. councils). Moreover, users who demand for participation via Web 2.0 are rare (Eilders 2011).

However, small but important audience groups are interested to be involved in decision-making, despite the complexity of PSM governance. A recent online-consultation about the broadcasting law for WDR, the largest federal broadcaster in Germany, produced over 1,100 comments on 19 questions (Land NRW 2015), and more than 140 persons submitted elaborated proposals for two publicly announced seats in the WDR broadcasting council (WDR Rundfunkrat 2016).

Despite Hasebrink’s (2011: 329) assertion that users-as-citizens are “typical civil society actors”, the user-as-citizen concept remains abstract. Aslama-Horowitz (2010) found that different users have distinct interests, engaging with different media for-

mats, institutions and content. Moreover, the concept lacks solid political grounding because individuals (users) are less able to voice concerns and be heard than collectives (audiences). The main goal of activists is to achieve impact on “opinion, legislation, government policies, or corporate behaviour” (Dahlgren 2011). According to Carpentier (2015), however, the term ‘participation’ is often used in a minimalist way, for example to describe interaction that is fully under the control of producers, as in scripted ‘reality’ shows. It is synonymously used for access *to* media and interaction with others *by* media, rather than co-deciding in and about the media institution. In his view, this logic “leads to a homogenization of the audience and a disconnection of their participatory activities from other societal fields and from the broad definition of the political, resulting in the articulation of media participation as non-political” (ibid: 18). Carpentier advocated “equalized power positions of privileged and non-privileged actors in particular decision-making processes” (ibid: 20).

To define civil society in the PSM context is not easy, as most representatives in broadcasting councils represent civil society organisations that are privileged, when compared to stakeholder initiatives *outside* these decision-making bodies. As observed by Klein (2008), civil society interests advocate social values such as solidarity and democracy that are distinct from the self-interested motives of power (state) or profit, and link the political periphery with the centre (Habermas 1992). For civil society today, networked communication is essential because activists typically lack resources and may have low levels of organisation.

The impact of civil society at the level of (multi-)stakeholder initiatives often suffers from low public exposure, although this may increase during crises when the political centre needs to renew legitimacy. One example is the current reform-process in German PSM, the best financed in Europe, that aims to reduce high labour costs while at the same time fostering innovative programmes for youth. In a setting where right-wing populism wants to abolish PSM, politicians depend on impulses from within civil society to build a constructive framework for PSM reforms. Activists who build networks and are part of formal organisations are likely to have more impact.

The normative approach obscures the reality of widespread public apathy, as evidenced by declining voter turnout across Europe. This trend is even more pronounced for complex governance issues. Consequently, strengthening participation in media governance on a broader basis is a substantial challenge. Moreover, debate about a crisis in public trust in media, often initiated by populist parties, conceals underlying complexities fuelled by the conflict between opaque media governance and public expectations (Jakubowicz 2010). In fact, levels of trust vary. In northern European countries with strong PSM systems, PSM ranks among the most highly trusted sources of mediated news. In Germany, a meta-analysis indicated that trust in media remained relatively stable (30-40 per cent) between 1990 and 2015 (Reinemann & Fawzi 2016). German public-service radio (77 per cent), television (71 per cent) and dailies (65 per cent) were the most trusted media sources, while the internet was the least-trusted (30 per cent) and social media was associated with fake news (Infatest 2017). In contrast,

in eastern European countries and countries with weak PSM systems (e.g. Spain), trust in PSM was low (Newman et al. 2016). The proposed challenger phenomenon with respect to participation in PSM has hence to acknowledge that activists' goals are related to a media system, may be small in numbers and need compelling reasoning to be heard publicly.

Another significant factor explaining the challenger phenomenon has been growth in public expectations. Recent protest movements have encouraged public participation to influence governance and to criticise the lack of institutional responsiveness (e.g. Schweigert et al. 2011). In networked societies, media governance must accommodate public expectations for transparency and participation and social diversity must be addressed sensitively (Horz 2016). Of course, the balance between participation and journalistic autonomy requires further consideration. Thus, the operationalisation of the user-as-citizen and proposed challenger models need clarification, which the empirical project seeks to provide.

## Operationalisation and methodology

Audience participation can involve various activities and modes (see Eilders 2011). Here we concentrate on non-institutionalised participation in digital, networked media to examine two questions:

1. What types of PSM challengers are active in Europe?
2. What is the scope of PSM challengers' activity and networking?

The focus is on PSM, because public service broadcasting is distinct from commercial media "by virtue of the functions it performs and [its] value" for society (Jakubowicz 2010: 13). Activism via social media (e.g. Facebook) is considered because it affords informal networking opportunities. The study examined PSM challengers' impact on public debate and PSM governance. Based on the theoretical grounding above the research addressed three dimensions:

1. Regulatory: activists demand reform of, or participation in, media governance (e.g. proposing audience councils or co-determination in broadcasting councils).
2. Content: users-as-citizens function as media watchdogs, scrutinise content quality and journalistic ethics, or initiate public dialogue with PSM.
3. Social: activists advocate public values, claim co-determination regarding public funding (e.g. licence-fee bodies) and respond to demographic changes (e.g. changing consumption habits).

I assume that PSM challengers use different channels (websites, interviews, social media, etc.) in efforts to influence public debate, and may question either the mode of PSM governance or the running of these public institutions. In countries with federal struc-

tures such as Germany, PSM challengers may have a subnational focus. The diverging contexts and institutional differences needs attention, but isn't the focus of this chapter.

The study frames PSM challenger activities on the basis of empirical research undertaken between April and July 2016. The study is predominantly based on desk research, observations and qualitative interviews, which are well-suited for identifying and understanding motivations and attitudes (Ritchie et al. 2003). The study is not intended to be representative, but rather to understand how interviewees interpret their activism related to PSM. Semi-structured interviews examined PSM-related activities (e.g. communication and mobilisation methods), opinions (e.g. regarding PSM institutions and financing structures), information-sharing (e.g. gathering and disseminating information), and biographical details (e.g. age, education, employment and political affiliation).

To identify PSM challengers and tackle the language barrier, scholars were approached via existing networks (e.g. the Euromedia Research Group and Global PSM-Experts Network). Feedback was received from scholars in Greece, Italy, Norway, Poland, Spain and Sweden. A sample of sixteen audience initiatives in seven European countries was selected according to significance and relevance to the research questions, and approached with interview requests. Most did not respond or were unwilling to be interviewed. The final sample consisted of five initiatives. Four interviews have been conducted: 'Teledetodos' in Spain, 'Infocivica' in Italy, 'Medienkritik' in Switzerland and 'Bürger/Publicumsmittbestimmung (öffentlich-rechtlicher Rundfunk)' in Germany. Based on interviews and complementary research, a typology of audience activism is proposed based on an overview of PSM challengers' main objectives, methods and networks.<sup>1</sup>

## The activities of public service media challengers

We can now examine the findings from the study, presented as three dominant aspects: 1) representing general audience interests, 2) safeguarding the future of PSM, and 3) boycotting PSM institutions or financing schemes. These aspects may be connected; ensuring an independent, high-quality PSM institution is for example about safeguarding the future of PSM, while complementing the user-as-citizen concept is about representing general audience interests. Some PSM challengers advocated specific interests such as traditional family or religious values that were beyond the scope of this study. In the analysis that follows, I look at the three aspects in three dimensions: political, social and content.

### *Representing general audience interests*

There are activist groups in various European countries advocating the political interests of PSM audiences and users. Initiatives with well-defined goals are mostly

organised by activists with a personal and professional interest in PSM that aim to affect change on behalf of audiences.

The British ‘Voice of the Listener and Viewer’ (VLV) is the most prominent European group representing general audience interests. Founded in 1983 by Jocelyn Hay, VLV is influential in advocating for an independent BBC. In 2015, VLV demanded the formation of an independent body for the licence fee after audiences were excluded from discussions about reforming the BBC’s financing scheme (VLV 2015).<sup>2</sup>

Several informal initiatives have spontaneously organised in Germany using Facebook. ‘Bürger/Publikumsmitbestimmung (öffentlich-rechtlicher Rundfunk)’ (‘Citizen/Public Participation Public-Service Broadcasting’) was founded in 2014 and has one editor and about 200 members (2016). The editor, Jurgen Valjent, assumes in a telephone interview an “enormous interdependency of PSM and politics”, and promotes institutional audience participation because politicians are members of broadcasting councils but also legislate federal broadcasting laws, creating potential conflicts of interest. Such informal initiatives work to enlist and retain members via networking on Facebook. But members’ motivations can vary widely, leading to ideological tensions and fragmentation within the group over the necessity and degrees of reform for PSM in a digital environment.

In Spain, ‘Teledetodos’ advocates public service media as a civic right in a democratic society, demanding independence in regulation and high content quality. The public service model in southern Europe was characterised by Hallin and Mancini as ‘polarized pluralist systems’ due to strong state intervention, “parliamentary or government model of broadcasting”, and high political parallelism (2004: 67). Spain’s RTVE is state-owned with ‘special autonomy’. Until 2006, the selection process for members of its governing body rested solely with government. Since 2006, the Parliament elects board members (eight by Congress and four by Senate) for twelve year periods (Medina & Ojer 2010). This still represents a rather high degree of political dependence that is questioned by ‘Teledetodos’, which has about 140 members with 10-20 that are active, depending on the topic (telephone interview with Rafael Diaz).

‘Infocivica’ was established in 2000 in Italy by journalists, scholars and media experts with similar goals. It lost active members until being re-established in 2016 with an agenda that focused on developing a public service internet.<sup>3</sup> Declines in membership and low activity are common problems. Even well-informed groups only manage to get a few involved and voluntarism has problems with sustainability. Policy analysis based on action theory explains political engagement as social action in conflicted areas that involve both individual values, interests and preferences, and the political sticking power of formal structures of a political system and economic orientations (Then & Kehl 2012). The individual factor plays a major role in coping with and transforming personal conflicts to produce sustainable and constructive engagement.

It is difficult to reach a broader public sphere to impact media policy. Those who network in active, well organised groups tend to be the most effective. Despite compli-

cations, ‘Teledetodos’ and ‘Infocivica’ have co-published open letters on their websites, aimed at policymakers and governments. Both groups view audience participation as essential to public value, democratisation and the future relevance of PSM. Transnational networks are supported by co-published texts and co-organised seminars, like the one these groups organised in Rome on 19 September 2016, which proposed a new European PSM model. This aim exceeds the goal of representing audiences to prioritise systemic issues that are necessary for safeguarding PSM on a European scale. Also, it illustrates the interconnectedness of concrete demands for protecting audience interests and achieving systemic reform.

It is too early to know their impact, but such groups have developed effective political support networks. ‘Teledetodos’ has drafted media policies for Podemos (a Spanish left-wing political party), while the German Initiative für einen Publikumsrat für öffentlich-rechtliche Medien (short: Publikumsrat) has been involved in governmental dialogues in Germany (Deutscher Bundestag – Ausschuss für Kultur und Medien 2017) and initiated public debate about the regulatory dimension of audience participation in PSM since 2013.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps one of the most important benefit is growing media literacy among audiences. The editor of ‘Bürger/Publikumsmitbestimmung (öffentlich-rechtlicher Rundfunk)’ assumes audiences “learn” how journalism and media institutions work through participation. But who gets to be involved and thereby ‘learn’ is an issue. While German legislation guarantees user representation in broadcasting councils (Rundfunk- und Fernsehräte), their composition reflects institutionalised “socially relevant groups” (e.g. political parties, churches or trade unions) rather than general audiences. The participation of ‘ordinary people’ is needed to safeguard the legitimacy of PSM in the future. Despite a recent reform, German broadcasting councils still often appear arrogant, distant, and intransparent, inadequately reflecting societal changes and representing social diversity (Kleinsteuber 2011, Horz 2017). Well-informed groups can bridge the gap between PSM institutions and audiences to facilitate an open PSM system (Wolf 2015: 24), although they frequently struggle to build large enough groups and socially diverse memberships.

Some groups are especially focused on content issues. In Germany, ‘Berliner Initiativkreis öffentlich-rechtlicher Rundfunk’ (‘Berlin Initiative Committee for Public Service Broadcasting’, BIKÖR) and ‘Initiativkreis zur Förderung des öffentlichen Rundfunks Köln’ (‘Initiative Committee for the Promotion of Public Broadcasting Cologne’, IÖR) regularly collaborate. Both groups focus on programme quality and journalistic ethics. Their activities range from statements published on homepages, to convening conferences and publishing academic books.<sup>5</sup> Due to the professional expertise of its members, IÖR is networked with media institutions, policy makers and scholars. PSM challengers represent audience interests by questioning potential violations of content standards and any lack of accountability in news reporting.

In Germany, audience watchdogs revealed several failures of PSM in reporting on the 2014 Ukraine crisis. In a leaked statement, the institutional programme council

of ARD (ARD-Programmbeirat 2014) confirmed an alleged bias. A detailed analysis of German PSM coverage of the Greek economic crisis also confirmed problems in bias (Otto et al. 2016). In Spain, the ‘Consejo de informativos’ was established by law in 2006 to ensure editorial independence. They found RTVE reporting on the recent Spanish election had been manipulated, which had been denounced by Teledetodos (Infolibre.es 2016). Such groups aim to foster the journalistic ethic of non-biased reporting and the public value of content diversity. Such democratic values are often at the heart of demands for audience participation in media governance.

Regarding the social dimension, some PSM challengers have demanded changes in public financing schemes. In Spain, RTVE is largely financed by taxes on commercial media. Rafael Diaz at ‘Teledetodos’ believes this creates a degree of dependency that undermines RTVE’s social mandate. In contrast, financial transparency in PSM systems that are financed by fees is seen as a way to ensure the representation of audience interests (Schoch 2017). Germany’s ARD and ZDF have established internal discussion groups to improve financial transparency, participation and remits for society to address demands from the prime ministers of the Federal States (*Länder*).

PSM challengers have argued that PSM has a responsibility to deliver content that reflects major demographic and technological developments that affect consumption habits, especially among young people. Some PSM challengers demand participation in content production, arguing that audiences should have a third-party right to broadcast for language or religious minorities. In Germany, legislation allows official religious groups (*Körperschaften*) to broadcast content and maintain editorial offices within PSM institutions. Italy’s ‘Infocivica’ rejects this model, arguing that trials of independently produced content (*autogestiti*) have failed because audiences felt manipulated by biased information. For PSM challengers, content *and* representation of social diversity are equally important, but must not undermine journalistic ethics or democratic values.

### *Safeguarding the future of public service media*

Many scholars agree that PSM needs to renew its democratic role in a networked society context (e.g. Iosifidis 2010; Jakubowicz 2010). Activists perceive a gap between an urgent need for action and policymakers’ hesitancy to initiate reforms. In Germany, ‘Publikumsrat’ calls for more audience participation in PSM, a reflection of academic calls to treat audiences as serious PSM partners and embrace a bottom-up approach (Krotz 1996; Weichert 2005; Horz & Schiffler 2014). A 2014 Federal Constitutional Court decision confirmed the legitimacy of this demand in reprimanding ZDF for the composition of its broadcasting council. The court called for less politicians, more diversification, and higher dynamism in representation on the council to keep pace with social change. This decision created momentum for a broader debate about the regulatory dimension of citizen participation in the future of PSM in Germany.

Well-informed groups argue that PSM should be regulated by independent bodies to strengthen their position against commercial competitors. Government regulators, they suggest, typically reflect institutionalised interests, address users as consumers and fail to represent minority interests. This is evident in Spain where the government's competition regulator (Comisión Nacional de los Mercados y la Competencia) regulates RTVE, and in Italy where the government directly appoints the PSM council (Consiglio Nazionale dei Consumatori e degli Utenti). In Italy, the broadcasting system has a dualistic structure with RAI representing the public sector and Mediaset the commercial sector. State influence is traditionally high. The government of Romani Prodi tried to reduce political influence in media regulation, but the legislation failed (Padovani 2010).

Moving to the social dimension, many groups are concerned with the definition of public value. In Germany, IÖR is comprised of former staff of the regional-broadcaster WDR, members of WDR's broadcasting council, journalists and academics. The latest publication in a series of books they have published investigates PSM's public values and social mandate (Kops 2012). IÖR organises meetings and expert discussions. IÖR is a largely regional phenomenon due to the federal PSM structure in Germany, but does network with BIKÖR that is based in Berlin and mainly comprised of journalists.

BIKÖR especially campaigns to safeguard high journalistic ethics and content quality in PSM. In August 2016, the group published an open letter, 'Wege aus der Vertrauenskrise' ('Ways out of the confidence crisis'), suggesting that public trust in journalism was declining due to 'swarm journalism'. It proposed strengthening media transparency, promoting sensitivity to mistakes and criticised the embedding of PSM content in social media platforms. The latter is unrealistic in a networked society, however. Rather, the main challenge concerns safeguarding journalistic ethics and content quality across *all* platforms.

### *Boycotting public service media institutions and financing schemes*

PSM challengers can also act as political pressure groups. Some have used changes in PSM financing schemes to focus public attention on the social dimension of media governance through boycotts. In Germany, a change in PSM financing from a device-related fee to a household levy aimed at tackling the free-rider problem. However, the new flat-rate, universal fee ignored variation in consumption and reduced exceptions for non-viewers, students, low-income earners and people with disabilities. Several boycott initiatives with various agendas were formed by activists to campaign against the 'compulsory levy' (*Zwangsg Gebühr*).

Boycotts are often motivated by perceptions that PSM supports rather than questions political power, and views public financing schemes as an unjustifiable tax. In Germany, 'Online Boykott' was formed in 2011 by a blogger actively posting news about prosecutions against the fees. Two other groups, 'Remote Control' and 'Initiative Mediennutzung ohne Zwangsggebühren' ('Initiative for media use without the compulsory levy'), were formed after the introduction of the household fee 2013. 'Online

Boykott' (2016) perceives PSM as but one media channel in a pluralistic system and demands a social return on public funding. With over 100,000 supporters, it is self-described as the "biggest platform in Germany that deals with the financing of PSM".

According to its own account, 'Remote Control' has organised over 6,000 people to withhold over €2.5 million Euros (Zahlungsstreik.net 2016). Compared to other boycotters, 'Remote Control' is an initiative of critical media users and addresses the social dimension of PSM governance, contributing constructively to an informed public debate: "We suspend our payments in order to negotiate how our fees are spent. We demand a socially-agreeable calculation of the amount. We demand political and economic transparency. Public-service broadcasting has to be as plural as its users" (Remote Control 2013; author's translation). 'Remote Control' members view existing PSM councils as dominated by politicians who focus too much on viewing figures, making PSM indistinguishable from commercial media. They believe PSM is inaccessible, undemocratic, hostile to fine arts and antisocial, and therefore demand a decentralised PSM model (Zahlungsstreik.net 2016).

Online petitions play an increasingly significant role in such boycotts. 'Initiative Mediennutzung ohne Zwangsgebühren' (2016) launched an open petition in 2014 and claims to have over 12,000 signatures. Another activist, 'Luigi C', launched an online petition in December 2013 that gathered over 531,000 signatures, although whether 'Luigi C.' is a concerned user or a market competitor is unclear (Luigi C. 2013). This illustrates how difficult it may be to separate political and audience interests in defining challenger motivations and actions. In Germany, online boycott petitions have gathered a combined 800,000 to 1 million signatures. In Switzerland, 'NoBillag', established by right-wing activists in 2014 in opposition to a household fee, garnered over 100,000 signatures and successfully provoked a public opinion poll (NoBillag 2016). On March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2018, however, a majority of over 71 per cent of the Swiss decided pro licence fees and PSM. Even the Swiss SRG – with its highly responsive structure as a registered association with about 15,000 members in the German-speaking part, organised in public clubs (Publikumsvereine) – was threatened to be abolished. Several Facebook pages are proving less successful. In 2016, the Norwegian 'Nei til NRK-lisens' ('No to NRK licence fees'), established in January 2011, had only about 5,000 likes and the German 'Alle gegen Beitragsservice' ('All against the service fee') had about 13,000 members.

Online activism aims to develop networks between like-minded people and gain public exposure. Overall, the spontaneous 'clicktivism' of online petitions seems more successful in gaining public attention than building online networks or constructive communities. Carpentier (2011) has criticised the pseudo-participation of social networks that demand little to no sustained involvement while superficially suggesting users are engaged in a socially important act. Furthermore, the reliability of statistics on, and the impetus behind, these initiatives are often questionable. Further research is necessary to identify the organisers and social networks involved

At least some PSM boycotts seem to appeal to neoliberal and right-wing groups. The Prometheus Institute, a neoliberal think-tank affiliated with the German FDP (a

classical liberal political party), established *Zwangsbeitrag.info* in 2015. This website presents an image that mimics the anti-nuclear power sticker which became synonymous with the anti-nuclear grassroots movement in Germany in the 1980s with the caption “Zwangsbeitrag? Nein Danke” (‘Compulsory levy? No thanks’). This campaign is an exercise in strategic communication, so called ‘astroturfing’, which aims to corrupt civil protest for self-interested goals.<sup>6</sup> At the time of writing, the campaign had gathered over 8,000 signatures.

Right-wing populist political parties and movements have used similar campaign methods to argue that PSM should be abolished, or not publicly financed. The Schweizerische Volkspartei (Swiss People’s Party) launched ‘Medienfreiheit’ (‘Media freedom’) in 2014, a cross-party network that employs democratic principles to lobby against SRG and public financing of PSM (Medienfreiheit 2016). Since 2015, the populist right-wing party Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany), has campaigned for PSM public financing to be ‘switched-off’. The Swedish Facebook group ‘Stoppa vänstervridningen inom SVT/SR’ (‘Stop the left-wing orientation at SVT/SR’), launched in 2015 and with about 500 supporters, argues that PSM has a structural left-wing bias. These groups fear independent media, which explains their hostility (Perloff 2015). It needs further research to analyse how far left-wing South European populism uses similar strategies.

Thus, two aspects of civil society participation are normatively problematic. First, political lobbyists and right-wing groups disguise lobbying as civil society action by adopting typical civil society methods or demands (e.g. organising petitions or demanding plebiscites on media governance), but with the aim of undermining rather than strengthen public service media. The social dimension needs to be extended to an anti-social dimension of activism. Second, lobby groups exploit civil society’s ‘problem sensitivity’, and use issues and communication channels to weaken civil society, media pluralism and public debate. These factors can undermine partnerships between PSM institutions and audiences. As demonstrated in a report from the German Ministry of Finance’s scientific council (Bundesfinanzministerium 2014), the idea of a reduced or abolished PSM has gained popularity in recent years, increasingly blurring the boundaries between left and right, civil society and ideologies, making analysis more complicated.

## Discussion

This chapter provided an overview of PSM challengers, which is a highly relevant phenomenon based on the development of networked communications. The results presented make no claim of generalisability, but point at a set of social issues and practices with many unsolved questions that are pertinent to the viability and roles of PSM in a networked society. The study reveals two main types of highly-active networking groups in between the three thematic issues described above.

First, ‘well-informed groups’ that consist of people with professional and personal interests in PSM (e.g. scholars and journalists). These groups aim to change audience self-perceptions, counter hegemony, and influence media governance by enunciating concrete recommendations, promoting informed public debate and utilising “self-centred mass-communication” (Castells 2005). They are active in the regulatory and content dimensions oriented towards representing audience interests and safeguarding PSM (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Summary of findings

| PSM challengers’ dimensions | Main objectives  | Examples   |
|-----------------------------|--|--|
| Regulatory                  | Audience interests<br>Safeguarding PSM                   | Transparency and accountability of and participation in media governance<br>Participation of ‘ordinary people’ in media governance<br>Demand for independent regulators<br>Participation in regulation and councils as necessary step to safeguard legitimacy of PSM |
| Content                     | Audience interests<br>Safeguarding PSM                   | Criticise violation of content standards<br>Demand unbiased reporting and reflect social diversity (e.g. third-party rights to broadcast)<br>Demand program participation of users<br>Journalistic ethics and content standards                                      |
| Social                      | Audience interests                                       | Demand financial transparency<br>Fair and socially accepted broadcasting fees<br>Transparency of funding<br>Public value   |
| ‘Anti-social’               | Boycotting<br>Lobby group interest<br>Political interest | Reject PSM fees or PSM altogether<br>Boycott as means to claim fair and socially accepted broadcasting fees<br>Astroturfing<br>Pick up consumer interest for own political goals   |

The insularity of well-informed groups limits their impact on media governance. Some groups focusing on audience interests specifically target PSM institutions, in contrast with others who target the system of public service media as such. In Spain, this differentiation is ambiguous because there is only one PSM provider. It is not easy to separate the (often intertwined) goals of representing audience interests and safeguarding PSM as an institution.

Second, there is a problem with groups that use PSM as a field for political campaigning, mostly in the consumer-oriented social dimension. Enrique Bustamante,

head of ‘Teledetodos’, stated that PSM is fundamental to democratic societies, facilitating economic and political debates (Bustamante 2016). However, the limited institutionalisation of media criticism in mass media and the public sphere creates a vacuum of deliberation. Well-organised groups are particularly suited to exploit this potential for mediated influence, as visibility and impact increases with the level of organisation.

To make things more complex, this space is also occupied by small civil society groups, individual activists and ideological interests (e.g. extreme political parties). The recent success of right-wing populism and manipulation of news coverage across Europe suggests that (a minority of) users distrust mass media and view PSM as ‘liars’ steered by established interests. Differentiated and longitudinal studies contradict the standard view that trust in mass media is declining. In Germany, recent surveys have shown that trust in media is issue and medium dependent (Zapp/Infratest 2016), with PSM more trusted than print or internet-based media (WDR/Infratest 2016). Initiatives like ‘Teledetodos’ or ‘Infocivica’ that have complementary objectives can build collaborative national and transnational networks, which are interconnected with various governmental, EU or PSM institutions.

As for the second group, while most PSM challengers bridge the gap between PSM institutions and audiences, some undermine PSM legitimacy and deepen the gap between PSM and audiences. As boycotters show, it is not always clear whether PSM challengers promote audience, economic or political interests. These groups contort public debate and may discredit media critique as such. In this respect, the extent of networks between users, ideological interests and political parties is a pressing research question.

The task of PSM advocates remains focused on encouraging wider audience participation for improved media governance by engaging a shared culture of PSM responsibility. As long as PSM governance remains opaque, partnerships remain ambiguous and users continue to be treated as consumers, audience participation in PSM governance will be ineffective (Lowe 2008b). Further research is needed to understand the extent to which networking can enhance the impact of well-informed groups, and the degrees to which networking undermines PSM.

## Notes

1. One item on the agenda, the media watchdog, was abandoned due to lack of empirical data.
2. For more about VLV, see Herzog & Zetti (2016).
3. See: [http://www.infocivica.it/infocivica.eu/chi-siamo\\_presentazione.htm](http://www.infocivica.it/infocivica.eu/chi-siamo_presentazione.htm) (accessed 10 July 2016) and <http://teledetodos.es/index.php/blogs/item/1151-declaracion-de-refundacion-de-infocivica-dichiarazione-rifondativa-di-infocivica> (accessed 12 September 2017).
4. ‘Publikumsrat’ will not be scrutinised to avoid potential conflict of interest (I am a founding member).
5. See: <http://www.berlinkreisrund.de/index.htm> and <http://www.ioer.org/> (both accessed 20 August 2016).
6. Astroturf, a brand of artificial grass, describes institutional campaigns that mimic grassroots movements.

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