

10: PSB as an Instrument of Implementing WSIS Aims

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Introduction

The World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) in Geneva in December 2003 was a key event in questions of global communication. The issue of information thus became a focal point in the global public sphere. But traditional media as print, radio and television did not play an important role in the discussions and final papers, despite WSIS' far-reaching and ambitious aims concerning the role of information, its dissemination and its role for development.

The member states of the UN decided in Geneva to enforce informational rights of men and women (i.e. free access to media and digital services). In 2015 everyone shall have access to radio and television, 50 percent shall have access to the Internet. The media as a whole should work for the enlightenment of society and be enforced as an integrating force for a global vision of free communication. Therefore mechanisms of financing support should be developed.

I want to look in this chapter at the role Public Service Broadcasters can play in its capacity to become an instrument for implementing WSIS aims. Therefore I will look at:

- The notion of information and knowledge;
- Decisions and declarations in the documents concerning traditional media literally;
- Fields of interest in the WSIS documents affecting traditional media;
- The provisions of PSBs for implementing WSIS aims;
- Examples from PSBs of the Western world in doing so;
- Obstacles preventing PSBs from doing so further;
- Perspectives for WSIS 2005 in Tunis.

The main hypothesis of this contribution is: Public Service Broadcasters with their obligation to serve cultural and social purposes are qualified to make an essential contribution to those ambitious aims which are connected to the concept of information and knowledge society.

The Notion of Information and Knowledge

If we consider the content of the World Summit more profoundly, we can state that one of the key issues within the development of the information and knowledge society deals with the suppliers, i.e. the actors who provide knowledge. Common knowledge is still distributed via the traditional audio-visual media. I here refer to the notion of common knowledge used by Gripsrud (1999) who considers television as *'the central medium for the production and mediation of knowledge'*, as *'primary contributor to common knowledge'*. He states that it is the problem of this medium, that elites mostly ignore this function of television. Common knowledge can as well be considered as popularized knowledge; that is as *'widely shared pool of information and perspectives from which people shape their conceptions of self, world and citizenship'* (Gripsrud, 1999: 2). Thus a world declaration, which claims:

to build a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society, where everyone can create, access, utilize and share information and knowledge, enabling individuals, communities and peoples to achieve their full potential in promoting their sustainable development and improving their quality of life. (WSIS Declaration of Principles A)

cannot ignore traditional media. And an action plan, based on this declaration should take print, radio and television into consideration. How did they do so?

Decisions and Declarations in the Documents Concerning Traditional Media Literally

The principles reaffirm the importance of any medium for the reception and impartation of information and ideas and call to recognize the role of the media:

***We reaffirm**, as an essential foundation of the Information Society, and as outlined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, that everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; that this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers. Communication is a fundamental social process, a basic human need and the foundation of all social organization. It is central to the Information Society.*

***We are resolute** in our quest to ensure that everyone can benefit from the opportunities that ICTs can offer. We agree that to meet these challenges, all stakeholders should work together to: improve access to information and communication infrastructure and technologies as well as to information and knowledge; build capacity; increase confidence and security in the use of ICTs; create an enabling environment at all levels; develop and widen ICT applications; foster and respect cultural diversity; recognize the role of the media; address the ethical dimensions of the Information Society; and encourage international and regional cooperation. We agree that these are the key principles for building an inclusive Information Society. (WSIS Declaration of Principles A)*

In a special section, freedom of information, diversity of media and the important role of traditional media in all their forms for the Information Society are underlined:

9) Media

55. We reaffirm our commitment to the principles of freedom of the press and freedom of information, as well as those of the independence, pluralism and diversity of media, which are essential to the Information Society. Freedom to seek, receive, impart and use information for the creation, accumulation and dissemination of knowledge are important to the Information Society. We call for the responsible use and treatment of information by the media in accordance with the highest ethical and professional standards. Traditional media in all their forms have an important role in the Information Society and ICTs should play a supportive role in this regard. Diversity of media ownership should be encouraged, in conformity with national law, and taking into account relevant international conventions. We reaffirm the necessity of reducing international imbalances affecting the media, particularly as regards infrastructure, technical resources and the development of human skills.

The action plan is clear about the promotion of the joint use of traditional media and new technologies and sees traditional media responsible for supporting local content development. Access to traditional media is seen as one important element for the maintenance of cultures and languages and local communities and for facilitating their communication:

C2. Information and communication infrastructure: an essential foundation for the Information Society (Plan of Action)

l) Encourage and promote joint use of traditional media and new technologies.

C8. Cultural diversity and identity, linguistic diversity and local content

e) Support local content development, translation and adaptation, digital archives, and diverse forms of digital and traditional media by local authorities. These activities can also strengthen local and indigenous communities.

f) Provide content that is relevant to the cultures and languages of individuals in the Information Society, through access to traditional and digital media services. [...]

j) Give support to media based in local communities and support projects combining the use of traditional media and new technologies for their role in facilitating the use of local languages, for documenting and preserving local heritage, including landscape and biological diversity, and as a means to reach rural and isolated and nomadic communities. (my emphasis)

Especially in the paragraph dedicated to the media the action plan states that media should be encouraged to play an essential role in the information society and that traditional media should be encouraged to bridge the knowledge divide:

Media

24. *The media – in their various forms and with a diversity of ownership – as an actor, have an essential role in the development of the Information Society and are recognized as an important contributor to freedom of expression and plurality of information.*

a) Encourage the media – print and broadcast as well as new media – to continue to play an important role in the Information Society.

b) Encourage the development of domestic legislation that guarantees the independence and plurality of the media.

c) Take appropriate measures – consistent with freedom of expression – to combat illegal and harmful content in media content.

d) Encourage media professionals in developed countries to establish partnerships and networks with the media in developing ones, especially in the field of training.

e) Promote balanced and diverse portrayals of women and men by the media.

f) Reduce international imbalances affecting the media, particularly as regards infrastructure, technical resources and the development of human skills, taking full advantage of ICT tools in this regard.

g) Encourage traditional media to bridge the knowledge divide and to facilitate the flow of cultural content, particularly in rural areas.

Fields of Interest in the WSIS Documents Affecting Traditional Media

But there are many fields of interest within the key issues in the WSIS documents, which can as well be considered to affect traditional media. Those are:

- Infrastructure of information and knowledge;
- Digital divide;
- Access to information and knowledge;
- Capacity-building;
- Cultural identity and diversity;
- International and regional cooperation.

I will come back to this later.

The Provisions of PSB for Implementing WSIS Aims

Why is PSB in this contribution declared to be a good tool for implementing those aims? The sense and idea behind these declarations of the international community clarify that they agreed on a formula according to which media are seen not only as a market good, but that they should serve certain social purposes and be orientated to the common good.

After years of experience with a commercialized mediascape we have learned that the implementation of media objectives that focus on the common good and public service is dependent on organizational characteristics of the media. Europe has generated an institution, which has a long-standing experience in serving the public with media content: Public Service Broadcasting, and exported it to the world.

Public Service Broadcasters with their obligation to serve cultural and social

purposes are qualified to carry into effect those ambitious aims that are connected to the concept of the information and knowledge society and that also lie behind the event of the World Summit. Furthermore, they are grounded on established and tried-and-tested organizational patterns able to integrate heterogeneous interests concerning the use of information media via controlling and regulating structures. Thus the Public Service Broadcaster can be seen as one of the actors appropriate to supply information in an information society based on a societal consensus.

Looking at public broadcasting as a form of regulation (as Syvertsen does) implies three essential conditions (Syvertsen, 2003: 156):

- Broadcasters serving the public are protected to a certain – varying degree – against market forces, e.g. by securing their financial base.
- They are obliged to serve some fundamental social or cultural aims and purposes that lay beyond consumer's interests. Those obligations are fixed within their licences or special laws.
- To secure those privileges and obligations, certain controlling mechanisms, based on the participation of different social groups and interests, are involved. They work within a social consensus about the content of the obligations.

Thus PSBs dispose of competences, structures, content and so forth, which should be used for the implementation of the ambitious aims described in the *WSIS Declaration of Principles* and *WSIS Plan of Action*. The following is an overview of those topics of the World Summit where PSB can be used as an instrument. Here I refer to the concept of popularized or common knowledge.

Examples from PSBs for Implementing WSIS Aims

Infrastructure of Information and Knowledge

The dissemination of knowledge via television and radio is an important element if we consider the notion of popularized or common knowledge. Public broadcasters have developed a wide range of formats to present knowledge based on all sciences and to do so for many different tastes and educational levels. In their presentation, they are less vulnerable to market forces and can follow their own agenda and programme mission. In world regions with low alphabetization rates and low Internet access rates, radio (and especially community radio) becomes a central element in the dissemination of knowledge and information.

Digital Divide

Some PSBs work hard on broadening the access to the Internet via the use of digital TV. For example the British government is including the BBC into its strategy to move on to a knowledge-based society. Labour is considering the transition to digital TV as a key issue in the development of an information/knowledge society, in order to provide a majority of the British people with Internet access. Offering free high-quality content on Digital TV is therefore a cornerstone of the strategy to draw audiences to digital TV. The BBC took on this

challenge. With the support and backing of politics, the BBC has pushed forward the development of digital techniques, especially digital services and platforms (e.g. its website which is well accepted worldwide), developing interactive services and data applications. Thus the activities of a public broadcaster here serve to overcome the digital divide within British society, as it draws new audiences to the digital services. Elements on the website of the BBC do help people to get involved and become accustomed to the Internet.

Access to Information and Knowledge

Public broadcasters dispose over a huge amount of audio-visual documents concerning history, society, and sciences... in many areas of interests. Although there are many copyright problems, those documents can be considered as a stock of information and knowledge which should be open to the public, as it has been produced (to a high extent) with public funds, i.e. the licence fee or other public financial resources. Giving access to those archives of audio-visual material is possible. Many broadcasters are working on it. For instance, the CBC is concentrating on putting documentaries about important events of Canadian history on the Internet; and the INA in France is developing a database of the archives of France Télévision, which can be used on the spot.

Capacity-Building

The BBC offers a big portal giving access to the many different forms of education and adult education. Anyone interested in improving his or her capacities finds on the BBC website a variety of programmes, supplied by different providers and institutions aimed at individual and professional capacity-building. Something similar can be found at the Deutsche Welle, which also serves as a market place offering professional education. Many PSB TV programmes with relevant content give access to their material via the Internet.

Cultural Identity and Diversity

PSB is organized, in general, in a way that it is providing content for different ethnicities, cultural identities and diverse tastes and opinions in a given society. It withstands (more or less successful) to the pressure of programme mainstreaming. Some PSBs even try to re-enter the road of public service qualities in this way (e.g. the CBC). And they have – more than commercial media – the means and the obligation to serve the aims of strengthening cultural identity and diversity.

International and Regional Cooperation

EBU is a cooperation network, which has already expanded to countries outside of Europe, for instance some Arab countries – thus enforcing and deepening exchange and cultural diversity. Thus cooperations between PSBs throughout the world could be encouraged and deepened, also with the perspective to serve the information and knowledge society.

Obstacles Preventing PSBs From Implementing WSIS Aims

The main condition for PSBs to go further on this road providing knowledge and

information beyond the immediate TV programme is dependent on their ability and possibility to use new online media for their purposes. Expanding to this area means expanding their remit.

In many societies media politics, facing the constant pressure of commercial broadcasters, are not willing to give PSBs this possibility. In Germany, for example, Internet activities of ARD and ZDF are strictly bound to their programmes. Any further offerings are – according to the broadcasting law – not compatible with their mission. In the United Kingdom, where this obstacle does not exist, the BBC became the biggest information provider through its portal. Also in Canada is CBC's website the most important provider for information on the Internet. This is even more important as the Canadian information and TV market is heavily flooded by material originating from another culture, i.e. the U.S.

Perspectives for WSIS 2005 in Tunis

These ideas should illustrate that PSB should be brought into the debate as an important tool for the implementation of the aims of the WSIS. This argument can as well be included into the current evaluation of the WSIS achievements and into the preparation of the follow-up *Plan of Action*. The 2003 *Declaration of Principles* and the *Plan of Action* were not very clear about structures, preconditions and tools for pursuing the ambitious aims. Pointing to the provisions PSBs represent, this gap could be closed a little bit further.

References

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