

ROMANIAN PUBLIC SERVICE TELEVISION: THE PURSUIT OF AUDIENCE IN A MULTI-PLATFORM CONTEXT

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Abstract

The increasing use of the internet has brought new challenges for the public service television system all around the world. Despite the free access to information and the use of digital technology, the Eastern European public service television is still in a shading cone mostly because of the small scale of their broadcasting markets. Recently the Romanian Public Television is undergoing a major financial crisis that has led to the closure of one of its TV channels, namely TVR News. This article offers an overview of the Romanian Public Service Television (TVR)'s multi-platform strategy and aims to address the following questions: Is the concept of public service television still relevant in Romania? What are the present challenges and what is the future of the Romanian public service television in the age of multi-platform broadcasting?

Key words: TVR, public service television, internet, crisis, multi-platform broadcasting.

JEL Classification: Z

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years there has been an increasing trend in using the Internet for almost everything, from shopping to watching television. The Internet as we know and understand it today generates a 'public arena' with multimedia utilities and simple access (Campbell, 2004, p. 250). The emergence of new digital technology has brought significant changes in the television landscape and is still seen as a challenge and constant threat to public service broadcasting. This has led to an ongoing debate on the future of television, public service television in particular, in Europe. The scholars' discourse is built around the following question: 'What is television as digital media?' James Bennett (2011) offers a straightforward answer to this question considering that "television as digital media is a hybrid media form. The more challenging aspects of this hybridity in the digital age ask to understand television as dispersed across a range of screens, sites, and devices that mix it with the properties from digital media- such as software, code, interfaces, social networking, broadband, peer-to-peer file sharing" (2011, p. 7). Therefore, broadcasters have increasingly turned their attention to multi-platform practices so as to increase their audience and secure their place in the changing media environment (Klein-Shagir and Keinonen, 2014). In this new context the legitimacy of public service broadcasting institutions has, according to some authors (see Tracey, 1998; Papathanassopoulos, 2002), disappeared since spectrum scarcity has turned to digital abundance due to new digital technologies (like digital television but also online services, streaming video platforms etc.).

Analyzing the future of public service television in the digital era, Steemers (1998, p. 196) asks a pertinent question: 'Is Public Service Broadcasting really necessary?' and argues that "faced with the prospect of a multitude of broadcast and non-broadcast services, it could be argued that public service broadcasting is no longer necessary, that it is simply a quaint relic from earlier times". Since Steemers has made that inquiry many things have changed in the media landscape. Most of the public service broadcasters around the world have identified new ways of delivering public service content and engaging the audience but the future of public service television in the digital era is still uncertain. Furthermore, Steemers (1999), Bardoel and d'Haenens (2008) address the importance of the digital switchover considering that the public service content should be freely accessible to all the people on all platforms and technologies. Evens, Vergem, and De Marez (2010) state that all European countries should freely choose their transition to digital television strategy. Moving the discussion forward, Iosifidis (2007), Evens, Vergem, and De Marez (2010) underline the advantages of the digital television such as: more choice, better signal stability, image and sound quality; lower distribution costs and the possibility of transmitting more channels and services at similar costs; greater efficiency in spectrum use, and the ability to send data that allow for interactivity. However, despite all these advantages, scholars like

Verdegem, Hautekeete and De Marez (2009), Iosifidis (2005) highlight potential problems of the digital switchover in Europe. The most relevant reasons underlined in their works are: people's fear regarding a significant increase of costs; the citizens' lack of faith in the authorities that praise the importance of digital switchover; financial problems that could prevent people from having access to digital television services.

Based on the ongoing debates regarding the future of public service television in the digital age, the present article tells the story of the Romanian public service television's path towards a multi-platform era of digital technology. Starting from Gulyas' (2013: ix) premise that public service media are going through dramatic transformations as a result of technological developments, policy changes, market pressures, and changes in media consumption, this article aims to address the following challenging questions: Is there any need for public service television in Romania considering its declining support from the public and government, and what does it have to do to secure its digital future? Does TVR have a successful multi-platform broadcasting strategy? Bearing these questions in mind this article begins with the outgoing debate on the mission, goals and strategies of public service broadcasting in the digital era, then analyses the challenges brought by the digital technologies in Romania and the extent to which these affect the Romanian public service television (TVR). The second part of the article examines the major changes of TVR after the fall of the Communist Regime and the final section argues that TVR's major problem is the lack of vision for a multi-platform strategy. We anticipate that TVR, as well as other public service broadcasters across Europe and all around the world, faces an uncertain future because the "public channels have found it difficult to respond to new technological advancements, regulatory changes and ideological shifts" (2007, p. 42).

II. PAPER AND TEXT FORMAT

Public Service Television: missions, goals, values and strategies

By their very nature, public television services are the heart and core of the public sphere, because they represent the arena in which the democratic processes are taking place. In a democratic system, the public television service is, first and foremost, an institution of the public sphere and of the civil society – although it often maintains, in an indirect and sometimes ambiguous way, some ties with the state. Iosifidis (2007) states that "there are some common obligations bestowed upon the public television by society which define the remit of its activities. These obligations can be summarised as follows:

- Universality of content and access
- Provision of programmes which contribute to social cohesion and democratic process
- Setting of high quality standards in the areas of entertainment, education and information
- Contribution to political pluralism and cultural diversity
- Enriching the lives of individuals through history, the arts and science
- Preservation and promotion of national culture and heritage
- Editorial independence and accountability
- Serving the needs of an increasingly multi-cultural society" (2007, p. 8).

When analyzing the future of television in the digital era we are faced with two contradictory approaches. On one hand, some scholars anticipate public service broadcasting demise (Tracey, 1998) or argue that the introduction of digital television will diminish public service broadcasters' power in the television market and further bring a threat to its justification for existence (Papathanassopoulos, 2002). A second body of research considers digital platforms only an extension of television (Klein-Shagrir, Keinonen, 2014) and argues that new media brought not only challenges and obstacles for the public service broadcasters but also new opportunities for engaging audiences online and therefore that will secure its place in the new media landscape.

The two above perspectives on the future of public service broadcasting institutions in the digital era are contradictory. Increasingly, however, the issue is not about which road to take in the digital era, but rather about identifying the new role and place for the public service broadcasters in the digital media landscape. Mapping the future of public service media, Jakubowicz (2008, p. 44) considers that: "The main avenues to explore are how to introduce user-generated content into the PSM programme offer- naturally without compromising its quality- and how to turn the audience into a "community of users" and a "social network of partners" in constant dialogue with the PSM organisation. The purposes are accountability and public participation in determining the direction in which the organisation should go". Therefore public service broadcasters will continue to register considerable public support (Debrett, 2009, p. 807, 2010, p. 15) and their future lies in the development of a multi-platform digital strategy that allow public participation and user-generated content.

Romanian Public Service Television after 1989

In the past two decades, the television environment in Romania has undergone great changes. There have been two important developments that brought major changes in television: the establishment of commercial television channels and the emergence of the Internet. Ioan Dragan and J.P. Lafrance (1994) divide the evolution of the post-communist press into three stages: the stage in which the revolution was broadcast “live” (1989-1990), the stage of disappointments (1991-1992), and the stage of the rebuilding of the public sphere (after 1992). On the other hand, Peter Gross (1994) considers that 1990-1995 is the first and the most important stage of the post-communist press when the Romanian media quickly tripled their number and, the press freed itself from censorship. However, analyzing the post-communist Romanian media Gross (2008) identifies both progress and regression in 2005-2006. TVR has been a witness of the Communism’s downfall and that is why, for a long time, it was known as “the television of the revolution”. Its mission after 1989 was not simple, because it “had to play an efficient, proactive role in the process of democratization, by bringing its contribution to the process of socializing and educating the public in, and for, new social roles and values, in an open society” (Gross, 2004, p. 170). The difference in opinions is perhaps one of the reasons for which the evolution of TVR after 1989 was so slow. There was no clear vision for this public institution and those who had a clear vision were constantly expelled due to political interests. Competing interests within the discourse on the future of TVR still give rise to crucial tensions between the politicians.

For some years after the Revolution TVR still had an enormous influence on the audience and a great responsibility for the education of the people, for the expansion and evolution of democracy in post-communist Romania. For several months after December 1989, TVR was called Free Romanian Television – thus marking the drive to transform the former television ‘of the state’ into a public television, according to the model of the European public service television, with the following objectives:

1. A common reference point for all members of the public
2. A forum for broad public discussion
3. Impartial news coverage
4. Pluralistic, innovative and varied programming
5. Programming which is both of wide public interest and attentive to the needs of minorities
6. Reflection of the different ideas and beliefs in pluriethnic and multicultural societies
7. A diversity of national and European cultural heritage
8. Original productions by independent producers
9. Extended viewer and listener choice by offering programmes not provided by the commercial sector (Raboy, 1996, p. 15).

Public television’s role in the Romanian revolution is indisputable, because ‘after being the personal institution of the former dictators, television suddenly became both the inaugural space and the symbol for the liberation from tyranny, playing the role of a catalyst and a command center of the revolution’ (Dragan 1993: 3). Television became Romanian’s “spokesman” and had to play, after 1989, ‘an efficient, proactive role in the process of democratization, thus contributing to the socializing and educating the public in and for new roles and social values in an open society’ (Gross 2004: 170). Nonetheless, after the long period of 30 years during which it had functioned under the control of the totalitarian communist regime, it was not easy to perform the transition towards a television which functions independently from the point of view of the editorial contents. The shift from state television – which was politically obedient – to public television which would function according to the European standards, has implied, among other things, a never-ending process of reform and re-organization from the corporative and editorial point of view (Nicolau, 2009).

Because of the low audience figures TVR’s existence is contested by politicians, journalists and general audience. TVR’s freedom, truth and accuracy, impartiality and fair play are constantly being questioned; TVR being accused on several occasions of not being able to control its budget, not being able to adapt to the present, having the same employees incapable of reinventing themselves and failing the public service television objectives.

Romanian Public Television in the Multi-Platform Broadcasting Era

With the emergence of the Internet and the rapidly changing media landscape in terms of competition, the reorganization of public service broadcasting institutions has become a significant issue. According to Steemers (1998) public service broadcasters have been refining their strategies in response to the introduction of commercial television. Although in most of the European countries the analogue switch-off has already been completed, in Romania, after many promises, this is yet to happen with the most likely date being 17 June 2015. With the completion of digital switchover in July 2015, the competition will grow still further in Romania too

and therefore we must ask: Is TVR still relevant in this competitive market?

TVR aims to be different from commercial broadcasters but at the same time provide a mix of television programmes for all audiences. While commercial broadcasters are profit-driven organisations, TVR has social, cultural and other public service purposes and for this reason, it should provide television programmes, that commercial broadcasters are unlikely to provide because they do not generate huge revenue such as, for instance: tv programmes that focus on arts, culture, or education. However, instead of focusing on such types of programmes, during the past decade TVR has started to offer commercial television programmes in order to compete with the commercial broadcasters.

It could be argued that even if TVR’s audiences are decreasing TVR as an institution is still necessary because it still provides universal coverage in Romania. This will, of course, change once the digital switchover will be complete and TVR will have to reinvent itself. The solution for TVR is to become a cross-platform or multi-platform content provider. TVR must not focus only on the traditional broadcasting functions and content, such as radio and television services, but also on the online new communication multi-platforms. However, even is TVR launched the portal TVR+ (tvrplus.ro a platform that allows people to view television shows online and watch TVR live) at the moment there is still no concern for redefining the idea of public service television and Romanian scholars and politicians fail to address the need for a new digital multi-platform strategy for TVR.

Methodology

In order to investigate the future of TVR in the digital era as seen by the Romanian people, a quantitative audience research was conducted, using a structured questionnaire. The aim of the questionnaire was to identify Romanian people’s solutions for the future of the Romanian Public Service Television. The survey was conducted in March- June 2015 and used a sample of 270 Romanian people (20-50 year old). Only 250 responses were valid for the present study, representing 46% men and 54% women.

Results and discussion

According to the results of the survey, Romanian people believe that the Romanian public service television (TVR) is still influenced by the rulling parties as 74% of the respondents stated (Figure 1). Only 5 % of the respondents believe that TVR acts independently and only 4% of the respondents believe that TVR serves the interests of the ordinary people as a public service television should do.

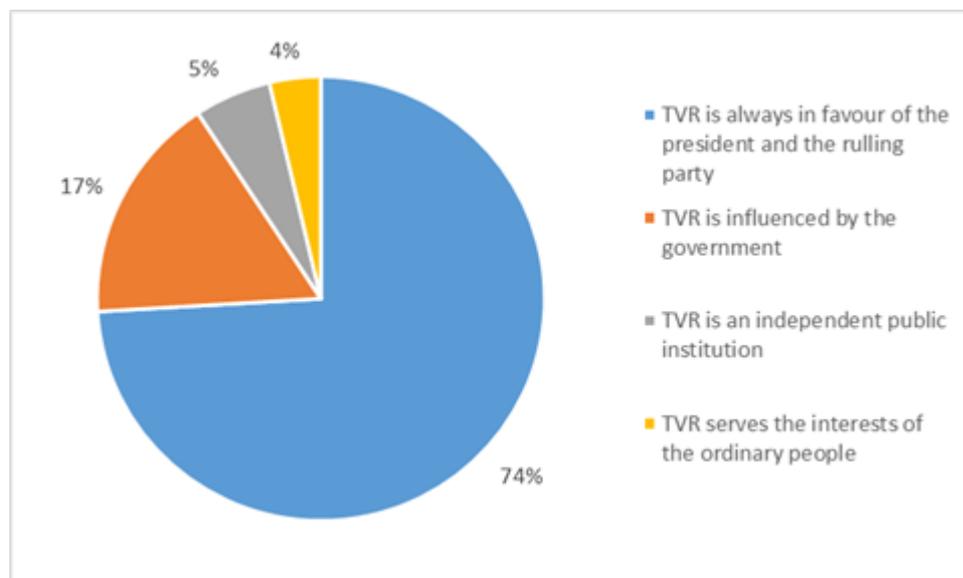


Figure 1 – TVR’s freedom

Because they do not believe in TVR’s impartiality, most of the respondents do not watch TVR. 62% of the respondents watch TVR occasionally and only 4% watch TVR every day (Figure 2).

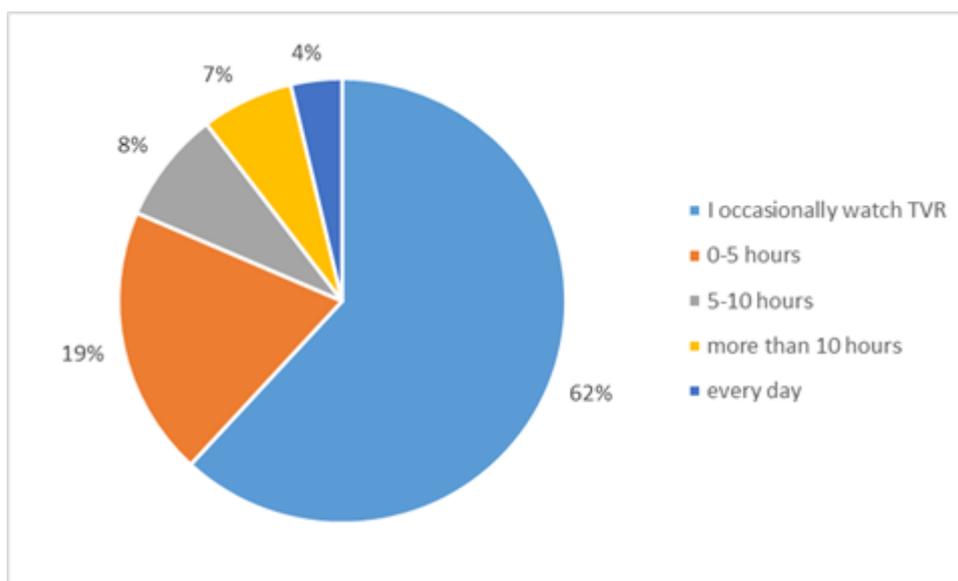


Figure 2 – Hours spent watching TVR per week

Most of the respondents choose not to watch TVR’s programmes online because they consider that the website is dull and it does not allow user-generated content, or it is not updated as fast as it should be, and the streaming is slow (Figure 3). 7% of the respondents tried to watch TVR while they were on vacation and noticed that unlike other Romanian television channels (such as Antena 1, Antena3, Realitatea TV, Romania TV) TVR’s programmes cannot be viewed from outside Romania (showing a similar strategy to the BBC who tries to protect the people who pay the licence fee).

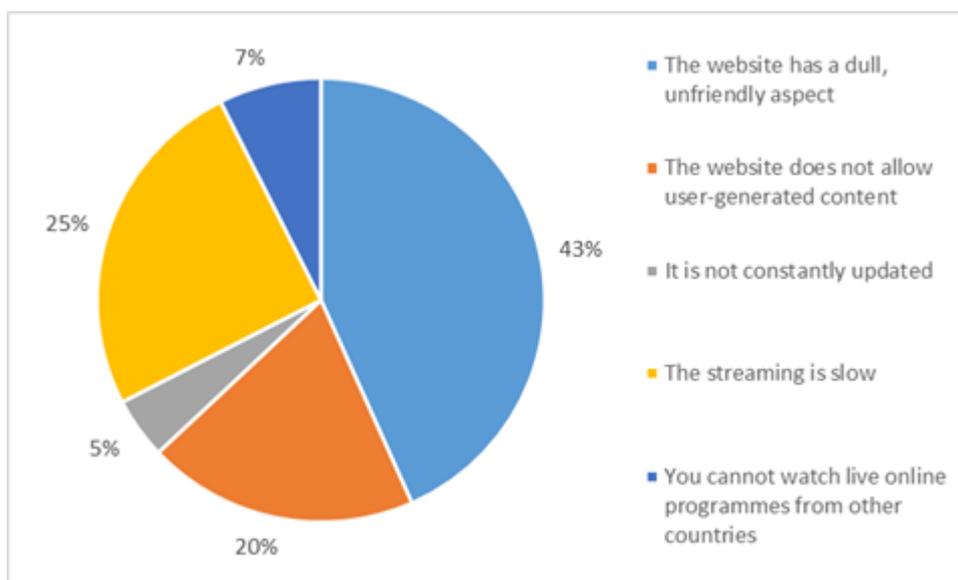


Figure 3 – People’s reasons for not watching TVR online

When asked about the problems that TVR undergoes the respondents consider that the most relevant problems that TVR faces are: low audiences because of the constant competition with the private television channels, poor leadership that lacks vision and professionalism, corruption because it is not able to control its budget reckless expenses, with no connection with any concrete strategies that would have raised the level of audience and people believe that it is a big hole in the public budget, lack of editorial independence and not protecting the interests of the people (see Figure 4).

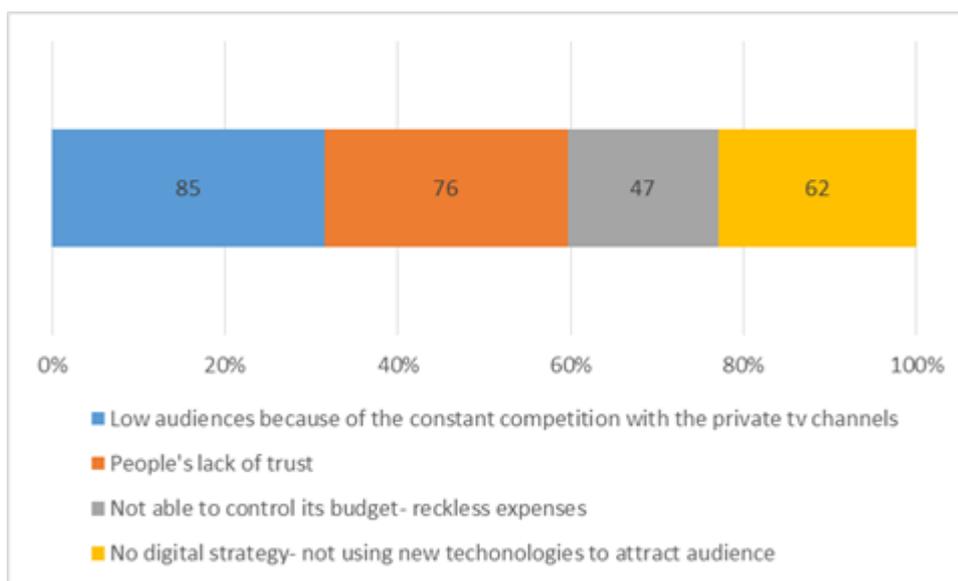


Figure 4 – TVR’s actual problems

The respondents consider that public service television still have a future in Romania should it regain people’s trust and take advantage of the new communication technologies and come up with a user-orientated strategy via all the platforms (Figure 5). More analysis...



Figure 5- Solutions for the future of TVR

III.CONCLUSION

During the last years, public television has lost a lot of ground in the competition with the private TV stations. It is a trend that manifests itself not only in the former socialist countries but across the entire Europe. Public television has a hard time in trying to keep up with the digitization. TVR should not see this as a ‘defeat strategy’ (Doyle, 2010) but as a future strategy that will assure its future in the current media landscape.

However, this articles proves that Iosifidis (2007: 184) was right when stating that ‘the public service broadcasters’ relationship with the audience remains strong and ensures their visibility and relevance in the digital age’. Indeed TVR is still among the Romanian people’s preferences but ‘unfortunately, as Romanian’s post-communist history has repeatedly demonstrated, whenever progress is registered so is some regression’ (Gross 2008: 143).

This article offered an overview of the major changes and challenges of TVR since the fall of the Communist Regime in 1989 and investigated the present challenges and the future of Romanian public service television in the digital era. Furthermore, the study confirmed that the “public channels have found it difficult to respond to new technological advancements” (Iosifidis, 2007, p. 42) as the major problem that TVR currently faces is the lack of digital vision towards a multi-platform strategy. Therefore, one of the legitimization strategies employed by the Romanian public service television should be the use of new media for purposes of public participation and self-representation of ordinary people because TVR should be a television for all the people. TVR should use technology as a legitimization tool, refashioning its ways to engage audience. Instead the gap between TVR and the public is increasing at the moment because people have lost interest and trust in this public institution and TVR needs a user-oriented public policy strategy with new people, new TV shows, on new platforms. Since it is the television of the people, now more than ever, with the use of the internet TVR could empower the ordinary people by creating a user-friendly website. A user-orientated policy might increase TVR’s public value, projecting its traditional role as a public institution that promotes public education into the digital future. Also, by engaging more people, TVR might gain audience and could help to the digital literacy of the people and re-valorization of the televisual individual experience reinforcing what Beckett (2008) states when referring to the BBC. Moreover, the creative use of digital technologies could help TVR to testify to the institution’s commitment to deliver public value by connecting with citizens and make their accounts of events newsworthy. Participation through new media could increase user satisfaction, along with the visibility of its programmes.

IV. ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This paper is supported by the Sectorial Operational Programme Human Resources Development (SOP HRD), financed from the European Social Fund and by the Romanian Government under the contract number SOPHRD/159/1.5/S/136077.

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