Although the digitalization of broadcasting has been the subject of much debate across Europe, most of the discussion to date has focused on the upcoming switch-off of analogue services, the growing role of mobile telephones, personal computers and other digital devices as platforms for distributing television programmes, and the potential ‘digital dividend’ generated by the release of scarce radio spectrum capacity. Much less attention has been paid to the growth and future of broadcasters’ online activities. This is a key issue, particularly for public service broadcasters, since it offers them opportunities to extend their core mission and forge new relations with their audiences and users. At a time when public service is under mounting attack from commercial television interests hit by the sharp downturn in advertising revenues and governments looking to cut back on public expenditure, the question of how public broadcasters should use the Web is of fundamental importance to their future and their future relevance.

Hallvard Moe’s doctoral thesis tackles this issue with flair, taking the contrasted experiences of public broadcasters in the UK, Germany and Norway and contextualising their practices by way of a well-informed, closely argued and, in many ways, original recasting of arguments around the idea of a public sphere. The result is a stimulating piece of work that anyone interested in these issues simply has to read.

Moe’s re-reading of Habermas revolves around two major arguments. First, that it is essential to see public broadcasting as pivotal to the cultural public sphere, cultivating empathy, understanding and insight through fiction, comedy and play, as well as providing information and platforms for dialogue and deliberation. Second, following Chantal Mouffe’s critique of Habermas, broadcasting should provide a public arena – where conflicting views and interests can compete and clash – rather than always be aiming for provisional consensus or settlement. These points are cogently argued. Throughout the thesis, however, the forms of programming and representation associated with PSB are treated as coterminous with the institutions that have traditionally delivered them. Yet one of the main arguments mounted by critics of present arrangements is that this identification is arbitrary and that with the end of spectrum scarcity it can be jettisoned without loss. This position has generated policy proposals that attempt to define the essential characteristics of ‘public service programming’ and go on to argue that providing these outputs should be open to competition.

Hallvard Moe’s failure to confront this policy push, which has strong backing from commercial interests eager to gain access to public funds, has major implica-
tions for his central argument. He is adamant that rather than treating public broadcasters’ online activities as an extension of their own screen programming, they should be accorded «an autonomous role in the remit» (p. 279). The problem is that if PSB Internet activity is seen as largely free-standing, this potentially strengthens the case for opening its provision to competition rather than allowing it to be monopolised by the existing public institutions.

There are problems too with the way PSB online activity is conceptualised. Moe argues forcefully for the role of dissemination alongside dialogue, but largely ignores a third major area, namely origination. PSB institutions have a substantial history of experimenting with mobilising audience members, not simply as participants in programmes controlled by professional production teams but also as programme makers in their own right (the BBC’s Video Diaries series being a notable case in point). The arrival of the Internet, and, more particularly, its second generation (Web 2.0), has seen an explosion of user-generated content from blogs to video production and posting. Broadcasters have increasing drawn on these sources, mobilising eye-witness testimonies, amateur photographs and video and lay commentary as integral elements in web-based presentations of news and current affairs. They have also offered space to amateur creative production. This development raises crucial questions about the future relations between professional producers and their audiences and about the role of accredited expertise and organisational capacity. These issues merit sustained consideration in any attempt to map the future role of PSB online activity.

In tackling them, we also need to engage with the online provision being developed by other public service institutions – libraries, museums, galleries, universities. There is a strong case for constructing a public service strategy that capitalises on convergence to provide an alternative to the growing concentration of commercial provision and for thinking through in detail what roles PSB institutions might play within this new networked cultural commons. By considering the future of PSB online largely in isolation, Moe finds himself in the paradoxical situation of focusing on new connectivities but working with an analogue model of public media (based on separate institutional domains) in an emerging communications field increasingly characterised by potential networks, hyperlinks and synergies.

Any suggestion that PSB should assume additional roles and responsibilities will be met with a concerted barrage of condemnation from commercial interests decrying unfair competition. Facing down this onslaught requires policy-makers to have a clear conception of why a vigorous public cultural domain matters more than ever and why PSB institutions that take full advantage of the Internet are essential to its future. Unfortunately, policy-making is moving rapidly in the opposite direction. Seeing the undimmed enthusiasm for market models that dominate and drive EU policy, Moe puts his faith in decision-making at the national level and argues powerfully for a «shift in the balance between supranational competition concerns and nationally based cultural policy motives» (p. 231) so as «to
reserve ample room for national differences to be expressed in the regulation and organization of public service media institutions» (p. 229).

This argument rests on a dichotomy that is never properly interrogated in the book, between EU=economic imperatives vs. national=cultural considerations. But what if national policy is even more oriented to markets and private enterprise than EU policy? This is precisely the case in the UK, where extending competition is central to the current policy regime and where thinking in this area is in advance of the EU and is seen in some EU circles as pushing through innovations that merit generalisation. Since the banking crisis, financial services are no longer contributing as much as they did to growth rates and there is a swelling chorus of opinion that sees the ‘cultural industries’ as the best hope of plugging the gap. In this climate, public broadcasters can expect to be assailed from two directions, i.e. from governments needing to cut expenditure to repay the massive debts incurred by bailing out the banking system, and by commercial entrepreneurs arguing that giving them maximum freedom to pursue their brand of market-driven creativity is essential for economic recovery.

At the heart of this gathering debate is the long-standing tension between PSB’s construction of audiences and users as citizens and commercial media’s impetus to address them primarily as consumers. The duality and, for many, opposition, is deeply inscribed in current debate and regulatory practice. The UK regulator Ofcom, for example, has a statutory duty to protect and advance people’s rights as both citizens and consumers. But what does this injunction mean in current circumstances? The question of what exactly we mean by citizenship rights in the field of culture in complex multi-ethnic polities is a matter of continuing and, often, acrimonious dispute – added to which there are many who would argue that the duties of citizens in relation to environmental degradation and climate change are most effectively pursued at a practical day-to-day level by changes in consumption. Does realising this aim require a radical scaling down of broadcast advertising in all its forms? Does it reinforce the argument for having no product advertising on any PSB channels or web domains? A long hard look at these debates is central to any consideration of PSB’s future both online and offline, and merits more sustained attention than Moe gives them.

In the present inhospitable environment, the battle not simply to retain broadly based PSB systems but to recreate them as the key nodes in a new public cultural commons will be fierce, but the careful research and cogent scholarship that Hallvard Moe has given us in this book, and perhaps most of all the provocation to argument and debate it offers, offers valuable resources with which to work.

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