

Public Service Broadcasting By Radio: Challenges Ahead

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Abstract :

At a time when commercial and entertainment broadcasting both in Radio and TV has been overwhelmingly keeping the masses captivated across the world, the significance of Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) is also increasing every passing day because of so many reasons. However, with a multiplicity of entertainment channels nowadays based on advertising revenues, it is a major challenge for the PSB to keep up with ever-increasing demands for messages with public welfare as the ultimate aim. This is because of the competition from commercial broadcasting vying for attention of the masses. This paper examines the challenges faced by this particular kind of broadcasting in terms of contents and more so in financing and possible solutions to these challenges. Because, for developing countries like India, PSB still holds immense relevance which must never be allowed to be undermined by the growing onslaught from entertainment broadcasting at all.

Keywords: Public Service Broadcasting, Market, Commercial Revenue, Advertising Revenue,

1. Introduction :

“The Press is the best instrument for enlightening the mind of man, and improving him as a rational, moral and social being,” Thomas Jefferson, President of the USA. (Folkerts & Lacy, 2005).

In this era of information explosion, the role of media in the developmental process is even greater. The new era of media, with the massive distribution of news and information, requires leadership and guidance for the betterment of individuals based on values, compassion, concern for others and above all spirituality.

Now, Radio is the first technology-based entertainment mass medium to enthrall millions of people at a time. It is also the oldest of the electronic media with a history of public service broadcasting (PSB) stretching for more than 80 years now. But, at a time of considerable growth and development of media in general Radio's importance is being tended to be undervalued by the people concerned.

Progressively, however, the specialist character of radio audiences has come to be recognized. And the services which they need have been seen to require successful public service and community Radio systems as well as commercial Radio.

2. PSB - the Concept :

Freedom of speech and expression are generally taken for granted and need not be expressly recognized by law. It is only by imposing restrictions and regulations that the law draws attention to the concept. The extent to which such restrictions and controls are to be found is perhaps a good yardstick to determine how free a society is. A liberal democratic society introduces as few curbs as possible on freedom of speech and expression. And those that have been imposed can and ought to be justified in the larger interests of the society.

The need to inform and educate the masses stands out as the imperative need over and above the entertainment aspect.

On the other hand broadcasting products are produced, distributed and financed by these three types of institution ---

- **Markets** – As markets apply decentralized and horizontal decision-making (voluntary decisions between suppliers and customers), they create high incentives to provide exactly those goods demanded by the customers – people who are able as well as willing to pay for them. Also, because of the markets’ objectives to maximize profits, they are efficient and they support freedom and self-responsibility for both the customers and suppliers.

- **Governments** – Governments do not apply decentralized and horizontal decision-making practices of markets, but central and vertical rules (orders). They can provide goods with market failures – goods which are monopolistic or not cost-effective.

- **Non government non profit organizations** – These organizations function between the markets’ decentralized and horizontal rules and the government’s central and vertical rules. Such organizations are engaged in broadcasting activities neither for money (as in commercial firms) nor as a result of governmental directives, but mainly to satisfy intrinsic motivations like cultural, artistic, educational, religious or charitable objectives ((Banerjee & Seneviratne, 2005).

This is a ‘third way’ solution to provide goods – some people refer to it as the ‘third sector’ or the ‘autonomous sector’. Also the term ‘civil society’ expresses the way of organizing societies and economies.

Considering all pros and cons of these three systems we can say that a Public Service Broadcaster (PSB) should possess these characteristics ---

- **It should be a non governmental public broadcasting.** This means that decisions about its tasks, contents, organization, financing should be made publicly, yet should not be made by the existing political (governmental) public institution, but by a separate non governmental public institution. In order to ensure that no ruling establishments do abuse its wide reach for furthering narrow party goals it should be governed only by a politically-independent board which should be represented by people from viewers, listeners and others concerned who feel responsible for the various implications of the programmes broadcast.

- **A PSB should be non commercial public broadcasting.** This is because as in general, or at least some specific types of programmes of these bodies have market failures, the decisions about tasks, contents, organization, findings can’t be made by market criteria which are suitable and effective for commercial goods only. For the same reasons the benefits of public broadcasters’ programmes can’t be evaluated by the criteria that are suitable for the evaluation of commercial broadcasting programmes.

Commercial broadcasting on PSB should be restricted for two reasons ---

- **A PSB should articulate a wide, pluralistic spectrum of issues and views considerably exceeding the range that is relevant from a purely commercial point of view.** For example, it should include cultural and religious issues which are of fundamental importance for citizens and for society also. But being non-marketable goods, these issues do not interest commercial broadcasters and not provided by them.

- **Commercial broadcasting on PSB involves the risk of commercial and political interests merging and the danger of commercial power being used to steer political power in a non-transparent and anti-democratic way.**

A broadcaster must essentially satisfy three conditions for qualifying to be called a PSB ---

First of all its purpose and mission must be different from those channels in the market.

Secondly its mission must be to inform, educate and to entertain which must apply across various genres of programmes, and,

Finally – it must be free at the point of use for everyone.

So we can say that purpose, mission and universal access form the three pillars on which the foundations of a PSB is built upon.

It should reflect both mainstream and minority tastes, helping create social cohesion and a sense of belonging for minorities. It must also reflect national culture and promote national identity through its programming mix.

Further, the ‘Council of Europe 2000’ defined the other culturally-related missions of PSB are –

- to develop pluralistic, innovative and varied programming which meets high ethical and quality standards and not to sacrifice the pursuit of quality to market forces,
- to develop and structure programme schedules and services of interests to a wider public while being attentive to the needs of minority groups at the same time,
- to ensure that the programmes offered contain a certain significant proportion of original productions, specially feature films, drama and other creative works, and to have regard to the need to use independent producers and cooperate with the cinema sector,
- to extend the choice available to viewers and listeners by also offering programme services which are not normally provided by commercial broadcasters
- PSB should reflect the different philosophical ideas and religious beliefs in society with the aim of strengthening mutual understanding and tolerance and promoting community relations in pluriethnic and multicultural societies,
- it should also contribute actively to a greater appreciation and dissemination of the diversity of national and European cultural heritage (Nissen, 2006)

The UNESCO definition of a PSB is somewhat like this --- “PSB is broadcasting made for the public and financed and controlled by the public. It is neither commercial nor state-owned. It is free from political interference and pressure from commercial forces. Through PSB, citizens are informed, educated and also entertained. When guaranteed with pluralism, programming diversity, editorial independence, appropriate funding, accountability and transparency, PSB can serve as a cornerstone of democracy” (Banerjee & Seneviratne, 2005).

3. Financing of a PSB 1 :

As it is quite difficult to devise a system for financing a PSB system which is perfect we can see attempts by various countries and nations trying several models of PSB financing. The budgets of the financing pattern of the PSBs are one of the major indicators of the significance assigned to them by the respective national governments. A study by the financial consultancy firm McKinsey identified these four types of funding systems ---

- Those financed purely or almost purely by revenue collected from licence fees – the systems are ---

Japan, Norway, Sweden, Australia, the UK, Denmark etc. These countries can also be termed as purely PSB providers,

- The mixed financing pattern dominated by licence fees – Germany, Turkey, Belgium, Netherlands,

France, Czech republic, Italy etc.

- For the third group licence fee is important though not dominant – France, Poland, Denmark, South Africa etc. For them, either government grants or commercial revenues are the main sources of revenue. These are considered as ‘commercial broadcasters’ with ‘public service elements’ or as government broadcasters with PS elements.

- Those who do not receive any licence fee but funded by government grants and / or advertisements

only – Portugal, Spain, New Zealand. These can be termed as ‘purely commercial’ broadcasters with minor public service elements (Banerjee & Seneviratne, 2006).

It needs to be borne in mind that good quality programmes are a universal support for formal and non formal education. Quality programmes are always popular. At the same time PSBs have to be

accountable to the public and the latter in turn has to accept that PSB is a credible entity even to support education (Nissen, 2006)

“Neither commercial nor state-controlled, public broadcasting’s only raison d’être is public service. It is the public’s broadcasting organization, it speaks to everyone as a citizen. Public broadcasters encourage access to and participation in public life. They develop knowledge, broaden horizons, and enable people to better understand themselves by a better understanding of the world and others,” World Radio & Television Council, 2002 (Nissen, 2006).

As we all know that PSBs all over the world are increasingly facing funds crisis there was a move by the MIB and PB for introducing a licence fee which had to be shelved in the face of public protest. Thus PSB is also facing the challenge of striking the right balance between public funding and garnering advertising revenue for its operation.

Like any other enterprises, PSBs require income in order to provide their services. Initial decisions on establishing PSBs and choices of how to provide funding were made in widely-differing settings at different points of time in the 20th century. Thus, there exists no single and similar funding pattern for them all.

PSBs established in the early years of the century were founded in an environment in which governments monopolized the audio broadcasting space. And those introduced late in the century were launched in an environment in which coexistence of public service and commercial broadcasting were common across Europe.

Those instituted late in the century developed in post-industrial and transnational economies in which labour and class divisions played important roles. And in which there was greater concurrence among parties on fundamental social policy principles than had existed when broadcasting first emerged. So is the difference in policies and funding patterns which is reflected in their functioning.

Another major factor in this difference in funding and operational patterns of these PSBs all over Europe has been the wide differences in history, culture and politics among the nations. Because the fundings had to accommodate varying social, cultural and political realities. Nevertheless, certain funding principles are considered as ideal today.

They are considered ideal if they include provisions of sufficient resources to allow PSBs to effectively compete with commercial channels, predictable income that permits planning and reinvestment, regular funding increases at or above inflation, and independence from damaging government or commercial pressures.

In some cases, as the potential for broadcasting to be used for manipulating public opinion was properly recognized, financing through licence fees was seen in many nations as a means for diminishing the potential for government interference with content if funding came from tax receipts. As a result, licence fees are seen as having these distinct advantages---

First, it assigns the cost for broadcasting directly to the consumers,

Secondly, this tends to create a mutual and reciprocal sense of responsibility between the broadcasters and the audiences, which in turn frees the broadcasters from control and influence by governments (as might be the case where direct government support exists) or advertisers (as might be the case in commercial systems).

It needs to be mentioned here that advertising is the second most important source of funding for PSB, particularly in TV. Competition from advertising sales is high and public service firms compete directly with commercial firms to obtain funds and must provide access to desirable audiences in order to receive it.

The increasing reliance of many PSBs on advertising for income is strategically problematic because it is recognized as an uncertain form of revenue on which dependence can be damaging. It is separate from issues associated with the types of content advertisers are most willing to fund.

3.The BBC Model 2 :

The principles of British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) – the model PSB - have been identified as such –

- universal geographical accessibility,
- universal appeal in general tastes and interests,
- paying particular attention to minorities,
- contributing to a sense of national identity and community,
- keeping a distance from vested interests,
- direct funding and universality of payment,
- competition in good programming rather than for numbers,
- guidelines that liberate rather than restrict programme makers,

John Reith, the first Director General of BBC identified the four cornerstones of a PSB thus -

- offering a public service rather than commercial programming,
- national coverage,
- a high quality of standards of programming,
- centralized operations of the corporation,

This model prevailed in the UK till about the 1960s and influenced quite a few other countries (Banerjee & Seneviratne, 2005).

Tongue (1996) argued that democratic societies required shared information or common knowledge in order to function effectively and democratically. She also warns that when differentiation and fragmentation arise within the society, common knowledge is lost. This is a fact which should strengthen the case for public information and PSBs because diversity and access are the key principles of PSB (Banerjee & Seneviratne, 2005).

She also argued, “PSB has been built on the principle that it is free at the point of use. There is no reason why this principle should be abandoned. The new world of TV with multiple channels and the fragmentation of audiences increases the case for PSB being available to all and by all means via all technologies. This was stated in her report to the EU’s Committee on Culture, Youth, Education and the Media.

In the information age, PSBs can play a critical role in informing and educating citizens in an accurate and unbiased manner, keeping in mind the public interests and the citizens’ right to know. For the past two decades or more, PSB has been facing stiff competition from its commercial counterpart.

In case of funding of the PSBs though the different nations of EU have different structures yet broadly two distinct systems can be witnessed. Such as –

--- public revenue in which they are funded by licence fees or directly by the state. This however, does not constitute the only source of revenue for PSBs.

--- commercial revenue ones in which advertising, sale of programmes, books, discs and in recent years Pay TV income etc. are included (Banerjee & Seneviratne, 2005).

In most of them, a mixed pattern is actually seen by which the PSBs do actually function.

The idea of a PSB media not only represents a societal extension of the individuals’ right to communicate but is also legitimized by its close relationship with the representative democracy. This is very much reflected finely in the observations and conceptualizations of the political sociologist Jeremy Bentham when he said that representative democracy was the only form of government that would serve the public interests and not misuse power.

4. PSBs' obligations :

The PSB broadcasters have several important obligations such as –

- to expose the audiences to creative artistic achievements in all areas,
- to raise the audience's cultural competence (spread of knowledge, understanding and appreciation of the arts),
- to promote artistic creation, such as by investing into audio-visual production.

A genuine PSB can't be expected to serve the public interest while at the same time competing with commercial broadcasters for advertising revenue and profitability. Financial independence has always been one of the best ways to ensure the success and stability of PSB institutions. So, many of the PSBs are supported by public funding either in the form of parliamentary allocations or licence fees.

As against this, many of the PSBs are being forced to rely upon commercial and advertising revenue sources which distract them from their primary goals and aims and objectives. This is definitely going to be a major problem for the PSBs in the new century worldwide.

Significantly enough, when the hundreds of electronic media or broadcasting channels are forcing the media to get involved in the mad scramble for earning money ignoring genuine concern for the peoples' needs, the need for a PSB is far greater today than anytime earlier.

Since a PSB is funded by public money it should, as an obligation, reflect the aspirations of the public in its truest sense. Similarly, the concept 'public' should always define the logical boundary of any PSB. Or it should become basically a broadcasting by the people, for the people and of the people.

The problem becomes acute when we find that despite being the most ideal advertising vehicle, advertisers in general do not utilize it as it has to air quite a lot of programmes on educative, informative and socially-relevant issues and themes which do not earn revenue.

We talk of 'PSB' also when we are referring to their activities in the new field of interactive 'point to point' communication, although it has nothing to do with broadcasting in its strict technical meaning. Incidentally, this ambiguity may very well develop into a controversial policy issue if PSBs are restricted to broadcasting its narrow sense, merely because legal use of the term has not kept up with the times.

Since the early beginnings, education has been one of the main obligations of PSBs. The inclusive power of nationwide broadcasting made it a tool for reaching out to all corners of the society, introducing culture and citizenship to a mass audience.

5. The Challenges :

The emergence of commercial broadcasting and the introduction of advertising funding has challenged the social and cultural role of PSBs which must alter its ways to be consistent with its mission. Digital technology with more bandwidth capacity and new interactive services are opening up for us a whole range of new possibilities – both in education and in the public access of public services. Hence public service media is at the beginning of a new era with new obligations as well as means to serve them.

Again, in view of the newer challenges and developments, the strategic dilemmas facing PSBs in the digital age can be tackled with the aid of clear production and distribution strategies optimizing audience reach through cross platform delivery and cross media formats. The *raison d'être* of public service media still remains intact.

Traditionally, the broadcasting sector has demonstrated classic characteristics of a public good. This has positioned broadcasting among a select group of goods and services which are seen to require or benefit from public intervention in the form of regulation. In the Radio and TV sectors one of the main consequences of intervention has been in the form of PSBs with statutory obligations to ensure that

public policy objectives set for the sector are achieved. The developments in the last two decades have profound consequences for public policy in relation to the role of the public sector in Radio and TV.

The PSBs must be used regularly by the citizens as a prerequisite for living up to their cultural, social and political obligations. On the other hand they have to do so by serving the audiences with a range of contents and services not found in the general media market. These two sets of more or less conflicting requirements are analyzed and discussed leading to a tentative answer to the central question – is public broadcasting by its contents offer making a difference or has it by the forces of market competition been tempted or forced to join the mainstream.

6. Challenges from globalization :

However, in the age of globalization and cultural diversity, the challenges are -

- to become a multicultural and multilingual public broadcaster,
- to serve minorities and immigrant communities,
- create a sense of affinity and understanding with the people of other countries in the region, promote intercultural and inter-religion dialogue at home and internationally,
- promote acceptance of, and respect for, cultural diversity, while at the same time introducing the audiences to the cultures of other people around the world.

Every nation's commitment to public service media and its broadcasting structures flow from its unique, natural, historical, political and economic features. In New Zealand's context, it started out with government control in a parallel line with the private sector Radio and TV stations. Later on, when the government ushered in the welfare state concept private operators were acquired by the government for running a commercial as well as 'non commercial' Radio both at the same time.

The basic mission of a PSB is to serve the cultural, social and political needs of their audiences, to provide a common universal service that helps foster national identity.

BBC - often cited as a model PSB for any nation all over the world – at first started as a private initiative. It was granted a licence to operate in 1923 and it intended to secure financing by these two means – an annual licence fees collected through the post offices to be re-distributed to BBC, and a fee was due when a radio receiver set was purchased by anyone.

A major threat developed to bring BBC under the government control in 1926 which ultimately prompted the government to promulgate a Charter in 1927 by which BBC was transformed into a 'corporation'. Its Board of Governors were entrusted with the duty and responsibility that the institution reflected the diverse societal groups and their interests. At the same time its independence from state or political influence was aimed at. As it was supposed to be a social service, collection of licence fee was sort of justified by the government (Banerjee & Seneviratne, 2005).

In the meantime at the dawn of the World War II, majority of the national governments in Europe mostly abolished licence fee and exercised severe censorship. Interestingly, UK was different as she was not that badly affected by the WW II like the other nations of the continent. And state or public-controlled monopolies became the rule. In the post war period several of the state broadcasters were remodeled on the BBC style.

This was attached with provisions – in varying degrees – like the duty to be independent, objective, unbiased and fair provision of information. And the possibilities of the state to influence decisions or coverage were restricted also by organizational and financial safeguards. The securing of diversity was considered the paramount objective of media policy. For the post-Communist countries the transition from national state broadcasting to public (service) broadcasting took place in the early 1990s. This process was implemented with a lot of difficulties on the way. And many of the state-controlled broadcasters with a supposedly public service mandate have been allowed commercial broadcasting almost in an equal footing with public service programmes.

7. The European PSB crisis :

The European PSB model which is directly under government control is terminally in crisis with its credibility lost, and with a chronic economic deficit. It seems pretty clear that when public funding of these media is used as the answer to their economic losses, their autonomy is an illusion.

As the PSB media is supposed to be transcending governments in any country and reflect a whole range of political opinions, any newly-proposed or newly-structured corporation must be placed under the control of the Parliament directly, as it represents the interests of the State and consequently the interests of the citizens (Folkerts et al, 2005).

If we would like to give the upcoming PSBs a future, we have to create an efficient public service with no other objective than to move public broadcasting towards plurality and autonomy. An autonomy moreover that includes economic self-sufficiency which is an essential element for its independence.

Broadcasting is an extremely efficient technology for transmitting large amounts of information to large numbers of people simultaneously. But it has its limits – viewers and listeners unless they store content locally, are constrained to the programming schedule, and choice is restricted.

Significantly enough, the new content distribution possibilities opened up by internet technologies come at a time when the fundamental model of PSB is being undermined. The means by which European PSBs deliver ‘merit goods’ such as culture and education to citizens have altered dramatically during the past decade.

In the past the PSBs did command a captive audience who had few alternative choices of broadcast entertainment, and schedulers were able to some extent to choose content deemed beneficial on behalf of the consumers.

More recently, increased channel choice and use empowerment has led to a decline in the effectiveness of PSBs in terms of their abilities to ‘make good popular, and the popular good.’ In this context, some of the traditional economic arguments for public provision have been questioned.

On the other hand these same new technologies which have fragmented and empowered their traditional captive mass audience have also enabled the PSBs to engage in new kinds of public service. In the context of expanding access to broadband, PSBs attempt to realize the broad civic and cultural goals of the PSB on new platforms, including the internet. For example – by ‘on demand’ services.

In the olden days, PSBs’ success could be explained largely as the result of superior production values, enabled by subsidies that were both direct and indirect. And PSBs also had a privileged position in relation to audiences – they could use the lack of choice and consumer control as a means to ensure that cultural and educational content was delivered to a captive audience. This model is breaking down and PSBs are attempting to find a role in a new space - the extremely consumer-driven online and on demand space.

The UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity also went on the same lines to call for “encouraging the production, safeguarding and dissemination of diversified contents in the media and global information networks and, to that end, promoting the role of public Radio and television services in the development of audiovisual productions of good quality, in particular by fostering the establishment of cooperative mechanisms to facilitate their distribution”.

On the other hand the UNSECO Convention on Protection and Promotion of Diversity of Cultural Expressions has also recognized the PSB as one of the important means of achieving the enhancing goal of diversity of the media (Banerjee & Seneviratne, 2005).

It is an accepted and well-established fact that a PSB, if it is healthy and well-financed can be a strong shaper of the broadcasting ecology. In this instance, it can set an example for commercial broadcasters to follow by demonstrating the public need for, and the success of, cultural programming. This can be justified from the UNESCO declaration that ‘the public and private sectors and the civil society at

local, national, regional and international levels should work to provide the necessary resources. And also take necessary measures to alleviate language barriers and promote human interaction on the internet by encouraging the creation and processing of, and access to, educational, cultural and scientific contents in digital form. This is to ensure that all cultures can express themselves and have access to cyberspace in all languages, including indigenous ones.’ So it is obvious that PSB carries the major responsibility of serving cultural, ethnic and linguistic minorities, often in its regional services.

“European PBSs are essential institutions in the service of culture and democracy. European integration, the emergence of a huge international media market and the new possibilities offered by digital technologies have only made this more evident. PSBs act as guardians of national cultural unity. You will hardly find anyone else in the audio-visual world that would consistently preserve and foster the languages, literature, theatre, music and history of the many European nations,” Amsterdam Protocol.

In the present day circumstances, more than ever in the new digital environment their mission will involve a permanent reconciliation of creative requirements and market pressures with attaining socially-desirable goals. When left solely to the market forces, the electronic media will inevitably begin to slide to the level of a mere commercial venture. The rules of business dictate that content should be produced with as little money and effort as possible with regard to maximizing profit. Even if it meant just buying ‘cheap’ entertainment in both senses of the word. This trend runs contrary to the essential interests of any society in preserving its cultural identity and media pluralism, which are and will remain invaluable. In a modern state the citizens must have a guaranteed right to quality contents regardless of their social position, economic status and access to technical platforms. The public broadcasters’ relative independence from commercial pressures enables them to set the criteria of quality and mark out an arena in which other channels must be willing to step in and confront the PSBs if they want to be successful and maintain their credit.

8. Conclusion :

The PSB is indispensable in helping resolve the cultural dilemmas and meeting the cultural needs of today and tomorrow. This is not just a cliché The world is changing – and the direction of change is not always very encouraging. So it is better to keep the PSB in the traditional cultural role and it may be prevented from the challenges which we are facing at present. All these call for a programme of action designed both to bolster the culture role of PSB and to adapt it to new circumstances.

The concept of PSB establishes that not only an area should be reserved on Radio and TV for a wide range of quality of programmes. But this space should be of significant size and scope to engage the public based on programming that not only entertains, but educates and informs.

In Europe, it was not ‘by chance’ that access to public service was assured to all the citizens and that the public took it upon itself, albeit at considerable cost, to guarantee signal delivery throughout the nation, including scarcely populated regions. PSB was vested with the responsibility of cultural promotion and dissemination function that fits into the paradigm elaborated by John Reith as mentioned earlier.

The increasingly competitive and complex scenario of the new means of communication unquestionably risks blurring the PSB media and making them less ‘recognizable’. Nonetheless, the reasons underlying its existence in the European industry are still strong. And they continue to rest on its original vocation to ‘inform and educate’ the audience in its entirety, with the aim of not depriving anybody of the possibility of cultural growth and social emancipation.

The new mission of public service, thanks to tools and skills available, shall thus be to contribute to the growth of a homogenous social system in which traditional welfare mechanisms are integrated by promoting opportunities for all individuals alike.

We conclude with an optimistic note and hope that PSB would be revive itself again against all odds and thereby keep providing the masses with optimum benefit through welfare-oriented messages in the days to come.

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