Knowledge Society and Public Sphere
Two Concepts for the Remit

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While 'public sphere' is an old concept incorporated in debate to enhance reflection on the possibilities of European integration, 'knowledge society' is a newer concept linked with efforts to describe an important factor shaping contemporary society. The concepts will be used in this contribution to develop the broadcasting remit for the public sector. Public sphere and knowledge society can both be described as empiric facts and as normative concepts. Public sphere addresses the conditions related to communication in society, while knowledge society addresses the conditions suggested for economic growth and prosperity. As normative concepts, both depend on universal participation to achieve described aims as an optimum.

This chapter begins with discussion about these concepts and what they mean for public communication. Treatment then focuses on their consequences for public service broadcasting. The author concludes with an evaluation that investigates the extent to which the conditions of convergence support these possible new demands and challenges for public service broadcasting.

Public Sphere, Knowledge Society and public communication

Public Sphere

Consideration of the public sphere can be viewed as an empirical fact – which will nevertheless be quite difficult to prove – and as a normative ideal. In the later case, two models can be distinguished (Gerhards, 2002). The first is the *liberal-representative* model beginning with John Locke (1695) and usefully elaborated by John Stuart Mill (1861), Joseph Schumpeter (1942), Anthony Downs (1957) and Bruce Ackerman (1989), among others. Ackerman discussed the dimensions of the concept in relation to the work of Jürgen Habermas (1962).

This model posits the following preconditions: It is obligatory for democracy in a political system that decisions which are binding/obliging be bound to interests and processes expressing and forming the will of citizens. This characteristically happens in elections. In order for citizens to decide they must be informed about the competing candidates for power, and also about the actions and law put into practice since the last previous election. Thus, Robert Dahl (1989) suggests the possibility to inform oneself as a criterion of democratic process in terms of "enlightened understanding".

The role of the public sphere in this model is to deliver information, to contribute to the forming of will and to the control of the political elite. The public sphere is therefore the system of observation, showing the competing political elite. For their part, the political elite knows they are being observed and are dependent on positive attitudes among citizens. They will therefore orient their action towards citizen expectations. In this way a certain responsivity of the elite to citizens is guaranteed via the public sphere. In large societies, the public sphere is largely constructed via media because intimate, immediate contact between citizens and the political elite isn't possible for most.

The second model is *deliberative* and more demanding as far as the role of the public sphere is concerned. In three dimensions one finds strong aspirations for defining the quality of the public sphere (Gerhards, 1997): 1) Who is speaking in the public sphere? 2) What is the nature of communication in the public sphere? 3) What is the character of the results of a debate in the public sphere?

Jürgen Habermas, Joshua Cohen, Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, authors defending the deliberative model, plead the case for a discourse in the public sphere that is in opposition to the power model where only transparency is demanded. Here the implementation of decisions is also included as a question of power. The 'autochthonous' public sphere, that is to say the desirable, features a participatory civil society comprised of groups of citizens, NGO's, etc. The groups are immediately and intimately bound to the interests and experiences of the citizens represented by them (respectively or collectively).

The character of discourse is a central element in the deliberative model. In a valid discourse, statements are premised on arguments and feature a well-conducted exchange of information and reasoning between the acting groups and parties. The participants are orientated to a dialog, i.e. pursuing an orientation to the arguments of the others. Thus, the rationality of debate is a given.

While in the first model the outcome of a debate is simply implemented by the majority, in the deliberative model consensus is crucial. Important notions of the public sphere in the deliberative model are inclusion (or exclusion), transparency and access. Media, as an important con-stitutive element of the public sphere, must implement these notions into social reality.

Knowledge Society

A second concept with relevance for public communication is the knowledge society. The crucial idea here is that since the turn of the century knowledge has assumed such importance that it is no longer goods and services that are most important for the prosperity of a society. Knowledge is a central productive factor.

Knowledge is the result of scientific research, including social and human sciences. Because the effects of scientific results for politics, economy, society, work and everyday life are comprehensive, knowledge about these processes in any form is important – whether first in intimate circles or then by a broad population. The production, distribution and reproduction of knowledge, the content of information, the media of communication, the reasons for knowledge-demand, and the changes caused by knowledge, are all considered as constitutive characteristics of society. We can call this a Knowledge Society if its structures and processes of material and symbolic reproduction are permeated by knowledge-based operations so that information processing, symbolic analysis and expert systems are prevailing factors in reproduction (Willke, 1997: 13).

The central notion of 'knowledge' should therefore be regarded as something more than simply information – more precisely it is information connected with experiences. Or, as Stehr puts it, knowledge is the capability for social action, the possibility "to set something on foot" (Stehr, 1994: 208). It is decisive to take into consideration that knowledge is no longer produced in special circles or sub-systems of society (e.g., only in universities or even in science more generally) but rather in every part of society. In consequence, knowledge and the access to it are vital for production and shape its very structure.

This is even more important for political and social realities. The answers to such questions as who has knowledge, and who has access to knowledge, is at the foundation of social hierarchies, accounts for social inequality, and effects the manner by which power is performed. At its best, it is a precondition for social cohesion and integration and creates chances for social participation and peaceful negotiation of interests. It thereby serves the progress of 'civilisation.' At its worst, domination of the pro-duc-tion and distribution of knowledge only serves the interests of a few and enforces social inequality in a global perspective.

Considering these contingencies characterising a Knowledge Society, one may ask which criteria are essential for the first option to be the reality? These criteria would include access to knowledge, social cohesion, integration/inclu-sion, social participation and peaceful negotiation of interests. When these criteria cannot be met, the result is domination and constriction of knowledge that can only serve the interests of a few. So the positive possibilities of the Knowledge Society demonstrate agreement with the Habermasian deliberative model of the public sphere; they both posit the same preconditions.

The knowledge society and public sphere concepts are linked in a variety of other aspects (Thomass, 2001), four of which are of particular relevance to this discussion.

Cultural orientations and collective identities, which comprise the 'supra-structure' of a society (Willke, 1997), are formed via the media within the public sphere. Therefore, the public sphere can be regarded as a constitutive element of this supra-structure. The experiences of people in the context of a knowledge society, and the changes thereby induced, are expressed within the public sphere – including feedback to the political system. This can be properly understood as a vitalization of the public sphere.

Second, Willke describes the role of the state within a knowledge society as that of a supervisor that enforces the capacity of a society for self-observation, aiming at new perspectives and opinions while also detecting the 'blind spots' of a society (Willke, 1997). Because the Knowledge Society thus attributes to the state a new supervision function for self-governance, it logically follows that the relationship between the public sphere and the political elite can be designated as the supervision of the supervisor. Thus, in a Knowledge Society the public sphere is mandated with supervision of the state. That, in turn, indicates a change in the quality of the public sphere. Questions of access within the public sphere to knowledge and science enjoy heightened relevance.

Third, in a Knowledge Society forms of political governance must also change. The media are correspondingly affected because public communication is characteristically viewed as a 'collateral good' where politics retain responsibility for maintaining reliable standards, ensuring compatibility with the public interest, and for the creation of the necessary legal frame.

Finally and generally speaking, the public sphere becomes more active and demanding. In short, the more that knowledge becomes central to processes and decisions within politics – and this is what the concept of 'knowledge' implies – the more public participation depends on abilities to access relevant knowledge. Knowledge thus becomes a *precondition* for participation. If we then consider this from the perspective of the performance of the public sphere, we can say that knowledge is a determinant of the *quality* of the public sphere. This is precisely why the crucial social question for a Knowledge Society is about how far the potential of values, information and ideas within a society are accessible for a broad majority (Hoffman-Riem, 2000: 9).

Public Sphere, Knowledge Society and public service broadcasting

Before we discuss the extent to which these concepts affect PSB, we must take a closer look at the role of media in the knowledge society. Media are

an integral aspect because they perform a decisive role in the distribution and circulation of know-ledge – including popular knowledge of everyday life. The later is particularly important because non-fictional as well as fictional content form ideas and images of the world and of society. Patterns of values and orientations are shaped via the production and distribution of media content. Selec-tion is therefore vital: Which portions of overall know-ledge are made available to become popular knowledge? Those who dominate the media control access to many kinds of knowledge. The quality of knowledge presented in and by the media is therefore one of the shaping elements of the public sphere when one acknowledges that media are a constitutive part of the public sphere.

In communication science, the public sphere was traditionally connected to the media in the sense that media comprise one important field for public discourse and debate about public issues by which the forming of public opinion takes shape (Hickethier, 2000: 4). It is mainly the press and broad-casting that perform these tasks. With the emergence and development of new media, it should be clear that their constitutive role for and in the public sphere must grow.

In consideration of our definition of knowledge as the connection of information and experiences, we can conclude that the supply of popular and popularised knowledge via media is also a constituting element of the public sphere. And if we further consider cul-ture and entertainment in the media, where value patterns, social orientations, gene-ral ideas and images are conveyed, we can then underline the proposition that the quality of knowledge presented in the media is one formative element of the public sphere. Even the role of traditional media changes in a Knowledge Society because they are even more vital with regard to their various tasks: To mediate, to provide orientation, to structure, and to show the contexts of information, whether it be in application, action, experience, decisions or expectations.

The abundance of media information demands that media offer answers to questions that would include: "What does this information mean to me? Which sources are the most reliable? What does this information have to do with my specific view on the world?" (Johnson, 1999: 44). Here the primary consideration is not simply that media (with their flood of information) have created the need for such accom-panying meta-information (Bleicher, 2001: 212). That is important, of course. But the question also arises as to which media are most appropriate to address such meta-information needs?

In the Knowledge Society, some of the functions of traditional media move to the Internet. These would include providing for education, being a source of information, interpersonal exchange and personal experiences, games, etc. Bleicher observes that television, as well as other traditional media, reacts to the advancing position of the Internet with a reactivation in providing experiences and events: "The growing of knowledge is coming along with a growing supply of entertainment. Knowledge society and nonsense cul-

ture in the media are also in the future strongly interconnected" (Bleicher, 2001: 218). And here is where the question fully arises: What are the consequences for public service broadcasters?

Knowledge society and public sphere are normative concepts (not forgetting they can also be observed empirically). This normativity links with the concept of Public Service Broadcasting because central concerns within the tradition are related to questions of citizenship and consumerism. So at the European level the tradition does represent a normative ideology of media in the service of democracy, and also for the purpose of sustaining the development of national culture and citizenship – i.e. pluralism and diversity.

Public service media are financed to a large extent by license fees and by restricted commercial income, with autonomy from direct political influence, and with broad cultural and social obligations in opposition to the rationale of programming primarily based on commercial profit and audience maximisation. And yet is also clear that public service culture is now approaching a new era where the former appeal to a broad national audience is breaking down. Specialisation and new distribution technologies will change the role and form of public service in the future. One finds that public sector broadcasters, both in radio and TV, have developed new types of programming but have also, in a number of countries, lost a significant share of their former audiences to other channels.

To reiterate, then, defining notions of the public sphere in the sense of a deliberative model emphasise inclusion, transparency, and access. Media are an important constitutive element of the public sphere because they must implement these notions into social reality. But they can fail in this mission when they must also follow competing aims, especially economic ones. Public service media must meet these requirements as valid obligations founded in legal provi-sions. But the remit of PSB is changing in the conditions of the emerging Knowledge Society.

- The aim of integration can no longer be supported only by the means of television (and radio) but also must include all the new possibilities of online transmission. As the integrational function of PSB cannot be limited to the technical device of television, PSB has to follow its audiences wherever they tend to look for content. The Internet, digital distribution, interactive services and wireless services – all of these are means wherein a public service orientated content must be available for users.

- The old triad of information, education and entertainment will have to be modified and enlarged. Particularly the notion of education will have to be reconceived as knowledge. Education as a main task of PSB stems from the old Reithian era of public broadcasting in the UK, where the BBC from the beginning took over a rather patriarchal role towards its audiences and wanted to "educate" them. The principle behind this education, i.e. enabling audiences to take part in the intellectual rich-

ness of a country, could be well transferred to the notion of know-ledge as participation. The capability to use information for social action and activities in the economic, as in the political sphere, is of central importance for the Knowledge Society.

- If the all-encompassing notion of education is altered to the need for a flexible concept of knowledge, this means that individualised forms of supplies must be possible. As digitisation of distribution tends to dissolve the strict border between mass communication and individual communication, it no longer makes sense to reduce broadcasting to mass communication. Video on demand, enhanced programming services, individualised news bulletins, etc. are forms of content delivery which should be involved in the knowledge communication strategy of PSB.

- Universal service (and a basic comprehensive supply, as it is stated in German broadcasting laws with the notion of *Grundversorgung*) has to be reinterpreted as access to any possible transmission of knowledge, and to free individualised services. As platforms of distribution become multiple, questions of access are becoming more and more important. Control over these platforms is no longer with the public broadcasters, but rather with commercial operators. They tend to grant access according to their income interests. This may create problems of access for the public broadcasters and for the audience as well.

The consequences of this are varied and crucial, as Table 1 illustrates:

Table 1.   Reinterpretation Consequences

✓ PSB must be available on all technical platforms of distribution.

✓ Platforms and Electronic Programme Guides (EPG`s) must give prioritiy to PSB.

✓ It is necessary to develop corporate branding so that (PSB) content is easily recognised in the abundance of media contents and services.

✓ Integration is realised no longer via the appeal to the largest possible audience for one programme, but rather of one branded ʻtypeʼ of contents and services.

✓ Integration also means leading those who are not integrated in the knowledge society to the new structures offering knowledge.

✓ PSB must provide help for orientation within the market of content and services.

✓ PSB must popularise the stocks of knowledge in society.

✓ The service of PSB for the public sphere has to change.

The concept of the public sphere also has consequences for PSB, although changes here are not as severe as those correlated with the knowledge society notion. We earlier observed that the public sphere is a space of public communication within democracy that links public opinion and political

action. The public sphere is therefore understood as a space where citizens speak out and express their interests towards the political system, and thereby try to influence and control it. Media are thus a constitutive part of public sphere where they serve as informant, controller and also as a platform for participation and debate – as well as an actor.

Having discussed two different models of the public sphere, criteria for an ideal public sphere were elaborated. These include a broad participation of civil society, rationality and a discourse that results in an approximation or a consensus of those involved (at its best). We also noted changes within the public sphere in conjunction with knowledge society. These were:

- A vitalisation of the public sphere

- A growing demand for the quality of public sphere

- Questions of access to knowledge and science have an increased signification

- The public sphere is attributed the task of supervision of the state. The maintenance of reliable standards of public communication is inalienable

- A more active and demanding public sphere would emerge

Thus, operating logics are designated that are only compatible with the contextual operating logic of the media market under specific conditions. It is far more probable that those media able to perform according to these necessities are those considered most accountable to the public sphere, and with the appropriate structures and content already in place. In short, this means public service broadcasting.

This clearly implies that PSB must meet certain and particular challenges:

Table 2.   Public Sphere Challenges for PSB

✓ Ensure participation of all parts of the public sphere, of all groups of civil society, in the public discourse
✓ Select issues that are relevant to the public interest
✓ Offer programmes, genres and formats that permit *and promote* rationality and discourse
✓ Ensure access to knowledge and science
✓ Facilitate supervision of the state
✓ Maintain quality standards

All of this strongly confirms the traditional guiding principles of public service broadcasting. With that in mind, we then must ask about the extent to which they are either threatened or promoted in the conditions of digitisation and media convergence? That question, in turn, is relevant to the consequences for the public sphere when linked with consideration of the knowledge society concept.

Conditions of convergence and new challenges for public service broadcasting

Digitisation and convergence change the mediascape. For some scholars, the changes are thought to endanger the future existence of PSB. Thus, we should investigate the relations between the challenges and demands discussed to this point in light of the conditions of convergence. Do the conditions support or hinder the development of PSB? What does convergence mean for satisfying the demands?

The notion of convergence has undergone several permutations in meaning. Although digital TV and online services develop parallel conver-gence, this is not actually a 'melting' but rather "...new combinations of different platforms for distribution and access, terminals, services and content" (Kubic-zek et.al., 1998: 142). Com-puters and television sets will continue, and for a given time digital TV and new online services will exist side by side. But via convergence, a new environment is emerging in which the broadcasting system becomes part of a diversified communication and infor-mation system offering services with overlapping sectors. "The state of development of this communication system has its repercussion to the possibilities of development of the broadcasting system" (Hoffmann-Riem, 2000: 8), and therefore on PSB as well. It is crucial to observe that this convergence is creating the technical potential necessary to bring about the change from a post-industrial society to the Knowledge Society.

New platforms of distribution and access allow new forms of products and marke-ting. Packing programmes as bundles (or 'bouquets') is one ex-ample, and actually domi-nant since the launch of digital television. This has created, in the eyes of the audience, a perception that digital TV is the same as Pay-TV. This perceived image is obviously a problem for Public Service Broadcasting because knowledge about their free-to-air services is under-mined and possibly even underdeveloped.

Meanwhile, the bundling of programmes as packages that have to be subscribed as a whole means, for traditional mixed and also specialised channels, an erosion of market share. Digitisation of distributing techniques enables strategies of differentiation as an increasingly typical practice – obviously the case, for example, with the new 'targeted pro-gramme bou-quets.' So the number of the channels is growing rapidly, but doing so un-der conditions indicating a limited in-crease of content. It is nonetheless attractive financially because the reduction of costs to be realised in the digi-tised relationship is on the order of 1:6 compared with terrestrial analogue distribution (Hadas-Lebel, 2000: 50). This suggests enormous incentive for PSB broadcasters struggling and suffering with escalation in content and copyright costs.

Digitisation also makes it possible to introduce new forms of interactivity. Although such possibilities were first greeted with enthusiasm, recently a gloomier sense of reality has emerged due to the slow pace in developing

the technical means for interactive features. But crucial questions are none-theless valid for future PSB strategies: What degree of interactivity might or will be technically possible, which options are economically reasonable, which alternatives are desirable, and what will the user of potential interactive services actually be interested in? These are open questions where PSB will and can give different answers than commercial broadcasters.

Concerning the user, traditional television has inculcated a specific practical value via its programming, its way of structuring time and in serial supplies. It promises parti-ci-pation in a common cultural practice. It features a stable media disposition, reflecting traditional patterns of working and leisure time. We can suppose there is need for structure as an anthropological constant. Trends in greater flexibility in wor-king time would likely change patterns of reception and preferences in the use of media. This would further imply that traditional programming would not be accepted in the same way.

Given the abundance of channels, one should also expect that electronic programme guides and navigation systems will be increasingly important for users, and also as instruments for marke-ting. There is a possibility that the characteristic identity of a traditional programme provider could collapse. This would have dire consequences for public service broadcasters because they are already living on a strong image and identity as a programme pro-ducer and provider.

All of these noted changes equated with convergence must be added to those that have already been broadly described under the rubric of 'liberali-sation and commercialisation' of the public sector, combined with deregulation and 'globalisation.' Although convergence is changing the shape and contours of the mediascape, pluralism, diversity, freedom of information, access and availability of specific content and quality have to be secured as target ob-jectives for the concept of the public sphere to persist. This is keenly relevant for any with a legitimate interest in developing the public sphere in a manner that subscribes to the deliberative model, and also in order to achieve the most promising options for a contemporary Knowledge Society.

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