

What are the ways to address the monopolization of big media companies in order to build a more democratic society in the US?

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Thesis: By taking a look at how to reverse the privatization and monopolization of US media conglomerates, it is crucial to recall a public service broadcasting based on a hybridization model that combines public subsidies and private organizations support to fight against misinformation and to build a stronger democracy.

Introduction

Presently in many nations around the globe the rule of law, civil, and political rights, along with institutional mechanisms for citizens' control of governments still remain ineffective or partially developed (Moisés, 2019; 33). In the US, the regression to authoritarianism, the civic disengagement, the rise of misinformation and the tensions from an increasing liberal technology management are directly affecting the pillars of contemporary democracy.

Many of these tensions share the needs of the country for a radical new market intervention as the progression of neoliberal ideals in the US have spread to every dimension of the civil society in a continuing stress and under-participatory culture. Consequently, the role of the media as the site of ideological control and the center of a democratic society becomes essential. Especially, the underestimated power of the public broadcasting service for public communication to serve as a model of society integration, one that would value citizenship over consumerism (McCauley, Peterson, Artz & Halleck, 2003: 23).

This paper will look at the media system of two different countries comparing the history and practices of the commercial monopoly media giants of the US with the mixed public funding model of the BBC in the UK to argue why the British Broadcasting Company is a better sustaining model for democracies around the world. The idea departs from the journalism's overall goal in our society: to consummate an ideal dialogic democracy -communicative democracy- whose actors and its public can only perform within a supported public service that will eventually decelerate the US media conglomerates' power.

Ward (2018; 105) insists on the idea that journalists should recognise themselves as democratically engaged public informers. The situation here discloses that a public institution should constitute and conform a diverse workforce, allowing opportunities for journalists with a variety of backgrounds and experiences to come together not just to represent the variety of voices in the community but to ensure that the government speaks for that plurality. Ideally, this notion allows all citizens to feel represented and equipped to participate in public discussions on matters that affect them directly or indirectly. Consequently, it will strengthen the public sphere and the formation of political will like the public opinion that would engage in an increasingly democratic debate (Dahlgren, 2005; 149).

As the media becomes more privatized and, in most cases, public services funding models depend on private partnerships, it is important to draw attention to the transparency of the

model and how much freedom are they going to allow the institution. The BBC is the perfect example of a successful PBS that continues to operate with a good degree of autonomy from government and Parliament secured through multi-year charters (Freedman, 2019; 1). However, the recent announcement of the privatization of Channel 4 -which will imply the rejection of its legislation duty on the reflection of the diversity of the country- has caused desperation among its audience. Below, we will argue why a modelic PBS as the BBC needs to face the threat to its existence in these challenging times in order to build a stronger social democracy in the US.

Media conglomerates in the US: an alienated PBS

Looking at the history of public and private broadcasting in the US is important in order to situate the factors that are contributing to the harm of American politics within an environment of increasing intolerance, non-listening “argument culture” (Ward, 2018; 111) and misinformation. These violations are allowed throughout a commercial media system that aims for profit before acting as the ‘guardians’ of the public interest. It is Victor Pickard who expresses that the monopoly of the media, the capitalism favoritism and the deregulated actions of the FCC rewriting rules in order to meet the needs of corporations (44) is what leads to the spread of low-quality and self-interest information that causes misinformation.

Within the public orbit, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) has, since 1969 when PBS was incorporated in the US, provided funding to the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), National Public Radio (NPR) and Public Radio International (PRI) to provide niche broadcasting services (Banerjee & Seneviratne, 2006). The role of the PBS is to connect all public television stations making the structure decentralized and diverse. However, in contrast with the mixed model of the BBC, most of its operating budget comes from private sources. These private sources are mainly multinational corporations like Ford, General Motors, Kellogg’s, Mobil Oil Company and Pfizer Pharmaceuticals (Banerjee, & Seneviratne, 2006).

Furthermore, although persistent indicators like subsidizing the mailing of newspapers (Pickard, 2019) or limiting the concentration of local and national newspaper and broadcast media ownership still show the role of the government in assuring public interest, in recent years the FCC (the center of media policy and an independent government agency) has not acted as a vigilant watchdog. An example of this is how in 2017 the FCC removed restrictions on media

concentration going against its obligation to “foster localism” (Hart, 2021;165). An urgent attention is consequently drawn into national news being narrowed in profitable presidential politics and its neglect of unprofitable coverage of institutional activities.

Dahlgreen (2006) underlines how media conglomerates and the centripetal forces of private capital are coalescing under the prevailing neoliberal order as they draw power away from the formal political communication system. It is a structural crisis in which the commercial system collapses as the advertising industry has other effective ways to market their products on the internet (McChesney, 2016; 129). Consequently, the role of the media as a source of information to which people can relate facilitating a rational dialogue diminishes.

Much of the twentieth century up to the 70s, the US media corporations made a commitment to public service values because professional journalism was founded on the notion that its content could not be shaped by the commands of owners and advertisers, or by the prejudices of editors, but rather by core public services values leaning towards the ideal ability of the people to govern themselves. However, the PSB has always been in the margins of American broadcasting, acting more as a niche service and without intentions of reproducing the European public service broadcasting (Aufderheide, 1996; 63). Thus, this might be one of the structural failures.

A highlight in Nixon’s presidency media management is important to make in order to understand the politics of media in the history of the nation. The Republican president in a time of violent crime dominance and cultural norms being constantly challenged, he attacked the media arguing it was unrepresentative. Along with his media consultant Roger Ailes, they created Fox News in order to provide a pro-administration service merging entertainment and news shifted to a public that was already disattached from the media. However, with the Watergate scandal the TV network couldn’t come into life until years later with the money of Rupert Murdoch. This ideological shift challenged American politics emphasizing style over substance and making propaganda profitable. We witnessed here the scenery for Trump’s sympathization to the network trying to keep credibility in the conservative sphere and reaching audience records in 2020.

The principal problem that this phenomena presents is the creation of a community of interpretation sided to the realm of authoritarianism. The way of reversing these outcomes rely on the structural aspects of the media of the nation. J.H. Snider proposes the creation of a

watchdog journalism branch of government independent of the legislative, executive, and judicial branches (2021) designed to report directly to the people and not through officials within the different institutions. This proposal goes beyond John Street's theoretical concept of the watchdog function of journalism as the act of protecting citizens against unfair or illegal practices from those in power (2001). However, it is essential to complement this idea with the Public Interest Stewardship that Michael Schudson recounts as the role of the journalist to co-guardianship in collaboration with the government as they both look for a common public interest. Snider's proposal should be implicit within the independence of the service itself in a time when the audience is fragmenting more and more. In this sense, an ideal solution is continually discussed within the community of media experts: an independent public service news media that is strong enough to defy the pressure of both government and market and to serve citizens without fear or favor (Freedman, 2019; 203).

In these terms, media technology and democracy organizations, like the *Center for Media, Technology and Democracy* in Canada, have started to rise rapidly to produce critical research, online and offline policy activism, and many other inclusive events that inform public debates about the changing relationship between media and democracy.

Retaining the model of the BBC

In April 2022 the announcement of the privatization of one of the most reliable and quality channels of the British Broadcasting Company -Channel 4- would add a remarkable step to the fearful decline of the representative value of 'publicness' in broadcasting. As we have been discussing throughout this paper, news services have been decisive in validating democratic discourse. The BBC especially delivers the 'social glue' that helps bind society together in the community (Fairbairn, 2004, 65). In contrast with Fox News, the BBC is popular not for its style but because of the rich and ambitious content that expands beyond what the market provides by itself. This means that the network for example is capable of broadcasting Radio 4 as well as EastEnders, the news, and quality shows such as Inside No.9 or powerful narratives like *Three Girls* (2017) .

According to a 2016 poll conducted by the Reynolds Journalism Institute (Kearney, 2017; 16), four of the ten most trusted news sources for US audiences are from outside the US,

including the BBC as the main one. Because the ultimate point of journalism is to make people in public life effective participants, effective rulers, and to make self-government possible (McChesney, 2016; 128), PSB should support minority audiences and counter-hegemonic groups creating more creative competition, diversity content, citizen's trust and engagement in politics. However, how does a system like this survive the threads of the digital revolution and the neoliberal growing practices? The BBC is not perfect -rather a compromised version of a potentially noble ideal according to Freedman (2019)- and neither can not completely resist the neoliberal, business-dominated Establishment. The history of the BBC is drawn upon the ongoing activity of private power influence in and out of the British government (Mills, 2016; 207). Currently, the network is on the defensive side; but as the most important single cultural institution in the country, a decisive weight is implicitly placed on it. A big challenge comes into the picture with the need of constitutional guarantees for transparently funded service and independence.

Likewise, the mixed model of the network, aimed to ensure that there are sufficient resources to create quality content and preserve the public interest have caused controversies in Europe for so many years as private companies complain that these strategies are unfair as PSB are also both competing in the market and getting benefits from public budgets too. In consequence the European Union has limited the public service remit (Goyanes, 2021;27). However, David M. Ryfe insists that we cannot stop direct public subsidies to journalism as a strong and independent journalism increases participation in civic life and reduces levels of political corruption and misinformation. The reason for this is that when public officials feel that their actions are closely monitored, they are less likely to engage in dishonest behaviors (Hart, 2021; 235). Furthermore, public services tend to be less costly and more efficient (Gao et al., 2020) as every dollar we could spend on investigative journalism multiplies the amount in social benefits.

Nevertheless, we have witnessed how countries like China or Russia state aid control results in the ideological manipulation and the limiting of rights (Goyanes, 2021; 29). This became the cause of PSB holding onto the free-market driven system. Knowing this, Alan Peacock provides a private funding view for public services settling the example of the National Trust, a private non-profit corporation that establishes restrictions on the percentage that is being funded as it could raise from commercial activities and encouragement given to support from

individual and corporate subscribers who would have voting rights in the election of its governing body (2004).

Furthermore, some authors have reflected about the no returning point of the media services that try to live on paywalls or the hope of protectionist intellectual property laws. However, this cannot sustain a non-profit democratic media service anymore. Society is in a position in which the most efficient system of journalistic and cultural production to fight against media conglomerates would be by publicly funded at the level of production, and freely available to all (Mills, 2016; 217). Thus not just universal access but universal opportunities too.

Many countries also fund news from the revenue generated by spectrum sales or cross-subsidies from digital intermediaries and other revenue-rich organizations (Pickard, 2015). The example of The Guardian, according to McChesney (2016), is remarkable as it subsidizes its online operations through their non-media-related properties and sets the emphasis on local production in a global era.

Conclusion: The democratic bliss under a public World Wide model

The traditional media services are currently being challenged by the emerging media technologies. This poses a threat to democracy in the US as national private corporations use their negotiating power to influence the electorate and the public. The nation cannot put aside the certainty of social justice challenges along history that made America great. Thus, many scholars insist on using this idea to reframe and impulse journalism towards a more inclusive and representative communication. A strong media service that assesses the private sector as well as the public sector is critical, and only the figure of the PSB can do that.

BBC's performances throughout history have aimed towards remaining meaningfully independent disregarding its framing into the UK. The commercial subsidiary of the BBC, the BBC Worldwide, have proved to support the BBC public service mission maximizing profits on its behalf (Donders, & Van den Bulck, 2016) as it functions through the mixed funding model. However, this is also strengthening the hegemonic position of Anglo-Saxon content worldwide and subverting public broadcasters' objectives. According to Donders (2016), most public broadcasters look satisfied with their relationship with BBC WW, whom they consider a logical partner. Consequently, what would happen if alternatively to building up relations with the

ultimate image of the BBC -rooted in the history of the UK- they could associate with an international public broadcasting service that could serve under the management of the United Nations? Perhaps more research would be needed towards this direction as nation state-global democratic institutions become increasingly interdependent, human rights tend to be undervalued and democracy fights for a new global order in the uprising of the US neoliberal hegemonic practices.

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