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Public Service Media Between Theory and Practice

Interview with Professor Karen Donders

First, warm congratulations on receiving the Media and Democracy Karol Jakubowicz Award 2021. Your latest book, entitled “Public Service Media in Europe. Law, Theory and Practice” greatly impacted discussions on Public Service Media (PSM) futures. How did you come across the book idea? What’s behind the story?

I started contemplating that book, from the moment I published my book on European state aid policy and the impact it has on public service media across Member States of the EU. That was in 2012, not that long after I completed my PhD. In the years after 2012, I did new research and focused on publishing scientific articles. That is of course great, but with an average length of 6000 words these articles do not really offer sufficient space to elaborate on a certain statement you want to make about public service media. After all, PSM is a highly complex concept, both theoretically and legally. Furthermore, the actual practice of public service media is a multi-layered construct that adopts a variety of shapes depending on where you are.

So, I wanted to write this book to de-construct the normative, theoretical, legal, and practical aspects of public service media in Europe. Too ambitious, I know... But that essentially was what I envisaged doing. I did not manage to do that entirely. But overall, I think the book adds something to existing scholarship and the award recognizes that, and I am very happy with it.

So, why does society need public service media?

I am not sure that each society does need a public service media organization inspired by the BBC or ARD model. That might sound quite revolutionary. I am convinced though that communities need media, which act in the public interest, not as a side product, but as their *raison d’être*. To date, public broadcasters in a variety of countries have proven to be the most effective as well

as efficient way of doing that. The model works, with all its deficiencies that we need to recognize and that the book elaborates on. In several countries though, particularly those countries where democracy is nonexistent or where some sort of authoritarianism is on the rise, one can question whether the public service media model that we have in Western and Northern Europe will work at all. That is a difficult truth. But as scholars we need to ask this question. Will this model, that many of us have studied and value because of its proven impact on quality content and society at large, deliver media in the public interest in countries such as Poland?

My research shows that that is highly unlikely. That is not *per se* the fault of a specific government alone, although one can hardly deny the worrisome nature of what PiS is doing. The recent denial of the rule of law by the Polish constitutional court is a case in point. Rather, it is the outcome of the combined actions of political elites, a weak public service media regime, and a socio-cultural setting that is fairly accepting towards government control over media. Public broadcasters in this are not passive victims of government policies, even if we would like to see them as such. They are also agents with power and have been socialized and institutionalized within a certain context.

Yes, I think public service media is necessary, today more than it was 20 or 30 years ago. Platformization and the continued consolidation of media markets are resulting in highly perverse practices that really harm social cohesion, informed citizenship, and even fundamental rights. In numerous countries, public broadcasters are the best even though imperfect tool to achieve this. In some countries, they might not be that and we should think about other models that could work better. Such an exercise requires scholars on public service media and scholars on community media, alternative media and emerging media organizations to talk more to each other.

/// Your book looks at a growing gap between normative public service media theories and their daily regulatory and newsroom practices. Why there are so many clashes between PSM models and the forms they take?

The easy answer to that is, that everything is imperfect. Practice will never be able to live up to the normative ideal. Of course, there are some public broadcasters that approach the ideal and others that remain far from it. The findings of my book show that the (mis)matches between the normative ideal, the law and practice are largely explained by political and economic factors, as well as the

cultural and value foundations on which public service media is being built. The latter aspect is, indeed, very difficult to research and I think a lot of innovative scholarly work can be done in this area.

/// **One of your case studies is focused on the recent shifts in the PSM in Poland. Do you think there is also a gap in understanding public service media between the East and the West?**

Definitely. When I first went to Poland, it was great fun and especially in a city such as Warsaw, where things seem very similar to Brussels or Berlin on the surface. But when you dig deeper, you realize you know nothing. There are huge differences at the societal, cultural, political, and economic level. That isn't a problem. However, when you start applying concepts such as public service media from a Western-centric angle to other parts of Europe, that is problematic. Moreover, we have exported these concepts to countries based on notions such as policy diffusion and policy learning. It isn't working because the countries that we have exported public service media to have no historical experience in it, and very often no inclination to genuinely adopt it. Even when such enthusiasm existed, for example at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s, the lack of a professional journalism culture, the swift realization that the BBC and ARD have 3 and 9 billion plus euros respectively to deliver their remit, and disappointment with what democracy has delivered in general, ensures that the persistence of the state broadcasting system's problems resurfaces. I do not deny that a lot of scholars, journalists, citizens and activists regret that (the flawed adoption of the PSM model) and want to escape from that pattern. But escaping from patterns might be one of the most difficult things to do, both as an individual as well as society.

Next to that, what I also found striking is that despite these huge differences, there are also enormous resemblances between what is happening in the East and West. In both parts of Europe, we struggle with how to deliver the public interest in media in the context of digitization and social media platforms. There are huge problems with fake news, polarization and with populism. And nowhere, do media companies have an answer to these challenges. These are areas where we can learn from each other. Scholars from the West should not have any superiority feelings, though. There is much that is dysfunctional about our media systems too.

/// **You have recently moved from academia at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel into the professional sphere of the Flemish PSM. How does this change your perspective when looking at public service media?**

A big step. It really was a huge decision for me to leave the Vrije Universiteit Brussel and opt for a management position within a public service broadcaster. It was a great opportunity to impact public service media from within. In a way, there is not that much that surprises me. I have advised VRT for a long time. So, I knew the company quite well. On the inside, it is of course different than on the outside. I have to say what surprises me the most is the discussions on the public interest in media and how to achieve it. I think as scholars we sometimes have the impression that we talk about these things and public broadcasters themselves do not, that they are a bit self-complacent. I have to say that there in fact are a lot of discussions within our newsroom on pluralism, disinformation, accessible information for youngsters, etc. The people who are working on our audio and video services, are talking constantly about the right content mix, how to engage better with audiences and society around our content, how to position ourselves closer to society, public service algorithms, and so on. It is difficult to find the right answers. Scholars can play a big role in adding to the discussions we have within public service media.

I also see the passion of people working here for public service media as a project. That is something I think universities and public broadcasters have in common. In a way, you try to change the world.

What I underestimated a bit, was the financial planning. There is a lot of budgeting going on. So, that requires a lot of my attention. There are also a lot of rules, besides the public broadcasting specific ones, that we need to comply with. That is also something that is not visible from the outside, but it takes a lot of effort to get all of these things right.

/// **And your academic knowledge? To what extent is this going with the PSM picture you had before?**

I did not leave my academic knowledge outside when I entered the VRT building. I really try to use my knowledge for the good of VRT. The research department is also supervised by me. So, that is of course great fun because they have a lot of data – I dare say more than we have within universities on media usage.

I still think that the research I did on public service media policy and on multi-stakeholder policy is valid. I have not yet seen anything that goes against the findings from research I also did together with much valued peers such as Tim Raats, Hilde Van den Bulck and also you, Michal.

What is more important within VRT than in the academic field so far, is the very fragile position public broadcasters have in a commodified and international platform environment. That is not only about the big platform players, but also about the big media conglomerates. Local players, including public broadcasters are threatened in such an environment to continue to play their

role and serve the public interest. We are definitely no longer the center of the value chain. That makes discussions on market distortion a bit ridiculous because we in fact no longer have the power to distort the market, even if we wanted to. More research on these things would be very helpful, not only for us, but also for policymakers.

/// You are now dealing with critical societal challenges and responsibilities, responsible for the Public Value. What's the most challenging in producing the PSM today – from the inside (organisational cultures, structures, management systems, mindsets)?

The biggest challenge we are facing from the inside is our transition to a digital organization. That might seem a bit odd as the Internet has existed for a long time now. But we need to transform public service media organizations from broadcast-centric organizations to public service platforms. That is what we must do. It will not suffice to offer our radio and television programs online. We must develop more innovative digital formats. We also need to engage more with our audiences, take them seriously, and allow them to co-create part of our offers. This also requires change at levels that are not visible to outsiders.

The entire accounting system, all management systems, risk assessment, data management systems, ... must change as well. Moreover, we need people with advanced digital skills. However, these people are needed in other sectors as well. There is a fierce war for talent. Furthermore, our mindset as an organization must become more inclusive. We need to adapt to the changes in society if we want to represent it. So, these are but a few things we need to do at the organizational level.

/// And finally, any ideas or recommendations for scholars who want to contribute to a healthy PSM? How can they become more active?

Spread the message. Pure and simple. If there is great research, spread it. Not the full-length paper. Five bullets, infographics on Twitter and LinkedIn, Instagram sliders, ... Also scholars, not only public broadcasters, need to adapt with new formats to this environment. The digital environment gives us ample opportunities to deliver on our remit better. The same also holds for academia.

Karen Donders was interviewed by Michał Głowacki in September 2021.

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Karen Donders is Director of Public Engagement, Talent and Organization at Vlaamse Radio- en Televisieomroeporganisatie (VRT) – public service media in Flanders. Prior to joining VRT she worked as an associate professor at Vrije University Brussel, Belgium. Her publications include monographs, edited collections and scholarly papers on the European media policy and innovation in public service media. In 2021 Karen has received the Media and Democracy Karol Jakubowicz Award for her book, entitled “Public Service Media in Europe. Law, Theory and Practice” (Routledge, 2021).