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# THE GLOBAL STUDIES JOURNAL

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Comparing Media Systems: Re-evaluating the Role  
of the Public Media in the Digital Age

Carolina Oliveira Matos

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# Comparing Media Systems: Re-evaluating the Role of the Public Media in the Digital Age

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*Abstract: This paper is the continuation of my previous PhD research, Journalism and Political Democracy in Brazil, which was published by Lexington Books (March 2008), and was an investigation of the role of the mainstream media in Brazil and in Latin America in the re-democratization phase following the end of the dictatorship in the mid-80's. Comparing Media Systems is a comparative research analysis which aims to be an initial examination of the state of the public media structures in Europe in contrast to the strengthening of the public media platform in emerging democracies like Brazil as a means of boosting wider cultural and educational levels. It aims to assess the ways in which such an initiative can contribute to the fortification of spaces for debate and the further construction of a complex communication system that can attend to multiple and diverse publics in Latin America. In the context of decline of the PSB tradition in the UK due to digitalisation and market expansionism, this project focuses on the ways in which the public media - attached to a revised understanding of the role that the public sphere ideal can still have in the 21st century - can contribute to deepen media democratisation in the region. These nations have a weak public sector and are seeking to fortify multiple public spheres in order to expand citizens' information rights, creating the means for cultural emancipation and providing wider access of less privileged groups to quality information and debate.*

**Keywords:** Public Service Broadcasting, Public Interest, Regulation, Media Policy, Uk Media, Brazilian Media, Globalization

## Introduction

**T**HE ONGOING RE-DEMOCRATIZATION of the social and political institutions in Brazil since the mid-80's onwards following the end of the dictatorship in 1985 has significantly paved the way for a wider concern with the expansion of media democratisation in general and the strengthening of the public media platform in particular. This debate has gained in importance in the last years, moving beyond petty politics towards becoming a democratic vision which favours the fortification of a public media sector committed to the public interest, standing in direct opposition to its current image of being a mere mouthpiece for oligarchic politicians to pursue their own private interests. This controversy has most certainly gained momentum at a crucial period in the contemporary political history of Latin America, when many countries are seeking to enhance their public media sectors, and are looking for ways of integrating these platforms in order to establish wider cultural and political links.

In the aftermath of the establishment of the 1988 Federal Constitution, which gradually began to open the way for the emergence of the current deliberations on *how* to bolster media democratization in Brazil, the 1<sup>st</sup> National Conference on Communications (Confecom), which is to be held in the first week of December 2009 in Brasília, emerges as a milestone in its recognition of the urgency of discussing public policies on communications which can



better serve the public interest. This is inserted in the context of a country that is still deeply divided, and which has not fully come to terms yet with the horrors of its previous dictatorship past (1964-1985). Moreover, the meeting - which will for the first time unite members of opposite sides, such as civil society players, journalists, representatives of media outlets and media entrepreneurs - can be seen as a direct development of the launch by the Brazilian government of the first public television station, the TV Brasil in December 2007.<sup>1</sup> Immersed in media hype and frowned upon by the market sector, the event of the entry of EBC in the “media market” took place amid intense debate concerning the communication sector’s capacity of opening up a new chapter in the project of deepening democratic media standards in the country. This was the direct result of a series of pressures which had been articulated by various sectors of civil society, journalists and academics throughout the last two decades, as my previous research has shown (Matos, 2008; Bucci, 2000; Leal Filho, 1997).

This paper thus aims to contribute to this emerging debate by pursuing a comparative research project which aims to contrast the reasons for the crisis of PSB in advanced capitalist societies, mainly in Europe and specifically in the UK, with the ways in which it can contribute to wider media democratization in developing nations. The intellectual framework for comparison of the UK PSB experience with the case study of Brazil is first supported by the fact that the worry with the future state of PSB is first of all a *global* concern (Banerjee and Senevirante, 2006). Moreover, we cannot discuss local media without reference to the global context. Secondly, the UK case is particular in its kind, as it emerges within Europe and elsewhere as being an example of a relatively successful implementation of a public media service with democratic goals, and one which is successfully adapting to the new broadcasting context. It also has established a complex regulation system and public service remits which can be a source of inspiration and knowledge for other countries. This research thus does not make a case for the direct transportation of the UK model to Latin America, but rather sees in its ideal a universal and successful model for PSB, much as democratic values are also perceived as being universal in nature (Raboy, 1995, 6; Sen, 1999). Finally, the increasing globalization of the world’s media, and the ways in which media regulation today becomes more and more a practice that depends on wider cooperation and exchange of information between various countries, attests also to the importance of discussing and contrasting case studies from both a more advanced capitalist society to a less developed one.

In order thus to begin to re-evaluate the role that the public media can have in the near future in a current context where free market solutions impose their limits on products and services worldwide, it is of paramount importance to assess the relationship established between the public media platform and a global view of citizenship in a comparative perspective. Esser and Pfetsch (2004; 384) have stated for instance that it is only through comparative research that one is aware of other political and communications systems, thus being able to better assess the merits and limitations of one’s own system and acquiring a whole new wealth of knowledge of other political and cultural models.

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<sup>1</sup> The station is part of the public media platform which is called *Empresa Brasileira de Comunicacao* (EBC). It was launched by the Ministry of Culture and the Brazilian government in parallel with the launch of digital TV transmissions. The public sector platform and decision-making organ is composed also by the radio state station, Radiobras, *Radio MEC*, the Cabinet of the Presidency and the Rio state television, *TVE Brasil*. According to the minister of Communications, the former acclaimed TV Globo journalist Franklin Martins, the new channel has received a budget of R\$ 350 million.

In the context of the decline of the PSB tradition in the UK due to various political and economic pressures and new technological challenges, such as digitalisation and expansion of multi-channels, this early research project is an attempt to investigate the ways in which the public media - attached to a revised understanding of the role that public forms of communication and their association to a public sphere ideal - can still perform a function for deliberative democracy in the developing countries in the wake of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Latin American nations to start with have a weak public sector and are currently seeking to fortify existing public spaces of debate in order to expand citizens' information rights as well as creating the means for wider cultural emancipation. Thus as Banerjee and Senevirante (2006) have noted, it is precisely when PSBs are most vulnerable in Europe that they start to be perceived as being quite relevant for other parts of the world.

Thus the contrast between models of PSB in different nations is a way of evaluating the achievements of the public media in European countries, investigating further the role that it can still have in these societies and pointing also to the potential of a stronger public media platform being a source for social and economic inclusion in post-authoritarian societies. Is it thus possible to envision a reality where the public media can function free from governmental constraints, assuming a truly progressive role in expanding the media's space for public dialogue? This is one of the many questions raised here in this initial investigation of the role of public communications in developing countries in a comparative perspective. Finally, any examination of the potentialities of the public media should not be understood as necessarily an attempt to celebrate the PSB as the only ideal form of mediated public sphere, or yet engage in a nostalgic revision of its "golden years" in Europe previously to the expansion of commercial TV in the 80's. Rather, this paper is an initial discussion of the need of a thorough assessment of the potential of PSB for the advancement of educational and cultural levels in Latin American nation-states in the context of ongoing debates in the UK and Europe concerning the future of public service broadcasting.

## Defining PSB and the Public Interest

The concept of public service broadcasting is problematic to define, and there has not yet been a standard definition of what PSB is exactly about (Seneviratne, 2006, 11). Notably, public communication media have certain characteristics and elements which distinguish them from commercial market media. These are alluded to for instance in some of the public service obligations listed in the BBC Charter, which basically have assigned a *democratic* role for the UK's main PSB. According to Seneviratne (2006, 19), the Council of Europe's Independent Television for instance has defined PSB channels by 11 key characteristics, which include among others: 1) the offering of a wide range of programming; 2) high quality technical and production standards; 3) the catering for minorities and other interests; 4) reflection of a nation's identity; 5) the inclusion of significant amount of original productions; 6) the values of independence and impartiality; 7) universal coverage and 8) the use of limited amounts of advertising and 8) the free at the point of delivery or accessible to a vast majority of the population.

Since the mid-90's, many European institutions were concerned about the future of PSBs<sup>2</sup>, although their importance to new democracies has also been acknowledged in the last years.

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<sup>2</sup> A European Parliament resolution stressed the cultural importance of PSB, and demanded that the European Commission lay down guidelines to promote it in Europe (Seneviratne, 2006).

As Seneviratne (2006, 22) has noted, in a speech given to the World Electronic Media Forum Workshop on PSB in Geneva (2003), dr. Abdul Waheed Khan affirmed that public service broadcasting “is most suited to meet the challenges of development faced by the developing countries”. The recognition of the role of PSB in bolstering social and cultural goals in a developing country is precisely the key concern of this paper.

As Iyer (2006, 140-143) has further argued, there is global support for PSB across nations in a current context where the need for international regulation will become more felt in the coming years, with greater cooperation beginning to occur between national policy-makers. Iyer (2006, 143) states how there has been evidence of support for PSB in resolutions such as the Unesco Declaration of Alma Ata (1992), which encouraged governments to develop PSB within their territories. Unesco has placed PSB systems as being at the very heart of a society’s democracy: “...broadcasting made for the public and financed and controlled by the public. It is neither commercial nor state-owned. It is free from political interference and pressure from commercial forces. Through PSB, citizens are informed, educated and also entertained. When guaranteed with pluralism, programming diversity, editorial independence, appropriate funding, accountability and transparency, public service broadcasting can serve as a cornerstone of democracy” (in Splichal, 2007, 250-251).

Nonetheless, as Raboy (1995, 2) underscores, the full realization of the ideals of PSB is a problematic task, given the series of political, economic, technological and ideological challenges and constraints that is confronted with. These factors are part of the problem of fortifying PSB in Brazil, of equating it fully with the “public interest” and disassociating it from its link with individual political interests. Arguably, the problems facing media in the transition to democracy are often examples of the problems of democratization generally, and this is seen mainly in the ways societies are struggling to deal with issues concerning fragile identities and their deep-rooted social divisions (Voltmer, 2006). As Voltmer (2006, 247) further argues, some countries in Eastern Europe have managed to implement PSB with some degree of independence from the state and the market, although in most new democracies, such as in the case of Russia, central parts of broadcasting still remain in the hands of the state. As Cowling and Tambini (2004, 170) correctly affirm, the central challenge in public service communications is precisely the relationship that is established with governments. Furthermore, PSB must not only be free from state control, but its role must move beyond the free market view that it should only exist to correct market failure.

Due to word limits, this paper will not attempt to discuss other forms of broadcasting, such as private broadcasting, state-controlled and other European models, and also will not explore issues of balance and objectivity in commercial market media, debates examined by me elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> Most importantly, the intellectual framework that I begin to pursue here is rooted in an initial investigation concerning the public function of the public media platform in Brazil, and what it is all about. Public service broadcasting will thus be understood here in its ideal model, mainly that of a public media platform that is capable of providing citizens with independent and quality information, free from both commercial and political pressures, and which has its roots in the enlightenment notion of a public space where social and political life unfolds (Habermas, 1989, 1991). Most importantly, in an increasing changing and global world, independent PSB can contribute to promote intercultural dialogue, reflecting multicultural societies more in depth and assisting in providing quality and detailed inform-

<sup>3</sup> See Matos, Carolina (2008) *Journalism and Political Democracy in Brazil*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books

ation on both international and national affairs, for fully informed (global) citizenship and global governance requires thorough understanding of the main social, political and economic dilemmas facing large parts of the world today.

### **PSB at a Crossroads: Towards a Revival or Death?**

Much has been said in the UK about the imminent death of public service broadcasting amid the growing expansion of multi-channels and the switch to digital television, a debate that began to take shape mainly in the 80's in the context of the Thatcher government and the revival of the neo-right neo-liberal market politics towards the media, which had as their main aim the intention of reducing state regulation in broadcasting in order to promote the market logic (Collins, 2002; Stokes and Reading, 1999). In such a scenario, PSB began to erode and to be slowly replaced by a mentality which saw television as being just another element of the market economy (Stokes, 1999; 139). Various arguments further question the very existence of PSB in the context of the expansion of media commercialisation and deregulation trends in Europe and the US since the 80's, including the PSB's very necessity in the face of technological development and media abundance, which have significantly imposed on the public media a series of challenges (Keane, 1995; Raboy, 1995).

The BBC for instance after 80 years of its existence since the 20's seems for some now to be on the very verge of total collapse due to a series of reasons, ranging from the explosion in digital choice and the increasing changing media consumption habits of mainly the younger sectors of the UK population to the ideological attacks orchestrated by the likes of Murdoch's News Corporation and other market lobbyists. In such a reality, a key dilemma for PSB has been to strike a balance between commercial and the public interest (Banerjee and Senevirante, 2006, 3), having had to shift neurotically between adapting to the tastes of a more fragmented and younger audience of the multi-media age whilst still maintaining its core public service ideals. Other arguments point to the burden of the license fee tax on UK citizens and the claims that the BBC discourages innovation, and that in its efforts to retain the attention of fragmented audiences, it is "dumbing down" and becoming more indistinguishable from commercial broadcasters such as Five.

Nonetheless, the history of the very development of PSB in Europe has been linked to advances of democracy in particular countries (Jakubowicz, 2006, 96), with public service broadcasting having been constructed as part of a "communication welfare", which would dedicate itself to the advancement of social and cultural goals, functioning also to limit the power of monopoly owners of the media. Criticising academics (i.e. Curran, 2003; Garnham, 1997; Scannell, 1989) and their understanding of public service broadcasting (PSB) as being close to an ideal Habermasian space where rational critical debate can occur, Keane (1995) has deemed the public sphere obsolete in the 21<sup>st</sup> context. Keane (1995; 57) has argued that public service media in old European democracies has slipped into a profound identity crisis, suffering from financial insecurity and anxiety in relation to their role in a post-industrial world which has seen a decline in support of traditional party politics and other forms of public communication (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995; Hallin and Mancini, 2004). Quoting Nowak (1991) and Blumler (1995), Keane adds that (1995; 57-58) the increases of the PSB license fee income reached its peak in the 70's, and that from then onwards, with the saturation of holds with TV and radios and the rise in program cuts, the licence fee revenue began to decline. The cuts in spending led to a weakness of the involvement of PSB in contributing

to further the media technological revolution, which was eventually embraced by the market sector.

Although Keane (1995) acknowledges the achievements of PSB, there seems to be an implication that the concerns with the public interest are not fully grounded in our current “post-modern” context of multiple social movements and interests, global events that are transmitted via 24hours news channels to global audiences and the diversity of elite decision-making public readers of international newspapers. According to Keane (1995, 58), the development in the 21<sup>st</sup> century of a “multiplicity of networked spaces of communication” which are not tied to the nation-state, and the fact that the language of the “public interest” and “public good” were terms which were used in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries as weapons to pressure for the “liberty of the press”, and to pursue a struggle against monarchs who acted in favour of their selfish private interests, indicates that the notion of the public sphere is taken from a different historical context and inserted upon our current digital reality of multiple publics, one in which there seems to be little need for concern with the greed of others.

The recognition of such a reality however does not serve to dismiss the arguments put forward by various academics (Tambini, 2004), including myself (Matos, 2008), who have acknowledged the potentialities of the market as being capable of offering an important contribution in providing various consumers with multiple media products as well as facilitating media expression. This contestation also does not disguise the fact that the market media are constructed for profit-making, and that the access to various forms of communication technologies cannot be provided for everyone if segments of the population do not have consumer spending power.

Keane’s argument can perhaps strike a wider cord with critics from more advanced democracies which are currently experiencing a situation of media-saturation, but even here such statements which seem to dismiss the possibility of the existence of a sphere of public debate in the mainstream media are problematic, as well as the contestation that press struggles are a thing of the past, with surveys from the *Freedom House* and others conducted by leading academics (i.e. Norris, 2004) providing a much more intriguing and complex picture which stresses how the press is subject to multiple societal, economic and political pressures. For it is one thing to criticise arguments that point to commodity-structured economies as inherently encouraging selfishness on the basis of a simplistic understanding of the role of markets, and another to presuppose too rapidly that the market can attend to *all* of the needs of complex societies.

If we take the case of Brazil and other Latin American countries for instance, the strengthening of the public media can also be somewhat seen as a reaction against excessive self-interest, especially in the case of countries that are moving beyond post-authoritarian regimes, are tackling corruption in both the private and public sector and are seeking to construct a public media sector more genuinely committed to serving the public. Although perhaps this is not the intention, Keane (1995) nonetheless seems to construct his argument in a way which seems to adopt a fatalistic take on the role of markets and the ways in which communications are closely tied to private interests. Furthermore, it is one thing to criticise Habermas’ idealised version of the public sphere of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and his pessimistic take on the decline of public life amid growing mass democratisation and commercialisation of the media, but another to abandon the ways in which the concept can still stand as a normative ideal. In my previous research (Matos, 2008), I discussed the role that commercial media

can have in contributing to democratic processes. I reviewed for instance Habermas' tone of lament with the decline of a supposedly "golden age" of public rationale debate. Having identified market power as being a force for both change as well as regression depending on historical contexts as well as political and economic factors, I did not defend though a stance which excluded the validity of public forms of communications as an imperative for wider media democratisation in the country.

Thus in spite of the competition from Internet sites, multiple TV cable and satellite channels, the persistence of the recognition of the importance of PSB for deliberative democracy, and for the healthy functioning of media systems in increasing complex societies, is something that even Ofcom recognises. In the launch of its most recent review of PSB in April 2008, public service broadcasting accounted for two-thirds of viewing in 2007, with most audiences still pointing out the relevance of its public purposes despite the decline of 3% in viewing of the main channels in that same year.<sup>4</sup> Such a recognition by the public has historical as well as sentimental roots. Writing in the context of the 80's, Paddy Scannell (1989, 85) emphasised how public broadcasting in terms of programme content has served as a public good, having contributed to the democratization of everyday life in the UK. These are pertinent points which raise again the discussion on the ways in which PSB can still serve as a forum for public debate. As Scannell has stated in his examination of the BBC, PSB in the UK has contributed to voice the opinions of all members of society regardless of class and socio-economic status. Scannell has thus highlighted the significant role that it has had in widening the access of quality information to various groups of British society, expanding the access of wider groups to political information, knowledge of international affairs and both high and national cultural products, precisely the vital role that is still required of the public media, and the one that it is destined to have in developing countries.

Despite all the commercial pressures and the crisis of identity that PSB has been suffering since the 80's, I believe that this perception of what public service broadcasting is all about still lies at the very *heart* of the UK public's understanding of what the public media is. Various academic studies have indicated how the PSB is still vital for deliberative democracy, with work pointing out how the BBC for instance is capable of delivering more elections news, produce longer stories of greater substance and give more attention to minority parties than commercial television (i.e. Curran, 2009; Scammell and Semetko, 2000). Curran and Iyengar's (2009) recent cross-national study of the media systems in the UK and the US in contrast to the Scandinavian countries for instance has stressed how countries with a strong PSB tradition, like Britain with its dual system and Denmark and Finland, with their more traditional public media system, citizens gain more knowledge of politics and international affairs than the US, where the commercial media system predominates. Such findings highlight the strong impact on public knowledge perceptions and citizenship ideals of the *type* of relationship that is established between media systems, the market and the state in different countries.

It is widely acknowledged amongst defenders of PSB that in the UK the license fee has provided the means for the BBC to build its reputation in journalistic excellence, high quality

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<sup>4</sup> Regardless of the current commercial pressures on public service broadcasting in Britain and on the BBC in particular, the UK government has maintained its recognition of the importance of PSB for deliberative democracy. In September 2004, New Labour defended the continuation of the licence fee for the next ten years, stating the importance of the BBC remaining the pre-eminent public broadcaster. The government thus decided to give the BBC a ten-year renewal of its Royal Charter from 2007 onwards.

programming and impartiality, emerging as an ideal public service model worldwide in contrast to other models, including media systems built around commercial broadcasting standards, where the state has been merely responsible for frequency allocations and regulating private broadcasting, which is the case of the US, many Latin American countries and Asia, or the state broadcasting controlled system which is slowly opening up, and can be found in parts of Africa and Asia (Banerjee and Seneviratne, 2006, 12). Nonetheless, the BBC has not been totally immune from either political or economic pressures: clashes between the organisation and the government have marked the very history of the evolution of PSB in the UK whilst the plethora of cable and satellite television since the 80's worldwide has forced it to adapt to new publics in order to compete with commercial broadcasters. All these factors have shattered the PSB's public service commitments, having thus placed it in a profound identity crisis (Keane, 1995).

### **The BBC as a Model PSB: A History of Tensions with Government and Funding Challenges**

Deliberations on the role of public service broadcasting (PSB) in the UK have been engulfed in various intellectual traditions and paradigms, including the discussions on the very nature of the concept of PSB and its role in everyday life (i.e. Keane; 1995; Scannell; 1989); the influence of politics on the daily performance of public service broadcasting; the necessity of a license fee and the re-visiting of forms of funding for the UK PSB public and commercial channels (Tambini, 2004) in the context of the rise of market pressures and various claims that the sector can represent all of the needs of contemporary fragmented audiences. Most significantly, clashes between the government and the BBC have notably characterized the development of PSB in the UK in spite of its public service obligations. This has ranged from the reporting of the General Strike of 1926 - a moment when the values put forward by John Reith in regards to impartiality were put to the test by accusations made by the Labour Party of having been refused equal airtime - to the Hutton inquiry controversy of 2004. The latter culminated in the resignation of the Director General of the BBC, Greg Dyke, in January 2004, being substituted by the current director Mark Thompson whose reign has been immersed in redundancy polemics, expense claims and a wide intellectual debate on the very existence of the BBC as a national information and cultural institution in the near future.

John Reith, the first Director General of the BBC until 1937, was responsible for having imprinted the core values of its public service broadcasting ethos ("to inform, educate and entertain"), standards which are still seen today as being at the very heart of what the PSB is all about in its commitment to offering public-oriented and balanced journalism free from both political and economic constraints. Most significantly, the BBC operates under a self-regulatory framework with a Board of Governors responsible for ensuring that it acts within the terms of its Royal Charter and Agreement, which contains the BBC's public remit, obliging the corporation among other things to produce a diverse output but not to impose detailed content requirements on the number of hours of defined programme genres (Collins, 2002). As competition in the television market in the UK and also in other places of Europe slowly began to increase, PSB as a normative ideal began slowly to be questioned in an uncertain future. Such a reality might see the BBC competing with other broadcasters for public funds

and, according to some, might even contribute to undermine creative programming and further the process of providing audiences with a wider range of mass entertainment products.

Thus if public service broadcasting and the public media have had diverse histories and intellectual traditions both in the UK and the US, and if today European public service broadcasting is facing a series of challenges which range from crisis identity to scarcity in resources, the history of broadcasting in Brazil has been constructed very much differently but also subject to various other tensions and political upheavals (Fox, 1997; Sinclair, 1999; Waisbord, 2000; Straubhaar, 2001; Matos, 2008). It encounters similarities with the US context in its strong broadcasting commercial sector imperative, but remains nonetheless a weak public media platform, which currently is in desperate need of remedies in order to reverse the tradition of historical deficiencies, political patronage and clientelism that has very much overwhelmed it.

### **Public Media in Brazil: A State or Public Media?**

The relationship between the public media and the state has always been an uneasy one in the history of broadcasting in Brazil, with the latter having been constructed more as a state model media than a proper public communication platform (i.e. Waisbord, 2000). Television in Brazil is the main source of information for a mass audience, but the TV market in the country has been historically constructed around commercial imperatives. Thus the strengthening of the public media can contribute for better quality and unbiased information to be made accessible to the highest number of citizens in the country. Thus discussions concerning the type of public service media model which would suit Brazil best, plus the performance of mainstream television channels and the ways of reconciling interactivity of the incoming digital TV with the fortification of the public media, are currently quite hot topics. In May 2007, the first round of serious examinations on the resources, functions and current health of the public media took place at the 1<sup>st</sup> National Forum of Public TVs, resulting in the document *Preliminary Suggestions for a Model of Public Broadcasting Applicable to the State and Public Communication Sector*. This paved the way for the launch of the new TV Brasil<sup>5</sup>, which emerged also in the light of various societal pressures for digital TV to be used to widen political pluralism and cultural diversity. In regards to the current project of strengthening PSB, concerns have been raised further in relation to the political links that it has maintained with the Federal State, mainly the role that the government is having in implementing the public media platform and the fears of pro-establishment bias, which nonetheless have begun to slowly decline following the one year anniversary of TV Brasil.<sup>6</sup>

As Paddy Scannell (1995) has argued in relation to how PSB in the UK advanced different styles of talk, encouraging open discussion of social and even controversial issues, I believe that the public media in Latin America can also have a vital function in changing public attitudes, in stimulating solidarity and creating wider dialogue in countries which have only

<sup>5</sup> Interviewed by the press on the day of TV Brasil's launch, and asked if the new medium would function as a vehicle of State propaganda, former minister of Culture, Gilberto Gil, replied that the programming of the public media would not be dictated by the quotas of the stock market.

<sup>6</sup> Writing in the *Correio Braziliense* ("A Tv Brasil, a democracia e a fracassomania", 10/08/09), director-president of *Empresa Brasil de Comunicação (EBC)*, Tereza Cruvinel, former *O Globo* political columnist, made a passionate defense of the importance of a public media platform in Brazil, attacking the São Paulo newspapers for criticising the initiative which is seen by most as a legitimate example of expansion of media democratization in the country.



recently left authoritarian regimes, and which are strengthening their democratic practices which go beyond the mere market liberal demand of removal of state interference. For it seems pertinent that talk in Brazil, and that is quite likely the case of other Latin American countries, including Mexico and Chile, it is still not very spontaneous and is marked heavily by various forms of (linguistic), ideological, social and political constraints, mainly of what can and cannot be said, of *who* has the authority and which voices have more economic power to impose their own version of the “truth” onto less privileged groups. In my last research (Matos, 2008), I investigated how the mainstream media gradually opened up spaces for debate for left-wing groups and other voices during the last decade, shifting away from providing one-sided perspectives to opening up room for multiple identities and groups. As I have also shown (Matos, 2008), although the commercial press expanded spaces of debate in the media’s public sphere, certain topics, such as wealth distribution, gender inequality, the inclusion of groups from the Northeast and a more participatory role for the state, still carry ideological overtones.

Waisbord (2000) has highlighted that state intervention in South America has had the main aim of reinforcing governmental powers rather than promoting democratic forms of communication. Broadcasting regulation for instance has been under control of the Ministry of Communication, with presidents using the distribution of radio and television licenses as a form of political patronage. The Brazilian state was a prime contributor to the development of the newspaper market and the modernization of television (Matos, 2008; Abreu, 2002; Lins da Silva, 1990). The ties with the state were weakened from the 1990’s onwards but still somewhat maintained. Certain legislations that were of interest for the media market for instance were approved in the last few years by federal governments, including the privatization of the telecommunications system and the permission for the participation of foreign capital in the national market (Matos, 2008). Furthermore, similarly to the ways in which many Americans oppose an active regulatory role for the state because of their fear that state intervention will encourage partisan manipulation, in Brazil similar worries were expressed at the time of the emergence of EBC. The concerns are still embedded in the core critiques made by the sectors of the market media to TV Brasil. Nonetheless, the difference between a democratic public service model from one of direct government control and interference, which is more associated to authoritarian regimes, are mainly the placement of regulatory structures that institutionally guarantee partisan balance, fairness and quality in programming and information.

Similar to other Latin American countries, PSB sectors in Brazil have enjoyed a relationship of political clientelism with mainly local and regional as well as national governments. The Brazilian broadcasting media have also had to comply with public interest commitments defined by the 1988 Federal Constitution, although these have not been strictly reinforced. Furthermore, state interventionism has been characterized by a mixture of clientelistic practices, censorship control, funding and regulation and less by concerns with the public interest. In contrast to the Rio and SP dailies, which have gained more political and economic independence, the regional and local media have continued to be partisan. Oligarchic politicians and Church interests control radio and television stations and thus dominate the public media sector (Matos, 2008). In the Northeast of Brazil, the family of Collor de Mello dominate the media in Alagoas, the Sarney’s in Maranhão and the recently deceased famous conservative oligarchic politician Antonio Carlos Magalhães (ACM) in Bahia. Thus the Brazilian PSB has a chance now to urgently reverse its history of being used as a political

tool by regional politicians, or being frowned upon by market liberals or sectors of the financial elite who believe in the ultimate “powers” of the market, in order to be promoted in ways which favours the public’s interest.

In many emerging democracies, PSB does not have a history and rather it is the market media and commercial broadcasting which have been allowed to develop somewhat unregulated.<sup>7</sup> In their fear of a stronger public media sector posing as a threat to the commercial media, market liberals in Brazil have pointed to the bad state of the structures of the public media, including the promiscuous relationships shared between the weak and partisan state media with politicians from the Northeast and sectors of the evangelical church, as the main reason to condemn the PSB platform. The close links between the government and the revitalization of the public media have thus been subject to heated debate.<sup>8</sup> Controversies have been raised by the opposition questioning the intentions of the government of supposedly using the channel for its own political purposes. Market lobbyists, or those who are more sympathetic to the *tucanos* of former president Fernando Henrique Cardoso, see the fortification of the public media platform as a reaction of the Worker’s Party (PT) to the years of stigmatisation and little access afforded to them by the media. This ideological climate nonetheless was more predominant during the creation of EBC, and has since then slightly died down but not disappeared fully.

The public media sector in Brazil as it stands today suffers from various historical deficiencies. Chaos and irregularities mark the process of radio and TV concessions. Academic Venicio de Lima (2007) launched a research highlighting among other things that 50% of the more than 2.000 community stations permitted to operate by the Ministry of Communications belonged to people linked to politicians. The Special Sub-commission of Broadcasting was installed in Congress in March 2007 in an attempt of improving the selection process for future radio and television concessions in order to make them more transparent. According to Luiza Erundina, MP from SP, the inefficiency of the current process is due to the reduced number of technical staff at the Ministry of Communications, who cannot deal with the enormous amount of requests that arrive from every part of Brazil.

The fact of the matter is that Brazil has always had a weak public media sector which has been composed mainly of the respected but funded-starved *TV Cultura* in SP and its counterpart *TVE* in Rio, as well as other regional outlets controlled by local politicians and by sectors of the evangelical Church. Currently, many public TV and radio stations are in the hands of politicians. Statistics from the Deputy Chamber in the Legislative year of 2006-2009 indicated that 30% of Brazilian senators and various MPs have concessions of radio channels and TV stations (Lopes, 2008). MPs approved concessions rapidly in a way which contrasted to the slowness of the Communication Ministry in its processes of evaluation of these legal documents for community radios and TV stations, which proliferated amid the deregulation trends of the 90’s.

<sup>7</sup> The public communication sector there is composed of the executive legislative TVs (Senate TV); community channels and TV stations linked to state and federal governments as well as to the university.

<sup>8</sup> The new channel is also being attacked by market liberals and by some other sectors of civil society due to its connections to the Secretary of Social Communications of the Presidency. Recently, the *Folha de Sao Paulo* newspaper published an editorial (31/07/09) asking for the end of *TV Brasil* claiming that it was employing too many people. It was much criticized by Cruvinel, among others. For different reasons and due to different circumstances, the BBC has also come under attack by James Murdoch in the UK (“Murdoch attack on ‘dominant’ BBC”, *BBC News*, 29/08/09) on the grounds that it threatens independent journalism.

## **The Public Media in Brazil as a Counter-weight to Commercial Television**

### ***Academic Debates on the Public Media***

Communication research in Brazil has expanded significantly in the 90's (Matos, 2008), with a growth in work done on media and politics, history and sociology of journalism, television, *telenovelas*, ethnicity and gender (Lins da Silva, 1990, Abreu, 2003). There is still little research and work done on media regulation and public forms of communication in Brazil, with perhaps Laurindo Leal Filho's (1997) study on the BBC, Cesar Bolano's (2007) work on the Brazilian telecommunications market, Murilo Ramos' (2007) on public communications at the *Universidade de Brasilia*, Eugenio Bucci's studies, among a few others, being the key references in the national debate on the topic, in contrast to some ground-breaking international research on commercial television (i.e. *TV Globo*) and the Brazilian telecommunications market (i.e. Straubhaar, 1995; Sinclair, 1999; Porto, 2007). The history of the Brazilian media is a very recent one. In 2008, Brazil was celebrating 200 years of the existence of its press, a sharp contrast to the longer history of the evolution of the printing press in the UK since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, from the years of the radical press to the growth of big newspaper chains and the commercialisation of the British media (Curran and Seaton, 2003; Stokes, 1999). Thus in the current post-dictatorship context of expanding democratization, debates on the role of the market and the state, and their relationship to the media, have gained momentum (Matos, 2008), and will without a doubt unfold in heated debates to be held at Confecom in the end of the year.

Any democratic society which aims to boost the democratic potential of its media needs a complex media system which can attain to the interest of multiple publics. Referring to the specific context of PSB in the UK, Curran (2000) has defended the co-existence of various sectors, with the public media at the centre and other commercial, civic and alternative sectors surrounding it. Such a sophisticated media system, which is aimed to attend to the needs of multiple groups, would be quite suited for Brazil, which has seen in the last years the slow inclusion of less privileged groups in mainstream society and politics as well as the provision of access of wider sectors of ethnic minority groups and Afro-Descendents to universities.

As Tambini (2006, 113) has stated in his discussion of the notion of *information rights*, which he sees as being essential rights of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, no one can fully exercise their role as a citizen unless they are able to use communication media, the condition *sine ne qua non* for individuals to participate in contemporary society as equal citizens. As this argument goes, citizenship requires access not only to particular networks, but to certain forms of content and to a shared space for various views to be exchanged (2006, 114). This is not the main purpose of the market media and, in the case of countries where newspapers and commercial TV suffer more widely from economic pressures, the delivery of such vital rights is in constant tension with the profit motive (Matos, 2008). Similar to the debates regarding the democratic potentials and expansion of the public sphere that can be provided by new media technologies, the public media sector is the one that has more capacity of contributing to invigorate the country's public sphere, increasing wider political pluralism and most importantly, creating in various segments of the population a wider appreciation and contemplation of art in general and of culture and education in particular, very much the core essence of what the public service media and broadcasting has stood for in most parts of the world.

## TV Globo and the History of Brazilian Commercial Television

There has also been some significant research on TV Globo and the ways in which this notorious commercial Brazilian television, considered to be one of the fourth largest in the world, according to what has become common knowledge (Straubhaar, 2001), has had in the construction of the national Brazilian identity and in the promotion of Brazilian culture within the limits of the nation-state (Porto, 2007; Straubhaar, 2001; Sinclair, 1999). TV Globo for instance has been mainly successful with its *telenovelas* and soap-operas, which have been exported to various countries in Europe and Asia. In spite of its entertainment-driven ethnos which has marked its very foundation, TV Globo's journalism and wider commitment to political debate has grown as a response to the critiques that it received in regards to its lack of balance in the coverage of presidential elections, as various authors including myself have discussed elsewhere (Matos, 2008; Bucci, 2000; Conti, 1999).

Most significantly, although TV Globo and other stations have had a role in the promotion of Brazilian culture and of a particularly Brazilian way of life – much that can be said also of the role that the BBC in the UK has had, as Scannell (1995) eloquently has highlighted – , the fact of the matter is that commercial TV in Brazil is heavily skewed towards entertainment formats. If we have to judge it from its journalistic aspect and assess its informational role, it becomes clear that commercial Brazilian television has thrived in terms of good technical quality standards, but that it nonetheless has lacked in innovation and experimentation, having built itself on entertainment values, soap opera genres and sensationalist tendencies, encountering further difficulties in regards to political pluralism following the collapse of the dictatorship. Only in the last decade for instance have there been clear institutional attempts conducted by the corporation of fortifying its balance criteria and journalistic quality standards (Matos, 2008). It is also accused of not representing enough regional and local cultures, especially those from the Northeast.

Writing about the evolution of commercial broadcasting in countries like Mexico and Brazil during the dictatorship period of the 70's, Straubhaar (2001, 134) has highlighted the importance of the role that the then strong state assumed in shaping national TV systems. According to him, the combination of strong state and national broadcasting helped to reinforce a sense of national identity in countries like Brazil, with the *telenovelas* run by the commercial stations like TV Globo playing a large part in the construction of a national culture. The military government were therefore interventionist in the media during the dictatorship, having financed microwave, satellite and other aspects of TV infra-structure, favouring in particular TV Globo.<sup>9</sup> Thus the development of Brazilian television by military planners in the 60's onwards contributed for the formation of what Straubhaar (2001; 138) has defined as the “nationalizing vocation”, in other words, the creation of a consumer culture which has culminated in a wider engagement of Brazilians in the market economy.

In what way then would the public media differ from commercial television? Firstly, it can emerge as a counter-weight to the historical predominance of commercial television in Brazil as well as to the trend of increasing commercialisation of Latin American TV. Arguably, competition for audience share has been the characteristic behaviour of television stations

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<sup>9</sup> It was only in 1981 that the government issued license packages to create competitors SBT and TV Manchete (Straubhaar, 2001, 140-143). In the last years, TV Record has emerged as a strong competitor to TV Globo, and the expansion of cable and satellite in the 90's, as well as of community channels and now the public media, has undermined Globo's monopoly over the largest number of television audiences.

in Brazil, many of which are constantly adjusting their programming in accordance with the Ibope ratings (Mattelart and Mattelart, 1990, quoted in Sinclair, 1999).<sup>10</sup> Until what extent however commercial television is promoting regional culture and representing the multiple identities of the country free from both political and economic constraints is another contested issue, with PSB thus emerging as being the only one capable of assuming such a role. In the interview given to *Observatorio da Imprensa* (03/06/08) concerning his new book, *Vozes de Londres* ("Voices from London"), Laurindo Leal Filho (2008)<sup>11</sup> stressed three important points in favour of the fortification of PSB, including the universality of access that it can provide, with the PSB signal reaching all of society, the participation of larger segments of the population in public debate and the formation of a whole new generation of Brazilian professionals with a public service ethos.

Moreover, the total funding for the recently launched EBC has come from various different sources, including money from the federal government and donations. The main programming is provided by Rio's educational television (*TVE*), with 2 programmes from Radiobras and 2 remodelled TV journals being shown as well. The programming consists of hourly independent and regional programmes, including the famous high-brow talk show *Roda Viva* from *TV Cultura*. The main attractions of the station are the national films and documentaries shown three times a week, although there are still various other investments being pursued to transmit more documentaries and more in depth analyses of national and international news.<sup>12</sup> Most significantly, one of the main ongoing projects part of the whole process of the strengthening of the public media is the wider integration with other public media from Latin American, an investigation which I aim to pursue further in more detail elsewhere. Thus it is clear that the public media can function as a vehicle for wider cultural integration between different Latin American countries, reversing the historical distance that has been maintained between them and, most importantly, it can create new spaces for expanding debate and freedom of expression in a new democracy such as Brazil.

## Conclusion

Despite the decline of civic communications and of the public sphere in advanced capitalist societies due to a variety of reasons, which include the decrease of the role of traditional party politics; the challenge of the importance of political journalism and the increase in the fragmentation of the public, dispersed in multiple lifestyle identity politics interests (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995), it seems evident that the death of the public sphere cannot yet be proclaimed. The public sphere as we know it cannot – and most importantly, *should not* – be considered obsolete (Keane, 1995) and/or dismissed due to the adoption of a fatalistic approach to the perceived all powers of the market in providing everything to citizens-consumers. If we consider the standard principles of impartiality which are proclaimed by PSB in the UK in its provision of information and cultural products to all sectors of the British public, and contrast this to the strong partisan character of the tabloid market press with their

<sup>10</sup> Ibope is the institute that measures audience ratings.

<sup>11</sup> See "BBC, um modelo para o Brasil" in *Observatorio da Imprensa* ( <http://observatorio.ultimosegundo.ig.com.br/artigos.asp?cod=488TVQ001> ).

<sup>12</sup> Besides TV Brasil, the other public organisations are: TV Cultura SP, TVE-RS, Parana Educativa, TV Cultura SC, TVE-ES, TVE Bahia, TV Ceara, Rede Minas, TV Brasil Central, TV Rio Grande do Norte, TV Cultura PH and TV Palmas.

disregard for balance and in depth coverage of political news, the contestation of this fact alone is an acknowledgement of the important role that PSB has had in the country, and the ways in which it can still be a significant democratic media model for developing nations to preserve in an age of increasing global market expansionism.

As my previous research (Matos, 2008) has explored, the construction of a public sphere of debate in the mainstream media happened gradually, with the invested interests of the financial market emerging as forces for both impediment and advancement of democracy. In this sense arguments in regards to the capacity of a stronger public media in Brazil being able to be an instrument of media independence and freedom from both political and economic constraints (Matos, 2008) are in tune with the sign of the times. This does not necessarily mean to say that questions in regards to the characteristics of PSB and the ways in which it is different from the market media, and why we must continue to defend it, have not disappeared. Arguably, more and more debates on the forms of establishing partnerships between the private and public media are being pursued, and should also not easily be dismissed even when we aim to preserve the core essence of public service broadcasting in the digital age. For it seems even evident that the philosophy and ethos of PSB has not died, and that various developing countries who are pursuing an agenda of massive investment in the public service platform are not going against the tide of the times, very much on the contrary, they are pursuing a legitimate path of democratizing more knowledge by creating the means for a wider strengthening of diversity and expansion of multiple publics in the mediated public sphere.

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Matos obtained her PhD in Media and Communications with no corrections (thesis: Journalism and Political Democracy in Brazil) in January 2007 from Goldsmiths. Her supervisor was Professor James Curran. Her thesis is an investigation of the role of the mainstream media in the advancement of democracy in the aftermath of the dictatorship. It focuses on the analysis of the media coverage of political and presidential campaigns and looks at over two decades of contemporary Brazilian and Latin American history in the context of the process of increasing Americanisation of international media and the re-workings of social-democratic politics in Europe. Matos' position in the LSE involves teaching on the courses Media and Democracy and Political Communications as well as pursuing further work on her new



research project on public media systems in Latin America in comparative perspective to the UK and North America. She is a former print journalist who has worked with international news, culture and political affairs for newspapers, magazines and organisations both in Brazil and in the UK, and which have included Reuters and UNESCO. Her research is in the area of global media and democracy, the role of the media in social and political change in developing countries, media and elections, political journalism and the public media, with a particular interest in global citizenship, Latin American and British politics and the history of the media. She has attended various conferences and given papers in Portugal, Denmark, Sweden, Egypt and the US. In 2005, she received a grant from the Swedish Stint Foundation to pursue a one month research project on social-democratic politics and the Scandinavian media at the Media and Communications Department of Orebro University.



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