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PUBLIC TELEVISION IN THE CONTEXT OF ESTABLISHED AND EMERGING DEMOCRACIES: QUO VADIS?

Julia Rozanova

Abstract / The future of democracy is seen by many as uncertain, particularly in Russia. Consequently, the prospects for the freedom and independence of the media cannot be considered outside this context. This article provides initial insights into the factors that facilitate and constrain the ability of one of the most influential media – television – to be an instrument of democracy. Contrasting the original Russian voices with the key perspectives established in the seminal western literature, it points out several common conclusions, namely, that ‘publicness’ is an essential characteristic of free and independent television, that informational pluralism cannot be maintained without combining the market and the non-market regulatory practices in the broadcasting sphere, and that new media, community media, Internet discussion groups and other ‘alternative’ forums may not replace public television but can meaningfully complement its functions.

Keywords / democracy / public sphere / Russia / television

Introduction

Concerns about the future of democracy are quite extensively discussed, and the decline of public service broadcasting (PSB) has been named among the challenges (Kellner, 2005). In a global move to neoliberalism, the area belonging to PSB is shrinking with less government investment. As the corporate media oust PSB from the increasingly global media market (McChesney and Foster, 2003), even the loyal supporters of public television begin to question the likelihood of its sustainability at the level of national television channels (Humphreys, 1996; Kellner, 2004). They discuss instead whether the new technologies such as the Internet can ensure informational pluralism, by providing citizens with access to the balanced information regarding all issues of public importance.

While the challenges to PSB have been studied in great detail in the established western democracies (McChesney, 2003; Raboy, 2003; Tracey, 1998), more research is needed to talk with accuracy about the *global* tendencies in the development of the media, and to ‘re-evaluate, reframe, . . . internationalize and de-westernize media theory’ (Becker, 2004: 141). In the light of the continuing critique of PSB in

the industrialized western societies with established democratic regimes, we need to consider whether PSB has any prospects in the post-Communist societies where democracy is at best only emerging (Jakubowicz, 2004).

This article contrasts the experiences of a post-Communist Russia with the key media research findings pertaining to the western democracies, to outline both the universal challenges to the public media, and ways in which these challenges manifest in a specific institutional and political context of Russia. It examines the relationship between public television and the political regime in order to point out the conditions that may facilitate and constrain media independence and freedom. It argues that although the ability of television to be public, that is to serve as a medium of mass communication that facilitates the mechanisms of expressing the political will of the people, is more compromised in Russia in comparison to any western society, the challenges to the 'publicness' of television witnessed in the Russian context share the similar logic described by both the western media theorists and by Eastern European media scholars based on analysis of media and politics of their countries.

PSB and Democracy – Precarious and Vulnerable Linkages?

There are many definitions of democracy, but in simplest terms it is a mechanism of expressing the will of the people (Benhabib, 1996; Krasin, 2002; Young, 2000). According to Kellner (2004: 29), 'a democratic social order requires a separation of powers, so that no single institution or social force dominates the society and polity', a vigorous public debate of key issues of importance, and an informed electorate, able to make intelligent decisions and participate in politics. It is therefore essential that the media are not a tool of any economic or political force and can criticize the state and non-state institutions of power, foster active public discussions, and provide citizens with information resources that support a meaningful civic and political participation (Kellner, 2004: 30).

'In today's world, democracy remains precarious and vulnerable' (Dahlgren, 1995: 1). Among the more obvious external factors contributing to that is the increasing power of corporations and a transforming international system where the status of the nation-state is increasingly problematic. However, internal challenges emerge from the very process of democratic governance. Due to the rapidly growing complexity and sophistication of the society, the amount of time, effort and knowledge required for informed political participation is getting beyond the grasp of average voters. As a consequence, most citizens lack the 'civic competence' (Dahl, 1991, 2000) needed to make political decisions, and withdraw from the political process, leaving its management to the 'political class' (Hobsbawm, 1994). Such depolitization includes both the affluent minority with ample private resources to pursue and satisfy their interests, and the majority who become increasingly cynical and disillusioned and pull out from participating in a political game they view as futile (Dahlgren, 1995: 1; Farnen, 2003: 7).

In opposition to commodification of democracy as 'offering consumer choice in the rotation of elites' (Dahlgren, 1995: 3), Habermas's thesis about the public sphere linked the understanding of democracy as a system expressing the will of

the people with the concept of 'public', and placed the problematic of the mass media central to this approach. Anchored in the critical theory of the media (Adorno, 2001; Horkheimer, 1975), Habermas's notion of the public sphere as a communicational condition of democracy inspired much critical media research, but remained heavily contested. Liberal discourses on media and democracy do not explicitly use the category 'public sphere', but they nonetheless underscore the citizens' need for useful and relevant journalism, access to reliable information from a variety of perspectives and a diversity of opinions on current affairs, to arrive at their own views on important issues and thus prepare themselves for meaningful political participation. As Dahlgren (1995) pointed out, Habermas's public sphere is not totally remote from the notion of the marketplace of ideas that Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes inserted into the debates about the freedom of speech in Anglo-American liberal tradition over 80 years ago. Public sphere was also challenged from the neo-Marxist and feminist perspectives, which argue that 'Habermas' public sphere was overwhelmingly male, bourgeois, and white and thus highly exclusionary, and therefore, hardly democratic or very public' (Mosco, 1996: 168). However, this space as both the social sites where meanings are articulated, distributed and negotiated, and the individual and collective consciousness constituted through this process, points to the communicational requirement of a viable participatory democracy (Garnham, 1990; Habermas, 1989). 'This space, and the conditions for communication within it, is essential for democracy. And even though the reality may contrast with the normative depictions of democracy and the public sphere, even though these ideals may be anemic does not prove that they are irrelevant' (Dahlgren, 1995: 9).

The practical embodiment of the public sphere especially in Britain was associated with public service broadcasting (Garnham, 1990; Leys, 2001). According to McChesney (1999: 226), 'public service broadcasting is a system that is nonprofit and noncommercial, supported by public funds, ultimately accountable in some legally defined way to the citizenry, and aimed at providing a service to the entire population – one which does not apply commercial principles as the primary means to determine its programming'. The understanding of what PSB is varies a lot between countries,¹ but at its foundation is always the notion of state support for what is considered as the basic preconditions of effective social, cultural and political participation in a democratic society.

Rejecting the claims that at bottom television is a commodity like many others, Leys (2001: 108) analyses the conception of PSB in Western Europe, when television was believed too important to be left to the broadcasters, and simultaneously too important to democracy to be entrusted to whoever happened to hold state power. Out of that tension arose the idea of broadcasting serving neither private interests nor the government of the day but the democratic process itself, by providing citizens with the adequate balance of information, entertainment, education and debate that they need for effective participation in political life. Drawing on Sen's notion of capabilities, Garnham (1999) points out that PSB increases both the range of real communication options made available to the audience (not mere choices between products and services with minimal real differences), and the ability of viewers to engage with these options (Garnham, 1999: 121). Thus in Garnham's

view, PSB is indispensable as it offers programmes that maximize the capability set of broadcasting users but which cannot be evaluated only in terms of what people actually buy or what they actually enjoy.

Public service broadcasting started to come under scrutiny in the 1980s when the whole *raison d'être* of state intervention into the mass media was radically challenged. Governments around the world privatized what were for decades their national public monopolies – postal services, transportation, telecommunications and broadcasting, in the name of opening up the services to competition.² Many different factors accounted for this dramatic shift in policy. First, the view on the state and its role in the society and the economy has undergone substantive changes. These changes have theoretical roots in neoliberal philosophy and the ideas of economists like Ronald Coase (1937, 1959, 1960), who argued that once the system of private property rights in resources is established, private enterprises and the competitive system will manage themselves and only need the government to maintain a legal system defining property rights and resolving disputes (Rožanova, 2006). In a climate of growing corporate power and inability of economic regimes with a strong emphasis on the role of the state, be it Keynesianism or state socialism, to effectively address the challenges of the globalizing marketplace, public sector including PSB came under attack and deregulation became the new keyword in theory and in practice.

Technological development has eroded the main reason justifying government intervention – airwave scarcity (McQuail, 1997; Wedell, 1995).³ Since the Internet undergoes little intervention, and forecasts estimate that increasingly in future years there will be the integration of computers into the television, it is claimed that continuation of special funding privileges to PSB can no longer be justified. Moreover, since the new broadcasting technology (satellite) does not respect national boundaries, national legislation cannot properly be applied to global media operators.

Simultaneously, the process of integration and the development of competitive markets have impacted PSBs particularly in the European Union. Commercial channels increasingly question the legitimacy of state funding of PSBs, claiming they distort the market. This criticism is compounded when the public broadcasters in question have commercialized their output, started to carry advertisements, and their programming policy has become as commercially driven as that of the private television channels with which they compete for prime-time viewership. Curien (2000a), Dagnaud (2000) and a number of other European media scholars point out the inequality between different organizational types of broadcasters on the media market and demonstrate that PSBs, despite having gradually commercialized their activity, still have access to cheap state credits and a number of other privileges, such as lower prices for services they purchase, that other types of broadcasters do not enjoy.

To summarize, the main criticisms of PSB from the right have been that technologically there are no more reasons to justify the existence of PSB (Hamilton, 1996; Wedell, 1995); the organizational form and management of PSB is inefficient (Grefe, 1999); and the existence of special conditions for the operation of PSB distort the market (Curien, 2000b; Vedel and Caby, 1997). But an important critique of PSB

was also coming from the left. Across Western Europe and North America, these institutions were accused of paternalism and elitism in their programme output, of ignoring the growing pluralistic and multicultural character of their own societies, and of being generally stagnant and in need of creative renewal. Raboy (1999, 2003) adds another dimension to this critique by pointing out that PSB as an embodiment of the public sphere has no international equivalent, and stressing the difficulty for the national institutions to manage public broadcasting in the name of public good at the transnational level.

The most significant criticism of PSB from the left concerns the role of the state. According to Mosco (1996), the model of PSB in advanced capitalism is essentially imperfect, because there is a fundamental problem facing government. The state has to promote the interests of capital even though it reputedly is an independent arbiter of the wider social or public interest. Bennett (1998) comes to similar conclusions analysing public television as both an institution of culture and a political institution and reviewing the Gramscian critique of the civil society as a spin-off of the bourgeois state. Being in control of PSB, the bourgeois state cannot with necessity ensure that it truly serves the public interest. Moreover, PSB may potentially be a hegemonic tool for ideological control by the state, as Burgelman (1986) wrote, drawing on the perspectives of critical theorists of the 1960s and 1970s. As Dahlgren remarks,

A society where democratic tendencies are weak and the social structure is highly inegalitarian is not going to give rise to healthy institutional structures for the public sphere, [including TV broadcasting]. . . . For instance, the state, together with vested interests, can pursue media policies, which hinder the flow of relevant information and constrict the range of opinion. Alternatively, such mechanisms [as 'news plants', misinformation, and trivialization] may operate through the public sphere to hinder democratic development. (Dahlgren, 1995: 12. Emphasis in original)

How do the aforementioned factors abuse the 'publicness' of television and reduce the role of public television from an instrument of democracy to an instrument of the state in the context of a post-Communist society where democracy is at best only emerging? To address this question, I proceed to examine the realities of the Russian media.

Public Media and Democracy – Russian Scenarios

According to Jakubowicz (2004), the change in the media systems in all post-Communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) is part of a larger process of systemic social transformation, connected to changes of a society's economic system, political regime, social consciousness, political culture and the public view of the media. Splichal (2001) points out three ideal-typical patterns of media systems transformation in CEE countries: idealistic, imitative/mimetic and atavistic. The idealistic pattern envisages creating a media system subordinate to societal control on the basis of values of justice, equity and solidarity by transforming state into social broadcasting. Yet creating such a media system was impossible in any CEE country because their societies lacked the necessary social, political and cultural conditions

to sustain truly social media. Thus a realistic goal was to mimic the West by creating a set of institutions and legal frameworks that would redesign the media system to 'internationalize' it, develop guarantees for freedom of speech and create media markets (Jakubowicz, 2004). It was expected that over time these legal frameworks introduced from above, in combination with the changing political culture, continuing economic development and democratization of the political life, would foster a socially responsible system of balanced commercial and public broadcasting.

An imitative pattern of media system transformation was characteristic of the CEE countries classified by the World Bank (2002) as 'competitive democracies', which had a comparatively high level of political participation, civil liberties and economic reforms (for example, Poland, Hungary and Czech Republic). Yet even in those countries, introducing a balanced, socially responsible media system and particularly PSB faced enormous challenges due to the politicization of society, inadequate political and civic culture, lack of managerial and professional competence and a low commitment to media impartiality and public interest (Jakubowicz, 2004). As Zandberg (2003) stated, in Poland for example, economic and consumer culture developed faster than civic and political culture, and people were more active in the roles of consumers than in civic and citizenship roles.

In 'concentrated' political regimes such as Russia, Ukraine, Bulgaria and Croatia (World Bank, 2002), political power was consolidated in the executive branch of the government or was captured by oligarchs and insiders, civil society was almost non-existent, and reforms failed to sustain an efficiently functioning economy. The transformation of the media system in these countries followed an atavistic pattern. While the new political elites overtly declared commitment to independent and socially responsible media, in reality they expected the journalists to be 'cooperative, guided by a sense of responsibility for the process of transformation and assisting the government as the leader of the process, rather than exercising an impartial and critical watchdog role' (Jakubowicz, 2004: 58).⁴

The creation of a balanced media system that would serve as a vehicle of democratization of the country was the officially stated priority of the Russian agenda of reforms, but the actual situation in the Russian media during all the years of transformation has remained highly controversial, relentlessly reflecting all political, economic and social problems that the country has faced. According to experts,⁵ three phases may be distinguished in the history of the Russian television system. The first phase, until 1986 and perestroika, was totalitarian (Chumikov et al., 2002; Zassoursky, 2004). The second, the beginning of the 1990s, was the phase of unlimited freedom (Chumikov et al., 2002). The third and current phase that started in 2000 with the presidency of Vladimir Putin is the period of managed democracy (Lipman and McFaul, 2001) or 'democracy on the leash' (Chumikov et al., 2002).

The Soviet television system was a hierarchical organization, comprising four central programmes (corresponding to four terrestrial broadcasting channels) and centrally managed by the State Committee of Radio and TV Broadcasting of the Council of Ministers of the USSR (Rozanova, 2006). The programming material was produced and transmitted by television centres (52 of which were located in Russia and 78 in other Soviet republics). Television was under the rigid ideological,

administrative, financial and political control of the state (Dewhirst, 2001; Simon, 2004; Zassoursky, 2004). On the positive side, television had high priority in the state budget, which resulted in high professional qualifications of journalists and a high level of trust of the society. However, state support was a means of manipulation, and the state television was neither public nor democratic (Rozanova, 2000).

Television, alongside other media, was a mouthpiece of the state personified by the Communist Party (Dewhirst, 2001; Lipman and McFaul, 2001; Simon, 2004) and a channel through which the party provided information to the masses (Rozanova, 2006). Dissent and opposition were eliminated from the public scene not only by overt suppression, but through self-censorship of journalists who came to understand the parameters of their actions within the dominant ideological system (Simon, 2004).

The introduction of perestroika and glasnost by Gorbachev in 1986 allowed the media greater editorial licence to investigate the controversial pages of Soviet history and to discuss the ongoing reforms (Simon, 2004). The new, independent newspapers such as *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, *Kuranty* and *Kommersant* that appeared in the late 1980s (Lipman and McFaul, 2001) reflected a plurality of perspectives that emerged in the opening society, while still enjoying the economic benefits of being financed from the state budget.

The phase of unlimited freedom (Chumikov et al., 2002) that began after the collapse of the USSR was marked by the privatization of television. It was facilitated by the senior state officials who sympathized with the interests of the emerging television business sector and desired to reduce the state financing of television (Rozanova, 2006). The first commercial (i.e. relying on advertising revenue, not state funding) television company in Russia was the channel '2X2', founded by the State Committee of Radio and TV Broadcasting in 1990. In 1992, two main state-owned television channels – ORT (Channel 1) and RTR (Channel 2) – were allowed to engage in commercial activity. In 1994, a presidential decree transformed ORT into an open joint stock company. Fifty-one percent of its shares belonged to the state, and 49 percent of shares were sold to a group of banks and commercial structures associated with Boris Berezovsky, allegedly through inside deals arranged by the Kremlin (Simon, 2004). TV-6 (originally called the Moscow Independent Broadcasting Corporation) was founded in 1993 by the Moscow city administration and a group of associated entrepreneurs. NTV, the largest private television company in Russia and the flagship of Media-Most, the empire of another Russian oligarch, Vladimir Gusinsky, was created in 1993 by presidential decree. The money paid by Gusinsky for the control package of NTV shares allegedly resulted from his political connections as the chief banker of the Moscow city government. Originally, NTV shared the Channel 4 frequency with Kultura, a state-owned channel that broadcast cultural and educational programmes. Coincidentally, NTV obtained the licence to use Channel 4 exclusively following the 1996 presidential elections, in which the channel vigorously supported Yeltsin (Lipman and McFaul, 2001: 118).

Throughout the 1990s the functioning of television was influenced by multiple interest groups, often conflicting in their goals. All the political actors (including the oligarchs and political elites whom they supported, the State Duma, the Federal

Assembly, the government, the president and his administration) considered television a very powerful weapon in their fight for power, and struggled to increase their influence over television while preventing their opponents from doing so. A media insider I interviewed in 1999 suggested that the most dramatic political struggle concerned the Law on Television and Radio Broadcasting. Passed in 1991, the Law on Mass Media outlined the Russian television system only in general terms. The specifics of regulation were to be detailed in the Law on Television and Radio Broadcasting. However, the conflicting political actors resisted the development of this law for fear that the adoption of clear legislative norms would give more authority over television and consequently a strategic political advantage to their competitors. The lack of clear norms and sanctions in the regulatory documents concerning television was also convenient when:

. . . [after the 1996 presidential elections] the media became more and more [the] tools of their owners in the pursuit of their owner's narrow interests. Having played a pivotal role in Yeltsin's re-election, the oligarchs no longer had a common cause and began to engage in battles over the division of remaining profitable sections of Russia's state-owned media. . . . An increasingly common feature of the media in the late Yeltsin period was the use of so-called 'kompromat' or 'compromising material' with which to smear politicians and other public figures. (Simon, 2004: 178)

Yet throughout the 1990s, the state continued to own all production and distribution capacity for television programmes at both federal and regional level, including the offices where television stations were located, and all the equipment and facilities for generating, recording and transmitting television signals. Despite the ongoing struggles between the various political actors, which Mickiewicz (2001) called the 'pluralism of power', the executive branch of the state (in contrast to legislative or judiciary branches) retained (and gradually increased) significant influence over television. The state continued to fully own RTR, reorganized into a state unitary enterprise in 1993, as well as its 51 percent of ORT shares (Rozanova, 2000). The president had ultimate control over these channels' programming policy by virtue of appointing their top executives, including the chairperson of the ORT shareholders' council.

Becker (2004) was right, nevertheless, in stating television's relative autonomy from the state, albeit based not on a commitment to civil liberties and democratic institutions, but on the internal disputes between the elements and actors comprising the state and their inability to develop and implement an effective media policy. While the relationship between television and the state during the 1990s remained controversial, there was real pluralism of organizational forms, sources of financing and control, and consequently, of viewpoints expressed in the programmes (Koltsova, 2001; Lipman and McFaul, 2001; Simon, 2004). On the negative side, television became colonized by various political interest groups and outpourings on the screen of a mixture of politically compromising material (*kompromat*), commercials and *zakaz* (indirect commercials) (Koltsova, 2001). But on the positive side, political broadcasting and investigative journalism had space for development and growth, and represented diverse points of view, particularly within the framework of the non-state commercial channels like NTV. Political and current affairs programmes

used satire to relentlessly criticize the political establishment, through such acclaimed masterpieces as *Kukly* (The Puppets), referred to as 'the mirror of the Russian politics' (*Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 1997: No. 32, p. 7).

After Putin came to power, first as prime minister in 1999 and then as president in 2000, the state reintroduced administrative and political pressure on the television channels, but continued to encourage their commercial activities. Unlike Yeltsin, who had sought the support of media oligarchs to get through the political, economic and fiscal crises, Putin was determined to consolidate the Russian state, strengthen its executive apparatus and terminate the confrontation between the legislative and the executive branches of power ongoing during the 1990s. While continuing to declare commitment to the free media as a foundation of democracy, Putin asserted that the true social responsibility of the media was to support the government in carrying out its reforms (Albats, 2001; Coalson, 2000). The media that criticized the government and more importantly, supported its political opponents or the potential rivals to Putin's regime became the subject of scrutiny by tax inspectors, and were either shut down or placed under state control 'through selective application of tax and criminal law . . . and the direct pressure of the Ministry of Press' (Becker, 2004: 151). In 2000, following intense tax investigation and pressure to repay substantive loans, Gusinsky signed a contract passing his package of NTV shares over to Gazprom-Media, a subsidiary of the state-owned energy giant Gazprom. Following Berezovsky's escape to the UK after investigations concerning his business activities started in 2000, the state restituted its full control over ORT. A year after the closure of TV-6 (another channel that Berezovsky owned and continued to manage from abroad) in 2002, the court made a similar decision to liquidate TVS, which had been established by former NTV director general and journalist Yevgeny Kiselyov and colleagues, and funded by a consortium of businessmen, including Unified Energy Systems head Anatoly Chubais and aluminum baron Oleg Deripaska. Insiders and researchers argue that although the official reasons for the closure of NTV, TV-6 and TVS were, according to the Duma speaker Gennady Seleznyov, the stations' severe economic woes, there were undoubtedly political dimensions to these decisions (Becker, 2004). Duma deputy, Sergey Mitrokhin, in an interview with the information agency RBC, said that 'the hastiness, with which the liquidation decision had been made by the court, proved fears that the Russian judicial system became a tool for political persecution' (RBC, 2002).

The Russian experts I interviewed considered the ability of state-controlled broadcasting to serve the public interest very problematic. In their opinion, in the absence of genuinely public television, and under the imminent threat of reinstalling the state-run television system, corporate media would still serve the public interest better than the state-controlled media. These views are shared by key parliamentarians and journalists (Roanova, 2001) as well as some media researchers. The most significant among the latter are Kolomiets (2003) and Poluekhova (2003), who analyse in detail the commercialization of Russian television, and conclude on its positive impact in increasing information pluralism, diversifying programming structure, overcoming Russia's cultural isolation and fostering the development of regional television and the growth of available television channels. Although this argument was debated

by Razlogov (1997), Shabdurasulov (1999) and others, who pointed out that commercialization had many negative consequences, such as the erosion of educational broadcasting and the decrease in quality of programme content across all genres, the majority agreed that in comparison with the state-controlled television of Putin's presidency, the television of the 1990s, imperfect and faulty as it was, seemed the least of the two evils. Several Russian scholars, including Zasursky (2002) and Chumikov et al. (2002), regarded the corporatization of the media (and in particular television) in Russia as a step towards creating public broadcasting, for two reasons.

First, business executives tend to maintain a hands-off approach to the micro-management of programming policy, allowing the journalists creative freedom, as long as the media retain their social prestige and thus continue to attract advertisers and make money. Second, corporate media have to provide in the programming a critical and comprehensive analysis of matters directly relevant to public life. Otherwise the public, despising all kinds of propaganda and brainwashing, wouldn't tune in. Many scholars have argued that the corporate channel NTV, created in 1994 and taken over by the state in 2000, was as close an approximation to the ideal of a PSB channel as Russia has ever known (Becker, 2004; Koltsova, 2001; Lipman and McFaul, 2001).

This viewpoint is at odds with the conventional definition of public television, but consistent with the specific interpretation of the concept of 'public' with regard to television in Russian media research. According to Krasin (Krasin, 2002; Krasin and Rozanova, 2004), the debate on the crisis of liberal democracy and possible ways of resolving it is ongoing, in both western (Benhabib, 1996; Young, 2000) and Russian (Shevtsova, 2003; Shestopal, 2004) political science. The argument frequently mentioned is that a person has a right to 'personal privacy', and one's 'private space' needs to be protected from the intrusion of the media, so people are not prevented from making their own political choices.

According to Habermas (1996), the issue of independence and autonomy of a person in determining her or his political behaviour was outlined by Emmanuel Kant as the central problem of democracy. Kant pointed out that the freedom of choice is the freedom to be always able to publicly use one's reason. And anticipating the challenge of forced, paternalistic enlightenment when the authorities claim to know what is best for the people and enlighten them against their will, Kant (1998) emphasized that enlightenment can be possible only through the public use of one's reason. From these premises, the media become public and the main constituent of democracy if their activity ensures the freedom of citizens to publicly use their reason. The main precondition for that is the diversity of information, being able to compare different visions of the events, viewpoints and evaluations, and on this basis to form one's own opinion about what is happening.

By becoming corporate and subordinate to consumers, the media may not automatically become public, argues Krasin (2002). Such subordination leads to the creation of tabloid press or commercial exploitation (Jakubowicz, 2004). The media become public and independent only through subordination to the citizenry. The key public function they perform is contributing to the development of civic conscience. However, multimedia holdings are playing an increasingly important role in the

development of the mass media and information structures worldwide, and this trend does not lead to the media's increased subordination to the citizens. Concentration of the media industry and the purposeful anti-competitive strategy of media holdings mitigate against information pluralism, which is the necessary precondition for citizens' free choice and independent assessment of information from different sources, within their 'private space'. What it comes down to is that only certain groups of corporate and state-corporate interests are represented in the media, and the growing number of smaller interest groups are forced out and do not receive adequate coverage in the public sphere. Neoliberal illusions of western and Russian scholars about information pluralism being a direct consequence of privatization of the media and their inclusion into the marketplace are unsubstantiated (Becker, 2004; Mickiewicz, 2001).

Moreover, the amount of effort, time and expertise required of citizens to obtain and process the information in the multimedia world, even if the information is unbiased and the sources trustworthy, is often too costly. This requires revising the model of the relationship between PSB and democracy, placing at its core the concept of deliberation or capability to become informed and to participate in the political process. Analysing the experience of Russia, as well as the experience of western democracies, Krasin refers to two ways of activating this capability.

The first way is libertarian, when the formula for freedom is 'let me figure it out on my own, don't let the society tell me what to do' (Friedman, 1962; Hayek, 1978; Nozick, 1974). In reality, the society has become so complex and sophisticated that individualistic isolation leads either to absenteeism, to withdrawing from political participation (Farnen, 2003), or to incompetent decisions due to the lack of understanding, knowledge and expertise necessary to make a choice regarding any matter. The second way is deliberative, when a citizen participates in public reflection, which involves articulating and confronting views of various social and political forces, common debate and a search for general consensus and agreement (Elster, 1998; Habermas, 1996). The individual reason of a person is not isolated from society, but accumulates the results of public discussions, enabling the person to make a truly free and informed choice.

What may ensure a balance between these two ways? Even if the commitment to public and independent media and the recognition of subordination to the citizens as a major precondition for their existence takes root at the conceptual level, can any progress be made in this direction at the level of media policy? Sharing the position of Burgelmann and Calabrese (1999), McQuail (1998) and McChesney (2003), Krasin (2002) suggests that informational pluralism cannot be maintained without applying to the broadcasting sphere non-market regulatory practices. On the normative level, the solution may lie in ensuring regulation in the informational sphere on the basis of a broad, public, representative responsibility, according to the principles of a social contract between all the political, social and production parties concerned. This task is enormously difficult, but only thus can the democratic pluralism of information in modern societies be ensured.

The Future for Public Television: In Search of Alternatives

The challenges to PSB associated with the pressures from both the state and the corporate sector are highly significant. They are present, albeit in different degrees, both in the established western democracies and in the context of a neoauthoritarian Russian society. The question is whether there are substantive arguments to support the feasibility of PSB at the conceptual and practical level.

To some scholars, the virtue of PSB is self-evident. According to McQuail (1998), the role of the media in a healthy democratic political culture is to define and publicize diverse perspectives on the shared objectives or problems of society and of the wider international community; to provide trustworthy sources of information and ideas; and to maintain broad opportunities for access to public channels of communication for diverse collective and individual voices. 'This implies the existence of a public interest in mass media, which is more than the sum of individual "user" demands' (McQuail, 1998: 19). It is just as valid in a more competitive, globalized and commercialized age, as it has ever been.

Researchers sharing these views consider reregulation key to maintaining PSB 'to counteract the negative aspects of market forces and to optimize the positive role they can play' (Dahlgren, 1995: 15). Despite all shortcomings, the state still remains the most appropriate national instrument for implementation of public policy. But addressing the problems of PSB through legislative mechanisms is extremely difficult. Both the principles of reregulation and the mechanisms for their implementation remain subject to vigorous debate. According to western and Russian lawyers alike (Efimova and Artishchev, 2001; Hundt, 1996), the main points of contention are whether the rules and standards should be the same for all broadcasters regardless of their organizational form, and if not, on what grounds should different rules be applied to different types of broadcasters. The experience of Russia during the 1990s convincingly demonstrated that the conflicting interest groups preferred using television as a power resource and in the absence of clear rules or responsibilities, and thus resented the idea of compromise and would sabotage the development of broadcasting laws. Although this resentment may take more refined forms in other societies, the interested parties like multimedia holdings have considerable financial resources and translate them into political power to lobby against media regulation.

Another question concerns whether regulation should apply to PSBs as organizations or to the services they provide. A common assumption in the literature on PSB was that when a PSB organization is weakened by a policy decision, so is the quality of public broadcasting as a service (Humphreys, 1996; Tracey, 1998; Wedell, 1995). Yet according to Clifton et al. (2003), PSBs around the world are different in terms of the quality of programming, their relationship to political institutions, the funding mechanisms and their independence from the state and business sector. Not all media organizations formally defined as PSBs provide quality public broadcasting all the time. Many of them, particularly in CEE countries, are 'empty shells' (Jakubowicz, 2004). The new regulatory initiatives in the EU situate citizens and services at the centre, rather than organizations, by using the term services of general

interest (Clifton et al., 2003). It is assumed that whether a broadcasting company is public or private is irrelevant, as long as its programmes comply with certain criteria developed through democratic legislative procedures. This approach ignores the interrelation between the organizational form and its performance, which has been consistently maintained by organizational and media studies (Huczinski and Buchanan, 2002), and suggests that private television channels can serve public interest better than heavily commercialized public television.

In a climate of erosion of PSB legitimacy, some voices start to speak of the emergence of new public spaces between the state and private capital, and place in them hopes for renewal or resurrection of PSB. Murdock (2000: 288) questions whether 'alternative media can be strengthened and linked together to create a genuinely popular public sphere that would break with the populism of the market and the paternalism of the existing public institutions, to develop a new kind of communications system'.

The term alternative or radical media refers to small-scale media of various technical and genre formats that have no allegiance to corporate, religious or government authority (Downing, cited in Raboy, 2003: 216). Their core is typically a group of media and computer activists, normally associated with particular advocacy projects but not necessarily permanent political groups or parties (Halleck, 2002). Radical media link different forms of communication and expression and include both the technologically based media and grassroots art activists such as puppeteers, banner designers, T-shirt designers, street theatre actors, musicians and so on, who are energetic in organizing and protest (Mohammadi et al., 1995).

Kellner (2004) articulates the capacity of alternative media to create a real alternative to the corporate media and regards the web as a postmodern public sphere, a forum for public discussion of all matters of general relevance in accordance with the democratic principles of freedom of speech, tolerance and transparency. Although more cautious in assigning them the role of saviours of the PSB, Downing emphasizes the impact of these media on social movements, especially the anti-globalists' protests around the meetings of the WTO in Seattle, the IMF in Prague, the World Bank in Washington and the Summit of the Americas in Quebec City (Downing, 2003: 216). However, the introduction of any communications technology typically creates high expectations 'concerning the level of communicative freedom and the possibilities of choice that will be available to the average citizen' (Burgelman and Calabrese, 1999: 130), and the Internet may contribute to a change of communication system but not completely substitute it.

There are several important factors why television remains a key forum for social interaction, and cannot be completely replaced by any other medium, including Internet. Access is a widely acknowledged factor – not everybody has the means or ability to go online (Azal and Harwood, 2005; Halleck, 2002), while the overwhelming majority of households own a television set. But considering alternative media a viable successor to PSB is conceptually dangerous for other important reasons that have not been given sufficient attention.

First, the very fact that powerful corporations in western societies and governments in 'concentrated' (Jakubowicz, 2004) regimes like Russia fiercely fight to

control television proves its tremendous and yet unsurpassed power as a means of mass communication. Unlike television, the Internet cannot become a background for our daily routines to the same extent as the broadcast media. Websites cannot reach their potential audiences in the same way as television channels, because web browsing is a much more proactive activity than watching television. As demonstrated by Azal and Harwood (2005), the majority of social movements' websites do not appear among the top 30 Google keyword search results using the movement's name, thus accessing these websites without knowing their exact address is difficult even for skilled people.

Second, the Internet is not an area of free and uncensored information. On the one hand, website browsing leaves identifiable tracks, exposing users to potential abuse by unscrupulous individuals or groups, or control by state authorities. On the other hand, the economy of scale continues to guide the production of information (Leys, 2001) and most of the key information websites belong to the major media companies (such as CBC or BBC). Third, small-scale and community volunteer media lack resources to sustain professional journalistic coverage of current affairs. This raises questions about the quality and validity of information they supply.

Last but not least, the assumption that alternative media may replace public media, and in particular PSB, raises the issue of fragmentation of the public sphere and distortion of its essential qualities. By definition, alternative media serve to articulate the interests and views of select groups. Although they have every right to be expressed and represented, a sum of group interests does not automatically equate to the public interest. Even when individuals can articulate their personal and group interests, public interests are largely opaque to them and may only become embodied into social relationships and institutions through public communication (Krasin and Rozanova, 2004: 277). While the role of the alternative media is important for ensuring democratic pluralism and freedom of speech, they need not be seen as *replacing* traditional media in any role – but they may meaningfully *complement* them.

Discussion

Public service broadcasting has been vigorously criticized from both the political right and the left. Dispute remains concerning the efficiency of its organizational form and management, the legitimacy for special conditions and rules being applied to it, the role of different agencies, most importantly the state, in its regulation, the quality of its programming and its ability to address the public interest. Some (Burgelman and Calabrese, 1999; Krasin, 2002; McQuail, 1998) see PSB as the communicational condition of democracy characterized by informed and responsible engagement of citizens in public debates under conditions of separation and balance of powers. Others (Coase, 1959; Vedel and Caby, 1997) regard it as a nuisance for the competitive television market, which takes advantage of the state financing without any worthy programming return.

Significant differences exist not only between western democracies and post-Communist countries, but among the latter as well (Jakubowicz, 2004) in their

experience of, and attitudes to, PSB, depending on the social, political and economic conditions that have shaped their television history. Naturally, these differences build into theory and policy debates. While PSB was declared among the goals for building the national television systems in countries like Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic that were aspiring to join the EU and imitating Western European media regimes (Jakubowicz, 2004), in the UK there were calls to replace the very term (Clifton et al., 2003). While some suggest introducing reregulation into the television sphere to address the current shortcomings of the television market (Dahlgren, 1995), others argue that there are no social or political forces to support this move (Tracey, 1998). While some view small-scale media as the realm of genuine popular freedom of speech, others regard them as the privatization of the public sphere. The processes of economic globalization, regional transformation, changes in the regimes of governance and in the balance of global power compound these controversies and make the broadcasting landscape even more ambiguous. While the media markets transcend national borders, many question whether democracy may follow in their wake.

My analysis has shown that challenges to the 'publicness' of the media have a universal character and manifest in both the established western democracies and in the post-Communist societies, in varying degrees, depending on the specific institutional contexts. My analysis also confirms that western and Russian communication scholars come to many similar conclusions regarding the sources of these challenges and their effects on the media and democracy. Bringing the Russian experience into the discussion about PSB is particularly important because the restriction of media freedom by the state is not unique to Russia but characteristic of all concentrated regimes, including such diverse countries as Belarus, Zimbabwe and Burma (Becker, 2004; Jakubowicz, 2004). The fact that a 2003 Freedom House survey of press freedom ranked only 78 countries 'free' and 115 countries (including Russia) 'partly free' or 'not free' (Becker, 2004: 144) emphasizes the gravity of the question of whether public media, and indeed democracy, may be part of the future for the majority of humankind.

The idea that alternative media may become New Public Media (Kellner, 2004; Murdock, 2000) is disturbing in its complacency regarding the vision that public institutions, including the media, may survive only on a small-scale basis, using rudimentary resources, while big production resources and large audiences are colonized by media corporations or governments that are subject to little restraint, particularly in the case of concentrated regimes like Russia, where democracy is on a tight leash. Operating on the local or group network level, small-scale media inform people and activate collective debate and decision-making, and in this capacity they are essential to democracy. However, on the societal level, there is always a need to create a common vocabulary, common frames of reference to facilitate public discussion and public decision-making. 'Global problems require global solutions' (Raboy, 1999: 213), and this article aims to contribute to a broader dialogue among the international scientific community, to address the question: 'Public Television and Democracy: Quo Vadis?'

Notes

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1. In the Western European perspective, PSB has been associated with a certain way of setting up the media system that was regarded as compatible with, and conditional for, democracy. In the US, PSB was created as a complementary subsystem. Officially established in 1967 as a national broadcasting service, public television's 125 original stations held in common general commitments to education, community and, especially for those affiliated with Midwestern universities, the land-grant tradition (Balas, 2003: 11).
2. This description is most accurate of the societies where PSB initially *had* a monopoly position – that is, in Western Europe. The situation was different in the US, where PSB was rudimentary and private networks dominated since the start of the history of television, or in the Communist world, where the state had a monopoly over television.
3. Wedell and McQuail are supportive of PSB in principle but believe that its fall is unfortunate but inevitable, hence the factors that they analyse.
4. The World Bank (2002) report outlined two other types of regimes in CEE as of that time: non-competitive, which demonstrated restitution of the pre-transitional single-party governance (for example, Turkmenistan); and war-torn by conflicts usually rooted in ethnic and territorial divisions that severely constrain the capacity of the state (for example, Tajikistan). The prospects for public television in these countries are probably worse than in the rest of CEE (Jakubowicz, 2004), but systematic data are not available, not least because of the unwillingness of the respective governments to provide researchers access to information (for details, go to: www.eurasianet.org/turkmenistan.project/files2/050503_15thWorldPressFreedomday.rtf).
5. The study was conducted in Russia in 2002 by a team of researchers headed by Alexander Chumikov, by means of telephone interviews. In total, 80 experts were interviewed, among them eight representatives of political authorities regulating the activities of television, 16 businesspersons working in the media sphere, 16 media researchers, 20 staff and journalists working in the central television channels and 20 staff and journalists working at the regional television stations. Permission to use the data from the study for secondary analysis was obtained from Alexander Chumikov. No direct quotes from interviews are provided in compliance with the original provision in the study to keep the experts strictly anonymous.

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