

**M A S A R Y K
U N I V E R S I T Y**

FACULTY OF SOCIAL STUDIES

**Public Service Media in
Uncertain Times: Normative
Ideals, Institutional Struggles,
and Public Perceptions**

Habilitation Thesis

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Brno 2025

Declaration

I declare that I have prepared the habilitation thesis entitled *Public Service Media in Uncertain Times: Normative Ideals, Institutional Struggles, and Public Perceptions* independently. All sources and references used in the writing of this thesis have been cited in the text and are listed in the bibliography.

Brno, June 23, 2025

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Abstract

Public service media (PSM) today operates under mounting pressure from rapid technological changes, political polarisation, shifting audience behaviours, heightened political scrutiny, and the fragmentation of the media environment. Its role as an independent, universally accessible, and democratically accountable institution remains vital, but its continued relevance depends on its ability to adapt to the evolving conditions. This habilitation thesis contributes to the ongoing debate on how PSM can best serve the public under profoundly changing circumstances, while also examining some of the key limitations and risks that PSM should seek to avoid. Based on seven published studies, the thesis examines PSM from three interrelated perspectives: (1) *the normative perspective* (Study I), with a focus on the roles and principles of public service journalism in the digital era; (2) *the perspective of institutional actors* (Studies II, III, and IV), addressing the professional autonomy of PSM practitioners, their experiences of interference, and their resistance strategies; and (3) *the public perspective* (Studies V, VI, and VII), which is focused on public trust, the public expectations of PSM, and willingness to pay. The research employs both quantitative and qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, a questionnaire survey, as well as normative/conceptual analysis. The findings contribute to several underexplored areas in the existing scholarship: the limited integration of audience perspectives in PSM research; the lack of empirical insight into how institutional actors experience political pressure; and the relative paucity of studies on PSM in Central and Eastern Europe.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my co-authors, Klára Smejkal, Marko Milosavljević, and Manuel Goyanes, for their collaboration, collegial spirit, and shared commitment to our joint work. I am equally grateful to the anonymous reviewers and editors whose feedback was invaluable in shaping the final versions of these studies. I would also like to extend my deep appreciation to all of the research participants who generously dedicated their time and insights. Likewise, I am indebted to the many individuals from diverse fields who engaged in background conversations about public service media, offering critical reflections and practical perspectives that have enriched my thinking over the years.

My sincere thanks go to my home institution and my colleagues from the Department of Media Studies and Journalism at Masaryk University for their ongoing support and for providing an environment in which I have been able to pursue a wide range of ideas. In particular, I would like to thank the colleagues and friends—Klára Smejkal, Iveta Jansová, Alena Kluknavská, Jakub Macek, Lukáš Slavík, Lucie Čejková, Alena Pospíšil Macková, and Lenka Waschková Císařová—who contributed in various capacities to the project *Rethinking the Role of Czech Public Service Media: Expectations, Challenges, and Opportunities*, funded by the Grant Agency of the Czech Republic, which resulted in several studies included in this habilitation thesis.

I am especially grateful to Iveta Jansová, the head of our department—not only for her unfailing can-do attitude in accommodating various needs and special requests, but also for generously covering my teaching duties during the Autumn 2024 semester, which allowed me to spend two months as a visiting researcher at the University of Fribourg. A special note of thanks is reserved for Jaromír Volek, who supervised my bachelor's, master's, and doctoral theses, and without whom I would likely not have found my path into academia.

Last, but certainly not least, I am deeply grateful to Ondřej and to my family for their unwavering support, trust, and patience—particularly in enduring the irregular rhythms of academic life and for standing by me, not only in the rare moments of success, but, far more often, through its difficult times.

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1. Commentary on Submitted Works

1.1 Introduction

Public service media (PSM) refers to the media created, funded, and controlled by the public for the public (UNESCO, 2008). It is a policy project grounded in noble normative ideals: it is intended to operate independently of both commercial imperatives and political or state influence, with the primary aim of delivering high-quality public service content. By informing, educating, and entertaining the public—while upholding the principles of independence, universality, plurality, diversity, and excellence—PSM can serve as a foundational pillar of democratic society (UNESCO, 2008).

Over the past two decades, however, PSM organisations worldwide, as well as the normative ideals that underpin them, have come under increasing pressure. Technological changes—particularly the transition from analogue to digital and the rise of digital platforms (Bonini & Mazzoli, 2022; Burri, 2015), along with ideological shifts, such as the widespread adoption of neoliberal policies rooted in market logic (Curran, 2002; Debrett, 2010; Jakubowicz, 2010; Steemers, 2003)—have transformed the media landscape and intensified commercial, political, and financial pressures on PSM. It is therefore unsurprising that the language of crisis has permeated academic discourse on PSM (Syvertsen & Enli, 2018), accompanied by numerous calls to reform, redefine, reinterpret, and adapt the PSM mission and remit to contemporary realities (Burri, 2015; Cañedo et al., 2022; Debrett, 2010).

This habilitation thesis contributes to the ongoing debate about how PSM can best serve the public under profoundly changing conditions, while also examining some of the key limitations and risks that PSM should seek to avoid. The following text summarises the findings of seven published studies¹:

- I. Milosavljević, M., & Urbániková, M. (2025). *Updating the classics: The roles and principles of public service journalism in the digital era*. In A. D'Arma, M. Michalis, G. F. Lowe, & M.-B. Zita (Eds.), *Challenges and developments in public service journalism* (pp. 25–46). University of Westminster Press.
<https://dx.doi.org/10.16997/14610450>

¹ Studies I, V, VI, and VII were conducted as part of the project *Rethinking the Role of Czech Public Service Media: Expectations, Challenges, and Opportunities*, which was conducted between 2022 and 2024 and supported by the Czech Science Foundation (GA22-30563S), for which I was the principal investigator.

- II. Urbániková, M. (2023). Arguing about the essence of public service in public service media: A case study of a newsroom conflict at Slovak RTVS. *Journalism Studies*, 24(10), 1352–1374. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2023.2214935>
- III. Urbániková, M. (2024). The anatomy of internal interference in public service media: How do journalists interpret whether editorial interference constitutes unacceptable encroachment on their autonomy? *Journalism*, 26(6), 1251–1269. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1177/14648849241255339>
- IV. Urbániková, M. (2021). Resisting perceived interference in journalistic autonomy: The study of public service media in Slovakia. *Media and Communication*, 9(4), 93–103. <https://dx.doi.org/10.17645/mac.v9i4.4204>
- V. Urbániková, M., & Smejkal, K. (2023). Trust and distrust in public service media: A case study from the Czech Republic. *Media and Communication*, 11(4), 297–307. <https://dx.doi.org/10.17645/mac.v11i4.7053>
- VI. Urbániková, M., & Smejkal, K. (2025). The value of public service media: What does the public expect? *Media, Culture & Society*. Advance online publication. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1177/01634437241313039>
- VII. Urbániková, M., Goyanes, M., & Smejkal, K. (2025). Understanding the willingness to pay for public service media: Testing the role of socio-political trust and partisan selective exposure. *Journalism*. Advance online publication. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1177/14648849251339823>

These studies examine PSM from three distinct perspectives: (1) the normative perspective (**Study I**); (2) the perspective of institutional actors (**Studies II, III, and IV**); and (3) the perspective of the public (**Studies V, VI, and VII**). The papers employ a mixed-methods approach and combine quantitative and qualitative research strategies (including semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and survey research) with normative and conceptual analyses.

Thematically, the studies address issues that are crucial to the future of PSM:

- PSM journalism, which is traditionally one of its foundational pillars (**Study I** explores the roles and principles of public service journalism in the digital era);
- The independence and professional autonomy of its practitioners as prerequisites for PSM to fulfil its role (**Studies II, III, and IV** investigate journalists' autonomy, their experiences of perceived interference, and their resistance strategies); and
- The expectations and attitudes of the public, which is the primary stakeholder of PSM (**Studies V, VI, and VII** examine the antecedents of public trust in PSM, audience expectations, and the predictors of willingness to pay).

These studies contribute to several under-researched areas. First, literature reviews of research about PSM (Lestón-Huerta et al., 2021; Moe & Syvertsen, 2009) indicate that, although academic interest in PSM is extensive, it has predominantly focused on policy and institutional dimensions. Audience perspectives remain comparatively neglected, which is an omission noted by several scholars (Campos-Rueda & Goyanes, 2023; Chivers & Allan, 2022; Johnson & Dempsey, 2024; Just et al., 2017; Lestón-Huerta et al., 2021; Sehl, 2020). Second, a similar gap exists in research on PSM independence, which is typically approached from a regulatory perspective (Dragomir & Horowitz, 2021) and seldom considers the experiences of institutional actors who face political pressure directly (Wright et al., 2024). Third, the studies respond to calls for increased research on PSM in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) (Cañedo et al., 2022; Just et al., 2017).

This commentary on the submitted works is organised as follows. Section 1.2 presents the theoretical and conceptual framework of the studies. Section 1.3 introduces the national context and the state of PSM in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, the two countries examined in empirical studies II–VI. Section 1.4 details the studies included in this habilitation thesis and outlines the author's contributions. Section 1.5 describes the studies' aims and methodological designs. Finally, Section 1.6 summarises the key findings and identifies directions for future research. The commentary is followed by the seven research articles that constitute the core of this thesis (Sections 2 to 8).

1.2 Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This section outlines the theoretical and conceptual framework that underpins the studies included in this thesis. It begins with an overview of the normative perspectives on PSM and its societal mission (Section 1.2.1). It then examines the major challenges that face PSM in Central and Eastern Europe—political interference and media capture—and highlights their implications for the professional autonomy of PSM managers and journalists, and the resistance practices employed when that autonomy is perceived to be under threat (Section 1.2.2). Finally, Section 1.2.3 explores the role of the public as both the funder and beneficiary of PSM, focusing on three key dimensions of this relationship: public expectations, trust, and willingness to pay.

1.2.1 Normative Perspectives: PSM and its Mission in Flux

Currently, PSM is experiencing exciting yet uncertain times. While some critics argue that, in an age of media abundance, PSM has become obsolete or that it should at least have a much smaller mandate (Van Dijk et al., 2005), its proponents contend that recent

developments—such as audience fragmentation, algorithmically personalised content, the proliferation of mis- and disinformation, and the growing dominance of Big Tech—underscore the enduring, and even increasing, relevance of PSM (Born, 2018; Fuchs & Unterberger, 2021; Rodríguez-Castro, 2024).

At the heart of this debate are two fundamentally different conceptions of PSM's purpose (Donders, 2012, 2021). The *market failure perspective* positions PSM as a corrective to deficiencies in media markets, a rationale that some argue has diminished in relevance in the digital era. In contrast, the *democracy-centric perspective* regards PSM as a deliberate policy instrument for fostering democratic values by providing content independent of market logic, thus promoting social cohesion, inclusion, diversity, and pluralism (Donders, 2021). However, to remain an effective policy tool capable of addressing structural deficiencies in contemporary media systems, PSM must adapt its mission and remit to meet the evolving conditions (Burri, 2015; Cañedo et al., 2022; Debrett, 2010; Jakubowicz, 2010).

Terminologically, the broader move from the traditional, linear broadcasting to the digital, interactive, and multimedia environments has been reflected in the shift from *public service broadcasting* to *public service media* (Bardoel & Lowe, 2007). At the same time, mounting commercial, political, and financial pressures on PSM have generated the need for renewed conceptual frameworks to justify its existence. In the debates on why society needs PSM and what it should provide, the concept of *public value*, which builds on Moore's (1995) broader theory, has gained particular traction and, alongside the concept of *contribution to society*, has superseded the older notion of *public service* in both scholarly and professional discourse (Cañedo et al., 2022; Puppis & Ali, 2023).

Irrespective of the framework adopted, the central challenge remains: how to define and sustain PSM's role in a changing society. The original mission, famously articulated by John Reith (1924) as to “inform, educate, and entertain”, has since evolved. The Council of Europe (1994) expanded this mission to include serving as a platform for democratic discourse, ensuring impartiality and pluralism, reflecting cultural diversity, and supporting minority voices. Similarly, the European Broadcasting Union (2012) identified six core values: universality, independence, excellence, diversity, accountability, and innovation. A particularly comprehensive framework is offered by Cañedo et al. (2022), who outline 12 components that PSM should fulfil: social engagement, diversity, innovation, independence, excellence, universality, citizen participation, media literacy, accountability, territorial cohesion, social justice, and cooperation.

Successfully addressing the challenge of adapting the mission and remit of PSM to the realities of the 21st century requires not only a normative and theoretical approach, but also

careful consideration of the perspectives of key societal stakeholders, including the public and PSM professionals. Understanding how these groups perceive PSM's mission and public value is essential to maintaining its legitimacy (Fehlmann, 2023). Three studies included in this habilitation thesis specifically address this issue. First, **Study I** focused on PSM journalism, one of the core pillars of PSM, and examined the guiding principles it should uphold and the roles it should fulfil to remain relevant in the digital age. Second, **Study II** adopted an empirical approach and, via a case study at Radio and Television of Slovakia (RTVS), the Slovak PSM organisation, explored how its journalists and managers perceive and interpret the essence of public service in PSM; how their interpretations differ from the academic and legal frameworks; how diverse the understanding of public service can be within one newsroom; and what consequences this variability can have for the functioning of that newsroom. Third, **Study VI** investigated the public expectations of PSM and the extent to which citizens' views align with the normative conceptions of the public value that PSM is expected to deliver.

1.2.2 Institutional Actors Under Pressure: Media Capture, Autonomy, Interference, and Resistance

Regardless of whether we adopt *public value*, *public contribution*, or *public service* as the central concept to capture what PSM is intended to deliver to society, one of the core attributes of PSM organisations is their political independence. Without political independence, PSM loses its *raison d'être*, because it forfeits its public character and effectively turns into state or party media. Independence is also vital for public trust: prior empirical research demonstrates that the more citizens perceive their PSM to be independent, the more they tend to trust it (European Broadcasting Union, 2024).

The phenomenon whereby political actors undermine media independence, exert control, and instrumentalise it to serve partisan or vested interests is referred to as *media capture*. It is defined as “a situation in which the media have not succeeded in becoming autonomous in manifesting a will of their own, nor able to exercise their main function, notably of informing people. Instead, they have persisted in an intermediate state, with vested interests, and not just the government, using them for other purpose” (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2013, p. 41).

According to Wright et al. (2024), who build on Dragomir and Horowitz's model (2021), the media capture of PSM consists of one or more of the following four components: (1) governance capture (i.e., the politicisation of governance boards and senior leadership); (2) financial capture (i.e., the politicisation of PSM's financial resources); (3) discursive capture (i.e., the strategic reframing of the public understanding of PSM and its purpose to make it more vulnerable to state capture); and (4) internal disciplinary capture (i.e., a specific form of

regulatory capture, where government-appointed officials selectively apply or enforce laws and regulations to encourage journalistic self-censorship). In addition to these systemic forms of encroachment on PSM independence, direct ad hoc editorial interventions represent another mechanism through which pressure may be exerted on PSM and its journalists.

Political pressure and attempts to capture PSM can be examined from several perspectives. Conceptually, it is useful to distinguish between *independence*, which refers to external freedom from undue pressure, influence, or control at the institutional or organisational level, and *journalistic autonomy*, which at the individual level denotes the “latitude that a practitioner has in carrying out his or her occupational duties” (Weaver et al., 2007, p. 70). Autonomy is threatened by interference, which is understood as threats or inducements intended to influence journalists’ professional behaviour (Hanretty, 2011, p. 5).

As argued in **Study III**, from the perspective of rank-and-file journalists, two primary sources of interference can be identified: (1) *external interference*, which originates at the macro level outside of PSM organisations (e.g., political and economic pressures); and (2) *internal interference*, which emanates from within PSM organisations (e.g., from editors and managers). While internal interference may sometimes result from legitimate editorial oversight or professional disagreements about good journalistic practice, it may also be driven by non-journalistic interests, such as the agendas of politicians or oligarchs. In such cases, the mezzo level of the management functions as a transmission belt for external pressures (Örnebring et al., 2016). The challenge for PSM journalists, therefore, lies in discerning the true motivations of their superiors and in distinguishing legitimate, journalistically motivated internal interference from illegitimate, *mixed interference* that stems from non-journalistic interests. This distinction is essential, because journalists’ ability to defend their autonomy depends on how they assess and interpret the nature of the interference they face. This issue is central to **Study III**, which, based on a case study conducted at the Slovak PSM organisation RTVS, examined how journalists evaluate whether the actions of their superiors constitute inappropriate interference with their professional autonomy, and explored the forms that such internal interference can take.

Given that independence is a core value of PSM, and that autonomy is one of the key ideal-typical values of journalism as a profession (Deuze, 2025), it is imperative that journalists within PSM organisations actively protect their professional autonomy and resist undue interference. Although the importance of professional autonomy is well established in scholarly literature, relatively little attention has been paid to the resistance practices that journalists employ when their autonomy is under threat (Barrios & Miller, 2020; Wright et al., 2024). **Study IV**, therefore, investigated how journalists respond when they perceive a threat

to their autonomy and identifies the forms of resistance they use. Based on a case study at RTVS, the study drew on organisational theory frameworks that address employee dissatisfaction. According to Hirschman (1970) and Farrell (1983), dissatisfied employees typically choose among four responses: (1) voice (i.e., expressing dissatisfaction and pushing for organisational change); (2) exit (i.e., leaving the organisation); (3) loyalty (i.e., remaining committed in the hope of eventual improvement); and (4) neglect (i.e., disengagement, withdrawal, or passive resistance). **Study IV** examined not only the specific resistance practices employed by journalists but also the sequencing of those practices and their integration into the broader individual strategies for coping with unsatisfactory conditions in the newsroom.

1.2.3 Public Perspectives on PSM: Trust, Expectations, and Willingness to Pay

As with any policy initiative, the sustainability and future of PSM depend on public legitimacy (Fehlmann, 2023) and the foundational social contract that justifies its role in society (Sjøvaag, 2010; Strömbäck, 2010). Over the past two decades, significant technological and ideological shifts have reshaped the media environment and exacerbated commercial, political, and financial pressures on PSM. Consequently, both the social contract and the public legitimacy of PSM have come under increasing scrutiny and they are now more contested than ever.

However, despite repeated calls for an audience-centred shift in media research (Gil de Zúñiga & Hinsley, 2013; Karlsson & Clerwall, 2019; Steppat et al., 2020) and a growing body of literature that advocates greater public involvement in the governance and strategic direction of PSM organisations (Dragomir, 2021; Glowacki, 2015; Vanhaeght & Donders, 2021), the public remains largely overlooked in the scholarly discourse on PSM. To address this gap, **Studies V, VI, and VII** examined three specific aspects of the public perspectives on PSM: public trust, public expectations, and the willingness to pay.

Study V explored the sources of public trust and distrust in PSM, because trust is a fundamental prerequisite for the functioning and survival of PSM, without which it cannot fulfil its societal role. In general, trust is the social glue that binds individuals, organisations, and institutions (Sztompka, 2000). More specifically, trust in the media can be defined as “the willingness of the audience to be vulnerable to news content based on the expectation that the media will perform in a satisfactory manner” (Hanitzsch et al., 2018, p. 5). Trust is a multifaceted construct that operates on at least three levels: (a) trust in the news content, which refers to the perceived accuracy and reliability of the information presented; (b) trust in the journalists and news presenters, which represents a form of interpersonal trust; and (c)

trust in the media institutions, which represents a form of institutional trust—namely, trust in specific brands, media types, and the news sector as a whole (Fisher, 2016; Strömbäck et al., 2020; Williams, 2012).

Although PSM is often perceived as a trusted island within many national media landscapes (European Broadcasting Union, 2024), trust in PSM is neither absolute nor universal. For instance, previous research indicates that trust in PSM news tends to be lower among younger audiences, ethnic minorities, individuals with right-wing political orientations, and those with lower levels of education (Jõesaar et al., 2022; Picone & Donders, 2020). This also raises important questions about the absence of trust, which may manifest as distrust (i.e., the belief that the media or journalists are doing something wrong), mistrust (i.e., suspicion-based doubt), media scepticism (i.e., hesitancy to trust without evidence), or media cynicism (i.e., doubt in journalistic sincerity and moral purpose) (Cook & Gronke, 2005). An additional conceptual challenge concerns the relationship between trust and distrust: are they opposite ends of a single continuum with identical, just reversed, antecedents, or are they distinct constructs with different origins (Engelke et al., 2019)? **Study V**, therefore, investigated how citizens explain and justify the extent to which they trust or distrust Czech PSM and, aiming to contribute to theoretical advancement, examined whether the reasons for trust and distrust are merely inverses or fundamentally distinct.

Building upon insights into public trust, it is equally important to consider the expectations that citizens hold regarding PSM, because these shape its perceived relevance and legitimacy. **Study VI**, therefore, examined the public expectations of PSM, recognising that the public value that PSM is meant to deliver should be identified through dialogue with the public sphere and through active citizen participation rather than dictated in a top-down manner (Moore, 1995). Otherwise, PSM risks promoting values that the public does not recognise or deem important (Fehlmann, 2023). Expectations are defined as “subject-held or broadcast utterances that express a modal response about the characteristics of the object's persons” (Biddle, 1979, p. 132). While existing scholarship often focuses on prescriptive expectations and evaluates them against normative criteria (e.g., Campos-Rueda, 2023; Sehl, 2020), **Study VI** adopted Biddle’s (1979) broad framework, which distinguishes three types of expectations: (a) *prescriptive expectations*, which involve normative statements or demands (e.g., “PSM news content should be objective”); (b) *cathectic expectations*, which reflect personal preferences or aversions (e.g., “I don’t like when PSM omits relevant sources”); and (c) *descriptive expectations*, which comprise objective descriptions of a given characteristic (e.g., “I often watch documentaries on PSM”). By examining not only prescriptive expectations but also cathectic expectations, which are expressed through individual evaluations of PSM performance, and descriptive expectations, which are rooted in

audience practices and experiences, **Study VI** aimed to reveal what individuals lack or value in relation to PSM, their deeper wishes and needs, and how they construct the criteria by which they evaluate PSM performance.

Following the analysis of these public expectations, **Study VII** turned to the practical implications to investigate the determinants of the public's willingness to pay (WTP) for PSM, which is essential for the survival of PSM. In Europe, the traditional source of PSM funding has been a licence fee; however, over the past decade, several countries have shifted to funding through the state budget (e.g., Norway, Denmark, France, and Slovakia). In countries where direct payments from the public (hereafter referred to as "fees") have been retained, debates continue about the appropriate fee level and who should be required to pay it (e.g., in Switzerland and the Czech Republic). Moreover, PSM budgets across Europe are under increasing pressure: when adjusted for inflation, PSM funding has declined by 10.9% over the past decade (European Broadcasting Union, 2025).

The literature on media payment behaviour (Chyi & Yang, 2009; O'Brien et al., 2020) distinguishes between consumers' *past payments* (i.e., whether or how much they paid for a product), their *paying/purchase intention* (i.e., whether they would pay for a certain product), and their *willingness to pay* for media content (i.e., the maximum amount they are willing to pay). However, unlike commercial media, PSM is a public good, and fees are compulsory rather than market-driven (Chivers & Allan, 2022). Consequently, research has tended to focus on perceived public value rather than payment preferences. While the literature on media payment behaviour is substantial (see O'Brien et al., 2020 for a systematic review), empirical studies that focus specifically on WTP for PSM, particularly in the European context, remain limited. Nevertheless, it remains important to investigate how the public values PSM in financial terms, the extent of their willingness to support it, and the factors that predict this willingness, because these aspects are crucial for PSM's long-term sustainability. **Study VII**, therefore, examined the determinants of public WTP for PSM in the Czech Republic and contributed to the existing literature by addressing socio-psychological antecedents and focusing on the Central and Eastern European region, both of which have received limited scholarly attention to date.

1.3 The Context: PSM in the Czech Republic and Slovakia

While these are challenging times for PSM globally, those in CEE, such as the Czech Republic and Slovakia, are arguably more vulnerable and less equipped to address these challenges. Unlike their Western European counterparts, PSM organisations in the CEE

region have a much shorter history. Prior to 1989, they operated as state-controlled media under one-party political regimes and functioned as instruments of state propaganda. Following 1989, they underwent what Marko (2017) describes as a “double transformation”: first, from state-controlled media to public service broadcasters, and, subsequently, from public service broadcasters to public service media.

These transformations occurred amid economic upheaval, deregulation, and the liberalisation of the media markets. They were further complicated by inadequate legislation, the absence of a clear vision for PSM's remit and future, persistent difficulties in achieving political and financial independence, outdated infrastructure, and slow technological adaptation (Broughton Micova, 2012; Marko, 2018). The legacy of this difficult transformation continues to affect PSM in the region, particularly through heightened susceptibility to political interference. Politicians frequently conflate PSM with state media and often demonstrate a reluctance to uphold the principle of PSM independence (Jakubowicz & Sükösd, 2008; Marko, 2018; Milosavljević & Poler, 2018; Šimunjak, 2016).

At the same time, many CEE countries, including the Czech Republic and Slovakia, face structural disadvantages that stem from their limited size, such as restricted market capacity, limited funding coupled with high fixed costs, constrained human resources, dependence on external actors, vulnerability to larger countries, and enduring corporatist tendencies (Berg, 2011; Trappel, 2010).

Given the focus of this habilitation thesis on PSM in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, a concise comparative overview is both relevant and necessary, because several notable distinctions emerge between the two countries. The Czech Republic, with a population of approximately 11 million, primarily funds its PSM through licence fees, with a total annual budget of around €395 million (Czech Radio, 2024; Czech Television, 2024). Slovakia, with a population of 5.5 million, allocates €175 million from the state budget to its PSM (RTVS, 2024). In terms of weekly offline reach and market share, Czech Television (ČT) leads the national TV market with 46%, while Slovak public broadcaster RTVS reaches 41%, placing it third in that national market (Newman et al., 2024). Trust in PSM news remains relatively high in both countries: Czech Radio (ČRo) enjoys a 62% trust rating (i.e., first place in the national market), and ČT follows at 59% (i.e., second place); in Slovakia, RTVS shares the top position with the commercial station TA3, both at 56% (Newman et al., 2024). However, PSM independence is assessed as a medium risk in the Czech Republic, compared to a high risk in Slovakia (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2024). According to the 2025 World Press Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders, the Czech Republic ranks 10th globally, while Slovakia ranks 38th (Reporters Without Borders, 2025).

Slovakia's lower ranking is partly attributable to persistent challenges faced by its PSM in maintaining independence. In 2024, the Slovak PSM organisation RTVS was abolished and immediately replaced with a new entity under a different name (STVR). This enabled the government to remove the director general and the entire supervisory board. The decision followed months of political pressure on the RTVS leadership and it was motivated by the governing coalition's desire to replace the management, as publicly acknowledged by the Minister of Culture (Eunews, 2024; TA3, 2024; Pravda, 2024).

Beyond these structural differences, it is also important to consider the specific country contexts during which the studies included in this habilitation thesis were conducted.

First, **Studies II, III, and IV** examined the roots, causes, and consequences of a newsroom conflict at the Slovak RTVS, following the 2017 appointment of a new director general by parliament. He was widely believed to have connections to the Slovak National Party, a member of the ruling coalition that supported his nomination. The appointment led to the replacement of key management personnel in the news division. Within a few months, a conflict emerged between journalists and the new leadership, which ultimately resulted in the resignation or dismissal of approximately two-thirds of the television newsroom staff by 2018, with many citing "creeping political pressure" (Jančáriková, 2018). While no direct external interference was reported, the journalists objected to pressure from their immediate superiors.

Second, with regard to the Czech context, data collection for **Studies V, VI, and VII** coincided with significant changes to PSM legislation: the so-called "small" and "big" amendments. These involved changes to Act No. 483/1991 Coll. on Czech Television, Act No. 484/1991 Coll. on Czech Radio, and, in the case of the "big" amendment, also Act No. 348/2005 Coll. on Radio and Television Fees. The "small" amendment, passed in spring 2023, transferred the authority to elect one-third of the members of the Czech Television and Czech Radio Councils from the Chamber of Deputies (lower house of the parliament) to the Senate (upper house). This reform aimed to promote a more pluralistic and independent supervisory structure for PSM.

The "big" amendment, enacted in spring 2025 after extensive debate that began in autumn 2023, raised licence fees by approximately 14%, which is the first increase in almost 20 years. It also introduced automatic indexation based on inflation (increasing fees by 6% if annual inflation exceeds 6%) and expanded the licence fee obligation to households with smartphones, tablets, or computers. Consequently, the data for **Studies V, VI, and**, particularly, **Study VII** were collected during a period of intense public debate about the role and future of PSM in the Czech Republic.

1.4 Overview of the Studies and Author Contributions

This habilitation thesis comprises of six articles published in high-ranking international scientific journals indexed in the Web of Science (WoS) Core Collection (*Journalism; Journalism Studies; Media and Communication; Media, Culture & Society*), and one book chapter included in the *11th RIPE Reader*, published by the University of Westminster Press. The RIPE initiative, established in 2001, is a leading platform for expert collaboration on the developments in PSM. It bridges the gaps between academia and industry and encompasses an international network, a series of conferences, and a widely recognised collection of edited volumes.

I am the sole author of three studies, the lead and corresponding author with primary responsibility for three others, and an equal co-author of the remaining one. Details of my individual contributions are provided below.

- I. Milosavljević, M., & **Urbániková, M.** (2025). *Updating the classics: The roles and principles of public service journalism in the digital era*. In A. D'Arma, M. Michalis, G. F. Lowe, & M.-B. Zita (Eds.), *Challenges and developments in public service journalism* (pp. 25–46). University of Westminster Press. <https://dx.doi.org/10.16997/14610450>

Contribution: 50%

The first and second authors contributed equally and shared responsibility for the initial outline, research concept, drafting, and revisions of the paper. The authors' names are listed in alphabetical order. My primary contributions consist of the abstract and introduction, the normative framework presented in Section 2 ("PSM Principles, Roles, and Functions, and their Implications for PSM Journalism"), and the conceptual analysis in Section 3 ("Principles of Quality Journalism"). The co-author was primarily responsible for Section 4, which examines the conceptual relationship between quality journalism and PSM journalism; Section 5, which addresses the digital opportunities and challenges for PSM journalism; and the concluding recommendations presented in Section 6.

- II. **Urbániková, M.** (2023). Arguing about the essence of public service in public service media: A case study of a newsroom conflict at Slovak RTVS. *Journalism Studies*, 24(10), 1352–1374. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2023.2214935>

Contribution: 100% (single author)

- III. **Urbániková, M.** (2024). The anatomy of internal interference in public service media: How do journalists interpret whether editorial interference constitutes unacceptable

encroachment on their autonomy? *Journalism*, 26(6), 1251–1269.

<https://dx.doi.org/10.1177/14648849241255339>

Contribution: 100% (single author)

- IV. **Urbániková, M.** (2021). Resisting perceived interference in journalistic autonomy: The study of public service media in Slovakia. *Media and Communication*, 9(4), 93–103.

<https://dx.doi.org/10.17645/mac.v9i4.4204>

Contribution: 100% (single author)

- V. **Urbániková, M., & Smejkal, K.** (2023). Trust and distrust in public service media: A case study from the Czech Republic. *Media and Communication*, 11(4), 297–307.

<https://dx.doi.org/10.17645/mac.v11i4.7053>

Contribution: 60%

As the lead author, I developed the main idea of the paper and I was responsible for the overall conceptualisation, research design (including the development of the focus group discussion guide), and data collection. I wrote the introduction, literature review, contextual section, and conclusion. My co-author and I jointly conducted the coding and interpretation of the data. The co-author took the lead in conducting the analysis and writing of the results and findings section.

- VI. **Urbániková, M., & Smejkal, K.** (2025). The value of public service media: What does the public expect? *Media, Culture & Society*. Advance online publication.

<https://dx.doi.org/10.1177/01634437241313039>

Contribution: 55%

My co-author and I jointly developed the research design and carried out the data collection: my co-author was responsible for the first wave of focus groups, while I was responsible for the second. As the lead author, I led the conceptual development of the paper and conducted the data analysis and interpretation. I wrote the results and findings section, the discussion, and a substantial part of the conclusion, and contributed in a more limited capacity to the introduction, literature review, and contextual section. My co-author was primarily responsible for writing the introduction, literature review, contextual section, and the methods and data section.

- VII. **Urbániková, M., Goyanes, M., & Smejkal, K.** (2025). Understanding the willingness to pay for public service media: Testing the role of socio-political trust and partisan selective exposure. *Journalism*. Advance online publication.

<https://dx.doi.org/10.1177/14648849251339823>

Contribution: 70%

As the lead author, I developed the main idea of the paper and I was responsible for the overall conceptualisation, research design (including the development of the questionnaire), and data collection. I wrote the introduction, literature review, contextual section, methods and measures section, and concluding discussion. The co-authors were responsible for conducting the data analysis and drafting the results and findings section.

1.5 Studies' Aims and Methodological Design

This section outlines the aims and methodological design of the seven published studies: one normative/conceptual (**Study I**) and six empirical (**Studies II–VII**). The empirical studies employ both qualitative (**Studies II–VI**) and quantitative (**Study VII**) research designs.

Study I aimed to explore the roles and principles of public service journalism in the digital era. Journalism has traditionally been one of the foundational pillars of PSM, but recent societal, technological, and political transformations have prompted a re-evaluation of its principles, roles, and functions. This normative/conceptual study reviewed the extensive literature on PSM values and functions, as well as the core tenets and values of quality journalism. Based on this review, it analysed the implications for PSM journalism, with a focus on its key roles and principles, as well as the digital opportunities and challenges it faces.

Studies II, III, and IV investigated the newsroom conflict at RTVS, the Slovak PSM organisation, which began following the appointment of a new director general in the summer of 2017. This conflict culminated in the resignation or dismissal of approximately two-thirds of the television newsroom staff by 2018, many citing “creeping political pressure” (Jančáriková, 2018). **Study II** examined how RTVS journalists and managers understood the essence of public service (“*verejnoprávnosť*”; i.e., how they interpreted the PSM mission and the key tenets of public service journalism), how their interpretations differed from legal and academic definitions, and how these differing conceptions contributed to the newsroom conflict. **Study III** explored the forms and types of internal interference experienced by journalists at RTVS from their superiors, and to examine how, and on what basis, journalists assessed whether such interference was politically motivated and whether it constituted an unacceptable encroachment on their professional autonomy. **Study IV** focused on the resistance practices employed by RTVS journalists to cope with what they perceived as undue interference by their superiors in their professional autonomy.

As a broader methodological strategy, these studies employed a case study approach—“an empirical method that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the ‘case’) in depth and within its real-world context” (Yin, 2018, p. 15)—to examine the roots and consequences of the newsroom conflict at RTVS. To investigate the case, I conducted 16 semi-structured interviews² with key actors (journalists and managers) and supplemented these with document analysis (e.g., media reports, an open letter by journalists, the management’s response) for triangulation.

Initial insights were gathered from publicly available information and two informal pre-research interviews with RTVS journalists who had taken different positions in the conflict—one who resigned in protest and another who remained. As RTVS does not publish an organisational chart or staff list, an RTVS journalist provided a roster of newsroom employees, noting who had resigned, been dismissed, or remained; this was independently verified by another RTVS journalist.

Based on the pre-research, key groups of actors with different positions within the RTVS newsroom and/or differing views on the conflict were identified. Purposive sampling was then employed to ensure representation across all relevant opinion groups and, where possible, to maximise diversity in terms of gender, age, role, and professional experience. The 16 interviews, conducted between July 2018 and September 2019, included: (1) one journalist whose contract was not renewed, most likely as a form of punishment for criticising the new management; (2) four who resigned in protest; (3) five who remained (one of whom resigned shortly after the interview); (4) four newly appointed managers; and (5) two former managers who had resigned. Participants’ journalistic experience ranged from three to over 20 years. Only one potential participant (a rank-and-file reporter) declined the interview invitation. All participants were informed of the study’s aims and gave their informed consent.

The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, anonymised, and analysed with Atlas.ti software. To analyse the data, I employed thematic analysis, “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79).

Studies V, VI, and VII examined the public perspectives of PSM in the Czech Republic.

Study V aimed to investigate the reasons for audience trust and distrust in PSM, and to explore the relationship between the two concepts—to what extent the reasons for trust are simply the inverse of those for distrust, and to what extent they differ. **Study VI** explored public expectations (broadly defined) for PSM in the Czech Republic and how these expectations diverge from the existing normative conceptualisations of PSM’s public value.

² Three of the 16 interviews were conducted by the author in collaboration with Jaromír Volek, to whom I would like to thank for his contribution.

Finally, **Study VII** aimed to identify the determinants of the public's willingness to pay for PSM.

Studies V and VI employed a qualitative research strategy and used the focus group discussion (FGD) method, a form of group interview centred on predetermined discussion topics and guided by a moderator (Bryman, 2012). Two waves of focus group discussions with the general public (i.e., 10 focus group discussions with a total of 60 participants) were conducted. Both heterogeneous and homogeneous approaches to focus group composition were employed (Morgan, 2019), using participants' political preferences as the main organising principle. This approach made it possible to uncover divergent views and tensions among individuals with differing political preferences, while revealing synergies and consensuses among those with similar views (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996).

The first six focus groups, which were conducted in May and June 2022, were based on both participants' political preferences and their ages, because these characteristics had previously been identified as key factors in relation to trust in PSM (Smejkal et al., 2022). Two focus groups comprised of participants who voted for parties described as populist in the preceding election; two groups consisted of voters for non-populist parties; and the remaining two groups included non-voters. In each pair of focus groups, one group consisted of individuals under 40, while the other consisted of individuals over 40. All six discussions took place in Brno, the second-largest city in the Czech Republic, in a rented conference room.

For the remaining four focus groups, which were conducted in November 2022, a maximum diversity sampling strategy was adopted. The participants were chosen in an attempt to replicate the Czech population in terms of gender, age, education, region, size of residence, and internet use (additionally, one question in the recruitment process pertained to political preference). Three discussions were conducted online (via a video conferencing platform), and one was held in person in the capital city of Prague due to its relatively easy accessibility from other regions. The ratio between online and in-person focus groups was determined based on the data from the Czech Statistical Office (2022), which indicated that four-fifths of Czech households have a computer or tablet, and a similar proportion has access to the internet. The in-person focus group was attended exclusively by individuals who indicated during recruitment that they use the internet less than once a month.

In both waves, participants were recruited by a professional market research agency. Each discussion lasted approximately 90 minutes. Participants were informed in advance of the research topic, their informed consent was obtained prior to the discussion, and they were financially compensated for their participation. Study V is based solely on the second wave of FGDs, while Study VI is based on both waves.

Finally, **Study VII** is based on a questionnaire survey that was conducted with a representative sample of 1,700 respondents and reflected the Czech population, aged 18 and older, in terms of gender, age, education, size of residence, region, and frequency of internet use. Data collection methods included online questionnaires (CAWI; targeted at daily and almost daily internet users, with 76% of completed questionnaires obtained) and face-to-face interviews (CAPI; aimed at infrequent internet users and non-users, which accounted for 24% of completed questionnaires conducted by 65 interviewers). The data collection was carried out by the Focus - Marketing & Social Research agency in November and December 2023. The average completion time was 28 minutes. To examine the determinants of the willingness to pay for PSM, hierarchical multiple regression and moderation analyses were used.

1.6 Discussion and Conclusion

The studies included in this habilitation thesis contribute to the ongoing scholarly debate on how PSM can best fulfil its mission under conditions of profound structural and societal change, as well as on the key risks and threats it faces. They approach the topic from three distinct perspectives: a normative perspective (**Study I**), the perspective of institutional actors (**Studies II, III, and IV**), and the perspective of the public (**Studies V, VI, and VII**). The concluding section, structured according to these three perspectives, summarises the main findings and identifies avenues for further research.

1.6.1 Normative Perspective: The Challenge of Adapting Public Service Journalism to the Digital Era

As one of the foundational pillars of PSM, public service journalism occupies a central place in its mission. This is reflected in the primacy of the “to inform” category within the classic triad “to inform, educate, entertain” (Reith, 1924)—which is the earliest and still enduring formulation of PSM’s purpose, articulated by John Reith, the first director general of the BBC. Expectations for PSM journalism are among the core public expectations of PSM as a whole (**Study VI**), and the perceptions of its quality significantly influence both public trust in PSM (**Study V**) and the attitudes of the politicians towards its regulation (Urbániková, 2025, forthcoming). However, technological developments have profoundly transformed the production and consumption of journalism and, at the same time, political polarisation, populism, and the rise of illiberalism have contributed to the increasing instability of PSM organisations (Holtz-Bacha, 2021; Sehl et al., 2022). Against this backdrop, **Study I** adopted a normative perspective to explore the roles and guiding principles of public service journalism in the digital era.

In **Study I**, we argue that journalistic content, as an integral component of PSM, should exemplify the typical attributes of quality journalism, such as accuracy, truthfulness, timeliness, verification, impartiality, balance, fairness, independence, accountability, analytical depth, pluralism, clarity, comprehensiveness, and relevance (Deuze, 2005; Gil de Zúñiga & Hinsley, 2013; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001; Meijer, 2012; Urban & Schweiger, 2014; van der Wurff & Schoenbach, 2014). In addition, public service journalism is expected to incorporate the normative principles intrinsic to PSM as a whole and contribute meaningfully to its broader mission. To this end, we conducted a comprehensive review of the scholarly literature on the mission and remit of PSM and distilled 10 key functions to which PSM journalism should contribute; these include:

1. Serving as a universal reference point and forum for broad public debate by providing inclusive coverage accessible to all citizens, in accordance with the principle of universality;
2. Guiding the free formation of opinions by delivering impartial and independent news coverage, free from political and commercial pressures;
3. Setting and upholding high-quality standards, thereby contributing to the cultivation and improvement of the broader media sector;
4. Serving as a credible reference point in fragmented media markets and fulfilling a curatorial role in guiding audiences through complex content landscapes, which includes acting as a safe harbour from disinformation and manipulated content;
5. Engaging audiences as active citizens rather than passive consumers, and promoting civic participation;
6. Acting as a watchdog to hold public and private corporate power to account, particularly through investigative journalism;
7. Fulfilling a national mandate by providing information and analysis grounded in national perspectives and interests, including through the maintenance of a stable network of foreign correspondents;
8. Reflecting the diversity of multicultural societies by representing minority voices, fostering dialogue, and exposing inequalities;
9. Educating and entertaining the public, and opening space for innovation in journalistic formats and practices to better reach audiences; and
10. Promoting national and European production and mediating cultural diversity.

We argue that what distinguishes public service journalism from quality journalism, which can, and often is, also produced by commercial media, is the principle of universality (Lowe & Savage, 2020). Drawing on and extending the conceptualisation proposed by Iosifidis (2007), we differentiate between three dimensions of universality: (a) the diversity of journalistic

formats and genres; (b) equitable and universal access for all segments of society through diverse means and platforms; and (c) comprehensive coverage not only at the national level, but also locally, regionally, and internationally. In short, while commercial media may tailor their formats, audiences, platforms, and thematic scope to their specialisation and economic rationale, one of the key distinctive contributions of PSM lies in its commitment to serving everyone across social groups and providing the content they need and prefer.

In addition, the digital transformation of the media ecosystem, which influences both production and distribution processes, presents new challenges and opportunities for public service journalism. We argue that this transformation entails the need for multi-skilling and continuous re-skilling of PSM staff, the exploration of innovative forms of communication across diverse platforms and applications, which have integrated content production for various technologies (e.g., radio, television, web, apps, podcasts), and the adoption of new systems for (big) data journalism. On one hand, PSM should embrace these technologies because they offer opportunities to better reach the public and enhance public service; on the other hand, it must do so more responsibly and thoughtfully than commercial media to remain true to its core values and roles. Most notably, this requires PSM organisations and their newsrooms to develop and implement their own standards for the use of AI technologies (Horowitz et al., 2023) and to create unique public service algorithms for content recommendation and curation (Bennett, 2018).

Finally, we argue that in today's polarised societal climate, which is marked by rising political populism, maintaining objectivity and impartiality—both in practice and as perceived by the public—has become increasingly difficult. As Ojala (2021) suggests, the lack of public trust in the media primarily stems from mainstream journalism's challenges in providing equal representation to diverse political groups and perspectives in times of heightened ideological conflict and divergent moral viewpoints. In such an environment, content that some label as “conspiracy theories” that preclude inclusion, others view as “alternative opinions”, the omission of which leads to perceptions that PSM is biased, controlled by political elites, and a censor of certain views. Given that the perceived independence of PSM is crucial for public trust (European Broadcasting Union, 2024), upholding the ideal of objectivity and impartiality, and persuading the public of this commitment, represents a critical challenge for public service journalism in the digital era.

1.6.2 The Institutional Actors' Perspective: The Challenge of Safeguarding Autonomy and Resisting Political Pressure

While the normative framework presented in **Study I** highlights the importance of objectivity and impartiality in the PSM mission, **Studies II, III, and IV** provide an empirical analysis of

how the ideals of political independence and professional autonomy are experienced and negotiated by PSM practitioners in practice. Although no PSM is entirely immune to political pressure (Nissen, 2016), PSM organisations in the CEE region are particularly vulnerable (Milosavljević & Poler, 2018; Šimunjak, 2016). Using the newsroom conflict at Slovak RTVS as a case study, these studies investigated the various understandings of public service within a single newsroom and the implications of this variability for its functioning (**Study II**), the forms and types of internal interference encountered, and how journalists assess whether such interference constitutes an unacceptable encroachment on their professional autonomy (**Study III**), as well as the resistance strategies journalists employ to cope with these perceived threats to their autonomy (**Study IV**).

First, **Study II** showed that debates about the PSM mission and the principles of public service journalism are far from merely theoretical. The case of RTVS illustrates how fundamental disagreements between journalists and management over key aspects of the PSM mission can lead to sustained internal conflict, the mutual accusations of political bias, and, ultimately, the departure or dismissal of a substantial majority of the newsroom staff.

Overall, RTVS managers and journalists exhibited a rather narrow conception of the PSM mission when compared to both the scholarly literature and the legal framework. Their understanding aligns more closely with a *market-failure perspective* than with a *democracy-centric perspective* of PSM (Donders, 2021). They largely framed PSM as an antithesis to commercial media and emphasised its role in producing niche, socially valuable, but not necessarily popular, content. Notably, they overlooked not only the entertainment function of PSM (cf. Reith, 1924), but also its role in fostering national identity and preserving national culture. This omission contrasts with findings from other countries, such as Norway, where this role emerged as a central theme in public discourse about PSM (Larsen, 2014), and Germany, Sweden, and Finland, where PSM managers explicitly identified it as a key element of the public service mission (Lowe & Maijanen, 2019). This reductive perspective may be attributed to the limited historical tradition of PSM in CEE and the absence of sustained public debate about its societal role. While countries such as the UK or Belgium periodically engage in discussions about the PSM mission and remit under changing conditions (e.g., BBC, 2025; Van den Bulck & Raats, 2023), discourse in Slovakia, and much of the CEE region, remains primarily focused on political independence.

Even more significantly, despite rhetorical agreement on the principles of public service, RTVS journalists and managers diverged sharply in their interpretations of two central concepts in public service journalism: power distance and objectivity. With respect to power distance (Hanitzsch, 2007), the opposing journalists accused managers of excessive

deference to political power, such as insisting on covering the trivial activities of government leaders. The new management, by contrast, viewed such coverage as intrinsic to the PSM mission.

Disagreement was even more pronounced regarding objectivity. Of the four key dimensions of objectivity identified by Skovsgaard et al. (2013)—absence of subjectivity; balance; hard facts (i.e., factual accuracy); and value judgments (i.e., not merely describing reality but also making the better position clear)—both groups agreed only on the need to avoid overt subjectivity. The new managers adopted an agnostic stance and questioned the distinction between facts and opinions, and even whether “hard facts” exist at all. They interpreted objectivity primarily as providing equal space to all sides of an argument and left the judgment to the audience. In their view, it was not the journalist’s role to indicate which side of a dispute holds the stronger position (e.g., in terms of truthfulness or relevance).

Ultimately, the managers' understanding of objectivity closely resembles what Brüggemann and Engesser (2017) term “false balance”. In contrast, journalists adhered to a more comprehensive definition of objectivity rooted in journalism scholarship (Donsbach & Klett, 1993; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001). In practice, these differences resulted in mutual accusations of unprofessionalism and political bias, and culminated in a newsroom conflict that ultimately led to the departure or dismissal of most of the newsroom staff.

More broadly, this case illustrates that conceptions of objectivity not only differ across cultures and countries (Donsbach & Klett, 1993) but they can diverge within a single newsroom. Such internal disagreements underscore the fragility of the journalistic culture in Slovakia, which may result from both the post-1989 transformation of the media system and the absence of a strong professional association that would serve as a platform for the discussion about professional standards and practices.

Second, **Study III** delved deeper into the forms and manifestations of perceived internal interference in the professional autonomy of RTVS journalists by their superiors. Based on the interviews, it examined the context and conditions under which journalists regarded such interference as politically motivated and as an illegitimate encroachment on their editorial independence. The study contributed to the existing literature (Breed, 1955; Bunce, 2019; García-de-Madariaga Miranda et al., 2022; Goyanes et al., 2021; Sigelman, 1973; Waschková Císařová & Kotišová, 2022;) by inductively developing a classification scheme that systematised the forms of internal interference from the journalists’ perspective and introduced several novel elements.

The classification scheme identified two main forms of internal interference:

(1) *Interference in the editorial content*, which may occur through various means and tools—such as questions, advice or suggestions, commands or prohibitions, changes made without the author’s consent, or the burying or refusal to broadcast a news story—and at three distinct levels:

- News-story level: this includes interference in the selection of topics, quoted sources, specific pieces of information, terminology and labels used to describe events, and the chosen angles, frames, and context.
- Newscast level: this involves influencing the prominence of news stories (e.g., their order or duration).
- Program level: this refers to the suspension or cancellation of entire broadcast programs.

(2) *Disciplinary mechanisms*: the use of sanctions and rewards—through feedback, work opportunities, remuneration, and employment contracts—to encourage journalists to act in accordance with management expectations, thereby rendering direct interference in the editorial content unnecessary.

Study III also demonstrated that, despite the absence of concrete or tangible evidence of inappropriate motivations on the part of their superiors, RTVS journalists interpreted management’s actions as unacceptable interference with their professional autonomy. This was caused by a general lack of trust in the new management’s moral integrity, professional competence, and political independence. Four main factors, some of which have been identified in previous literature, contributed to this distrust:

- *Initial scepticism that stemmed from the political and institutional context*, including the appointment mechanism whereby the director general is elected directly by the parliament, public statements by political representatives openly calling for leadership change at RTVS, and the reputations of the newly appointed managers;
- *Differences in political worldviews and journalistic culture* (in line with Ceron et al., 2019; Örnebring et al., 2016), which narrowed the range of topics and perspectives considered legitimate for disagreement (Hallin, 1986);
- *Several controversial actions and decisions by management* that consistently appeared to benefit the governing coalition parties; and
- *Communication failures* (in line with Goyanes & Cañedo, 2023) and the inability of the new management to convincingly justify their actions to staff.

The study further demonstrated that autonomy and perceived interference are deeply subjective, because the same situation within the same context can be assessed very

differently by the key actors. Moreover, the absence of direct personal experience with interference does not necessarily result in a sense of autonomy. For several RTVS journalists, simply witnessing how management treated their colleagues, particularly the most vocal rebels, was sufficient to prompt their resignation in protest. All of this has serious implications for the empirical examination of journalists' general sense of autonomy and their perceived pressure, particularly through quantitative methods (Maurer, 2017; Reich and Hanitzsch, 2013), and makes such analysis both intriguing and challenging.

Finally, **Study IV** focused on how journalists react and try to protect their professional autonomy once they acknowledge it has been threatened. It inductively developed a classification scheme for resistance practices the journalists used to cope with the perceived interference with their professional autonomy that came from within their media organisation. These include: internal discussions among dissatisfied journalists; the writing of an internal letter to express concerns to the management; requests for a meeting with the management; meetings with the management to clarify the situation; the voicing of concerns and criticism during regular newsroom meetings; contacting supervisory bodies of the PSM organisation; the establishment of a trade union; requests for independent mediation between the journalists and the management; the writing of a public open letter to the viewers and listeners; the public expression of concerns and criticism in the media; requests for voluntary re-assignment to another topic area or position in order to avoid pressure; staying at one's job but in open opposition to the management; and resignation in protest.

These resistance practices differ markedly from those identified in earlier research, which has primarily focused on cases involving external political interference (Ataman & Çoban, 2019; Barrios & Miller, 2020; Slavtcheva-Petkova, 2019) or external and internal commercial pressures (Borden, 2000; Goyanes & Rodríguez-Castro, 2019; Hanusch et al., 2017). This contrast indicates that the forms of resistance adopted by journalists are closely shaped by the nature and origin of the interference. Additionally, the organisational context plays a significant role, because certain resistance strategies, such as appealing to supervisory bodies, are specific to PSM and may not be available in commercial media outlets.

Additionally, challenging the employer-centric view that is common in organisational studies (Gorden, 1988), the study proposed a new framework based on employees' perspectives, and it distinguished resistance practices by their reach (i.e., internal vs. external) and aim (i.e., the improvement of the conditions within the organisation when journalists still believe change is possible vs. resolving the personal situation when change in the organisation is no longer considered possible). The introduced model offers a dynamic understanding of resistance that can inform future studies of newsroom conflict across media sectors.

More concretely, the study revealed that journalists at RTVS transitioned from internal to external resistance, ultimately moving from “voice” to “exit” (Hirschman, 1970), as their hope for organisational reform diminished. This aligns with prior research that indicates that expressing dissent in journalism often carries high personal costs and frequently results in job termination (Borden, 2000; Davidson & Meyers, 2016). Moreover, the findings support Hirschman’s (1970) claim that loyalty moderates responses to dissatisfaction, as journalists’ commitment to public service values motivated their prolonged resistance. Peer support and collective organisation also emerged as crucial factors that enable resistance, and they underscore the often-overlooked role of solidarity in journalistic autonomy.

To conclude, unlike blatant cases of media capture (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2013), such as those in Poland (Polyák, 2015) and Hungary (Dzięciołowski, 2017), **Studies II, III, and IV** focused on the more intricate and less clear-cut case at RTVS. This case involved internal interference from newsroom superiors, without direct political interference from outside the newsroom or the typical components of media capture, such as legislative changes or financial pressure (i.e., the institutional setup of RTVS remained unchanged). In such cases, journalists are often left to infer managerial motivations. These mixed forms of pressure are particularly difficult to identify and analyse precisely because they operate within the grey zones of editorial influence and professional discretion. Nevertheless, despite the scarcity of prior research (see Wright et al., 2024, as an exception), such interference is likely not uncommon; it can easily arise following abrupt leadership changes, which take place periodically in PSM organisations and can also occur in commercial media environments. The elusive and ambiguous nature of these cases underscores the need for careful, context-sensitive inquiry and highlights a form of interference that may significantly affect journalistic autonomy without leaving clear institutional traces.

1.6.3 The Public’s Perspective: The Challenge of Serving a Polarised Society

To complement the normative perspective and that of institutional actors, **Studies V, VI, and VII** focused on the public’s viewpoint, which is indispensable, given that PSM is ultimately meant to serve the public.

Study V explored in-depth the reasons that lead the Czech public to trust or distrust PSM, namely, Czech Television and Czech Radio. The focus group discussion with the public revealed a complex mix of reasons. Consistent with prior research (Fisher, 2016; Strömbäck et al., 2020; Williams, 2012), they can be grouped into three principal categories, trust or distrust: in the message (i.e., the content produced by PSM), in the source (i.e., PSM journalists), and in the institution itself (i.e., PSM as an organisation). Participants identified

four core dimensions as central to both trust and distrust in PSM: objectivity; the accuracy and truthfulness of the information; the professionalism and impartiality of the PSM journalists; and the systemic independence of PSM organisations from political influence.

From a more granular perspective, participants grounded their expressions of trust or distrust in reference to traditional journalistic standards, as identified in earlier studies (Campos-Rueda & Goyanes, 2023; Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019; Knudsen et al., 2022; Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Livio & Cohen, 2018; Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019; Wilner et al., 2022). Thus, Study V reinforced prior findings (Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019; Tsfaty & Cappella, 2005) that indicate that public perceptions of “the media” often centre on the news media. Additionally, two factors emerged as particularly salient in shaping the trust or distrust specific to PSM: the presence of an oversight board perceived as a guarantor of quality, and the institutional independence of PSM from political influence.

Importantly, a key distinction between trusting and distrusting participants was the latter group’s expectation that PSM should give voice to anti-system perspectives in the name of objectivity and balance. Their distrust was largely rooted in the perceived exclusion of these views. This aligns with research on low PSM trust in Western Europe, where authoritarian populist audiences often accuse PSM of bias against their perspectives (Holtz-Bacha, 2021; Sehl et al., 2022). At the same time, it underscores the need for media organisations to develop more effective strategies to address content perceived as conspiratorial or misinformative. Ignoring such content, as the findings suggest, may erode trust among segments of the audience; a more constructive approach would be to directly engage with and refute such narratives.

On a conceptual level, the factors that engendered trust were not simply the inverse of those that prompted distrust. This supports the view advanced by Engelke et al. (2019) that trust and distrust are related, yet distinct, constructs. For instance, certain qualities, such as the timely and non-sensationalist presentation of relevant information, were invoked only by trusting participants. At the same time, this does not necessarily imply that their absence cannot lead to distrust, but rather that those who distrusted PSM may not have found those aspects lacking, while still withholding trust for other reasons. Also, it raises a question about the extent to which trust or distrust stem from a rational assessment of media performance quality, and to what extent the mechanism can work the other way: that the reasons for trust or distrust stated by the participants had the character of a backward rationalisation of deeper and more stable attitudes to PSM.

Study VI explored the public’s broadly conceived expectations of PSM. Based on focus group discussions with the Czech public, it revealed that these expectations encompass four

main dimensions: (1) the expected roles and functions that PSM is intended to perform (i.e., why PSM exists); (2) the general characteristics of PSM content (i.e., what PSM content should generally be like); (3) the principles of PSM operations (i.e., how PSM should operate); and (4) the specific requirements for both news and non-news PSM content. To summarise the main expectations, PSM should be, above all, independent, trustworthy, staffed by highly professional personnel, and provide objective, serious, and relevant information as well as quality entertainment.

The most commonly voiced normative expectation—and simultaneously the most frequent criticism of current PSM performance, particularly in the case of Czech Television—centres on objectivity. Echoing Karlsson and Clerwall (2019), participants consistently emphasised the importance of objectivity, though their interpretations differed. Notably, dissatisfaction among some (though not all) participants stemmed from a reductive understanding of objectivity that diverges from established scholarly conceptions (e.g., Skovsgaard et al., 2013; Westerstahl, 1983). More concretely, some equated objectivity with a mechanical notion of balance, which Brüggemann and Engesser (2017) term “false balance” and which strips journalists of their evaluative role and reduces them to passive conduits. Others defined objectivity as the presentation of “hard facts” that are devoid of analysis or interpretation, which is a view that conflicts with core journalistic functions, such as contextual explanations and the watchdog role (Campos-Rueda & Goyanes, 2023; Trappel, 2010).

This is not to suggest that all criticisms of Czech PSM’s lack of objectivity were unfounded. On the contrary, the findings indicate areas for improvement, particularly in ensuring a neutral presentation (as some participants perceived visible personal biases, including sympathies or antipathies towards certain politicians, political parties, or worldviews, among journalists) and in offering space for diverse views and opinions (because certain perspectives are seen as excluded from coverage).

Compared to existing normative conceptualisations of PSM’s public value (Cañedo et al., 2022; Mazzucato et al., 2020), this study showed that, using the terminology of Mazzucato et al. (2020), the public focuses mostly on individual value and, to a limited extent, on societal value, while entirely neglecting industry value. More concretely, of the 12 elements of public value identified by Cañedo et al. (2022), the expectations of the Czech participants partially overlap with seven: independence; diversity; social engagement; excellence; universality; innovation; and accountability. Conversely, the expectations expressed by the participants fully omitted five elements of the public values identified by Cañedo et al. (2022): social justice; citizen participation; media literacy; territorial cohesion; and cooperation.

At the same time, the study showed that, rather than abstract ideas, citizens' expectations of PSM are grounded in concrete roles, functions, and tasks, with a consistent emphasis on the distinctiveness of PSM from commercial media. First, citizens view PSM as a non-commercial space that is free from excessive advertising and ratings-driven content that delivers high-quality journalism and culturally enriching non-news programming. Second, they expect PSM to serve as a national counterbalance to multinational VOD platforms by promoting national culture, language, and original programming, even though they do not necessarily frame this with themes like diversity or social cohesion. Third, citizens expect stronger oversight of PSM to ensure superior standards across all content compared to commercial media.

Finally, **Study VII** took a closer look at the public willingness to pay for PSM, drawing attention to a country in the CEE region as a case study—for, to our knowledge, the first time in this context. Additionally, it focused on the socio-psychological factors that affect WTP, which have largely been overlooked in previous research (O'Brien et al., 2020). The representative questionnaire survey of the Czech population revealed several factors that positively affect WTP for PSM.

This study added to a growing body of research that suggests that PSM consumption positively affects WTP for PSM (Delaney & O'Toole, 2004; Grammel & Gründl, 2018; Háló et al., 2023; Lin et al., 2013; Schlegel & Seufert, 2012). This indicates that, to maintain financial viability, PSM must provide high-quality offerings across different genres and formats for various societal segments, which are distributed through diverse channels and platforms to ensure broad relevance and consumption, and attract the broadest possible audience, which aligns with the principle of universality (UNESCO & WRTC, 2001).

In addition, the study revealed a positive effect for paying for commercial media on WTP for PSM, which aligns with Sehl's (2023) findings. This contributed additional evidence against the assumption of the "crowding out" effect between PSM and commercial media (Sehl et al., 2020) and suggests that PSM and commercial media are in the same boat given that they both need society to perceive quality media content and services as valuable and worth paying for. We assume that, as a counterpart to the "free mentality" (O'Brien, 2022), there is a segment of the audience with a "payer mentality" that perceives media content and services as valuable goods worth paying for, regardless of whether the producer is a commercial or public service medium.

Also, the data showed that socio-political trust (i.e., trust in other people and in key political institutions) is positively associated with WTP for PSM, which is similar to the findings of Háló et al. (2023), and which suggests that PSM may be widely perceived as part of the "system".

Interestingly, the tendency to partisan selective exposure (defined as the tendency to seek media content that aligns with one's ideological views while avoiding content that is ideologically incongruent; Tsfat, 2016) did not have a statistically significant effect on WTP for PSM. However, it has a moderation effect for the relationship between expenditure on commercial news and entertainment services and WTP for PSM. For individuals with higher levels of partisan selective exposure, an increase in expenditure on commercial news and entertainment services more significantly increases the amount these individuals are willing to pay for PSM. In contrast, this increase is less pronounced for individuals with lower levels of partisan selective exposure. This suggests that, for individuals with a "payer mentality", the tendency for partisan selective exposure goes hand in hand with an extra willingness to support the medium of their choice, even financially. This is broadly in line with prior research, suggesting that partisan audiences exhibit higher levels of loyalty (Ksiazek, 2016).

The moderation effect observed in the study suggests that certain audience segments perceive Czech PSM content as ideologically aligned with their own views, while marginalising the perspectives they oppose. Two complementary explanations may account for this. The more optimistic interpretation is that audiences align themselves with the core democratic values embodied by PSM, such as plurality, independence, and resistance to disinformation, rather than with extremist or conspiratorial media. A more critical interpretation posits that this alignment reflects a preference for specific political ideologies or partisan positions (e.g., right-wing or conservative views), which would imply the presence of systemic bias within Czech PSM. Such a development would contradict the public service remit to serve the entire population by offering a balanced and diverse range of viewpoints.

Evidence for the second, more pessimistic view is supported by prior qualitative and survey research that indicates a perceived right-wing bias in Czech Television and Czech Radio (Macková et al., 2024; Urbániková, 2024). This could mean that for those willing to pay for media content (who are more often right-wing, as our data showed), the tendency towards partisan selective exposure may increase their WTP for PSM because they perceive PSM as effectively reflecting their (right-wing) political orientation. Nonetheless, it is important to highlight that the public perception of bias is inherently subjective and may be shaped by political rhetoric, particularly from opposition parties who accuse PSM of favouring the current government. Also, approximately 40% of the Czech public still considers the content of ČT and ČRo to be neutral, compared to about 30% who express no opinion and another 30% perceive a political bias, either to the right or left (Urbániková, 2024). At the same time, externally commissioned analyses of the PSM content consistently show a high degree of balance in PSM output (Media Tenor, 2025).

To conclude, **Studies V, VI, and VII** revealed a recurring theme in public attitudes towards PSM: objectivity and political independence are not only core to the public's normative expectations, but they are also foundational to trust and the willingness to pay. Yet, as these studies and recent research (Urbániková, 2024) show, a substantial segment of the Czech public remains unconvinced that ČT and ČRo fully embody these ideals. This perception warrants serious attention from both media practitioners and policymakers. PSM institutions must engage more meaningfully with critical public voices to understand the roots of perceived shortcomings and consider how their editorial practices and communication strategies might be improved. At the same time, legislators bear responsibility for reinforcing the structural safeguards of PSM independence. Enhancing the transparency, credibility, and autonomy of oversight mechanisms would not only help insulate PSM from political pressures but also send a clear signal to the public that objectivity and independence are institutionally protected, not merely aspirational values.

1.6.4 Avenues for Further Research

Building on the findings of the seven presented studies, several avenues for future research emerge that warrant further scholarly attention. The final section of this commentary will suggest directions for future inquiry.

First, from a normative perspective, future research on public service journalism should prioritise two critical and increasingly pressing areas: the integration of AI and the implementation of personalised recommendation algorithms. Both developments pose significant challenges to the core normative values of public service journalism. The adoption of AI in news production, while offering potential efficiencies, risks, if not carefully governed, the diminishment of journalistic autonomy and editorial judgement, the amplification of misinformation, challenges to trust and credibility, and a decrease in pluralism and diversity. Similarly, personalised recommendation algorithms, often designed to optimise engagement, may inadvertently fragment audiences and undermine the democratic mandate of PSM to provide shared informational resources that cater to all segments of society. These technologies present not only operational dilemmas but also ethical and institutional threats that merit sustained scrutiny.

Second, the presented studies underscore the vital importance of political independence for PSM organisations: this is crucial not only for their staff, particularly journalists, but also for the public they serve. While independence is widely recognised as a core PSM value (e.g., Cañedo et al., 2022), practical knowledge remains limited regarding the legal and institutional frameworks that most effectively safeguard it. Although PSM funding, supervision, and management systems are well-documented in Europe at a descriptive level (see, e.g.,

European Broadcasting Union, 2025; Wagner, 2016; Weinand et al., 2021), there remains a notable lack of empirically grounded insight into what mechanisms are effective in practice and why. Further research, ideally conducted from an international comparative perspective, is needed to determine how best to establish checks and balances to robustly insulate PSM organisations from undue political interference.

Third, the studies that focused on internal interference at RTVS (Study II, III, and IV) suggest that journalistic autonomy and perceived interference are not only situational and context-dependent (Kotišová & Waschková Císařová, 2023; Sjøvaag, 2013), but also highly subjective. As demonstrated, identical organisational situations may be interpreted in fundamentally different ways by individual actors, and indirect experiences, such as observing the treatment of dissenting colleagues, can significantly shape the perceptions of autonomy. While most studies adopt a quantitative approach and focus on perceived autonomy or influence without specifying the concrete manifestations of interference (Ahva et al., 2016; Hanitzsch & Mellado, 2011; Maurer, 2017; Reich & Hanitzsch, 2013), these complexities highlight the limitations of conventional survey instruments and underscore the need for methodologically innovative approaches. Mixed-method designs, case studies conducted across different cultural contexts, and ethnographic research may offer more nuanced insights into how journalists perceive, assess, and respond to institutional pressures, thereby advancing our understanding of autonomy in practice.

Fourth, objectivity emerged as a central public expectation of PSM and the cornerstone of public trust in its work. At the same time, it represents the most frequently criticised aspect of Czech PSM from the public's perspective. This calls for further research to clarify what audiences actually mean when they invoke *objectivity*, and why they perceive PSM as falling short in this area. The public understandings of objectivity may diverge significantly from scholarly or professional definitions, a point underscored by the findings of Study VI. To respond meaningfully to audience concerns, it is essential to gain deeper insight into their expectations and grievances. Given the abstract nature of these concepts, qualitative methodologies, such as focus group discussions or semi-structured interviews, should be employed, ideally with concrete news content as prompts for reflection and critique. Such approaches would not only help unpack the meanings that audiences ascribe to objectivity but also reveal the implicit standards by which they evaluate PSM performance.

Finally, as funding remains a critical issue for the long-term sustainability of PSM, there is a pressing need for more comprehensive research into the public attitudes about its financing, which is an area that remains markedly underexplored in the European context. Future studies should investigate the factors that shape the public willingness to pay for PSM,

ideally through international comparative research that can illuminate the influence of different political, cultural, and economic environments. In addition to inquiries into the public perceptions of funding models and the adequate levels of financial contributions, further research should examine how citizens conceptualise the appropriate scope of PSM services in relation to funding levels. In the context of digital media proliferation, expectations for the breadth of PSM offerings may vary considerably across different demographic and societal segments. Therefore, rather than treating the current scope of PSM services as fixed, research on WTP should incorporate this dimension by exploring how much people are willing to pay for varying levels of service and what level of service they actually consider appropriate. Such an approach would provide valuable insights for the sustainable future of PSM.

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2. Study I: Updating the Classics: The Roles and Principles of Public Service Journalism in the Digital Era

Milosavljević, M., & Urbániková, M. (2025). *Updating the classics: The roles and principles of public service journalism in the digital era*. In A. D'Arma, M. Michalis, G. F. Lowe, & M.-B. Zita (Eds.), *Challenges and developments in public service journalism* (pp. 25–46). University of Westminster Press. <https://dx.doi.org/10.16997/14610450>

Chapter 2

Updating the Classics: The Roles and Principles of Public Service Journalism in the Digital Era

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Summary

The transformations brought about by recent societal, technological, and political developments have challenged public service media (PSM) to re-evaluate its principles, roles, and functions. This also applies to PSM journalism, which has traditionally been one of the foundational pillars of PSM. This chapter delves into the response of PSM journalism to contemporary developments, examining the guiding principles it should embrace and the roles it should fulfil to maintain its relevance in the digital age. In addition, it explores the concept of quality journalism and examines whether PSM journalism should be ‘just’ quality journalism or have unique characteristics that set it apart. We argue that PSM journalism should be based on the core normative principles of quality journalism while simultaneously incorporating the normative principles intrinsic to PSM as a whole. Thus, in addition to the standards of quality journalism, PSM journalism should incorporate and exemplify the principle of universality, which refers to: a) the diversity of forms and genres; b) equitable and universal access for all segments of society; and c) comprehensive coverage not only at the national but also at the local, regional, and international levels.

Introduction

Public service media (PSM) have been recently facing serious challenges. In addition to the ongoing and well-researched issues regarding political and economic pressures (Hanretty, 2011), major disruptive transformations of

media ecosystems have emerged, primarily due to digitalisation (Lowe et al., 2018). These new conditions have led to processes that extend well into the 2020s, including fragmentation of the media sphere, platformisation, the development of strategic disinformation campaigns, and the rise of fake news. In addition, broader political and societal processes have also significantly affected the functioning and performance of PSM, including political polarisation and the rise of populism and illiberalism, resulting in a shifting and frequently unstable position of PSM (Holtz-Bacha, 2021; Sehl et al., 2022).

As a result of these combined societal, technological, and political processes, for more than a decade, the rhetoric of crisis has dominated the debate on PSM. PSM, both as a concept and as organisations, are said to be eroding, collapsing, vanishing, under pressure, in flux, in trouble, and under threat (Chivers & Allan, 2022; Donders & Raats, 2015; Horowitz, 2015; Lowe & Steemers, 2012). As often repeated, to remain relevant, PSM needs to reconsider its remit, roles, and functions and modernise and adapt to the changing conditions. This is the task facing PSM services as a whole, not leaving aside the domain of PSM journalism, which has traditionally been one of its founding pillars. The significance of PSM journalism from the audience's perspective is also reflected in the fact that PSM is the most trusted news source in twenty-eight of thirty-one European countries (European Broadcasting Union [EBU], 2022).

So how should PSM journalism respond to these current developments? What principles should it adhere to in the rapidly evolving digital environment, and what roles and functions should it fulfil to remain relevant to its audiences in the digital age? And, moreover, is the concept of quality journalism universal, regardless of the type of media in which it is practised, or does PSM journalism have unique characteristics that set it apart? This chapter explores the implications of the dramatic changes and challenges for public service journalism and aims to critically examine and reconceptualise its roles and principles in the constantly transforming media environment in the digital age.

We argue that PSM journalism should be based on the fundamental normative principles of quality journalism while also integrating the normative principles and functions intrinsic to PSM as a whole. Therefore, in addition to adhering to the standards of quality journalism, PSM journalism should incorporate and exemplify the principle of universality, which is recognised as one of the core tenets of PSM (Born & Prosser, 2001; EBU, 2014; Iosifidis, 2007; Lowe & Savage, 2020; UNESCO & World Radio and Television Council [WRTVC], 2001).

Universality refers to: a) the diversity of forms and genres; b) equitable and universal access to all segments of society; and c) comprehensive coverage not only at the national but also at the local, regional, and international levels. Universality becomes particularly significant in societies dominated by private, commercial media (Milosavljević & Poler, 2018). Such media typically offer shorter news forms and a limited range of genres and topics that are less demanding in terms of knowledge, time, and production costs and target specific segments of society that are most profitable for them with regard to their business model and advertising or sales strategies. The focus on universality is the basis for the distinct journalistic approach and unique journalistic content, which contributes to the overall distinctive value of PSM in contemporary societies.

PSM principles, roles, and functions and their implications for PSM journalism

The significance of news and journalism in PSM production and distribution, along with the expectations and demands placed on them, arises from the foundational principles, roles, and functions of PSM. As an integral component of PSM, journalistic content is expected to contribute to its broader mission and adhere to its general principles. However, defining the mission and remit of PSM, including its journalism, particularly in the constant flux of digital disruptions and innovations, is a chronically difficult exercise, not least because different perspectives clash here. In addition to a normative/academic perspective, there is also a legal perspective and perspectives of the audience, PSM managers, and journalists (Urbániková, 2023). Based on the literature that draws on and maps these different perspectives, the PSM mission, tasks, and functions can be summarised in the following ten points – without any claim to completeness and with a necessary degree of simplification.

First, in line with the principle of universality (Born & Prosser, 2001; Cañedo et al., 2022; Chivers & Allan, 2022; EBU, 2014; Lowe & Savage, 2020; UNESCO & WRTVC, 2001; Vanhaeght & Donders, 2015), PSM should provide universal coverage and access to all citizens, serving as a common reference point for all (Campos-Rueda & Goyanes, 2023; Council of Europe, 1994; Holznagel, 2000). To achieve this, it should aim to create a public sphere where every segment of society can access both universal content that overcomes filter bubbles and, at the same time, specialised content tailored to their specific needs. PSM offering should be varied and diverse in terms of

content (topics, actors, formats, and genres), platforms (diversity of distribution, including the online sphere) and target groups (for example, youth; seniors; people with disabilities; national, ethnic, and religious minorities; LGBTQ+). In essence, PSM should be accessible to all, allowing everyone to choose content that interests and is relevant to them. Only in this way can it fulfil its role as a forum for broad public debate.

Second, PSM should fulfil the information function and act as a guide for the free formation of opinions. It should provide impartial news coverage and serve as a source of reliable analysis explaining why and how things happen and their consequences at the individual and societal levels (Campos-Rueda & Goyanes, 2023; Cañedo et al.; Council of Europe, 1994; Hastings, 2004; Holznagel, 2000; Lamuedra et al., 2019; Lowe & Maijanen, 2019; Mazzucato et al., 2020; Ofcom, 2023; UNESCO & WRTVC, 2001). This requires PSM to deliver quality journalism with all its usual attributes. To achieve this, PSM must remain independent from political and commercial pressures (including advertising, where applicable) and maintain full editorial integrity in the production of its news and current affairs content. While independence and autonomy are among the foundations of journalists' professional identity (Deuze, 2005), whether they work in commercial media or PSM, it can be argued that public expectations are even higher and stricter for journalists in PSM.

Third, PSM should provide information and analysis based on national perspectives and interests. It should serve as the voice of the nation in Europe and the world and promote national identity (Lowe & Maijanen, 2019; UNESCO & WRTVC, 2001). From the point of view of PSM journalism, this involves maintaining a stable network of foreign correspondents for comprehensive foreign coverage.

Fourth, PSM should serve as a watchdog (Campos-Rueda & Goyanes, 2023; Trappel, 2010) and control public and private corporate power. PSM fulfils this control function mainly through its journalism. This requires PSM journalism to hold power accountable, which should be reflected in the choice of topics and genres. It also implies a commitment to investigative journalism, which is often not lucrative for many commercial media due to its high financial cost.

Fifth, PSM should approach its audiences as citizens rather than consumers and encourage their active participation in society (BBC, 2004; Born & Prosser, 2001; Campos-Rueda & Goyanes, 2023; Cañedo et al., 2022; Chivers & Allan, 2022; Hastings, 2004; Lamuedra et al., 2019). Thus, it should fulfil the task of promoting citizenship. PSM journalism plays a pivotal role in

this. It should promote civic engagement by covering and explaining political processes, including those at the local level; providing diverse perspectives; facilitating public discourse; highlighting social issues; educating the public about their rights and responsibilities in a democratic society; and promoting transparency and accountability. Furthermore, PSM journalism itself can integrate the principle of public participation into its operations and foster dialogue and engagement with its audiences. This can be achieved through using interactive features; user-generated content; engaging with audiences on social media; using technology to tailor content to individual interests and preferences; and being responsive to audience inquiries, concerns, and feedback.

Sixth, PSM should reflect the diversity in multicultural societies, be attentive to the needs of minorities (this includes creating programmes for national, ethnic, and religious minorities; children and youth; regional and local programmes, and so on), give voice to the less privileged and promote an understanding of different human experiences (BBC, 2004; Cañedo et al., 2022; Council of Europe, 1994; EBU, 2014; Chivers & Allan, 2022; Hastings, 2004; Lamuedra et al., 2019; Mazzucato et al., 2020; Ofcom, 2023; UNESCO & WRTVC, 2001). In short, PSM should promote social empathy and cohesion (Campos-Rueda & Goyanes, 2023; Holznagel, 2000; Vanhaeght & Donders, 2015). PSM journalism can play a pivotal role in this by offering accurate and balanced reporting free of prejudice and stereotyping; representing diverse voices and perspectives within a society; giving voice to marginalised groups; helping people from different backgrounds see themselves reflected in the news; promoting dialogue and debate; and exposing injustice and inequality.

Seventh, PSM should educate and entertain also within its news programming and offer pluralistic, innovative, and diverse programmes, including those not provided by the commercial sector (BBC, 2004; Born & Prosser, 2001; Cañedo et al., 2022; Chivers & Allan, 2022; Council of Europe, 1994; Ofcom, 2023). Even though the primary purpose of PSM journalism is to inform, it can also contribute to fulfilling educational and entertainment functions. In-depth reporting and expert insights into various subjects can educate the public, while visualising data, multimedia elements, effective storytelling techniques and interactive content can help engage and entertain audiences.

Eighth, PSM should promote national and European production (including original production by independent producers) and mediate the diversity of national and European cultural heritage (BBC, 2004; Chivers & Allan, 2022; Council of Europe, 1994; Hastings, 2004; Holznagel, 2000; Lowe & Maijanen,

2019; Mazzucato et al., 2020; UNESCO & WRTVC, 2001). Thus, it also has cultural and creative functions. While these functions primarily apply to non-news content, especially entertainment and culture, they can also be relevant for PSM journalism. After all, news content can and should be innovative and creative, and PSM journalism should lead in devising new ways to engage audiences and deliver important messages.

Ninth, PSM should serve as a credible reference point in fragmented media markets and provide help with orientation within the market of content and services (Holznagel, 2000). This extends to PSM journalism too. Fulfilling the curatorial function requires a high level of trust. PSM journalism should be a safe harbour, and audiences must be able to rely on PSM news being selected, organised, and presented in a truthful and impartial manner that reflects reality well.

Finally, PSM is expected to set and guarantee high quality standards, thus also contributing to the cultivation of the entire media sector (Holznagel, 2000; Lowe & Maijanen, 2019; Mazzucato et al., 2020). This reference function naturally extends to PSM journalism and its contribution to raising the standard of the news media system, which brings us back to the requirement for quality journalism.

Principles of quality journalism

In essence, PSM journalism should be quality journalism. But how to untangle this concept and what exactly does this ideal entail? The debate about quality journalism is mostly approached from a normative democratic viewpoint (Bachmann et al., 2022), and the core of the definition stems from the expected roles and functions of journalism in democratic societies (Anderson, 2014). Thus, the principles originate from the classical Western perspective of the news media as the fourth estate (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001). This also means that, as expectations of journalists and the news media vary in different parts of the world (Hanitzsch et al., 2019), these principles cannot be considered as universally valid and accepted.

Despite this limitation, drawing on normative, audience, and journalist perspectives of quality journalism, its elements, principles, and functions can be summarised as follows (Bachmann et al., 2022; Bosshart & Hellmüller, 2009; Deuze, 2005; Gil de Zúñiga & Hinsley, 2013; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001; Maurer, 2017; Meijer, 2012; Urban & Schweiger, 2014; van der Wurff & Schoenbach, 2014). Quality journalism should provide timely, truthful,

accurate, and verified information. It should serve as an independent monitor of power and hold the powerful to account; provide the audience with analysis and interpretation of current affairs and complex problems; report different views and perspectives; and give ordinary people a chance to express their views. Furthermore, it should enable citizens to form their own opinions and motivate them to participate in public life.

Quality journalism should also be objective, impartial, neutral, balanced, and fair. Given that objectivity is a contested term and that its lack is frequently objected to by audiences and other groups, particularly politicians, a more detailed definition of this term is needed here. According to Westerståhl (1983), the main components of objectivity are factuality (truth and relevance) and impartiality (balance/non-partisanship and neutral presentation). Thus, objectivity extends beyond mere balance, and quality journalism should not settle for merely balancing multiple points of view and giving them equal time and space. Such 'false balance' (Brüggemann & Engesser, 2017) actually stands in direct opposition to quality journalism. Instead, quality journalism should pay equal attention to other components of objectivity, such as truth, relevance, neutral presentation, and fairness, just as it does to balance. Moreover, balance, while important, should be viewed as merely an instrument rather than a goal in itself.

At the same time, objectivity in journalism is often considered a Platonic ideal because it represents an abstract, aspirational concept that may be difficult to fully attain in practice (for a detailed discussion, see Maras, 2013). Journalists face the inherent need to make choices about what to include or omit and how to frame their stories. These choices encompass the processes of selection and editing, which imply that the resulting product – whether it is text, audio, video, graphics or photography – cannot offer a complete perspective. Furthermore, these choices are influenced by journalists' personal perspectives, values, and worldviews. Consequently, journalism cannot be entirely devoid of subjectivity.

In addition to the above-mentioned normative characteristics of quality journalism, various other criteria are frequently used, such as clarity, comprehensiveness, comprehensibility, diversity, factuality, relevance, contextualisation, and transparency (Maurer, 2017). Besides, quality journalism should involve captivating presentation, be interesting, entertaining, and enjoyable (Bosshart & Hellmüller, 2009). Also, to be able to meet all the requirements of quality journalism, journalists must be professional, independent, practise their profession autonomously and adhere to high ethical standards (Urban & Schweiger, 2014).

Is PSM journalism ‘just’ quality journalism or does it bring a unique value?

The debates about the normative principles of PSM and quality journalism often run parallel but remain distinct, for several reasons. First, PSM encompasses a much wider range of content and areas than solely journalism. Second, the realm of (quality) journalism approaches its foundational principles from a distinct historical perspective. Discussions on objectivity, diversity, plurality, verification, and truth within journalism have existed and persisted for decades or even centuries prior to the establishment of the first public broadcasters (Elliott, 1978; Merrill, 1997; Ward, 2006). However, at the intersection of the debates on PSM and quality journalism, we can identify a number of shared normative principles but also specific aspects that contribute to the distinctive identity of PSM journalism, which in turn can contribute to the overall unique value of PSM in contemporary societies.

We recognise the principle of universality as one of the fundamental principles of PSM (Lowe & Savage, 2020), which has significant implications also for PSM journalism. Universality remains a highly relevant principle even in the digital age. The disruption of business models has placed commercial media under economic pressure (Pickard, 2019), making them more susceptible to refraining from high-cost journalism and journalistic content and genres that do not yield high audience figures. This challenge is particularly pronounced in smaller countries (Milosavljević & Poler, 2018). Drawing on and extending the conceptualisation by Iosifidis (2007), we distinguish between universality of: a) forms and genres; b) access; and c) news coverage. The remainder of this section will address each of the three aspects of universality which contribute to the distinctive value PSM brings.

Universality of forms and genres

News content and journalism in general, is produced and presented to the public in a variety of forms and genres. In the most general classification, they fall into either informative (information and data-based) or interpretative (opinion-based) genres and are then classified into narrower specific genres such as news, reportage, news analysis, interview, commentary, and portrait. These genres are then produced within different forms and formats, with distinctive lengths, elements, visuals, and platform specifics (audio, video, running stories on the web).

These different forms and genres enable journalists in PSM to fully perform the tasks and roles that are generally expected of them, particularly normative tasks of informing, interpreting, investigating, serving as a watchdog, advocating, and also entertaining (Janowitz, 1975; Knowlton, 1995; Scheuer, 2008).

Some of these tasks are uncontroversial for PSM journalism, such as the task of controlling and criticising the sources of power (Scheuer, 2008). Others are discussed only in relation to their extent and manner – for example, the task of entertaining where ‘to make popular programmes good and good programmes popular’ (Tracey, 1998, p. 35) has been one of the historical mottos of PSM. The tasks of performing interpretative or advocacy journalism, however, are more contested within PSM. This directly affects which news forms and genres should or should not be used in PSM journalism.

Journalism which aims primarily at the detached dissemination of information builds on data- and information-driven reporting that rests on the assumption of verifiable truth. This approach stems from a general ‘fascination for the creed of factual objectivity’ (Cudlipp, 1976, p. 410, as cited in Elliott, 1978, p. 184), where the task of journalists is to remain detached in their portrayal of social reality (Maras, 2013) and to sharply separate facts and opinions (Janowitz, 1975).

This effort is understandable in the context of PSM organisations striving to provide a universal service to an entire society, encompassing all its constituents and demographic groups. This endeavour is also in line with the principle of promoting social cohesion (Iosifidis, 2007). Such pursuit of a universal audience leads to the avoidance of interpretative and advocacy aspects and genres that could give rise to accusations of bias and sidelining.

The outcome of this approach has been a ‘particularly fragmented type of news concentrating on available events and incidents’, though this does not preclude ‘controversy over their selection and interpretation’ (Elliott, 1978, p. 184). This general disinterest in ends ‘leads to a concentration on means’, resulting in the production of ‘castrated journalism’ (Milosavljević, 2001) and the emergence of the type of journalists that Desmond Taylor, in his BBC lunch-time lecture (1975, p. 4), called the ‘intellectual eunuchs’ of PSM.

Another normative task of journalism, in addition to informing, is that of advocacy. It acknowledges that objectivity in news reporting is not possible and argues that journalism should include the perceptions and interests of various competing social groups, particularly those that are marginalised, excluded or underprivileged (Janowitz, 1975). However, engaging in full-on advocacy within PSM poses challenges. On the one hand, it can potentially

lead to accusations of bias, contradicting the principle of universality of coverage, where PSM should strive to provide a shared voice for the entire society without alienating specific segments. On the other hand, the principle of universality of forms and genres requires PSM to produce content in a diverse range of informative and interpretative formats. The solution could involve being sensitive to the problems and needs of various social groups, without favouritism and blind spots, ensuring that no one feels left out or left behind.

Even more crucial, not just for the PSM but for the entire media ecosystem and society, is whether and to what extent PSM journalists produce the forms and genres that are more complex and demanding both in terms of knowledge and in terms of time and production costs, such as investigative journalism. PSM journalism is reasonably expected to take the lead in producing (or commissioning, based on its in-house standards) high-quality long-form content. This becomes particularly crucial in an era where quality journalism produced by commercial media is increasingly restricted behind paywalls, excluding citizens who may lack the financial means to afford it.

Besides investigative journalism, news analysis, for example, is another complex and resource-intensive genre. According to Bourdieu's well-known view of television and journalism, there is a journalistic tradition to 'focus on simple events that are simple to cover' (1996/1998, p. 8), with a 'patent lack of interest in subtle, nuanced changes, or in processes that, like the continental drift, remain unperceived and imperceptible in the moment, revealing their effects only in the long term' (1996/1998, p. 7). Because the mission of PSM is not to generate profit but to serve the public interest and contribute to the democratic, cultural, and social needs of society, PSM should not fall into this trap and should offer analysis and interpretation in addition to information.

Universality of access

While universality of access is defined as a general characteristic of PSM (Iosifidis, 2007; Lowe & Savage, 2020), it plays a specific role within PSM journalism, as it enables access to news – in terms of its content and production – to all groups of society. Commercial media can and usually do target specific socio-demographic and opinion segments of society and choose those that are most relevant for them with regard to their business model and advertising or sales strategies. This leads to a focus on specific groups that are often economically stronger and more privileged.

However, the specific task of PSM is to address and provide universal access to its journalism to each and every individual, group, and segment of

society. This is particularly relevant to marginalised groups and individuals who are often not (sufficiently) included in news content, either as creators or as speaking actors, and specific niche groups that are not economically attractive and viable for commercial media. This is also reflected in the general approach to the reporting of viewing figures for private and public service broadcasters, with private broadcasters usually reporting and publishing their results in the 15–55 (or 18–55) age group (which is the typical segment reported in surveys such as AGB Nielsen), while PSM reports results in the 5+ age group, thus avoiding age discrimination against children or young people on the one hand and the elderly on the other.

Universality of news coverage

While other media outlets may provide either general coverage or cater to niche audiences, the particular role of PSM is to provide universal and non-discriminatory coverage of all geographical areas, or what has Tuchman (1978) defined as an appropriate ‘news net’. This obligation extends not merely to the country and society as a whole but also to all regional and local areas, as well as to international coverage. This universal approach presents another unique contribution of PSM journalism to society. This is especially significant in recent decades when commercial media outlets have been reducing the number of correspondents and field reporters, both at the local and regional levels, as well as internationally (for example, Rasmussen, 2012). Consequently, societies are grappling with a scarcity of news in their regions, creating what are referred to as ‘news deserts’ (Pickard, 2023).

Also, while international news agencies such as Reuters and the Associated Press, along with other outlets, may offer a global perspective on foreign events and developments, PSM has a distinct role in providing a ‘translation’ of these international events to the domestic audience in their respective countries. This involves offering specific context and historical knowledge, and establishing connections between the domestic society and the locations where correspondents and field journalists are reporting from.

Digital opportunities and challenges for PSM journalism

The digital transformation of the media ecosystem has also impacted PSM and its journalism. While PSM may be less affected by digitalisation in terms of changes to their business models compared to many private commercial

media outlets, they are nonetheless significantly influenced by innovations in various digital technologies that affect both journalistic production and distribution. Additionally, they face other challenges of the digital era, including the advent of artificial intelligence, disinformation campaigns, and the polarisation of society.

Digital production of PSM journalism

Digital transformations within newsrooms have been underway for over thirty years, evolving from singular aspects, such as the introduction of integrated newsrooms, to complex and overlapping integration and implementation of various technologies and approaches in recent years. This includes an emphasis on multiskilling and constant reskilling in areas such as video and audio recording, editorial and production systems, and more. It also involves integrated production of audio and video content for diverse technologies (radio, television, web, apps, podcasts, and so on), the adoption of new systems for (big) data journalism, and the exploration of innovative forms of communication using different applications. Additionally, it encompasses the incorporation of emerging technologies for data collection and verification, which are particularly crucial in addressing issues of (strategic) disinformation and digital manipulation, including deep-fake technologies. While these and other new technologies offer opportunities for PSM journalism, they also bring significant challenges, particularly in the face of ongoing stagnation and erosion of their funding (EBU, 2023).

Digital distribution of PSM journalism

In addition to changes in production, PSM journalism must adapt and respond to significant shifts in media content distribution and consumption. The traditional means of distributing PSM through radio and television broadcasting have been, along with cable and satellite distribution, augmented by the internet and various digital forms, particularly through platforms and social media. Despite challenges and restrictions on the presence of PSM on the web in many countries (Cappello, 2015), it is essential for PSM to maintain a distribution-agnostic approach and leverage any available means, analogous to its integration with television when that technology became relevant, following its initial role as (mere) radio broadcasting.

Presently, PSM needs to be accessible through any technology to remain truly universal and available to the entire society, including the youngest generations. Achieving this requires aligning with the shift in digital media use and consumption and reaching audiences wherever they are in terms of technology. For PSM journalism, this imperative also entails ongoing reskilling and education of PSM journalists and editors to keep pace with the constant flux of media and journalism.

Artificial intelligence

A distinct challenge and opportunity that transcends the specific domains of production and distribution in PSM journalism is so-called artificial intelligence (AI), which holds the potential to fundamentally transform the entire media ecosystem. This gives rise to at least three implications for PSM journalism. First, the specific information function of PSM in delivering verified information takes again centre stage. A steadfast commitment to high journalistic standards and quality can enhance the value of PSM and its journalism to society as a safe harbour not only from disinformation but also from manipulated images, audio and video content (including deep fakes), and other deliberately misleading and inauthentic content.

Second, PSM and its newsrooms can and should develop specific approaches to AI and algorithms, including creating their own unique PSM algorithms (Hoffmann et al., 2015; Van den Bulck & Moe, 2018). These efforts further fulfil the general principle of serving the public interest and enhance PSM's autonomy, particularly in contrast to commercial stakeholders that dominate contemporary media ecosystems. While full autonomy may not be entirely feasible (as PSM will need to interact with commercial stakeholders and their algorithms to some extent), autonomy in the realm of AI remains a significant goal for the future of PSM – perhaps never entirely achievable but important as an aspirational ideal.

Third, PSM organisations must develop and implement their own standards for the use of AI technologies. These standards need to ensure quality, editorial autonomy, adherence to ethical principles, transparency, accountability, and other aspects involved in AI implementation in journalism (Milosavljević & Vobič, 2019). For this purpose, PSM should stay abreast of the development of international standards and documents related to AI in journalism, such as the 'Guidelines on the responsible implementation of artificial intelligence systems in journalism' by the Council of Europe (2023).

PSM journalism as a lighthouse in a polarised society

Several other challenges represent a new dimension of old issues regarding the roles, principles, and ideals of PSM and quality journalism. The rise of disinformation campaigns (often related to the proliferation of political populism), manipulated content, and the dissemination of conspiracy theories have become prominent in the 2010s and 2020s. This underscores the renewed significance of PSM journalism's information function, which is grounded in the search for accurate data, verification, fact-checking, and the pursuit of truth. This was further emphasised in the post-2020 period, especially after the outbreak of COVID-19. This crisis not only led to the spread of disinformation but also fostered doubts in science and data (Horowitz & Lowe, 2020). In this context, the role of PSM journalism goes beyond the information function; it also encompasses the public forum function of providing a shared space for public discussion, a variety of voices, and the presentation of important (scientific) insights and data, while subjecting them to potential criticism and deliberation. Thus, PSM journalism should serve as a lighthouse of information and integration in a polarised society.

Translating theory into practice: Recommendations for PSM

In a time of decreasing interest in news and increasing news avoidance (Newman et al., 2023), staying relevant to the public is vital for PSM funding and survival in the decades to come. PSM journalism needs to not only maintain its existing audiences but, ideally, also attract new audiences, especially the youngest generations, which PSM news often falls short of addressing (Schulz et al., 2019). How should PSM journalism transform itself in the digital era to accomplish this?

First, we argue that the principle of universality has gained renewed importance for PSM journalism, encompassing aforementioned aspects such as the universality of forms and genres, access, and coverage. Navigating the digital landscape, PSM journalism should leverage the advantages of digital technologies by producing niche (news) content that was once considered too narrow for traditional mass audiences. However, caution is necessary to avoid the pitfalls of filter bubbles (Pariser, 2011). PSM journalism needs to strike a balance between what Negroponte referred to as 'The Daily Us' and 'The Daily Me' (1995, pp. 153–164); that is, between providing a collective narrative addressing societal issues and personalised content catering

to individual interests. Achieving this equilibrium poses a key challenge for PSM journalism, but it is imperative for remaining both relevant and appealing to a diverse audience.

Second, as the digital era has disrupted traditional revenue models for journalism, negatively affecting the financial viability of commercial media (Pickard, 2019), the importance of quality PSM journalism for democracy becomes even more pronounced. It is therefore essential that PSM does not abandon complex, expensive long-form journalism, investigative reporting, and the maintenance of both local and foreign correspondent networks. These pillars of high-cost, quality journalism contribute significantly to a well-informed and engaged citizenry.

Third, a particular challenge for PSM journalism is how to convince the public that it is here for everybody, without any favouritism. Previous research shows that perceived independence of PSM is crucial for public trust (EBU, 2022); applied to PSM journalism, it means that it must be as objective and impartial as possible (Urbániková & Smejkal, 2023). This has long been a significant challenge for journalism as such, and PSM is under even stricter scrutiny with higher demands and expectations. Moreover, maintaining objectivity and impartiality, both in practice and as perceived by audiences, becomes increasingly difficult in a polarised society with rising political populism and the emergence of what some call ‘conspiracy theories’, while others view them as ‘alternative opinions’. As suggested by Ojala (2021), the lack of public trust towards the media primarily arises from the challenges that mainstream journalism encounters in providing equal representation to various political groups and perspectives during periods of heightened ideological contention and differing moral positions. Diversifying sources, including diverse perspectives and voices, while simultaneously correcting possible factual mistakes and untruths, clearly distinguishing news from opinion, presenting information neutrally, ensuring transparency in the reporting process, engaging with the audience, and fostering diversity in the newsroom can be some of the strategies for maintaining the image of objectivity and impartiality in a polarised society.

Fourth, to attract new audiences, PSM should leverage the opportunities provided by digital technologies, such as the use of open data (Lin, 2015); encouraging active participation and engagement; incorporating user-generated content; engaging in dialogic communication with the public and specific audiences (Vanhaeght, 2019; Vanhaeght & Donders, 2021); as well as implementing curation, moderation and the integration of social media networks (Hjarvard, 2018).

Finally, to ensure quality, accountability, transparency, and trustworthiness, PSM journalism should not only embrace digital technologies but also convincingly demonstrate to the public that it handles them thoughtfully and responsibly. Among other measures, this involves updating or creating new codes of journalistic conduct that address emerging issues, such as the use of AI in PSM journalism. These initiatives should also establish an industry benchmark for journalism as a whole.

Acknowledgements

Authors' names are listed in alphabetical order. Marko Milosavljević's work was financially supported by the European Union, under Grant 101094816 – DIACOMET – HORIZON-CL2-2022-DEMOCRACY-01. Marína Urbániková gratefully acknowledges support from the Czech Science Foundation (Grant No. GA22-30563S).

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3. Study II: Arguing About the Essence of Public Service in Public Service Media: A Case Study of a Newsroom Conflict at Slovak RTVS

Urbániková, M. (2023). Arguing about the essence of public service in public service media: A case study of a newsroom conflict at Slovak RTVS. *Journalism Studies*, 24(10), 1352–1374. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2023.2214935>

Arguing About the Essence of *Public Service* in Public Service Media: A Case Study of a Newsroom Conflict at Slovak RTVS

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ABSTRACT

Although it is generally acknowledged that the *raison d'être* for public service media (PSM) is to serve the public, there is much less agreement about what the term specifically means. This contribution, using a recent newsroom conflict at the Slovak public service broadcaster *Radio and Television of Slovakia (RTVS)* as a case study, explores how PSM journalists and managers perceive and interpret the essence of *public service* in PSM, how their interpretations differ from the academic and legal framework, how diverse the understanding of public service can be within one newsroom, and what consequences this variability can have for the functioning of that newsroom. It shows that the RTVS journalists' and managers' shared perception of PSM is closer to the market-failure perspective than to a more comprehensive democracy-centric perspective (Donders 2021). They construct PSM mainly as an antithesis to commercial media and see its value in the production of niche programmes and genres that are important, although not popular. Although they agreed in many aspects as to what public service obtains, the differences in the notion of objectivity and proper power distance were enough to cause permanent newsroom clashes and struggles, and eventually contributed to a significant staff turnover.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 12 May 2022

Accepted 9 May 2023

KEYWORDS

Newsroom conflict;
objectivity; PSM mission;
public service; public service
media; RTVS; Slovakia

Introduction

Public service, which is the foundation for public service media (PSM), is a concept that is used (and occasionally abused) by various stakeholders to assess, praise, or criticise the functioning of PSM and to legitimise or delegitimise its very existence. Although it is extensively discussed and examined by media scholars (e.g., Donders 2012; Donders 2021; Moe and Syvertsen 2009; Murdock 2005; Scannel 1990), much less is known about how the concept is understood and articulated by the key actors whose everyday jobs are to put it in practice: namely, the actual journalists and the managers of public service media organisations.

This contribution uses a newsroom conflict at the Slovak public service broadcaster *Radio and Television of Slovakia (RTVS)* in 2018 as a case study. Through 16 semi-structured

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interviews with journalists and managers from the RTVS newsroom it explores how they perceived and interpreted the concept of public service, how their interpretations differed from the academic and legal framework, how diverse its understanding was within one newsroom, and what the consequences of this variability had on the functioning of the PSM. The newsroom conflict started after the election of a new Director General in summer 2017 and culminated in a wave of protest resignations and layoffs in 2018 (see Urbániková 2021 for details). Differing views on the nature of public service and how best to fulfil it were identified by the actors of the conflict as one of the major sources for the upheaval.

The contribution of this paper is twofold. First, it examines the concept of public service from a rarely applied perspective. Typically, the scholarship on PSM takes a normative stance and focuses on what public service and PSM could or should mean in a democratic society and what its mission should be (e.g., Donders 2012; Donders 2021; Murdock 2005). Or, it takes an institutional and policy perspective to focus on how PSMs behave as institutions (e.g., Larsen 2014; Moe and Syvertsen 2007) and how, and with what effect, they are regulated (e.g., Hanretty 2011; Nowak 2014). This study adds to the scarce literature on how the ideal of public service is constructed and interpreted by the key stakeholders. The research so far concentrated on the audiences (Just, Büchi, and Latzer 2017; Lamuedra, Martín, and Broullón-Lozano 2019; Lamuedra Graván, Mateos, and Broullón-Lozano 2020; Reiter et al. 2018) and PSM managers (Larsen 2010; Larsen 2014; Lowe and Maijanen 2019; Maijanen 2015). This article explores how the concepts of public service and public service mission are perceived and interpreted by journalists and managers who work for a PSM organisation. Since they are the ones who put the concepts into practice in their daily work, their perspective is particularly important because it can inform their professional performance and subsequently the content they create, which in turn shapes the overall performance of PSM. Besides, who else but PSM journalists and managers should have a clear idea of the essence and value of PSM such that they can explain it convincingly to the public? Moreover, the paper shows how inherently different the understanding of public service and the idea of its fulfilment in practice can be within a single media organisation, and it demonstrates how damaging the consequences of disagreement can be for a PSM organisation.

Second, this paper contributes to the under-researched area of PSMs in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). The literature on PSMs predominantly focuses on Western Europe and only recently has started to look more intensely at other regions, including CEE (e.g., Jusić et al. 2021; Milosavljević and Poler 2018; Połomska and Beckett 2019), with attention mostly paid to the cases in Hungary (Bajomi-Lazar 2017; Polyák 2015) and Poland (Chapman 2017; Węglińska 2021).

Public Service Media and Public Service in Journalism

Public Service Media Mission

The provision of a public service is the sole purpose of public service media. Not only is it part of the actual name, but the public service remit is explicitly defined in legal acts that govern PSM, and its fulfilment is regularly assessed and evaluated. What, then, are the fundamental principles and core values of PSM? In addition to the legal perspective,

there is an academic perspective and perspectives of the audience, PSM managers, and journalists.

To the Reithian triad of “informing, educating and entertaining”, UNESCO (2005) added additional roles and functions: providing access to participation in public life; promoting access to culture; fostering interactions among citizens; serving the interest of people as citizens rather than as consumers; contributing to social inclusion; and the strengthening of civil society. The European Broadcasting Union, an alliance of PSM organisations that represents the managerial perspective, set out six core values for PSM: universality, independence, excellence, diversity, accountability, and innovation (EBU 2014). Other elements frequently mentioned in the academic literature include the provision of plural and quality information; the provision of open access to information and the actions of power holders; the provision of interpretations and explanations; the cultivation of an informed and enlightened democracy; the support of domestic culture and cultural cohesion (Lamuedra, Martín, and Broullón-Lozano 2019; Lowe and Maijanen 2019; Murdock 2005; Scannel 1990).

On a more conceptual level, according to Schweizer and Puppis (2018), media laws and decrees typically include three elements of PSM remits: genres; goals and functions; and the characteristics of journalistic practice. Even more broadly, Donders (2021) recognises two models or perspectives on PSM: a market failure and a democracy-centric perspective. According to the market failure view, PSM should provide only the services that commercial media companies do not sufficiently deliver (e.g., domestic children’s content, documentaries, local news, investigative journalism), and thus limit its scope to niche services. The democracy-centric perspective assumes that PSM is at the core of democracy and is a valuable asset to society that contributes to the realisation of a public sphere that is accessible to all. From this perspective, PSM should not limit its services to those not readily available on the market. Rather it should, regardless of profit, provide citizens with equal access to high-quality information, education, and entertainment. While the market-failure perspective can be linked to the perception of broadcasting as a public good that should be provided as long as audiences consume it, the democracy-centric perspective is such that broadcasting is a merit good that should be provided regardless of consumption patterns (Ali 2016; Donders 2012).

Although much has been written about how the PSM mission is understood by media theorists and set out in legal acts and documents issued by international organisations, surprisingly little is known about how the idea of public service is perceived and interpreted by the key stakeholders — namely, the PSM staff (journalists and managers) who are responsible for putting this idea in practice, and the public whose interest PSM should fulfil. Regarding the public’s perspective, studies from Switzerland (Just, Büchi, and Latzer 2017), Austria (Reiter et al. 2018), and Spain (Lamuedra, Martín, and Broullón-Lozano 2019; Lamuedra Graván, Mateos, and Broullón-Lozano 2020) show that people appreciate the PSM concept and consider it highly important but they are not satisfied with how the national PSM actually fulfil the public service remit. When it comes to audience expectations, citizens adhere to the traditional values of independence, professionalism, and the provision of accurate and unbiased information (Campos-Rueda and Goyanes 2022). In terms of performance attributes, a study from Germany and the United Kingdom suggests that citizens prefer a combination of a

small license fee and advertisements in exchange for balanced programming with a noteworthy share of entertainment content (Lis, Nienstedt, and Günster 2017).

Several studies (Larsen 2010; Larsen 2014; Lowe and Maijanen 2019; Maijanen 2015) focused on how the public service mission is defined by the PSM managers and how they legitimise the PSM position. The results showed that the views of PSM managers in Finland, Germany, Norway, and Sweden are, to a large extent, coherent with the usual legal and theoretical perspectives on PSM: they see the public service mission in developing and defending democracy; providing independent information; providing relevant content for all; ensuring high journalistic standards; defending and creating national culture; and sustaining national language and identity (Larsen 2010; Larsen 2014; Lowe and Maijanen 2019; Maijanen 2015).

Interestingly, almost no research attention has been paid to the perspectives of PSM journalists. A rare exception is a questionnaire survey study by Ibarra and Nord (2013), which shows that PSM journalists in Sweden and Spain share similar journalistic values and newsroom practices with their counterparts in commercial media, but they are more critical and concerned by increasing commercialisation and the decreasing quality of journalism. To fill this gap, using RTVS as an example, this study will focus on how journalists and managers understand and interpret the PSM mission.

“Public Service” in Journalism and Public Service Journalism

The provision of public service is not only the mission of PSM. It is also one of the basic normative expectations of journalism, irrespective of whether it is practiced in PSM or commercial media. Public service is one of the core ideal-typical values of journalism’s ideology (Deuze 2005; Kovach and Rosenstiel 2001). As Deuze (2005, 447) puts it, “journalists share a sense of ‘doing it for the public’, of working as some kind of representative watchdog of the status quo in the name of people”. An orientation toward public service (i.e., the belief that journalism’s function in society is to provide public service and produce the news in the public interest) versus market orientation is one of the key cleavages that indicates a different role orientation and, in a broader sense, journalistic cultures (Hanitzsch 2007). In this respect, empirical research mostly quantitatively examines how journalists perceive their professional role and to what extent they see their audiences as citizens (i.e., public service orientation) or consumers (i.e., market orientation) (Hanitzsch 2011; Hanitzsch et al. 2019).

A different but related stream of literature explores how journalists (Hujanen 2009; Jenkins and Nielsen 2020) and citizens (van der Wurff and Schoenbach 2014) construct quality journalism (Lacy and Rosenstiel 2015), and to what extent journalists’ perception of quality journalism align with the views of the public (Gil de Zúñiga and Hinsley 2013; Loosen, Reimer, and Hölig 2020; Riedl and Eberl 2022; Tsfati, Meyers, and Peri 2006; Vos, Eichholz, and Karaliova 2019). On a conceptual level, quality can be understood as a prerequisite for journalism to properly fulfil its public service role. Also, the quality of services and output is an often-cited principle of PSM (Born and Prosser 2001), and this inherently applies to journalism. In short, public service journalism (i.e., journalism in PSM) should be quality journalism.

So what are the foundations of quality journalism? When confronting journalism theorists, practitioners, and public views (Deuze 2005; Hanitzsch 2011; Hujanen 2009; Jenkins

and Nielsen 2020; Kovach and Rosenstiel 2001; Lacy and Rosenstiel 2015; Loosen, Reimer, and Hölig 2020; Riedl and Eberl 2022; Tsfati, Meyers, and Peri 2006; van der Wurff and Schoenbach 2014; Vos, Eichholz, and Karaliova 2019), several common values and traits appear. Journalists expect (and are expected) to be the watchdogs, hold the powerful to account, be objective, be neutral, be impartial, be fair, and report different views and perspectives as completely as possible. They should disseminate important information in a timely manner, provide the audience with analysis and interpretation of the news, empower citizens to develop their own opinions, and motivate them to participate in public life. Transparency, independence, and the verification of facts also belong to frequently mentioned principles.

A particularly contentious aspect of quality journalism is objectivity (with the related concepts of balance, impartiality, neutrality, and fairness). This principle is even more important for PSM journalism. PSM are publicly funded and tasked with delivering a public service, so the requirement that their journalism be impartial and not favour or disadvantage any person, group, or opinion, is even more stringent. Similar provisions tend to be explicitly set out in PSM laws and statutes: for instance, Article 3(3) letter (b) of the RTVS Act provides that the RTVS programme should “provide impartial, verified, unbiased, up-to-date, comprehensible and in its entirety balanced and pluralistic information on events in the Slovak Republic and abroad for the free formation of opinions”.

Objectivity is a value that is notoriously difficult to define and operationalise. Its frequently mentioned elements are the separation of facts from opinions; the presentation of an emotionally detached view of the news; fairness; and balance, which involves giving voice to both sides in a conflict (DeFleur and Dennis 1991). A more specific operationalisation is offered by Skovsgaard et al. (2013), who build on Donsbach and Klett (1993). They accentuate four aspects of objectivity: a) no subjectivity (i.e., journalists should be detached observers); b) balance; c) hard facts (i.e., accuracy, factuality); and d) value judgments (i.e., journalists should not merely describe reality but they should make the better position clear).

In their seminal work, Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001, 72) argue that objectivity should be understood as “a consistent method of testing information” and “a transparent approach to evidence” with the goal of preventing journalistic work from being distorted by bias. They also point out that objectivity does not mean the absence of a point of view and that balancing multiple points of view should never be a goal unto itself. In addition, they warn that the original notion of objectivity was replaced by balance and the tendency to measure the time and space devoted to each side, which can lead to distortion. In short, the pursuit of objectivity should not lead to “false balance” (Brüggemann and Engesser 2017). This would not only reduce the quality of journalism, but, in the case of PSM, it would mean that such journalism would not fulfil its mission.

Public Service Media in Slovakia and the Newsroom Conflict at RTVS

Although independence and autonomy are among the key principles of the functioning of PSM, without which its very purpose is threatened (Murdock 2005), PSM in post-communist countries have repeatedly encountered serious shortcomings in this regard. RTVS is no exception. It suffers from several caveats typical for PSM in the CEE region (Milosavljević and Poler 2018). In particular, the lack of political independence and insufficient

financial resources are two critical challenges for RTVS. Both personnel and financial matters are controlled directly by politicians: the Parliament elects the Director General and together with the Government decide on financial matters.

The low *de jure* independence of PSM enables politicians to exert their influence if they wish. As the past years have shown, this has not been hypothetical. Throughout its history, RTVS has repeatedly been used as a political tool, most flagrantly under Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar during his autocratic style of government (1994-98). This was achieved through the dismissals of the Director General and the members of the PSM Council, the appointments of loyal personnel, and subsequent mass dismissals (Gindl 1996). The independence of PSM in Slovakia was also widely discussed in 2007 after the appointment of a new Director General, when 15 editors and reporters resigned in protest against alleged interference in favour of the ruling coalition led by the Smer-SD party (Vagovič 2007).

The most recent conflict at RTVS began when the Slovak Parliament elected the new Director General of RTVS in June 2017. In April 2018, approximately 60 RTVS journalists signed an open letter to declare their distrust of their superiors and describe the working atmosphere as hostile and tense (“Otvorený list [Open letter]” 2018). By summer 2019, approximately two-thirds of the TV reporters and editors had resigned in protest, or their contracts were not prolonged.¹

According to information published in the media, the dissenting reporters and editors objected to several main points (Urbániková 2021). First, the selection of the new Director General, both procedurally and personally, raised concerns about the future independence of the Slovak PSM. In a secret ballot, the Slovak Parliament elected Jaroslav Rezník, a person with a questionable professional track record (see, e.g., Transparency International Slovakia 2015). He had alleged ties to the then-ruling Slovak National Party, a nationalistic party with a pro-Russian orientation, which significantly helped to push through his nomination.

Second, the managerial decisions of the new Director General amplified the concerns. Soon after he took office, he appointed three former press officers from ministries and state organisations to be top managers directly responsible for the TV and radio newscasts. He disregarded that there could be a conflict of interest. In addition, the new management of RTVS decided to shut down its only investigative programme after it broadcast a story critical of an organisation to which the new Director General had personal ties (see Urbániková 2021 for further details).

Third, and most importantly, the public statements of the actors of the conflict (the RTVS journalists and managers) showed that both sides referred to the concept of *verejnoprávnosť* when formulating their objections to the behaviour of the opposing party. *Verejnoprávnosť* (noun) is a term that has no simple translation in English; the adjective *verejnoprávny* is the Slovak equivalent of the German adjective *öffentlich-rechtlich*, which is used to describe legal entities of public law and can be translated as *public* or *public service*. Thus, the English term *public service media* translates in Slovak as *verejnoprávne médiá* (similar to the German expression *öffentlich-rechtliche Medien*). *Verejnoprávnosť* could then be loosely translated as the spirit and the essence of public service media; in short, it is what makes public service media public service media. Its meaning mainly draws on two theoretical concepts described above: the mission of public service media and, from a more narrow perspective, public service in journalism.

From a legal perspective, the definition of public service media and the specification of its mission is stipulated by Act No. 532/2010 Coll., on the Radio and Television of Slovakia (hereinafter “the RTVS Act”). Article 1(3) point (2) of the RTVS Act provides that in the realm of broadcasting, public service means the provision of a programme service, which is:

universal in its geographical coverage, offers a diverse range of programmes, prepared in line with principles of editorial independence by qualified staff with a feeling of social responsibility and which raises the cultural level of its listeners and viewers, provides space for contemporary cultural and artistic activities, presents the cultural values of other nations, and is financed primarily from public funds.

While a general legal definition may provide basic guidance, it is up to the RTVS journalists and managers themselves to interpret and implement it in practice. The stakeholders in the conflict often referred to the concept of *verejnoprávnosť* (public service) in their public statements. For instance, in an open letter to the public published in April 2018, nearly 60 RTVS journalists described the pressure they felt from the new leadership and claimed that “*verejnoprávnosť* [public service] can be threatened” (“Otvorený list [Open letter]”). In a public response to this letter, the new management stated that — paraphrasing — many of these journalists have not yet reached the level of quality required for public service media (RTVS 2018). One of the RTVS reporters responded in a Facebook post that the problem is not that the RTVS journalists do not feel what *verejnoprávnosť* (public service) is, but that what is happening at RTVS “has nothing to do with *verejnoprávnosť* [public service]” and it is “an emptying out of news coverage to dry information that doesn’t make anyone angry” (Zuzana Kovacic Hanzelova 2018). Also, the head of the news and current affairs section stated in an interview that the problem is “the style of work and the perception of *verejnoprávnosť* [public service]” (Šimková 2018).

This study asks two research questions: 1. How did the RTVS journalists and managers understand and interpret the concept of public service (*verejnoprávnosť*), specifically, how did they perceive the PSM mission and PSM journalism? 2. What role did disagreements between RTVS journalists and managers over the concept of public service (*verejnoprávnosť*) play in the newsroom conflict at RTVS?

Data and Method

This paper explores how the journalists and managers who worked for the *Radio and Television of Slovakia* (RTVS), the Slovak nationwide public service broadcaster, perceived the essence of public service (*verejnoprávnosť*) (i.e., how they interpret the PSM mission and public service journalism), and how their interpretations differed from the academic and legal framework. Furthermore, it examines the role that different conceptions played in the newsroom conflict that started after the Parliament elected a new Director General in 2017.

The clash between (some) reporters and editors, on one hand, and the new managers, on the other hand culminated in layoffs and resignations of roughly two-thirds of the TV newsroom by 2019 (Urbániková 2021). Although it affected both the radio and TV divisions of RTVS, the paper concentrates solely on the TV newsroom because the confrontation was more intense and led to a higher staff turnover.

As a broader methodological strategy, a case study approach — “an empirical method that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the ‘case’) in-depth and within its real-world context” (Yin 2018, 15) — was used to untangle the roots of the newsroom conflict in RTVS. Initial insight into the case was gained through publicly available information about the conflict (e.g., from media articles and interviews). This was supplemented by two informal interviews with two RTVS reporters who took different stances towards the conflict (i.e., one decided to leave in protest, the other stayed at RTVS), which were conducted in the pre-research phase, and which served for the initial mapping of the situation. Because the organisation chart of the RTVS newsroom and the list of its staff are not publicly available, one of the RTVS reporters provided the author with a list of RTVS reporters and editors (including whether they resigned, were forced to leave, or stayed on); this information was then independently verified by another RTVS reporter.

Based on the pre-research, the key groups of actors with different positions within the RTVS newsroom and/or with different views on the conflict were identified. Purposive sampling was then used to ensure that the participants were recruited from all of the relevant opinion groups, and, where possible, to maximise the diversity of the sample from the viewpoints of gender, age, position, and length of work experience. In total, I conducted 16 semi-structured interviews² with the five key groups of actors: the journalist whose contract were not prolonged by the new management (1 participant); the journalists who resigned in protest (4); the journalists who decided to stay at their jobs (5; although, one of them resigned shortly after the interview); newly appointed managers (4); and members of the previous management, who resigned (2). The years of experience of the 5 female and 11 male participants ranged from 3 years to more than 20. With one exception, none of the addressed participants declined the invitation to participate in the research study.

The pre-research suggested that, in addition to other reasons, different perceptions of public service (*verejnoprávnosť*) and different ideas about its proper fulfilment in practice by RTVS journalists and managers were among the causes of the conflict. That is why this study focuses on this topic. It is, however, part of a larger project conducted by the author that aimed to explore the roots of the conflict in RTVS and its consequences, the forms and types of perceived interference in journalistic autonomy, and the resistance strategies the journalists used to cope with the perceived interference. Therefore, the interview guide covered two main areas. First, it asked the participants to narrate the course of events from the appointment of the new Director General in July 2017 to the present, describe the course of the conflict, and identify its sources. Second, it included questions about how participants perceived and defined public service in journalism, the PSM mission, and objectivity, and how they believed these concepts were perceived by other actors in the conflict. Specifically, the participants were asked how they perceived the mission of PSM, how they saw the future of PSM, how they would explain to people that they should pay a licence fee, and what journalism in PSM should ideally be like.

The participants were informed in advance about the topic of the study, and their informed consent was obtained.³ To ensure anonymity in the following text, the names of the participants were changed and their gender was randomly assigned when the pseudonyms were created. The interviews were conducted face-to-face by the author between July 2018 and September 2019. All were recorded, anonymised, transcribed

verbatim, and subjected to coding in Atlas.ti. To analyse the data, I used thematic analysis, “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun and Clarke 2006, 79). The coding and analysis process followed the analytic procedure suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006): it started with becoming familiar with the data and generating initial codes, continued with searching for themes (i.e., collating the codes in potential themes) and reviewing the themes (i.e., including the creation of a thematic map), and ended with defining and naming themes, and producing the report. For reasons of brevity, in the following text, the term “journalists” is employed to describe the dissenting reporters and editors (who made up the majority of the newsroom).

Results and Findings: Untangling the Concept of Public Service

Before exploring how the journalists and managers working for RTVS understood and interpreted the public service mission of their organisation in general, and public service journalism in particular, the analysis starts with an examination of how different understandings of public service contributed to the conflict.

Different Understandings of Public Service as One of the Sources of the Newsroom Conflict

The interviews with RTVS journalists and managers supported the preliminary finding that was suggested by the pre-research (based on publicly available information about the conflict and supplemented by two initial informal interviews with two different RTVS journalists). Everyday life in the newsroom was affected by profound differences in how the journalists and the new managers understood the public service and the quality journalism that would fulfil the PSM mission. Several participants mentioned that this was at the heart of the conflict:

This was the biggest stumbling block, that two worlds with a completely different notion of objectivity and public service have clashed. This was the central core of all the conflicts. (Interview with an RTVS reporter, February 2019)

The disagreement on the interpretation of public service (*verejnoprávnosť*) and public service journalism that would fulfil the PSM mission led to frequent arguments on the practical level over how to make the quality news: who should or should not be quoted, when to include an “opposite” view or “balancing” quote, who can be considered an expert source, who, on the contrary, should not be given airtime, and how to identify certain events. Consequently, both sides accused each other of not knowing what public service (*verejnoprávnosť*) was, failing to deliver it, and even threatening it, and of being unprofessional, biased, and politically motivated. They used the reference to public service to justify and legitimise their positions and to contrast it with their opponents’ (supposedly flawed) stance. For instance, one of the new managers suggested that the opposing journalists “have no idea” what the difference between PSM and commercial media is and what public service means.

I can feel the difference [between public service and commercial media]. It seems quite important to me — some of them [the dissenting journalists] still have no idea — for them [the dissenting journalists] to realise why they are working here and what the difference

is. [...] And that means that they have to understand [...] what the public service medium is and what the public service is in the conception of our broadcasting. (Interview with an RTVS manager, September 2018)

The opposing journalists, on the other hand, saw the new managers' conception of public service (and of objectivity as one of its values) as fundamentally flawed. The interviews with the journalists also suggest that the new managers used the rhetorical appeal to public service as a tool to impose their vision of objectivity upon them:

The dispute over what is meant by public service escalated especially after [one of the new managers] came up with the public service issue. He arrived, and at the very first meeting — I saw him for the first time in my life at that moment — he introduced himself as a man who was born with public service [*verejnoprávnosť*] in his blood and knows what public service [*verejnoprávnosť*] is. He simply presented himself as the embodiment of public service [*verejnoprávnosť*] in its material form. And, according to him, public service [*verejnoprávnosť*] means that contradictory opinions should be presented side by side and given the same space. This means that — and this is a quote — if I find six political scientists who say the same thing, I have to find a seventh who will say something else and give him the same space as the six. (Interview with an RTVS ex-reporter, October 2018)

Before a more detailed exploration of what the concept of public service (*verejnoprávnosť*) meant for individual participants, both in terms of the PSM mission and PSM journalism, several points regarding the extent of the newsroom conflict have to be made. None of the interviewed journalists mentioned any experience of direct interference from the management; what they perceived as pressure came in the form of everyday arguments with their superiors and the need to justify what they considered as standard journalistic decisions. According to the interviewed journalists, the new managers used several measures to discipline them: excessive negative feedback; cuts on bonuses which were otherwise paid monthly and were a significant part of their pay; sidelining; and involuntary reassignments to other positions and topic areas. These indirect tactics and forms of pressure are notoriously difficult to research and interpret as the true motivation of the main actors typically remains unclear. Nevertheless, as a result, around two-thirds of the TV reporters and editors had resigned in protest, or their contracts were not prolonged. Also, several interviewed journalists mentioned that the clashes were often somehow related to the Slovak National Party, its leaders, and their areas of its interest — this bias has also been noted in the research reports by Newton Media (2018) and Transparency International Slovakia (2019).

PSM Mission from the Viewpoint of the RTVS Journalists and Managers: Non-Commercial and Catering to Minority Interests

Several RTVS journalists and managers stated that the dispute over the meaning of public service (*verejnoprávnosť*) was at the core of the conflict, so it is important to know what the individual actors understood by this term. In order to disentangle the concept, the analysis focuses on two aspects: the perception of the PSM mission, in general, and the perception of public service journalism (in the sense of journalism in PSM), in particular. Interestingly, when asked about their perception of public service and PSM, some of the participants reacted in surprise and labelled the question as “too complicated”, “academic”, or “theoretical”.

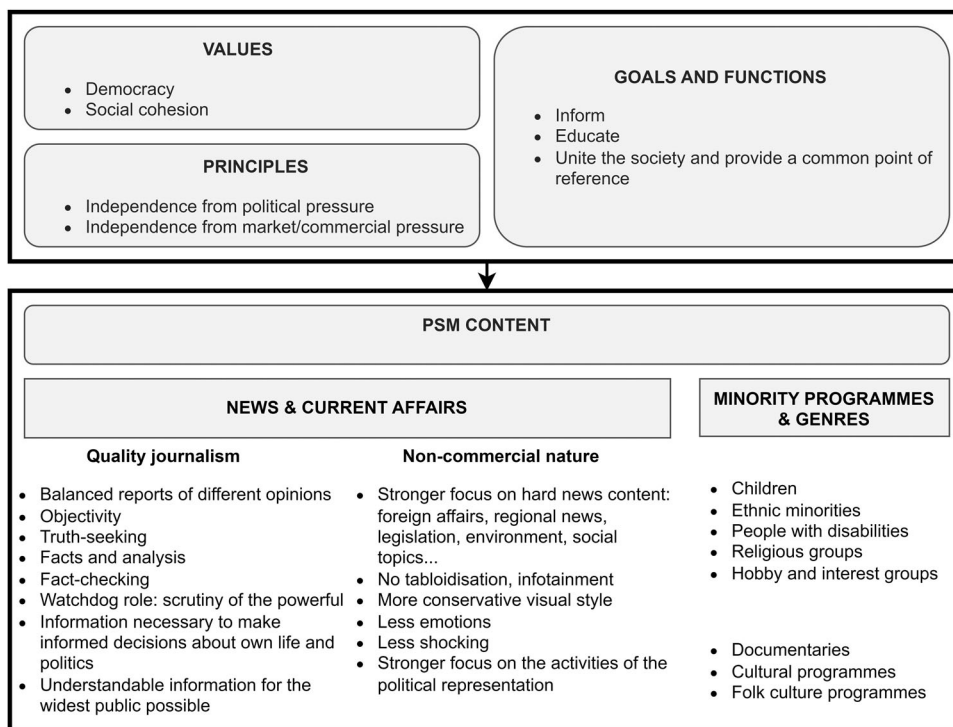


Figure 1. The essence of public service in PSM from the viewpoint of RTVS journalists and managers.

Based on their responses and accounts, a classification scheme of what the actors perceived as the essence of public service in PSM was inductively developed (Figure 1). In their explanations, four elements of the PSM remit could be traced: values (i.e., the key ideals to be promoted and developed by the PSM); principles (i.e., fundamental rules of its operation); goals and functions (i.e., the aims and purposes that the PSM should pursue and deliver); and the characteristics of the PSM content (i.e., news, current affairs, other programmes). The perception of the values and principles on which PSM stands and which it should promote determines how the participants understand its the goals and functions, and all of these translate to how they envisage the desirable characteristics of the PSM content.

In general, the RTVS journalists and managers largely agreed on the essence of public service in PSM and mentioned similar concepts and elements when describing it (although they did not always agree on their interpretations). There was almost universal agreement on independence from market pressure as the key principle of PSM, together with a strong focus on hard news content (i.e., information citizens need to make informed decisions) and the production of programmes and genres for minority viewers. On the contrary, none of the participants mentioned high-quality entertainment, sports, or innovation. The rest of this section describes the four elements of PSM as seen by the participants and analyses the differences between the two sides of the conflict in their understanding of public service.

The first aspect, the **values** behind the PSM concept, was surprisingly rarely discussed by the RTVS journalists and managers. When sharing their perspective on PSM, very few of them pointed out that PSM is essential for democracy and contributes to social cohesion. Much more attention was paid to the second element, the organising **principles** of PSM. Almost all the participants mentioned independence as the essential characteristic of PSM; however, they focused primarily on independence from market pressure while independence from political pressure was much less often discussed.

The biggest advantage of public service broadcasting is that it is paid by licence fees, that it is not dependent on any sponsorship gifts, it is not dependent on any owner who may have some economic interests. [...] This is probably the biggest advantage - that we don't have to look at the circulation figures or rating figures. (Interview with an RTVS reporter, February 2019)

The third element to which some RTVS journalists and managers referred when explaining their understanding of PSM (although rather rarely) were its **goals and functions**. Here, the participants discussed the function of educating the public, providing information, uniting society, and providing a common reference point. No participant mentioned the last function of the Reithian triad — to entertain.

It [PSM] aims to educate society and encourage the better side of people. For example, in our broadcast about the migration crisis, we firmly stood up for migrants and showed solidarity, despite the protests of a large part of the public, and said that we should simply show these people basic human emotions, such as solidarity and belonging. (Interview with an RTVS reporter, September 2018)

The values and principles on which PSM stands, and its perceived goals and functions, translate into the conceptions of its desirable **content**, the fourth element. PSM content, both in the area of news and current affairs, and in the area of other programmes and genres, was discussed in detail by the participants. Regarding the non-journalistic content, there was almost universal agreement among the participants that PSM should cater to minority audiences and interests. In line with the accentuated non-commercial nature of PSM, the participants stressed that its benefit lies in the production of specialised programmes for children, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, religious groups, and hobby and interest groups. At the same time, as PSM does not depend on rating and advertisement, they noted that it can afford to produce non-commercial genres, such as documentaries and cultural programmes.

I see it as a great advantage of public service media that other television [channels] do not have, that we cater to minority audiences. [...] Private, commercial media will simply never cover the interests of minority viewers. That's why I think that public service media should exist. (Interview with an RTVS reporter, February 2019)

Contested Issues in the Understanding of Public Service Journalism: Power Distance and Objectivity

In summary, when it comes to PSM values, principles, goals, and functions, and the characteristics of its non-journalistic content, managers and journalists largely agreed on the essence of public service in PSM. However, the domain to which they devoted their attention, and where significant contradictions emerged, concerned the journalistic

content. The RTVS journalists and managers discussed at length what public service journalism should look like. They used two strategies: they put it in contrast to commercial television, and, less often, they focused on the characteristics of the quality journalism that should be produced by PSM.

First, both the journalists and the managers stressed the non-commercial nature of the public service news and current affairs programmes, pointing out that it should focus on the hard news content and cover the topics that are relevant for the citizens, even though they are not necessarily commercially attractive (e.g., foreign affairs, regional news, legislation, environment, social topics, minorities). They also stressed that public service news and current affairs are not, and should not be, affected by infotainment and tabloidization, and they should be more factual and analytical, less shocking, less emotional, and use a more conservative visual style.

Commercial media in recent years is just infotainment. They cover the topics in a way that entertains the audience, and it goes at the expense of information. [...] We [at RTVS] tried to bring information without emotion. [...] And even those topics — there are many topics that do not get into the commercial media, but are important for people's lives. (Interview with an RTVS ex-reporter, September 2018)

In the comparison between the news and current affairs programmes in PSM and commercial media, the first significant difference between the journalists and the new managers in their understanding of public service emerged: focus on the activities of the political representatives which could be understood as a part of the broader concept of power distance (Hanitzsch 2007). One of the episodes of the conflict concerned the practice of so-called *compulsory figures* (*povinná jazda*). In the slang of the Slovak journalists, this term, borrowed from figure skating, describes news stories that simply must be done according to the direction of the superiors even if they are journalistically not very interesting. Typically, these stories uncritically cover mundane activities of the actors who seek publicity and traction. The opposing journalists complained that the new management forced them to produce such stories. One of the notable examples was the coverage of the official state visits of Andrej Danko, the then-parliamentary speaker and chairman of the Slovak National Party (the party that helped push through the election of the new Director General). A couple of months after he criticised RTVS for not paying enough attention to his international trips, RTVS produced a story that covered his state visit to the Czech Republic and his speech in the Czech Parliament, including the final standing ovation of the Czech MPs. The new management declared that even though the coverage of official state visits is not set out by law and it may not be commercially attractive, it is one of the PSM's roles.

Compulsory figures have always been here and always will be. Where else but in the public service media should top politicians present their boring official trips that would never be broadcast by commercial media because it will not bring them advertising and money. And that is why it is the role of the public service media, which is also paid by the voters of these parties. (Interview with an RTVS manager, September 2019)

Needless to say, none of the opposing journalists mentioned the coverage of the mundane foreign trips of top politicians in their interpretation of the PSM mission. On the contrary, several of them understood it as an example of a governmental PR. The two sides of the conflict were deeply convinced of the correctness of their position

and did not see any value in the perspective of the other. In general, the reporters criticised what they found to be an excessively subservient approach of the new management towards the ruling politicians. According to them, in addition to the compulsory figures, the loyal attitude was also manifested in the uncritical tone of some of the interviews and discussion programmes in which the ruling politicians were not asked uncomfortable questions. Instead of being loyal to the political representatives, the opposing journalists stressed that PSM should scrutinise the powerful and act as watchdogs.

In my opinion, it [the conflict] is about how to look at public service media and its overall role. I think they [the new management] got stuck in time, and they still think that public service television is supposed to be a medium in service of governmental circles and that this is encoded in their DNA. [...] That they do not think of it as of a sovereign entity. (Interview with an RTVS Reporter, September 2018)

Second, besides the non-commercial nature of PSM news and current affairs programmes, the RTVS journalists and managers pointed out that another of the key PSM features is the production of quality journalism. In their view, PSM news and current affairs should give space to a wide range of opinions and perspectives and that it should be balanced, objective, independent, and aimed at seeking the truth. Less often, the journalists and the managers mentioned that the quality journalism produced by PSM should scrutinise the powerful, provide citizens with information necessary to make informed decisions, be understandable for the widest possible audience, focus on facts and analysis, and be rigorous in fact-checking.

In my opinion, we should seek the truth and bring reliable information, of course, true information, as comprehensively as possible to the widest possible audience, so as to increase the ability — by members of that audience — to make competent decisions about their lives and their electoral decisions. [...] And different opinions should be given space. (Interview with an RTVS ex-manager, October 2018)

The perception of quality journalism is the second realm where profound differences between the opposing journalists and the new managers appeared. Specifically, objectivity proved to be the stumbling block. Although both sides of the conflict agreed that being objective is one of the vital features of quality journalism and it is essential for public service news and current affairs programmes, they differed significantly in their understanding of this concept. On the one hand, the new managers claimed that the opposing journalists were too one-sided, too focused on their truth, and at times failed to give space to all the opinions.

We insisted on objective and balanced reporting. That means that if I quote a left-wing analyst, I should also give space to a right-wing perspective. And they didn't want to do that. They refused to do it because they know where the truth is. They know what the report is supposed to look like, what's right, and they're going to broadcast it that way. (Interview with an RTVS manager, September 2018)

The opposing journalists found the new managers' perception of objectivity too simplistic and mechanistic, and labelled it as "fake", "formal" or "artificial". In their interpretation, the new managers wanted them to give each opinion and perspective equal space, regardless of its truthfulness or relevance.

The current management professes the so-called formal objectivity, an example of which is the famous five minutes to Jews, five minutes to Hitler, and the listeners, the viewers, should make their own opinion. (Interview with an RTVS reporter, February 2019)

The opposing journalists pointed out that the inclusion of as many opinions as possible, however marginal they are, contributes to the erosion of facts and truth, and it feeds into the notion that there is no truth. Moreover, they argued that by its very nature, such reporting cannot be too critical, which probably suits the politicians in power. In their interpretation, objectivity does not only entail balance but also truthfulness, factuality, context. According to them, journalism and especially public service journalism should be fair and balanced, it should be critical, assess and select sources, provide context, check the facts, and attempt to find the truth.

Several examples can illustrate the disagreement. For instance, several interviewed journalists mentioned that after one of them made a TV story based on an international research study on pro-Russian propaganda, the Russian disinformation campaign, and hybrid threats in the countries of Eastern Europe, the leadership sharply criticised him for not giving space to the “other side” – the representatives of the Russian Federation, even though the Slovak Prime Minister himself had already stated the existence of these threats.

Another example could be the anti-government protests that took place in 2018 in the wake of the murder of the journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová. The murder sparked the biggest anti-government protests since the Velvet Revolution in 1989 (more than 120,000 people gathered in various Slovak cities to demonstrate) and culminated with the resignation of Prime Minister Robert Fico and his cabinet. Several interviewed journalists mentioned that the new management instructed the reporters who were covering the demonstrations to include the voices of ordinary people who did not take part in the protests so that the opinion of the “other side” could also be heard. As one of the interviewed journalists described, they found it absurd and did not comply:

For example, during yesterday's protests, they [the management] came up with the idea that we should go into the side streets and reach out to people who did not go to demonstrate to the main square. So that we could have a second opinion. My colleague and I laughed about it and agreed to say that it was not possible. (Interview with an RTVS reporter, February 2019)

As a result, since the disagreement often arose in relation to the coverage of political topics and issues, both sides accused each other of failing to fulfil the public service mission, unprofessionalism, and suspected political bias.

Discussion

The analysis of how RTVS journalists and managers perceive the PSM mission and public service journalism provides at least two interesting findings that are worthy of further discussion. First, their perception of the PSM mission proved to be surprisingly reductive. To start, when it comes to the basic principles on which the PSM and its functioning should be based, both the managers and the journalists mostly mentioned independence from market pressure, but rarely referred to independence from political power, despite RTVS's recurring problems with political pressures. Also, they tended to describe the purpose and

the position of PSM mainly in contrast to commercial media and not so much in contrast to state or state-funded media, even though RTVS was created by the transformation from a state-owned media organisation after the change of the political regime in 1989, and anecdotal evidence suggests that some members of the public (and even some politicians) still do not fully distinguish between the concepts of the state and public media. This could be explained by the fact that, as there are currently no state media in Slovakia, the only competitors for RTVS are commercial outlets. Nevertheless, given Slovakia's communist history and its long tradition of state media, and given that political pressure and the lack of political independence is such a widespread caveat typical for PSM in the post-communist countries (Milosavljević and Poler 2018; Šimunjak 2016), failing to stress the political independence of PSM when explaining this concept seems to be a missed opportunity.

A rather narrow understanding of the PSM mission on the side of the RTVS journalists and managers is also evident from the comparison of their perceptions with the definition of PSM in the scholarly literature and the legal framework. Although in many aspects their views are coherent with the usual legal and theoretical understanding of PSM, several important differences appear. Besides the complete omission of entertainment, the last part of the Reithian triad of "informing, educating and entertaining" which is also stated in the RTVS Act, surprisingly few journalists and managers stressed that PSM news and current affairs should scrutinise the powerful, and none mentioned the provision of interpretations and explanations, even though these are considered to be at the core of the PSM remit (Murdock 2005). Also, the aim of developing national identity and preserving national culture that is captured in the RTVS Act, and that was also identified as an essential element in the public debate on PSM in Norway (Larsen 2014) and as an aspect that is important to the German, Swedish, and Finnish PSM managers (Lowe and Majanen 2019), was not mentioned by the Slovak participants. In addition, the RTVS journalists and managers overwhelmingly emphasised output rather than audiences when interpreting the public service mission. Although this is understandable given their production role, it suggests that the public itself (and its participation) is present rather indirectly in their conception of public service mission.

To summarise, the shared perception of PSM from the viewpoint of the RTVS journalists and managers seems to be closer to the market-failure perspective rather the democracy-centric perspective on PSM (Donders 2021). They construct PSM mainly as an antithesis to commercial media and see its value in the production of niche programmes and genres that are important, although not popular. On the one hand, this could be explained by the professional specialisation of the research participants. As they are all journalists or managers responsible for news and current affairs programmes, it is likely that their conception of public service stems from their everyday work, and their understanding of the broader PSM remit, especially when it comes to culture, entertainment, and sports, may be limited. After all, the characteristics of the PSM content, particularly public service journalism, was the most widely discussed element of the PSM remit, while the more abstract elements of PSM values, principles, and goals and functions attracted considerably less attention.

On the other hand, such a narrow understanding of PSM in line with market-failure perspective is unnecessarily reductive and defensive, and disregards PSM's broader

contribution to a democratic public sphere. Also, it may not help much in convincing the public that PSM is worth paying for and deserves protection from political pressure. In this respect, who but the PSM journalists and managers should be able to convincingly explain the meaning of PSM and its contribution to society? An Austrian study of young people's perceptions and valuation of PSM (Reiter et al. 2018) noted that their knowledge of the meaning of the public value was shallow; this, to an extent, applies to the Slovak PSM journalists and managers as well. This may be a consequence of a long history of state-controlled media in Slovakia and the relative novelty of the PSM concept.

Second, another area that deserves attention is the deep disagreement over some of the core values of quality journalism, namely objectivity and power distance. In terms of the four aspects of objectivity described by Skovsgaard et al. (2013), both sides of the conflict agreed on the principle of no subjectivity. This is where the agreement ends. The opposing journalists and the new managers disagreed on the importance of hard facts simply because they disagreed on where facts end and opinions begin, and whether there is such a thing as hard facts at all. This subsequently translated into disagreements over balance and value judgments. Because the new managers tended to hold agnostic views and because they were sceptical of the idea that it was possible to know where the truth lay, they interpreted objectivity as giving equal space to all sides of an argument and leaving the judgement up to the audience. At the same time, in their view, it is not the role of journalists to suggest which side of a dispute has a better position (e.g., in terms of truthfulness or relevance).

Thus, based on the interviews, it seems that the opposing journalists understood the concept of objectivity in line with the usual definition used in journalism studies (Donsbach and Klett 1993; Kovach and Rosenstiel 2001; Skovsgaard et al. 2013), while the new managers professed a rather limited understanding of objectivity and effectively reduced it to balance, or, more precisely, to what Brüggemann and Engesser (2017) call "false balance". This shows that the notion of objectivity is not only culture- or country-specific (Donsbach and Klett 1993), but it can also vary within a single newsroom. When such a disagreement occurs in one newsroom, as this case study demonstrates, serious conflicts can arise.

While the interpretation and implementation of the objectivity norm is undoubtedly a matter of debate in journalistic communities around the world and the question of the appropriate power distance is similarly contentious, the deep division within the RTVS newsroom is striking. The lack of basic consensus on the fundamentals of journalism points to the fragility of the journalism profession and the journalistic culture in Slovakia. This may still be a consequence of the profound transformation that the Slovak media system and journalism underwent after the change of the political regime in 1989. Here is an example to illustrate the poor level, or rather the absence of serious professional debate: while the BBC's Editorial Guidelines are 220 pages long, with a 10-page section on impartiality (BBC 2019), there is no similar document in the case of RTVS. The RTVS Programme Staff Charter merely reiterates the legal provision that RTVS should provide balanced and pluralistic information, emphasises the importance of distinguishing between news and commentary, and states that all sides of an argument should be given space (RTVS 2011).

Conclusion

While it is hardly surprising that different actors have different views of what public service means, one would expect the people whose job it is to apply this idea in practice, such as the journalists and managers working for PSM, would share a basic understanding of it. The case study of the conflict that took place in the *Radio and Television of Slovakia* demonstrates what can happen in a newsroom where the journalists and their managers differ significantly in how they perceive public service and interpret the PSM mission, including PSM journalism.

This does not mean that their views were fully divergent. Especially when it comes to PSM values, principles, goals and functions, and its non-journalistic content, managers and journalists largely agreed on their perceptions of the essence of public service in PSM. As the key features, almost all of them named independence from market pressure and a strong focus on hard news content (i.e., the information citizens need to make informed decisions), educational function, and the production of programmes and genres for minority viewers. On the contrary, none of the participants mentioned high-quality entertainment, sports, or innovation.

Public service journalism is the domain to which the RTVS journalists and managers devoted the most attention, and where significant contradictions emerged. Despite many similarities, the journalists and the new managers differed significantly in two important aspects: the interpretation of power distance and objectivity. First, the opposing journalists suspected the new managers of being too subservient to the ruling politicians and complained, for instance, of having to cover mundane activities of the top political representatives. The new managers considered such coverage to be a part of the PSM mission.

Second, and more importantly, the opposing journalists and the new managers had a profoundly different notion of objectivity (even though they referred to the same term). While the new managers were inclined to see the role of journalists in giving equal space to as wide a range of opinions (which are not illegal) as possible, the opposing journalists argued that the relevance of these opinions must be assessed and confronted with facts. In the view of journalists, if the news coverage is reduced to a simple overview of different opinions, it leads to an erosion of truth and facts and prevents the media from fulfilling their critical role. In short, a constant presentation of many different versions of reality can be as dangerous as insisting on a single truth.

Thus, while the new managers and journalists accused each other of not knowing what public service was, failing to deliver it, and even threatening it, the reference to public service served more as a discursive figure and a rhetorical means to justify and legitimise own position and contrast it with the opponents' (supposedly flawed) stance. Indeed, the core of the conflict concerned merely the interpretation of objectivity and the power distance that are integral parts of journalistic culture (Hanitzsch 2007) and important aspects of quality journalism. However, quality journalism is only one, albeit undoubtedly significant, part of the PSM mission. Still, these disagreements were enough, together with mutual distrust and differences in political views, to cause permanent clashes and fuel mutual suspicions of being biased and politically motivated, and eventually led to protest resignations and dismissals of two thirds of the TV newsroom.

The good news, however, is that both sides of the conflict clearly embraced the concepts of public service and public service media. Although the RTVS journalists and managers differed in their understanding of the selected aspects of public service journalism, public service was clearly a value held dear by all of them, and the interviews suggest that the discursive references to it were genuine and sincerely meant. None of the positions and interpretations could be understood as a blatant rejection of what the concept stands for or as an inclination towards the notion of state or government led PSM (even if the new managers seem to place less importance on the critical watchdog role). For Slovakia, a country with a long history of state media, this is no small item.

Notes

1. The proportion of the reporters and editors who resigned or did not have their contracts prolonged was calculated on the basis of data obtained from a source at RTVS who provided the author with a list of names of RTVS reporters and editors (including whether they resigned, were forced to leave, or stayed on); this information was then independently verified by another RTVS reporter.
2. Three of the 16 interviews were conducted by the author in collaboration with Jaromír Volek, whom the author would like to thank for his help.
3. According to the rules of the ethics committee of the Masaryk University, ethical approval was not required because the research project did not involve the use of biomedical techniques or vulnerable research subjects.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Jaromír Volek for his help with the interviews and the research participants for sharing their perspectives and giving their valuable time to contribute to this research. I also wish to thank Karen Donders and the participants of the RIPE@2021: “Public Service Media’s Contribution to Society” conference for their helpful suggestions, and the two anonymous reviewers for their careful reading and constructive comments, which have greatly enhanced the quality of the paper.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Czech Science Foundation [grant number GA22-30563S].

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4. Study III: The Anatomy of Internal Interference in Public Service Media: How Do Journalists Interpret Whether Editorial Interference Constitutes Unacceptable Encroachment on Their Autonomy?

Urbániková, M. (2024). The anatomy of internal interference in public service media: How do journalists interpret whether editorial interference constitutes unacceptable encroachment on their autonomy? *Journalism*, 26(6), 1251–1269.

<https://dx.doi.org/10.1177/14648849241255339>

The anatomy of internal interference in public service media: How do journalists interpret whether editorial interference constitutes unacceptable encroachment on their autonomy?

Journalism
2025, Vol. 26(6) 1251–1269
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DOI: 10.1177/14648849241255339
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Abstract

This study examines the suspected transmission of political pressure through management to journalists in public service media, where independence is crucial for fulfilling its democratic mission. Such interference is often covert and performed without hard evidence, making it difficult to prove. To provide insight into these practices, this study explores the case of RTVS, the public service broadcaster in Slovakia, during a conflict that arose after the appointment of a new director general in 2017. Using semi-structured interviews with journalists and managers ($N = 16$), it introduces an inductively developed classification scheme for internal interference and examines the context and conditions under which the journalists considered it to be politically motivated and as an illegitimate encroachment on their autonomy. The study shows that perceived internal interference by management takes two forms: interference in editorial content at various levels (and through multiple tools and means) and the use of disciplinary mechanisms. When journalists experience internal interference with a possible political background, trust in their superiors and the perception of their motives are crucial factors influencing their reactions and interpretation of the situation. However, for a variety of reasons that the study analyzes in detail, the RTVS journalists distrusted their superiors' moral integrity, professional skills, and political independence, which resulted in the departure of a large

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part of the TV newsroom. The article concludes with suggestions for methodological implications for further research on perceived interference.

Keywords

Autonomy, independence, interference, journalists, newsroom conflict, political pressure, public service media, Slovakia

Introduction

Autonomy is one of the cornerstones of journalism, without which it would cease to exist as a profession (Freidson, 1994). However, while some encroachments on journalistic autonomy are direct and obvious (e.g., an angry phone call from a politician demanding that an article is not published; an attempt at bribery; threats of violence), others, especially if they come from managers and editors within the media organization, are more difficult to assess. How do journalists judge whether the actions of their superiors constitute inappropriate attempts to interfere with their autonomy? What forms can such internal interference take?

This study explores the journalists' perspective of the suspected transmission of political pressures within a public service media (PSM) organization from management to the journalists. It draws on the case study of Radio and Television Slovakia (RTVS), the public broadcaster in Slovakia, at a time of editorial conflict that arose after the election of a new director general in 2017, which led to the departure of roughly two-thirds of the TV newsroom. Based on semi-structured interviews with RTVS journalists and managers ($N = 16$), the study aims to investigate the forms and types of interference experienced by journalists from their superiors, and to examine how journalists assess whether such interference is politically motivated and constitutes an unacceptable encroachment on their autonomy.

When it comes to the scholarship on journalistic autonomy, several authors (Örnebring et al., 2016; Reich and Hanitzsch, 2013) pointed out that research attention has been predominantly paid to external autonomy (i.e., the autonomy vis-a-vis other societal institutions like the state or the market) while internal autonomy (i.e., the degree of control journalists have over their own work within media organizations) has been less intensely studied. However, journalism is practiced within the boundaries of media organizations (Sjøvaag, 2013), so this is where most of the struggle for autonomy takes place (Hanitzsch and Mellado, 2011).

This study addresses this research gap and contributes to the scholarship on journalistic autonomy and interference in several ways. It adds to the scarce literature on internal autonomy and newsroom control that used a qualitative approach (García-de-Madariaga Miranda et al., 2022; Goyanes and Cañedo, 2023; Goyanes and Rodríguez-Castro, 2019; Goyanes et al., 2021; Waschková Čisářová and Kotišová, 2022). It offers a deeper understanding of the significant, but difficult-to-study, phenomenon of internal interference, which affects journalists regardless of region or media system. It develops an

empirically informed classification scheme (Marradi, 1990) for the perceived internal interference, and it systematizes the practices that editors and managers use to impose their will over journalists and media content. Moreover, it goes beyond the existing literature by exploring the context and the conditions under which journalists interpret the actions of their superiors as journalistically unjustified, possibly motivated by outside forces (notably by the political field), and therefore deemed unacceptable. Furthermore, this case study zeroes in on public service media which is a specific area more prone to political pressures than commercial media (Goyanes and Demeter, 2020).

Literature review

Autonomy and interference

Journalistic autonomy can be understood as the “latitude that a practitioner has in carrying out his or her occupational duties” (Weaver et al., 2007: 70). Journalistic autonomy is threatened by interference, which could be defined as threats or inducements that cause or attempt to cause journalists to act in a particular fashion (Hanretty, 2011: 5).

From the viewpoint of rank-and-file journalists within the journalistic field (Bourdieu, 1996), and in line with the distinction suggested by Nygren et al. (2015), two main sources of interference are identified (Figure 1). First, interference can be *external* and come from the macro-level (i.e., wider social field), most notably the political and economic fields. Second, it can be *internal* and come from within the journalistic field, from the mezzo-level (e.g., editors and managers). Internal interference can stem from the systems of editorial control and from legitimate disputes about how best to do journalistic work. This type can be journalistically motivated, and, therefore, legitimate. But the interference of superiors can also be motivated by non-journalistic interests, such as the interests of the politicians, owners, and advertisers. In such cases, external interference does not come directly from the macro level, but it is mediated via the mezzo level of managers and editors who serve as a transmission belt (Örnebring et al., 2016). Such interference is also referred to as *mixed interference* (Hiltunen, 2022). It can be difficult, and sometimes even impossible, for journalists to find the true motivation of their superiors; they can usually only guess the extent to which internal interference they are experiencing may exhibit characteristics of mixed interference.

Researching journalistic autonomy and interference

Encroachments on journalistic autonomy at the newsroom level, especially in the case of public service media, are surprisingly under-researched. Most studies adopt a quantitative approach and focus on perceived autonomy or influences without specifying the concrete manifestations of the interference (Ahva et al., 2017; Hanitzsch and Mellado, 2011; Maurer, 2019; Reich and Hanitzsch, 2013). More detailed measures of perceived autonomy, or the lack thereof, typically focus on: (a) the freedom to select news stories; (b) the freedom to decide which aspects of a story should be emphasized and how it should be framed; (c) the freedom to choose sources; (d) the frequency of editorial interventions;

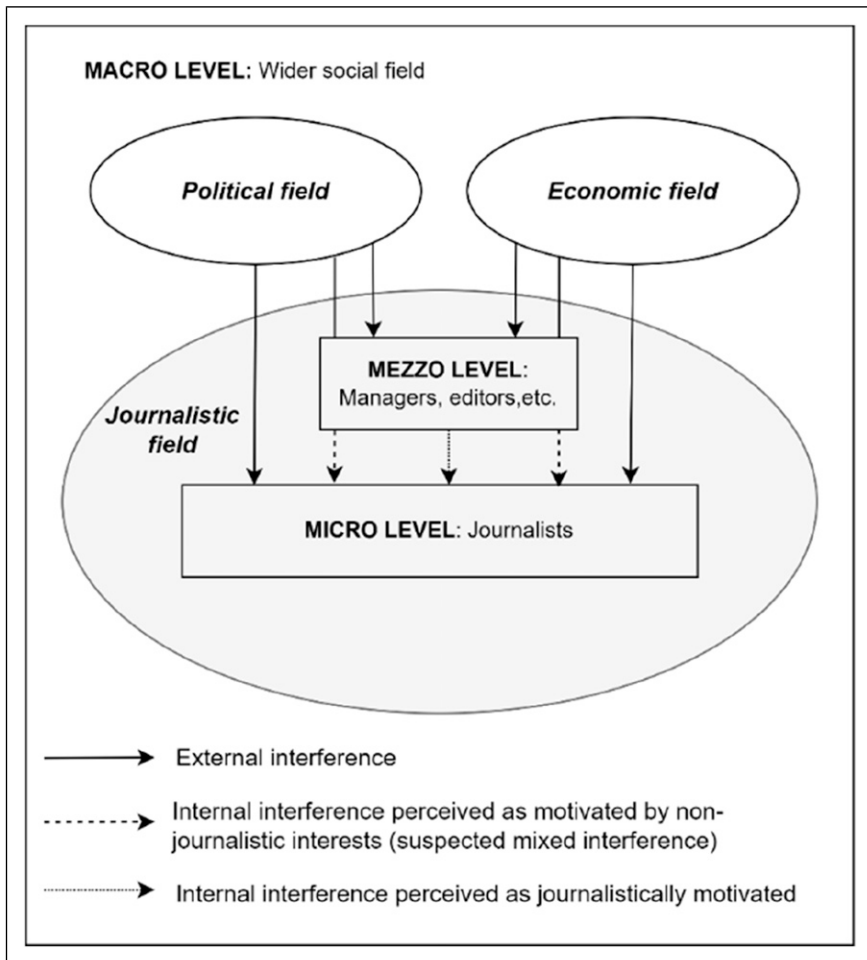


Figure 1. Types of perceived interference in journalistic autonomy from the perspective of journalists.

Source: author.

and (e) the actual publication of news stories (Hughes et al., 2017; Mellado and Humanes, 2012; Nygren and Degtereva, 2012; Örnebring et al., 2016; Skovsgaard, 2014).

Fewer studies examined autonomy and internal interference with a qualitative inductive approach. Some explored social control in the newsroom and the enforcement of an editorial policy that reflected the political orientation (Breed, 1955; Sigelman, 1973) or profit motivation (Bunce, 2017) of the media organization. Others examined newsroom conflicts in general (Goyanes and Cañedo, 2023); the perceived influence of commercial pressures within newsrooms (Goyanes and Rodríguez-Castro, 2019); the interference of political pressure in the news production process (García-de-Madariaga Miranda et al.,

2022; Goyanes et al., 2021); or the erosion of perceived workplace autonomy after the purchase of a given media outlet by a major political and business actor (Waschková Císarová and Kotišová, 2022).

These studies show that editorial interference in the content manifests itself in four major areas: (a) the selection of news stories; (b) the decision about their placement; (c) the selection of information; and (d) the choice of framing and the aspects of the story that should be emphasized (Breed, 1955; García-de-Madariaga Miranda et al., 2022; Goyanes et al., 2021; Waschková Císarová and Kotišová, 2022). In the case of indirect political pressure mediated by newsroom management, the strategy is to emphasize the news stories and information that are favorable to the selected political actor or ideology; to omit or downplay the unfavorable information; and to emphasize the information that puts opponents in a bad light (Goyanes et al., 2021; Waschková Císarová and Kotišová, 2022).

When journalists do not fully follow editorial policy and ignore suggestions from the higher echelons, different tools of organizational control come into play. They range from withholding praise to reprimands, a reduction of salary or bonuses, demotion, an assignment to night or weekend shifts, to the cancelation of contract, or dismissal (Breed, 1955; Bunce, 2017; García-de-Madariaga Miranda et al., 2022; Goyanes et al., 2021). In the long term, compliance is achieved by appointing like-minded managers, followed by the hiring and promotion of “appropriate” journalists and the adjustment or departure of opposing journalists (Breed, 1955; Bunce, 2017; Goyanes et al., 2021; García-de-Madariaga Miranda et al., 2022; Waschková Císarová and Kotišová, 2022).

To summarize, while previous research describes what practices and incidents journalists perceive as unacceptable violations of their autonomy, it does not thoroughly explore why and on what basis journalists had reached this conclusion. This is where the present study steps in.

Political pressure and public service media in the CEE region and Slovakia

While autonomy is essential for journalists and the media at large, this is especially true for PSM. For them to fulfill their mission, they must be politically and economically independent (Hanretty, 2011). However, PSM worldwide are tempting prey for ruling politicians. They must — with varying degrees of success — resist the attempts to subjugate them (Karppinen and Moe, 2016). In some regions, such as CEE, political pressure is more frequent and pronounced (Bajomi-Lazar, 2013; Milosavljević and Poler, 2018). This may be related to, among other factors, a challenging transformation from a state-controlled broadcaster, the lack of a public service media tradition, and a weak culture of journalistic independence (Milosavljević and Poler, 2018).

These common shortcomings also apply to RTVS, the Slovak public broadcaster. Political pressure is exerted through two main mechanisms: funding and personnel matters. First, politicians keep RTVS underfunded and dependent on the state. The license fee, which was the main source of RTVS’s income, had not been increased since 2003 when, at the end of 2022, the parliament suddenly abolished it without prior discussion and introduced funding from the state budget. Second, politicians also control

personnel matters: the director general of RTVS is elected by a simple majority of votes in the parliament.

In 2017, the parliament elected Jaroslav Rezník as the director general. He was believed to have links to the Slovak National Party (SNS), one of the then coalition parties that helped push through his nomination. This was followed by a change of key managers in the news and journalism sections. After a few months, a newsroom conflict between some journalists and the new leadership broke out (see [Urbániková, 2021](#); [Urbániková, 2023](#) for the details). It resulted in the voluntary and involuntary departure of more than 30 reporters and editors who complained of “creeping political pressure” ([Jančáriková, 2018](#)). None of the journalists mentioned any direct interference from outside the journalistic field. However, they objected to the internal interference that came from their superiors. This leads to two questions that this study aims to answer: (1) What forms and types of internal interference did journalists working at RTVS experience from their superiors? (2) How and on what basis did the journalists assess whether the internal interference was politically motivated and whether it constituted an unacceptable encroachment on their professional autonomy?

Method and data

To learn more about the mechanisms of internal interference and its interpretation from the perspective of journalists, this paper uses a case study approach, “an empirical method that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the ‘case’) in-depth and within its real-world context” ([Yin, 2018](#): 15). The case is the newsroom conflict at RTVS; it started soon after the election of a new director general in 2017, who changed the key top and middle managers and prompted a significant fluctuation in employees, both voluntary and involuntary, in the following months. Even though the qualitative method of semi-structured interviews does not allow to determine whether political pressure actually occurred at RTVS, it is a suitable method for exploring perceptions and interpretations.

Based on pre-research (a review of publicly available information about the conflict supplemented by two initial informal interviews with two RTVS reporters conducted by the author), the key groups of actors with different positions within the RTVS newsroom and/or with different views on the conflict were identified. Purposive sampling was then used to ensure that the participants were recruited from all relevant opinion groups, and, where possible, to maximize the diversity in the sample from the viewpoint of gender, age, position, and length of work experience. Between July 2018 and September 2019, 16 semi-structured interviews with the main actors of the conflict were conducted¹: the journalists who resigned in protest (4 participants); the journalists whose contracts were not prolonged by the new management (1); the journalists who decided to stay at their jobs (5; although, one of them resigned shortly after the interview); the newly appointed managers (i.e., those who oversaw rank-and-file reporters) (4); and members of the previous management who resigned (2). The interviews with the managers served to provide better insight and understanding of the context, and to check whether both sides agreed on the facts of the conflict and the main dividing lines. The years of experience of the five female and 11 male participants ranged from 3 years to more than 20. With one

exception (a rank-and-file reporter), none of the addressed participants declined the invitation to participate in the study.

The participants were informed in advance about the topic of the study, and their informed consent was obtained. The interview guide covered two main areas. First, it asked the participants to narrate the course of events from the appointment of the new director general in July 2017 to the present, describe the course of the conflict, and identify its sources. Second, it included questions about how participants perceived and defined the PSM mission and objectivity, and how they believed these concepts were perceived by other actors in the conflict. To ensure anonymity in the following text, they were assigned a code (from P1 to P16). The interviews were recorded, anonymized, transcribed verbatim, and coded in Atlas.ti software. Thematic analysis, “a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 79), was used to analyze the data. After the first round of inductive coding and the development of the basic structure of the themes, the second round of coding verified the content of the themes and their correspondence with the coded excerpts. The third round then focused on the relationships between the themes.

Results

The Anatomy of perceived internal interference

The interviews revealed that what journalists perceive as internal interference from their superiors can take two main forms (Figure 2). First, the superiors may try to *interfere in the editorial content*, in which case they risk potential opposition from the journalists. Second, interference can be indirect, via *disciplinary mechanisms*. In this case, the superiors try to make the journalists act in line with their expectations. If successful, the journalists themselves learn what to do and what not to do, and potentially contested and time-consuming interference in the editorial content becomes obsolete.

Interference in the editorial content. The interviews reveal that interference in the editorial content can occur at three levels. First, at the level of individual news stories, the superiors may try to influence the selection of topics; particular pieces of information; terms and labels used to denote events (e.g., the RTVS managers disputed the term “annexation”, which journalists used to denote Russia’s seizure of Crimea); sources; and angles/frames/context. Mechanisms of both inclusion and exclusion may be in place. The superiors can aim at influencing what to publish (e.g., as in the case of RTVS, they may instruct the journalists to cover a foreign state visit by a domestic politician which some journalists consider unimportant; or require quoting a source that journalists consider to have little expertise and credibility) and what to suppress and exclude. Second, at the newscast level, the superiors can try to influence the prominence of news stories (e.g., their order and length). Third, at the broadcast program level, interference can take the form of program suspension or discontinuation (e.g., the new RTVS management decided to halt its only investigative program, *The Reporters*, without providing a convincing explanation).

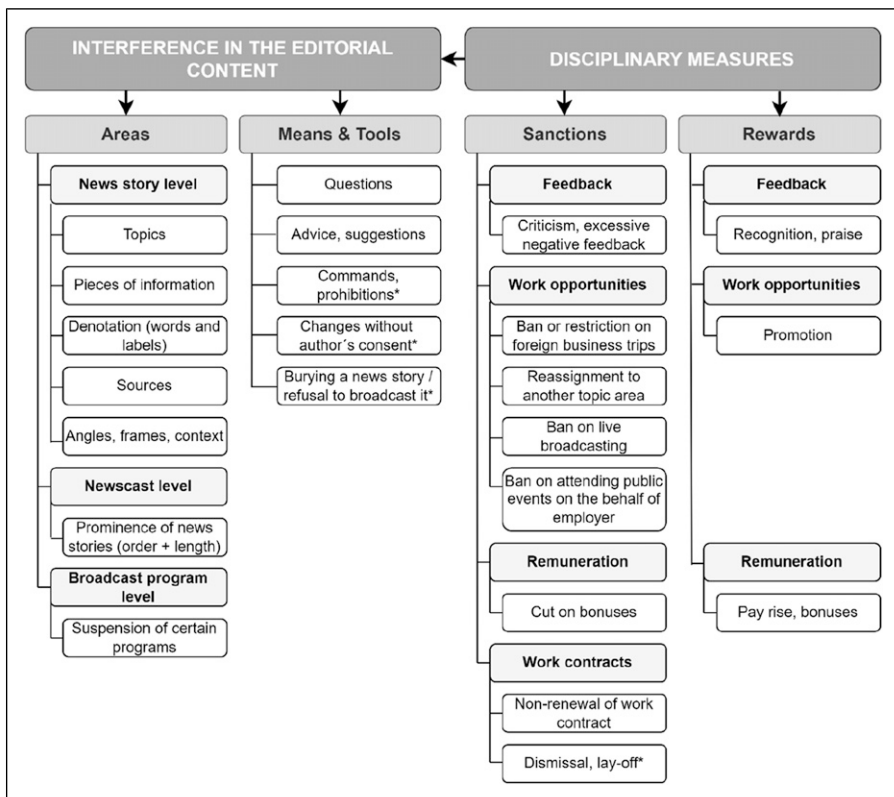


Figure 2. Classification scheme for the possible forms of perceived internal interference from the perspective of journalists.

Source: author.

Legend: Based on the interviews, the practices marked with an asterisk were not actually used by the management during the newsroom conflict in RTVS.

The management can use several means to interfere in the editorial content. To start with the least pervasive ones, questions (e.g., why a particular source was quoted) can sometimes be enough to let journalists know what their superiors find problematic or what they wish to see in a news story. Next, interference can take the form of advice or suggestions, which may be effective, particularly in the case of less experienced journalists. Finally, the most invasive tools are direct commands and prohibitions, changing content without the author's consent, and burying a news story or refusing to broadcast it. However, it must be stressed that none of the interviewed journalists (either publicly or in anonymous interviews) reported that RTVS management used any of the last three tools. Journalists mentioned them only when explaining that such actions did not occur and some also referred to these tools when describing the threshold beyond which they would consider internal interference unacceptable.

Disciplinary mechanisms. Interference can also take a more indirect form of disciplinary mechanisms aimed at journalists. If the tools mentioned above are not effective enough, and the superiors prefer to avoid the direct forms of interference, they may try to interfere in journalistic autonomy by disciplining the journalists. Both rewards (i.e., praise, promotion, pay raise, bonuses) for loyal employees and sanctions for rebellious employees can be used to achieve this goal.

Interviews showed that the sanctions, in particular, were perceived as a powerful tool for internal interference. The participants complained about ex-post criticism (e.g., for the choice of source quoted) and excessive negative feedback related to already broadcast news stories during daily newsroom meetings. Several journalists pointed out that excessive criticism brought them to the brink of self-censorship: “Whether you want to or not, you can’t work under this psychological pressure in the long term because you start self-censoring to avoid unnecessary conflicts” (P1, an ex-RTVS reporter). In addition, journalists described that the new management used critical email feedback from some audience members as supporting arguments. They forced selected journalists to respond to them, even if the criticism was hateful, not factual, or openly vulgar.

Another disciplinary mechanism described by the participants was restricting work opportunities, which was directed at specific rebellious reporters. This included a selective ban on foreign business trips; involuntary reassignment to another topic area (i.e., from politics to culture, which the management later claimed to be “a joke”); a ban on live broadcasting; and a ban on attending public events as a public representative of RTVS. In addition, several reporters mentioned that those who opposed the new management experienced a reduction or non-award of bonuses, which otherwise constituted a significant part of their income.

Finally, the most extreme disciplinary mechanism was non-renewal of work contracts. Even though no one was formally dismissed, the new management took advantage of the fact that several RTVS reporters were technically self-employed contractors (even though they worked exclusively for RTVS and had been part of the editorial staff for several years) and ended the contracts of four reporters who were among the signatories of a critical open letter and who openly confronted and criticized their superiors during editorial meetings.²

Over the line? When internal interference becomes an unacceptable encroachment on journalistic autonomy

The instances of internal interference described in the previous section do not automatically constitute an inappropriate encroachment on journalistic autonomy. For example, an internal editorial discussion about which topics to cover and which sources to quote is a standard part of the news construction phase. The same can be true for the critical ex-post assessment of news stories at editorial meetings and the use of disciplinary mechanisms. Why and under what conditions do journalists interpret internal interference as illegitimate?

The case study of RTVS shows that when journalists experience internal interference, but have no evidence of inappropriate motivation on the part of their superiors, trust is key

to the interpretation of the situation. Journalists must have sufficient trust that the conflicts are caused by legitimate motives and that the management is able and willing to insulate them from external interference rather than being a conduit. The interviews revealed that this trust was missing in the case of RTVS. For several reasons, the journalists did not trust the moral integrity of their new superiors, their professional skills, and their political independence (Figure 3).

Initial distrust. First, from the outset, some of the staff felt initial distrust of the new management. This stemmed from a broader context. The fact that MPs directly elect the director general undermines public and journalistic trust in his or her independence. Moreover, before the 2017 election, ruling politicians made no secret in their public statements that they wanted a change in the leadership of RTVS and accused RTVS of being anti-government and biased (Benedikovičová, 2016). In addition, some journalists were suspicious of Jaroslav Rezník, the new director general, because of his professional history and reputation, as well as his alleged ties to the Slovak National Party, which helped push his nomination. For instance, when he served as director general of the public

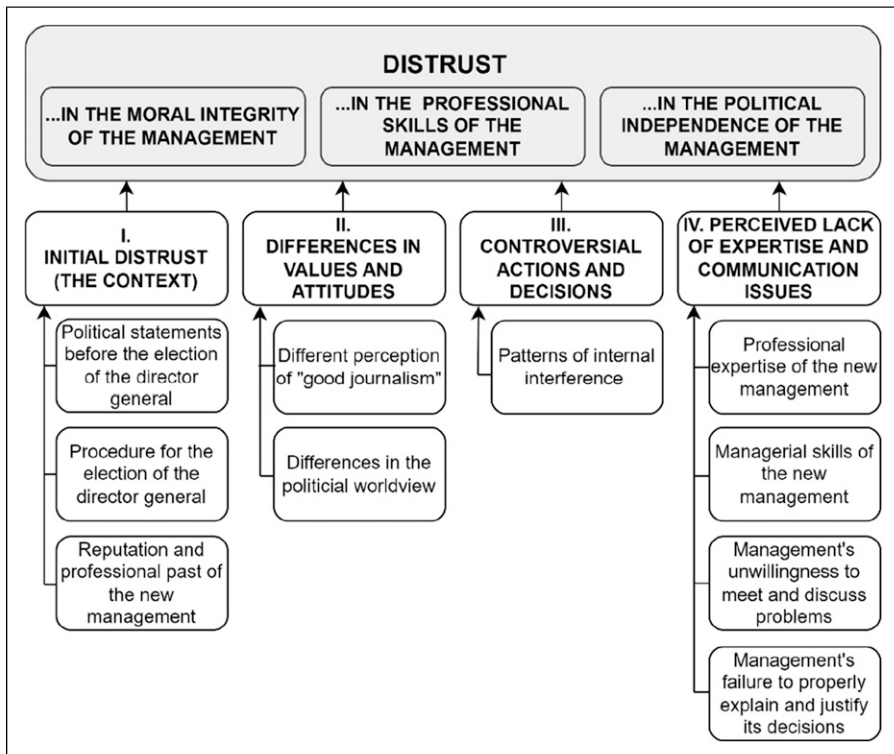


Figure 3. The sources of journalists' distrust of the new RTVS management.

Source: author.

service newswire (TASR), its news service was criticized for publishing a disproportionate amount of news about the SNS, which was not even a parliamentary party at the time ([Transparency International Slovakia, 2015](#)).

The initial distrust was exacerbated when Rezník appointed three former press officers from ministries and state organizations to be the top managers directly responsible for TV and radio news and current affairs without acknowledging that this could be a conflict of interest:

The main issue we all had with Jaroslav Rezník's arrival was the individuals he selected as managers. [...] I, and many others, advocate the principle that if a person starts as a journalist, they should not transition to become a spokesperson or enter politics. Once such a transition occurs, they have crossed over to the other side of the shore and should remain there.

P2, an ex-RTVS reporter

Differences in values and attitudes. Second, the opposing journalists and the new management differed in their values and attitudes. Not only did they have different views on what “good journalism” is, but they also differed in their political worldviews. The differences in journalism culture concerned two areas: the notion of public service (e.g., whether RTVS should automatically report on foreign state visits of the Speaker of Parliament, coincidentally also the chairman of the SNS, as a part of its public service remit) and the notion of objectivity, which translated into arguments about which sources to cite (see [Urbániková, 2023](#) for more details). According to the opposing journalists, the new management demanded that they include as many different views as possible, regardless of their relevance, rather than trying to get to the root of the matter themselves: “[We were arguing] whether, when five political scientists share their opinions on a particular topic, it's necessary to seek out a sixth one just for the sake of having an opposing view. That was their fake artificial objectivity” (P15, an ex-RTVS reporter). According to the new management, the opposing journalists were too one-sided and, at times, failed to give space to opposite views.

To further illustrate the dispute, when anti-government demonstrations were held in 2018 after the murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée, the superiors demanded that journalists to find and quote random people in the streets who did not participate in the demonstrations as part of their coverage of the protest (i.e., to give space to the “opposite side”). Or, in the case of a news story that concerned the warnings of international organizations that Russia was waging a hybrid war with a substantial impact on CEE countries, the management demanded that the journalist give space to the official Russian side (without specifying who that might be).

The two sides of the conflict also differed in their political worldviews. The interviews revealed that, in the eyes of the opposing journalists, some of the new managers had nationalistic and pro-Russian inclinations, while the new managers saw the opposing journalists as right-of-center liberals. Differences in political worldview would not necessarily be a problem, but, along with other factors, they narrowed the scope for what both sides would still consider a subject of legitimate disagreement. Using the

conceptualization proposed by Hallin (1986), the two sides disagreed on the topics and opinions that still belong to the sphere of legitimate controversy and what already belongs to the sphere of deviance, which falls outside the bounds of legitimate debate and where the rules of objectivity do not apply. In other words, if the two sides come from too different value bases (in the sense of a broader worldview orientation, e.g., pro-Russian or pro-Western), it is hardly surprising that they disagree on which opinions need to be balanced and which are no longer opinions but facts, and on which views and sources are legitimate enough and should be reflected in the broadcast.

Controversial actions and decisions. The third source of distrust from the journalists' point of view was the controversial actions and decisions of the new leadership. According to the opposing journalists, the cases of internal interference followed two interrelated patterns. The editorial disputes mostly concerned topics related to the SNS and its representatives and the topics related to Russia (at the same time, the SNS itself is known for its affinity towards Russia): "[...] later on it turned out that he [the new manager] is extremely sensitive on issues related to Russia, information warfare and defense, and things related to Russia and the ministries that the SNS is in charge of" (P10, a RTVS reporter). Some reporters mentioned that they noticed the tendency to give more space and more favorable coverage to persons and issues related to the SNS, to tone down criticism of them and to soften the critical tone towards Russia. When the management was not satisfied with their coverage of these "sensitive" topics, it used some of the disciplinary mechanisms described in the previous section (most often withholding salary bonuses), sometimes even admitting a connection to a particular story. As some of the journalists explained, they had no evidence, but the overall pattern seemed clear: "[...] the whole problem is that Rezník was simply given a political mandate to ensure that RTVS news did not bite the government" (P15, an ex-RTVS reporter).

Perceived lack of expertise and communication issues. Fourth, the opposing journalists questioned the professional expertise and leadership skills of the new management: "[The new management] was not able to effectively manage a team, both in terms of communication and from a professional point of view" (P10, a RTVS reporter). Several pointed out that the new management's conception of journalism, and their knowledge of the technical processes, were outdated because they had worked as journalists 10 to 20 years before and had been spokespersons and press officers since then. In the eyes of the opposing journalists, the new managers also lacked the ability to lead the team and provide a vision. In addition, from their point of view, the situation was not helped by the fact that the new director general refused to communicate with them and that their superiors were unable to explain their controversial actions and decisions convincingly.

The outcome: journalists' distrust of RTVS management. As a result, the reporters did not trust the moral integrity of their new superiors, their professional skills, and their political independence. Doubts were expressed both by those who left or were forced to leave, and by those who stayed at RTVS. In terms of moral integrity, one participant described Jaroslav Rezník as "a man who changes his opinions as needed" (P15, an ex-RTVS

reporter); another considered the new managers “mere executors of power” (P16, an ex-RTVS reporter); and yet another described the conflict as “a clash of two moral-value worlds” (P11, an RTVS reporter). This was compounded by distrust in the professional abilities of RTVS management. As one journalist said, “I didn’t respect those people professionally. I didn’t feel that I could learn anything from them” (P15, an ex-RTVS reporter). Finally, the reporters also lacked trust in the political independence of RTVS management. They described, for example, that “there is political pressure, certainly...to be milder, especially towards the SNS. Not in the sense of not criticizing them, but to do it more mildly” (P6, an RTVS reporter), and assumed that the director general “came with a political assignment to make the news more pro-government and less critical” (P15, an ex-RTVS reporter).

The RTVS managers, on the other side, described the conflict as a “misunderstanding” (P14; an RTVS manager) and as a “power conflict” (P3; an RTVS manager) in which the reporters wanted to get rid of the new management and choose their own bosses. They accused the reporters of trying to politicize their disagreements and of inflating and misinterpreting the incidents.

Thus, both sides of the conflict blamed each other for bias, a lack of professionalism, and political motivation. Almost all the participants stated that the arguments and the tense atmosphere made regular work in the newsroom impossible. Some even described how the situation had a negative impact on their mental and physical well-being. Eventually, in April 2018, four reporters did not have their contracts renewed, and in May 2018, 12 others quit in protest. In addition to the distrust of the management, the participants also cited the fear of emerging self-censorship and the declining quality of reporting, with which they did not want to be professionally associated, as reasons. They described that the outgoing reporters were replaced with less experienced and more loyal ones who did what was needed. From their point of view, the result was low-quality and superficial reporting where reporters merely “hold the microphone to individual sources and then piece it together” (P7, an RTVS reporter).

Conclusion

Politically connoted changes in top management and suspected political pressure are not uncommon in public service media (Nissen, 2016), regardless of where they are located and which media model they belong to. The same applies to organizational pressure and internal interference, which are universal and timeless themes in journalism. Thus, despite being a single case study, the story of RTVS has general implications.

This study shows that internal interference can take two main forms: interference in the editorial content (at the level of news stories, newscast level, and broadcast program level) and disciplinary mechanisms (sanctions and rewards in feedback, work opportunities, remuneration, and work contracts). These are used to make journalists act in line with management expectations, so that interference in the editorial content becomes unnecessary.

The inductively developed classification scheme systematizes the forms of internal interference and adds to the existing literature (Breed, 1955; García-de-Madariaga

Miranda et al., 2022; Goyanes et al., 2021; Waschková Císarová and Kotišová, 2022) several new areas where internal interference can occur (e.g., denotation of events, program suspension) and the means and tools used to achieve it (e.g., questions, advice, commands, prohibitions, burying a news story). Regarding disciplinary mechanisms, the tools identified were mostly in line with previous research on interference (Breed, 1955; Bunce, 2017; Goyanes et al., 2021; García-de-Madariaga Miranda et al., 2022; Waschková Císarová and Kotišová, 2022). The exception was the sudden non-renewal of some reporters' contracts, where the management took advantage of the peculiar Slovak system in which even long-standing staff members can be formally self-employed. A similar practice of non-standard contractual relations and the resulting vulnerability has already been described in the context of the Spanish public-service RTVE (Toledano et al., 2022). All in all, the personnel changes that began at RTVS after the election of the new director general eventually led to the replacement of opposing rebellious staff with new and loyal employees, which prevented further conflicts (cf. Sigelman, 1973).

The RTVS case also shows that, when journalists encounter internal interference, their trust in the management is crucial for their interpretation of the situation. Thus, trust between rank-and-file reporters and their superiors is important not only for the resilience of journalists to external interference, as described by Hiltunen (2022), but also for their handling of internal interference. In the case of RTVS, from the journalists' point of view, the management not only did not function as an "editorial defense shield" (Revers, 2017); it was perceived as a lever for external political interference.

The distrust of the opposing journalists towards the new management concerned their moral integrity, professional skills, and political independence. It had several roots. First, from the beginning, journalists approached the new leadership with initial distrust caused by the context of the case (i.e., the election system in which the director general is elected directly in the parliament; the statements of the political representatives who openly called for change in the leadership of RTVS). Second, the two sides differed in their political worldviews and perception of "good journalism", which narrowed the scope of topics and opinions they considered to be the subjects of legitimate disagreement (Hallin, 1986). This builds on previous research that shows that journalists enjoy more workplace autonomy if they share with management political views (Ceron et al., 2019) and professional journalistic values (Örnebring et al., 2016). Third, the opposing journalists spotted certain patterns in the controversial actions and decisions of the management. These mostly concerned the topics related to the SNS (the party that helped push through the nomination of the director general), its representatives, and interests. From the journalists' point of view, the aim was to provide more coverage of selected actors and topics, produce stories favorable to them, and mitigate criticism. Fourth, in the eyes of the opposing journalists, the new management failed to explain and justify its actions and decisions convincingly, refused to communicate, and lacked professional expertise and leadership skills. This corroborates the findings of the study by Goyanes and Cañedo (2023), which emphasizes the crucial role of communication in managing and resolving newsroom conflicts.

As a result of the combination of these factors, many journalists interpreted the management's actions as an unacceptable interference upon their autonomy. They

perceived it not only as journalistically unjustified, which was mainly the consequence of not sharing professional norms and values — that in itself would have been a strong enough reason for many to leave — but also as likely politically motivated, although they admitted that they could not prove the latter. Returning to the framework presented in [Figure 1](#), this means that, from the journalists' perspective, the mezzo-level (i.e., RTVS management) transmitted external political pressure into the organization, or at least voluntarily acted in accordance with the presumed interests of the leading political actors. Thus, in their view, the perceived internal interference had the nature of mixed interference.

To conclude the story of RTVS, Jaroslav Rezník's mandate expired in 2022. The parliament resulting from the 2020 elections selected Ľuboš Machaj as the new director general. The new director general has no known links to specific political parties and after his election, the situation at RTVS has stabilized. However, in autumn 2023, early parliamentary elections were held, which were won by Robert Fico's Smer-SD party. The new government reduced the RTVS budget and announced plans to dissolve RTVS. They proposed replacing it with a new organization, the Slovak Television and Radio (STVR), which would maintain the same mission, remit, and tasks. This move would provide an opportunity to replace the current director general with a new appointee ([Reuters, 2024](#)). This shows that political pressure on RTVS is far from over.

In a broader context, the risk of PSM being used as a tool in political power struggles is nothing new not only in the CEE region ([Jakubowicz, 2008](#)), but also, for instance, in Southern European countries belonging to the pluralist polarized model ([Hallin and Mancini, 2004](#)). The case of RTVS is a further manifestation of this climate, albeit so far milder than, for example, the PSM in neighboring Poland or Hungary. Here, the governments have effectively turned the PSM into state media: they changed media laws and appointed loyal figures as directors general (e.g., a former politician from the ruling party); this was followed by the mass forced and voluntary departures of staff and, subsequently, a noticeable bias within the media content in favor of the ruling parties ([Coynash, 2019](#); [Dzięciołowski, 2017](#); [Polyák, 2015](#)). Thus, there is no doubt about the direct political pressure and interference. However, the described case of RTVS was much less clear-cut and obvious, which, in terms of the independence of PSM, brings Slovakia closer to countries like Spain (see, e.g., [García-de-Madariaga Miranda et al., 2022](#)) than to countries like Poland or Hungary. The journalists could only assume the extent to which internal interference from their superiors was politically motivated. This made it difficult for RTVS journalists to explain to the public and to gain public support; this further underlines the intricacy of internal interference within a media organization.

Finally, what are the implications for further exploration of journalistic autonomy and interference? First, autonomy and perceived interference are not only situational and context-dependent ([Kotissova and Cisařová, 2023](#); [Sjøvaag, 2013](#)) but also significantly subjective. Thus, while a quantitative examination of journalists' general sense of autonomy and perceived pressure is undoubtedly useful ([Maurer, 2019](#); [Reich and Hanitzsch, 2013](#)), focusing on the incidence of specific forms of interference (e.g., [Hiltunen, 2022](#); [Hughes et al., 2017](#); [Örnebring et al., 2016](#)) could lead to more valid, reliable, and comparable results. Future studies could consider how journalists interpret

individual incidents and whether they consider the restrictions on their freedom and autonomy to be legitimate.

Moreover, frequency should not be automatically used as an indicator of the significance of interference, because, under certain conditions, one or just a few incidents may be sufficient to warrant a strong defensive response. This study also shows that the experience does not even have to be personal. Some of the journalists who left in protest mentioned that they did not encounter a case of internal interference but assumed that this was just because they did not work on topics that were sensitive and important to the management. They stated that seeing how the management treated their colleagues, particularly the most vocal rebels, was enough. Thus, the absence of personal experience of interference is not sufficient for a sense of autonomy. All this makes further exploration of interference and autonomy both intriguing and challenging.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the four anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments, which contributed to improving the manuscript, as well as Ilmari Hiltunen, Marko Milosavljević, and Gunnar Nygren for their constructive feedback on an earlier draft. Additionally, gratitude is extended to Jaromír Volek for assisting with conducting the interview, and to the research participants for sharing their perspectives and dedicating their valuable time to this study.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Czech Science Foundation, Grant No. GA22-30563S.

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Notes

1. Three of the 16 interviews were conducted by the author in collaboration with Jaromír Volek, whom the author would like to thank for his help.
2. In October 2022, the court of first instance ruled that the reporters were employees of RTVS and that RTVS had wrongfully terminated their employment and ordered RTVS to pay them compensation.

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5. Study IV: Resisting Perceived Interference in Journalistic Autonomy: The Study of Public Service Media in Slovakia

Urbániková, M. (2021). Resisting perceived interference in journalistic autonomy: The study of public service media in Slovakia. *Media and Communication*, 9(4), 93–103.

<https://dx.doi.org/10.17645/mac.v9i4.4204>

Article

Resisting Perceived Interference in Journalistic Autonomy: The Study of Public Service Media in Slovakia

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Submitted: 18 February 2021 | Accepted: 12 April 2021 | Published: 21 October 2021

Abstract

Autonomy is of paramount importance for journalism, but there is little empirically based knowledge of how journalists cope when it is threatened. Using a case study approach, this contribution examines a newsroom conflict that took place in the public service Radio and Television of Slovakia. It started when the new director general, a person believed to have ties to one of the coalition political parties, was elected by the parliament in 2017, and it culminated in layoffs and resignations of more than 30 reporters and editors in 2018. The case study is based on semi-structured interviews (N = 16) with the journalists who decided to quit in protest of what they called “creeping political pressure,” those whose contracts were not prolonged, those who decided to stay at their jobs, and the members of the previous and the new management. Building on the interviews and document analysis, the article inductively develops a classification scheme for resistance practices the journalists used to cope with the perceived interference with their professional autonomy that came from within their media organisation. These practices include having internal discussions, voicing concerns during newsroom meetings, writing an internal letter to the management, meeting with the management, establishing a trade union, requesting mediation, writing an open letter to the viewers and listeners, publicly criticising the management in the media, voluntarily asking to be re-assigned to another topic area or position in order to avoid interference, staying at one’s job in open opposition to the management, and resigning in protest.

Keywords

autonomy; interference; newsroom conflict; pressure; public service media; resistance practices; RTVS; Slovakia

Issue

This article is part of the issue “Media Control Revisited: Challenges, Bottom-Up Resistance and Agency in the Digital Age” edited by Olga Dovbysh (University of Helsinki, Finland) and Esther Somfalvy (University of Bremen, Germany).

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1. Introduction

Professional autonomy is one of the holy grails of journalism. The freedom of journalists to make and follow their own norms and rules of practice is one of the key ideal-typical values upon which journalism’s ideology is based (Deuze, 2005). It is what makes journalism a profession (Freidson, 1994) or, in Bourdieu’s terms, what makes it a separate field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Given its paramount significance, important questions arise: How do journalists react when they feel that their autonomy is threatened? What options and measures do they have to handle what they perceive as undue interference?

This study sheds more light on the different ways that professional autonomy can be defended in prac-

tice. More concretely, it focuses on the resistance practices used to deal with perceived internal pressure from within the news organisation (i.e., from management). It employs a qualitative case study approach (Yin, 2018) to analyse a newsroom conflict that took place in the Slovak public service broadcaster Radio and Television of Slovakia (RTVS) in 2017 and 2018. The conflict started when the new director general, a person believed to have ties to one of the then-coalition political parties, was installed by the parliament, and it culminated with the layoffs and resignations of more than 30 reporters and editors who complained of “creeping political pressure” (Jančáriková, 2018).

Even though the importance of professional autonomy in journalism is well documented in the scholarly

literature, resistance practices used by journalists when their autonomy is in jeopardy have rarely been studied (as pointed out, e.g., by Barrios & Miller, 2020). Empirical studies mostly focus on the perceived level of journalistic autonomy in various countries (Ahva et al., 2017; Hughes et al., 2017), or, from the opposite angle, on exploring various types and forms of interference in journalistic autonomy (Akharkhodjaeva, 2017b; Goyanes & Rodríguez-Castro, 2019) and on the extent of the journalists' experience with this interference (Clark & Grech, 2017; Hiltunen, 2019). However, the question of how journalists actually deal with the pressure and interference is less often addressed, and if so, available studies have focused mostly on external political interference that occurs in flawed democracies and authoritarian or hybrid regimes (Ataman & Çoban, 2019; Barrios & Miller, 2020; Slavtcheva-Petkova, 2019). Another relevant stream of literature, the research on conflicts in public service media, zeroes in on cultural clashes between the content makers and top managers who are responsible for administering and running "the factory" (Nissen, 2014), and on concrete cases when the independence of public service broadcasters was breached and journalistic autonomy constrained (Dragomir, 2017; Dzięciołowski, 2017; Koivunen, 2017). Again, an emphasis on the array of possible resistance practices of dissatisfied journalists is missing. This is where this study steps in.

The case of the newsroom conflict in the public service medium in Slovakia is of interest for three reasons. First, as already suggested, previous research has focused primarily on external political interference in non-democratic countries, unlike this study, which examines the case of (perceived) internal interference from within the media organisation in a European Union country with a relatively high ranking for democracy and press freedom. Slovakia is currently ranked 42nd out of 167 countries in the 2019 Democracy Index (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2020), and 33rd out of 180 countries in the 2020 World Press Freedom Index (Reporters Without Borders, 2020). Second, this study contributes to our knowledge of journalism culture in Central and Eastern Europe, a region which has, compared to Western societies, been studied considerably less (e.g., Standaert et al., 2019). As journalistic autonomy certainly did not belong to the core ideal-typical values of journalism during the communist times, the question arises whether and to what extent the journalists working for the public service broadcaster in Slovakia adopted autonomy as an essential value that was worth defending. And third, journalistic autonomy is of particular importance in the realm of public service media because their *raison d'être* is independence from both political and economic pressure. Therefore, although journalists in general are expected to defend their autonomy when they feel it is under attack, this expectation is reasonably higher in the case of journalists working for public service media, which makes RTVS an interesting case to study.

This article is organised as follows: It first reviews the literature on the resistance practices that journalists use to cope with interference in their autonomy and, drawing from organisational studies, reviews the literature on the practices that employees use to express their dissent (Section 2); it describes the research method and data (Section 3); it analyses the newsroom conflict and introduces an inductively developed classification scheme of resistance practices through 16 semi-structured interviews with the journalists and managers from the RTVS newsroom (Section 4); Section 5 is the summary and conclusion.

2. Literature Review: Resisting Interference and Voicing Dissatisfaction

2.1. Journalistic Autonomy and Coping With its Encroachment

Journalistic autonomy is the "latitude that a practitioner has in carrying out his or her occupational duties" (Weaver et al., 2007, p. 70). It refers to "the extent to which journalists can make decisions free of pressures from management, commercial factors, as well as other forces that reside inside the news environment" (Reich & Hanitzsch, 2013, p. 135). Journalistic autonomy can be threatened by the interference of various actors, either internally, from within the journalistic field (e.g., editors, managers), or externally, most notably from the political or economic fields. Interference can be described as threats or inducements which cause or attempt to cause journalists to act in a particular fashion (Hanretty, 2011, p. 5), or as methods used to "influence journalists with the objective of shaping editorial content" (Hiltunen, 2019, p. 5). Thus, interference does not only refer to direct interventions (or attempts at interventions) in the journalistic content, but also to all sorts of pressure to discipline the journalists and make them act according to the interests of the sources of this pressure. In the case of internal actors (most notably editors), in order to qualify their actions as interference, these actions must be journalistically unwarranted.

Available studies that explore the practices used by journalists when they feel their autonomy is endangered focus mostly on cases of external political interference that occur in flawed democracies and authoritarian or hybrid regimes (see Ataman & Çoban, 2019, for Turkey; Barrios & Miller, 2020, for Columbia; Fedirko, 2020, for Ukraine; Slavtcheva-Petkova, 2019, for Russia). These practices include: seeking support from editors (Barrios & Miller, 2020; Slavtcheva-Petkova, 2019); sharing or handing over sensitive stories to other colleagues or working anonymously (Ataman & Çoban, 2019; Barrios & Miller, 2020); using social media to attract followers in order to raise the costs for the potential sources of the pressure (Barrios & Miller, 2020); trying to solve the problems by directly contacting the sources of the pressure (Slavtcheva-Petkova, 2019); practicing borderless

and cross-border journalism (Ataman & Çoban, 2019); and using the support of international actors (Ataman & Çoban, 2019; Barrios & Miller, 2020).

Studies that focus on democratic countries mostly examine how journalists deal with commercial interference, either internal or external (see Borden, 2000, for the U.S.; Goyanes & Rodríguez-Castro, 2019, for Spain; Hanusch et al., 2017, for Australia and Germany). Regarding external commercial interference, coping practices include avoiding negative accounts about a product or service (Goyanes & Rodríguez-Castro, 2019; Hanusch et al., 2017); not reporting about a product or service at all (Hanusch et al., 2017); and being more careful about meeting journalistic norms in sensitive cases (Goyanes & Rodríguez-Castro, 2019). Regarding internal commercial pressure, according to Borden (2000), journalists use open protest, sabotage (e.g., making decisions without consulting higher levels of management), principled compromise (i.e., concession in order to accomplish basic journalistic goals), and “trump cards,” which suggest that non-compliance with standard journalism would lead to a loss of credibility.

Although these studies provide useful insights into how journalists cope with interference in different contexts, none of them examine a situation similar to this case study: A case of perceived internal interference that comes from within the media organisation and that is interpreted by dissenting journalists as the lack of professional skills on the side of the management (in the best case) and as politically motivated (in the worst case). Thus, this case study explores a unique situation where journalists perceive the interference of their superiors as journalistically unwarranted with only speculation for the underlying motivations.

2.2. Employee Dissatisfaction in an Organisation: Exit and Voice in Journalism

Besides research that focuses on how journalists deal with perceived encroachment on their autonomy, organisational studies are the second relevant stream of scholarship upon which this contribution is based. Specifically, it builds up the literature on the practices that employees use to express their dissent for the organisation where they work. In his widely cited work, Hirschman (1970) summarised that people respond to the decline in the performance of organisations mainly by exit or voice. They either leave the organisation (or stop buying its products), or they voice their discontent and exert pressure upon the organisation to improve its performance. Loyalty is the key moderating variable: Less loyal employees and customers are more likely to exit; more loyal ones are more likely to use their voice (Hirschman, 1970). Later research identified a variety of other predictors such as: organisational commitment; job satisfaction; perceived justice, trust, and fairness; psychological contract violation; job alternatives; employability; and psychological safety (Aravopoulou et al., 2017; Subhakaran & Dyaram, 2018).

Farrell (1983) enriched the exit-voice conceptualisation with two other options. Besides quitting or voicing their discontent, dissatisfied employees can opt for loyalty (i.e., stick with the organisation and patiently wait for improvement) or neglect (i.e., passive behaviour, withdrawal, and hostility). Focusing on employees' voice strategies, Gordon (1988) distinguished four types that are based on active-passive and constructive-destructive dimensions. Accordingly, as summarized by Kassing (2002), employees' voice can be active constructive (e.g., making suggestions, argument, union bargaining), passive constructive (e.g., listening, quiet support, unobtrusive compliance), active destructive (e.g., complaining, ingratiation, verbal aggression, antagonistic exit), or passive destructive (e.g., murmurings, apathy, withdrawal).

In the field of journalism and media studies, the exit-voice-loyalty-neglect model has been applied for several purposes: to explore and evaluate journalist resistance to business constraints (Borden, 2000); to analyse the responses of journalists to ethical dilemmas (Saldaña et al., 2016); or to examine career choices of journalists (Akhrarkhodjaeva, 2017a; Davidson & Meyers, 2016). Arguably, media organisations have several specific features that need to be taken into account when applying the exit-voice-loyalty-neglect model to journalists' behaviour. These traits make journalists' position when it comes to expressing dissent different from that of, for example, assembly line workers. Journalism is a specific profession with a high potential for conflict and employee dissatisfaction. The very nature of journalism—the construction of media representations of reality—offers much room for ideological tensions. Also, journalism can be considered as a semi-profession (Tunstall, 1971) without universally accepted standards and rules of practice and without a clear definition of what good professional performance is. This can be another source of potential disputes between journalists and management.

Journalism entails not only a high risk of conflicts but also specific requirements for their resolution. When journalists disagree with their employer's editorial policy, the stakes are high, and so are the societal demands placed on them. It is in journalists' vital interest to defend their autonomy as, without it, they lose their authority and can no longer be considered professionals (Borden, 2000). However, at the same time, journalists who would openly voice their discontent face extremely high costs (Borden, 2000). In some cases, using voice may mean quitting with “the possible prospects of not being able to return to the profession until conditions change” (Akhrarkhodjaeva, 2017a, p. 8). Also, many journalists hold the view that those who disagree with the editorial policy of their media organisation are free to quit and change to another one (Schimpfossil & Yablokov, 2014). In short, it seems that in journalism, there is an increased pressure on journalists to opt for voice or exit as opposed to loyalty or neglect—and of course, that comes with a price.

3. Data and Method

This article aims to explore the resistance practices used by the journalists working for RTVS to cope with what they perceived as the undue interference of their superiors upon their professional autonomy during a newsroom conflict that took place in 2017 and 2018. The study asks not only what resistance practices the journalists used, but also what was their order, and how was the selection of individual practices related to the broader journalists' strategies of how to respond to the unsatisfactory conditions in the newsroom. Even though the conflict affected both the radio and television divisions of RTVS, this study focuses on the television only because the clash was more dramatic, more closely followed by the public, and led to more staff resignations.

As a broader methodological strategy to learn more about the journalistic resistance practices, a case study approach—"an empirical method that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the 'case') in-depth and within its real-world context" (Yin, 2018, p. 15)—was employed. Conflicts where journalists publicly complain of interference with their autonomy serve as a useful research opportunity because they allow for the capture of the variability of individual and collective resistance practices, as well as the sequences. To explore the case of RTVS, I conducted 16 semi-structured interviews with the main actors of the conflict (e.g., journalists, managers) and supplemented it with document analysis (e.g., news articles, an open letter written by journalists, the management's response) as a form of triangulation.

As pointed out by Nissen (2016), conflicting parties in public service media organisations typically offer different interpretations of what happened. What one stakeholder describes as a brave defence of autonomy and independence, another interprets as a consequence of unsatisfactory performance and a lack of loyalty. Obviously, semi-structured interviews cannot reveal which side of the conflict in RTVS was "right" or "wrong," nor do they prove whether or to what extent the new RTVS management interfered with the professional autonomy of the journalists. However, this methodological approach can shed more light on how the journalists reacted once they perceived the interference. To verify (to the extent possible) the basic facts, I checked for inconsistencies in the versions and interpretations of conflicting parties and compared them with descriptions of individual events as captured in the news and other documents. All the interviewees agreed on the elementary explanation of what happened, and the document analysis also supported these findings. As expected, what was not agreed upon were individual actors' motivations and the interpretation of key values that needed to be protected.

Given that the subject of the analysis is an organizational conflict, it is essential to mention the RTVS' internal structure. RTVS was created in 2011 following a merger of Slovak Television with Slovak Radio, and

the director general supervises both the radio and television divisions. They are elected (and potentially also dismissed) by a simple majority of votes in the parliament. The term of office is for five years, and the same person may be elected to only two consecutive terms. When it comes to news making, the highest-ranking role (right below the director general) is the head of television and radio news and current affairs. Their direct subordinates are the editor-in-chief of television news and current affairs and the editor-in-chief of radio news and current affairs. One level below the editors-in-chief are the team leaders who lead the rank-and-file reporters.

The selection of conversational partners was led by an effort to cover the key groups of actors and to maximise the diversity in the sample from the viewpoint of position, gender, age, and length of working experience. Participants were selected based on the author's knowledge of the case. With one exception, none of the addressed participants declined the invitation to participate in the research study. The conversational partners fall into five key groups: the journalists whose contracts were not prolonged by the new management (1 participant); the journalists who resigned in protest (4); the journalists who decided to stay at their jobs (5; however, one of them resigned shortly after the interview); newly appointed managers (4); and members of the previous management who resigned (2). Managers are defined as people who oversaw editors and rank-and-file reporters (e.g., team leaders, the head of television and radio news and current affairs). The years of experience of the 5 female and 11 male participants ranged from 3 years to more than 20. In the following text, for the sake of brevity, I use the umbrella term "journalists" to denote the dissenting part of the newsroom that included a major part, though not all, of the reporters and editors.

The interviews were carried out between July 2018 and September 2019. All of the interviews were recorded, anonymised, transcribed verbatim, and subjected to coding in Atlas.ti. To ensure better anonymity for the conversational partners, the generic feminine pronoun is used throughout the text when referring to the participants. To analyse the data, I used thematic analysis, "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). The coding and analysis process followed the analytic procedure suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006): It started with familiarising with the data and generating initial codes, continued with searching for themes (collating the codes in potential themes) and reviewing themes (including the creation of a thematic map), and ended with defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

4. Analysis: The Many Shades of Resistance

In what follows, I analytically describe the newsroom clash in RTVS which resulted in a significant staff turnover. Based on the interviews and the document analysis, I inductively developed a classification scheme (Marradi,

1990) for the resistance practices used by the journalists. They can be divided into two groups (Figure 1): resistance when a change within the organisation is deemed possible, and resistance when change within the organisation is no longer deemed possible. Another dividing line establishes resistance practices that can be either internal (i.e., intra-organisational) or external (i.e., extra-organisational). The dissatisfied journalists at first believed that change was possible and, as a general rule, although with some exceptions, they first used internal resistance practices, then they resorted to external-resistance practices. These practices did not lead to change, so the journalists eventually accepted the status quo and opted for resistance practices based on personal reactions to the unsatisfactory situation. Although Figure 1 suggests a general direction of individual steps, the process is reiterative rather than linear (e.g., requesting a meeting with the management was a step that was taken repeatedly in several stages of the conflict).

4.1. Prelude and Exposition: The Election of a New Director General

The prelude to the newsroom conflict at RTVS started with the election of the new director general. In a secret

ballot in June 2017, the Slovak parliament chose Jaroslav Rezník to take the top position at RTVS. This choice was received with apprehension by part of the journalistic community and the public for two reasons. First, in the months preceding the election, the two leading politicians, then-Prime Minister Robert Fico (the chairman of Smer-SD party) and then-parliament speaker Andrej Danko (the chairman of the Slovak National Party), persistently and openly criticised RTVS and its management for being anti-Slovak, anti-government, biased, unfair with questions, and not publicising the successes of the government (e.g., Benedikovičová, 2016), and they claimed that “there must be a change in the leadership of RTVS” (“IPI criticises Slovak PM’s,” 2017). The second reason was personal: Jaroslav Rezník, the new director general, was believed to have ties to the Slovak National Party, the party that helped significantly to push through his nomination. Thus, the new director general took office in August 2017 in an atmosphere of tension and negative expectations.

The concerns were fuelled by the changes in the top management in September 2017. Rezník broke one of the key unwritten rules of journalism—to maintain a strict border between journalism and public relations—and appointed three former press officers

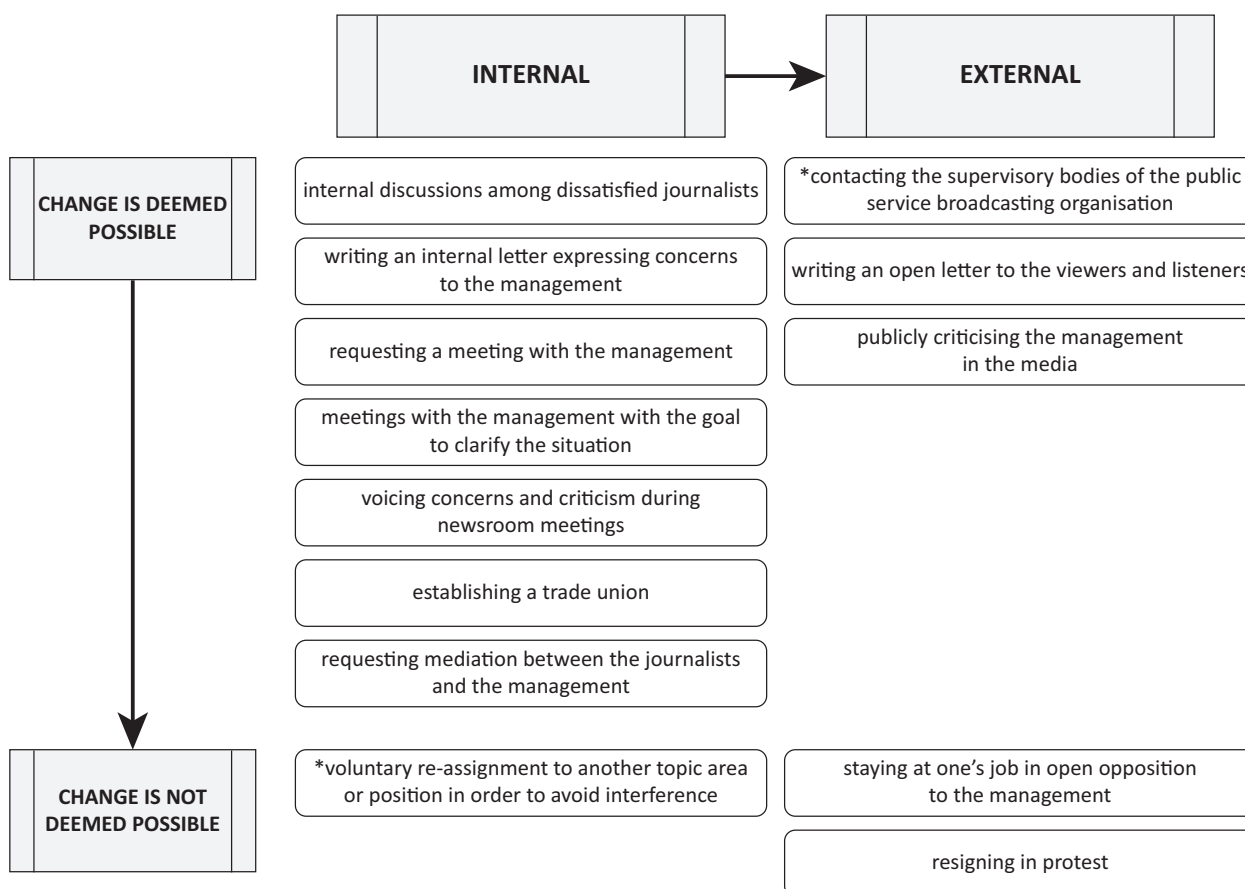


Figure 1. Resistance practices of the journalists facing internal interference with their professional autonomy. Note: The practices marked with an asterisk were mentioned by the research participants as a considered option, but they were not actually used.

from ministries and state organisations as the new top-managers for the television and radio newscasts. This was seen by some journalists as a conflict of interest that put RTVS' credibility in danger. The new director general refused to acknowledge the conflicts of interest and take steps to ensure that the people coming from the political environment would not have the direct control of the news content. As a consequence, the editor-in-chief resigned in protest, and the rest decided to wait and see what would come; at this stage, the concerned journalists discussed the issue internally and informally.

4.2. Collision: A Shutdown of an Investigative Programme and an Explosive Staff Meeting

In winter 2018, the management of RTVS decided to shut down its only investigative TV programme *The Reporters* (*Reportéri* in Slovak) without any discussion with the show's editors, ostensibly due to the lack of quality. This decision came shortly after the programme broadcast a story critical of Matica Slovenská, a state-funded national cultural organisation linked to the Slovak National Party and to Jaroslav Rezník, the director general, whose father happened to be a member of the organization's presidium. After protests from both the media community and the public, the show was reintroduced in September 2018, but the production team had been changed. Furthermore, soon after airing the Matica Slovenská story and the subsequent complaint of the organisation, RTVS broadcast what was marked by several interviewed journalists as an unusually laudatory story about the organization in its evening news programme.

The journalists tried to resolve their concerns within the organisation. They wrote an internal (non-public) letter to the management and requested a meeting for management to answer their questions:

In January, the newsroom became very concerned about this, but we talked internally that we didn't want to be hysterical and that maybe these were just communication misunderstandings that we wanted to resolve within the organisation. We wrote an internal letter signed by 77 or 78 people. [It] was a short text with these points that were very worrying....[We wrote] that we believe that it was a misunderstanding and that we were asking Director General Rezník for an immediate staff meeting to explain all of this. (Interview with an RTVS reporter, July 2018)

The staff meeting took place in January 2018 and included approximately 70 reporters from both the television and radio news divisions and the management that was supposed to calm the situation. The most noteworthy moment, according to various research participants, was a speech by one of the radio managers. Allegedly, he explained, the laudatory news story about Matica Slovenská was broadcast because, as cited by

several of the interviewed reporters, "sometimes steps need to be taken to soften the impact of a complaint" (Interview with an RTVS reporter, February 2019). This was met with loud protests from the reporters—they described their reaction as shock, some of them because they found such an approach to be journalistically and morally unacceptable and others because they were surprised that he admitted it so openly. As summarized by one of the interviewed reporters, "[E]veryone was shocked that he said that out loud. Even if it does happen, one does not say it [laughter]" (Interview with an RTVS reporter, February 2019).

Soon after the meeting, two of the three new top managers (i.e., former spokespersons) decided to resign, officially for personal and health reasons. According to the interviewees, they left due to the growing tensions between the director general and the news staff in which they were caught. The tension grew when one of the vacant managerial positions—the head of television and radio news and current affairs—was taken by Vahram Chuguryan, a journalist-turned-spokesman who worked, among other things, as a spokesperson for two ministers who were nominated by the then-coalition parties. Again, his professional past raised concerns among some reporters.

4.3. Crisis: Banned Badges, Quarrels About Objectivity, Open Letters, and Layoffs

The conflict entered its most heated stage in the strained atmosphere that followed the murder of Ján Kuciak, an investigative journalist who was shot dead with his fiancée in their home at the end of February 2018. Vahram Chuguryan, the new top-manager, asked the television reporters not to wear badges with the portrait of the murdered couple on-screen. The badge was originally designed and produced by the publisher of the news website for which Ján Kuciak had worked, and it quickly became a symbol of solidarity with the victims and their families. The badge became popular with many of the participants of the anti-government mass protests that were sparked by the murder and that eventually led to the resignation of Prime Minister Robert Fico and his cabinet. The new top-manager considered the badge to be a political symbol. Shortly after a discussion in the newsroom, the journalists leaked the story about the "ban on badges" to their colleagues in other media. At this stage, the dissatisfied journalists started to publicly express their concerns and criticise the management.

The tension grew into an open conflict. In the interviews, both sides mentioned hostile and stressful morning editorial meetings with every day quarrels, fights, shouting, and insults. It seems that what followed was a clash of two groups with two distinct journalistic cultures and different political orientations (including foreign political orientation in terms of East vs. West). On a practical level, this led to arguments about when a balancing quote was needed, what to include as the

“opposite” view, what sources to quote, who was a credible and relevant expert source, and how to name certain events. In short, these questions concerned objectivity, and even more broadly, they concerned the perceptions of journalistic roles and of public service. Also important to mention is that, according to some of the interviewed journalists, these clashes often had one thing in common—they were somehow related to the Slovak National Party (i.e., the party that pushed through the nomination of the director general), its leaders, and the areas of its interest.

None of the interviewed reporters mentioned any case of censorship. Nobody reported any direct command or prohibition with regard to the production of journalistic content, nor any case of an editorial change without the author’s consent. However, all the reporters, regardless of whether they decided to leave RTVS, complained of pressure exerted on them or their colleagues to conform to the views of the managers and to stop challenging them. According to the interviewed reporters, punishment was meted out for failures to adjust to their managers’ perception of objectivity, their notion of how to select sources, and the actors and opinions to include through two disciplinary measures: excessive negative feedback and cuts to bonuses, which were otherwise a significant part of their monthly pay.

A step that some of the journalists considered, but decided not to take, was contacting the supervisory body of RTVS—the RTVS Council. The Council oversees the functioning of RTVS, sets the salary of the director general, and it can submit a motion for filing a proposal for their dismissal to the relevant committee of the parliament. All nine council members are elected directly by the parliament. However, the interviewed journalists did not turn to the Council because they did not believe that the members were genuinely interested in discovering what was going on in the newsroom (and the members of the Council did not approach them on their own).

The journalists continued to request a meeting with the director general to describe the situation in the newsroom. However, according to the interviewed reporters, despite an initial promise made after the first big staff meeting in January, he avoided the meetings, postponed them, or cancelled one at the last minute. In this situation, in April 2018, around 60 RTVS reporters and editors signed a critical open letter to the viewers and listeners. They stated that they “continue to work freely... but in a hostile climate” and that they fight with “distrust in [their] superiors, their intentions, and their skills” (“Otvorený list,” 2018). They objected to the conflicts of interest of their managers and former spokespersons, and they accused the management of suppressing critical voices. In their public response, Jaroslav Rezník and the top managers labelled the signatories as young, inexperienced, and radical. Also, in reaction to the open letter, 35 reporters, anchor-persons, and other RTVS employees signed another open letter stating that they work freely and without pressure.

Soon after, the RTVS managers ended the contracts of four reporters who were among the signatories of the critical open letter and who openly confronted and criticised their superiors during the editorial meetings. The management took advantage of the fact that, due to the lack of financial resources, several of the RTVS personnel were technically self-employed contractors, even though they were a stable and long-term part of the newsroom. Therefore, when getting rid of undesirable personnel, it was possible to cancel their contracts overnight instead of providing a much more complicated formal dismissal notice.

4.4. Peripety: The Establishment of a Trade Union and Requests for Mediation

In April 2018, the opposing journalists established a trade union to protect their jobs and compel management to hold a meeting. According to Slovak law, the employer is obliged to negotiate with a trade union. Moreover, it is illegal to dismiss employees’ representatives during their term of office and for six months afterwards. Also, the employer may give notice or immediately terminate the employment of a member of a trade union only with the prior consent of the employee’s representatives.

At the same time, there were repeated attempts at independent mediation to resolve the conflict. These attempts failed as well. Both sides of the dispute were not able to agree on the mediator: The management wanted to select the mediator and expected the journalists to accept the choice.

4.5. Catastrophe: A Wave of Resignations

Taking into account the aforementioned events, it came as no surprise that at the end of May 2018, 12 television reporters and editors handed in their notices of termination. Resignation in protest happened shortly after the unsuccessful negotiation between the trade union with the director general. According to one of the reporters, before the meeting they still hoped that he did not have enough information about what was going on in the newsroom: “After this meeting we understood that he knew what was going on, he knew that our letters of resignations were almost on the table, but he actually did not care” (Interview with an RTVS reporter, July 2018). Thus, the non-extension of the contracts for the four journalists, together with a (perceived) lack of interest on the part of the general director, seemed to be the turning point after which journalists stopped trying to change the conditions within the organisation and started to focus on resolving their personal situation within the status quo.

When explaining their decision, none of the reporters mentioned any experience of censorship but several of them expressed that the pressure from the new management put them at risk of self-censorship:

The situation was terribly bad and there was enormous pressure for self-censorship. That's the main thing. No one told us what to write, but everyone, subconsciously, was already considering that I know that if I write this there, I know that they [the managers] will criticise me harshly tomorrow morning. (Interview with an RTVS reporter, February 2019)

As summarized by one of the interviewed reporters: "Censorship does not manifest itself only by someone saying that you can't broadcast something, but also by the exemplary punishing of colleagues who get bogged down in a topic that the management is not comfortable with" (Interview with an RTVS reporter, October 2018). As the reporters and editors who decided to resign explained in their public statement, they repeatedly tried to come to an agreement with the management but had now reached a point beyond which they could not go further, and that their resignation was a matter of professionalism and journalistic honour. They also declared: "We loved, love, and will love RTVS....We have children, mortgages, and obligations, but most of all—we love this job very much. Under these circumstances at RTVS, however, we cannot carry out [our work] as faithfully as before" (Spravodajské odbory RTVS, 2018). The management of RTVS stated that they regretted this decision but respected the choice of the reporters.

Besides resignation in protest, the dissatisfied journalists had two other options. One of the research participants considered voluntary re-assignment to another topic area or position in order to avoid the pressure (e.g., a transfer from the news section to the current affairs section), but in the end, she decided otherwise. Another option was to stay at one's job, but in open opposition to the management. This included open criticism both within the organisation and publicly. Some of the interviewed journalists who at some point belonged to the rebel group opted for yet another approach: They decided to focus on their own jobs and retreated into "internal exile"; however, this could be considered to be a strategy of acceptance rather than a strategy for resistance.

By Summer 2019, around two-thirds out of 26 television reporters left or were denied contract extensions. The same applies to roughly one-half of the editors and all of the on-line editors.

5. Conclusions

This article explored the resistance practices used by the journalists who worked for RTVS, the Slovak public service broadcaster, to cope with what they perceived as the undue and journalistically unwarranted interference of their superiors with their professional autonomy. The resistance practices identified in this case study included internal discussions among dissatisfied journalists, the writing of an internal letter to express concerns to the management, requests for a meeting with the management, meetings with the management with

the goal to clarify the situation, the voicing of concerns and criticism during regular newsroom meetings, contacting supervisory bodies of the public service broadcasting organisation, the establishment of a trade union, requests for independent mediation between the journalists and the management, the writing of a public open letter to the viewers and listeners, the public expression of concerns and criticism in the media, requests for voluntary re-assignment to another topic area or position in order to avoid pressure, staying at one's job but in open opposition to the management, and resignation in protest. To summarize, the journalists gradually moved from voice to exit, indicating that—in line with past studies (Borden, 2000; Davidson & Meyers, 2016)—using voice eventually comes at extremely high costs in journalism.

These resistance practices are very different from those identified in previous research, which largely examined cases of external political interference (Ataman & Çoban, 2019; Barrios & Miller, 2020; Slavtcheva-Petkova, 2019) or external/internal commercial interference (Borden, 2000; Goyanes & Rodríguez-Castro, 2019; Hanusch et al., 2017). This suggests that the choice of specific types of resistance is closely related to the source and type of interference. Another important variable is the type of organisation; some of the identified resistance practices can only be used in public service media (e.g., contacting supervisory bodies of public service broadcasting organisation).

In the organisational studies literature, voice strategies are distinguished from the employer's perspective based on active-passive and constructive-destructive dimensions (Gorden, 1988). However, this study argues that professional conflicts should not be assessed solely from the standpoint of the employer. If, for instance, voice has to be used to defend professional autonomy, from the viewpoint of the journalistic profession, labelling individual strategies as constructive or destructive may look quite different. This study therefore introduces a different conceptualisation that adopts the perspective of employees, and that is based on two main dimensions, reach and aim. In terms of reach, resistance practices can be either internal (i.e., used within the organisation) or external (i.e., extending beyond the boundaries of the organisation). Also, they can aim at the improvement of the conditions within the organisation (i.e., these practices are used when journalists still believe change is possible) or they can aim at resolving the personal situation when change in the organisation is no longer considered possible. In the first stage, the dissatisfied journalists tried to improve the conditions in the organisation with internal resistance practices. As a general rule, although with some exceptions, they only resorted to external resistance practices once they had exhausted the internal ones. In the second stage, the journalists accepted the status quo and opted for resistance practices that were focused on personal reactions to the unsatisfactory status quo. The reiterative model

of resistance practices, including the general direction of individual steps, introduced in this study can be further developed and tested in other newsroom conflicts both in public service and commercial media organisations.

Also, this case study supports Hirschman's (1970) claim that the key moderating variable that influences the response to dissatisfaction is loyalty. The journalists had long sought to change the situation in the organisation because they identified with its values and mission, felt to be a part of it, and considered the steps of the new management to be a threat to its reputation and ability to fulfil its mission. Another important variable that was identified in this case study is peer support and the journalists' ability to organise and resist collectively. Several of the resistance practices were collective (not individual), and many of the interviewed journalists mentioned that mutual support was a significant factor that helped them continue in resistance. The significance of the collective aspect of resistance must be emphasized all the more as journalists are often reluctant to organise themselves and practice their occupational voice (Davidson & Meyers, 2016).

Finally, this case study suggests that, even though journalistic autonomy historically did not belong to the core ideal-typical values of journalism in Slovakia, a country that once belonged to the Soviet sphere of influence, a significant part of the journalists who worked at RTVS considered it to be an essential value that was worth defending, even at the cost of their jobs. This is an important finding as throughout its history, public service broadcasting in Slovakia has been repeatedly attacked and used as a political tool (most flagrantly under Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar and his autocratic style of government in 1994–1998). In the previous cases, journalists either adapted to the new conditions or decided to leave without much struggle. This time, the dissenting journalists refused to succumb to self-censorship or to adopt the practice of "adekvatnosť" (i.e., a state of being adequate) that produces journalism corresponding to the authorities' expectations (Schimpfoss & Yablokov, 2014), which is known from contemporary Russia. Thus, even if some scholars argue that, in countries where the development of journalism culture has been disrupted, including Slovakia, journalistic autonomy is less deeply rooted in professional ideology or not regarded as important at all (Lauk & Harro-Loit, 2016), the conflict at RTVS signals that a non-negligible part of Slovak journalists abandoned the Soviet model of journalism and adopted the key values of the Western journalism culture not only rhetorically but also through their actions. This is a positive signal in terms of the vitality of the journalistic profession and the strength of public service media in Slovakia and, more broadly, in the CEE region.

Acknowledgments

The author wishes to thank all the research participants for their time and insight, as well as to the issue editors

and two anonymous reviewers for helpful comments on earlier draft of the manuscript.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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6. Study V: Trust And Distrust in Public Service Media: A Case Study from the Czech Republic

Urbániková, M., & Smejkal, K. (2023). Trust and distrust in public service media: A case study from the Czech Republic. *Media and Communication*, 11(4), 297–307.

<https://dx.doi.org/10.17645/mac.v11i4.7053>

Article

Trust and Distrust in Public Service Media: A Case Study From the Czech Republic

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Submitted: 26 April 2023 | Accepted: 11 July 2023 | Published: 7 December 2023

Abstract

Although public service media is a trusted island in the media landscape of many countries, trust in public service media is not absolute and universal. This study adopts a qualitative approach to explore what trust and distrust entail for the public, a perspective rarely applied in trust research. Also, it explores the extent to which the sources of trust and distrust are the same and whether the concepts of trust and distrust are identical (only inverse), or linked but separate. It focuses on the Czech Republic, where the level of trust in the news is among the lowest in the world, yet public service media is the most trusted news source (Newman et al., 2022). Based on four focus group discussions with the general public ($N = 24$), this study analyzes the reasons for the audience's trust and distrust in Czech public service media. There are three main categories: trust in the message (i.e., people trust public service media if, in their view, it provides objective, truthful, reliable, relevant, and fast information without sensationalism and anti-system views); trust in the source (i.e., people trust public service media if they perceive the public service media journalists as professional); and trust in the public service media organizations (i.e., people trust public service media if they perceive the regulatory framework as effective in ensuring independence from politics and oversight boards as a guarantee for quality). As the reasons leading to trust were not identical (only inverse) to the reasons leading to distrust, our findings suggest that trust and distrust in public service media are not two sides of the same coin.

Keywords

Czech Radio; Czech Television; distrust; media quality; public service media; skepticism; trust

Issue

This article is part of the issue “Trust, Social Cohesion, and Information Quality in Digital Journalism” edited by Thomas B. Ksiazek (Villanova University), Jacob L. Nelson (University of Utah), and Anita Varma (University of Texas at Austin).

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1. Introduction

Trust in journalism is a key ingredient without which journalists cannot fulfil their societal role as watchdogs, moderators of the public forum, and facilitators of shared experiences (Usher, 2018). At the same time, trust is also a fundamental prerequisite for the functioning and survival of public service media (PSM), which can serve as one of the cornerstones of democracy (UNESCO, 2008). Although PSM is a trusted island in the media landscape of many countries (European Broadcasting Union, 2022), trust in PSM is not absolute and universal. Previous research shows that younger audiences, ethnic

minorities, those with right-wing orientations, and lower education have less trust in PSM news (Jõesaar et al., 2022; Picone & Donders, 2020). What are the reasons for trust and distrust in PSM and its news service? How can PSM become more trustworthy in the eyes of the public, increase its legitimacy, and strengthen its relevance?

This contribution focuses on the case of the Czech Republic. It is noteworthy for two reasons. First, the level of public trust in the news is among the lowest in the world. According to the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2022* (Newman et al., 2022), the Czech Republic ranks 37th out of 46 countries surveyed. Second, while trust in PSM and commercial media as sources of news

is more or less balanced around the globe (Ipsos, 2019), in the Czech Republic, PSM is the most trusted national news source (Newman et al., 2022). Based on four focus group discussions with participants ($N = 24$) whose socio-demographic characteristics follow the structure of the Czech population, this study explores the reasons for the audience's trust and distrust in PSM (i.e., Czech Television, Czech Radio).

This study contributes to existing scholarship in three ways. First, it uses a qualitative approach to explore what trust and distrust entail for the public, which is a surprisingly rarely applied perspective for trust research because most studies use a quantitative approach (Engelke et al., 2019). However, the qualitative approach enables a deeper understanding of the sources of trust and distrust on the part of the audience. Second, in PSM research, the audience perspective is often neglected (Campos-Rueda & Goyanes, 2022; Lestón-Huerta et al., 2021) and the question of how the public evaluates and perceives PSM has received limited attention to date (Just et al., 2017; Sehl, 2020). Third, the article makes a theoretical contribution: Its broader aim is to explore the extent to which the sources of trust and distrust are the same, and whether the concepts of trust and distrust are identical (only inverse), or linked but separate, as Engelke et al. (2019) suggest.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Trust and Distrust: Two Sides of the Same Coin?

In today's complex and interdependent societies, trust is the social glue that binds people, organizations, and institutions (Sztompka, 2000). This includes the media and journalists: Without the trust of their audiences, they could not fulfil their roles (Usher, 2018), which would have serious consequences for society. Yet, trust in the media has been declining in many countries in recent years (Strömbäck et al., 2020).

Conceptually, different terms are used in media-trust research. While the term "credibility" is often employed in communication and journalism studies, the scholarship that draws on sociological traditions tends to refer to "trust" (Engelke et al., 2019; Kohring & Matthes, 2007). Ultimately, these terms are commonly used interchangeably (Kohring & Matthes, 2007) and frequently describe the same constructs (Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019). In this study, we use "trust" as the key term in order to draw on broader sociological theories related to this concept (Kohring & Matthes, 2007). Also, it is broader than the concept of credibility, which is currently understood as its subcategory which is related to the evaluation of media content (Fawzi et al., 2021).

Trust describes the relationship between a trustor and a trustee; it is:

The willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation

that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control the other part. (Mayer et al., 1995, p. 712)

Trust in the media can be defined as "the willingness of the audience to be vulnerable to news content based on the expectation that the media will perform in a satisfactory manner" (Hanitzsch et al., 2018, p. 5).

In their model of trust, Mayer et al. (1995) differentiate between factors that cause trust, the trust itself, and the outcomes. The factors that lead to trust are related to the trustor's propensity to trust and the three main characteristics of the trustee (Mayer et al., 1995): ability (i.e., skills, competencies), benevolence (i.e., the degree to which a trustee is believed to want to benefit the trustor), and integrity (i.e., adherence to the principles that the trustor finds acceptable). Applied to trust in the media, this means that audiences should trust the media if they are convinced of their professionalism, their good intentions to serve the public, and their adherence to the usual standards of journalistic quality and ethics.

Trust in media is a complex phenomenon that involves at least three levels: (a) trust in the news information, which relates to the media content; (b) trust in the journalists and those who deliver the news, which is a form of interpersonal trust; and (c) trust in the media organizations, which is a form of institutional trust and where we differentiate among trust in individual media brands, media types, and news media in general (Fisher, 2016; Strömbäck et al., 2020; Williams, 2012).

The lack of trust can have the character of distrust (i.e., the belief that the media and journalists are doing something wrong), mistrust (i.e., a doubt based upon suspicion), media skepticism (i.e., reluctance to trust without conclusive evidence), or media cynicism (i.e., distrust in the sincerity and nobility of journalists and the media; Cook & Gronke, 2005).

Another conceptual ambiguity concerns the relationship between trust and distrust. The two can be perceived as two ends of the same scale, which would mean that they are both determined by the same (but reversed) antecedents or as separate concepts based on different antecedents (Engelke et al., 2019). Engelke et al. (2019, p. 74) argue that trust and distrust are "linked but separate concepts" and that, although some antecedents are common for both concepts (just opposite), others are different for each of them. Their study showed that, first, some antecedents can be associated with both trust and distrust (e.g., while some recipients associated the high speed of reporting with trust, for others, speed was a reason for distrust) and, second, some antecedents were relevant only for one of the two concepts (e.g., familiarity with the journalist can be a reason for trust, although not knowing the journalists was never mentioned as a reason for distrust; Engelke et al., 2019). This difference in conceptualization has implications for the quantitative measurement of trust

and distrust because, if the two are distinct concepts, the usual single-scale measurement is inadequate (Engelke et al., 2019).

2.2. Sources and Correlates of Trust and Distrust

Previous empirical research, which is overwhelmingly quantitative, has identified several factors that influence or are associated with trust and distrust in journalists, news, and the media (for a detailed overview, see Fawzi et al., 2021). They can be distinguished into three categories: (a) wider social factors, (b) the characteristics of the audiences, and (c) the perceived characteristics of the media and media content.

First, previous studies suggest that trust in the media is lower in volatile political environments, politically polarized countries, and countries with low levels of political trust (Hanitzsch et al., 2018). There is empirical support for the “honeymoon effect”: In countries that have recently transitioned to democracy, initial excitement leads to increased levels of trust but is soon followed by disillusionment and a rapid decline in institutional trust, including in the media (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2019; Hanitzsch et al., 2018).

Second, when it comes to the audience factors, both institutional trust (specifically the trust in the government and political trust) and interpersonal trust are positively related to media trust (Jones, 2004; Lee, 2010; Pjesivac, 2017; Strömbäck et al., 2016). The same applies to news consumption (Tsfati & Ariely, 2014; Wilner et al., 2022). On the contrary, political cynicism (Lee, 2010), exposure to disinformation (Ognyanova et al., 2020; Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2019), and the use of social media as the main source of news (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019; Park et al., 2020) correlate with lower levels of trust. Political ideology also plays a role: conservative and right-wing citizens and those who are on the political margins are more distrustful of the media (Jones, 2004; Lee, 2010; Schranz et al., 2018; Wilner et al., 2022). Research on socio-demographic correlates, such as gender, age, and level of education, has been inconclusive (for an overview, see Fawzi et al., 2021; Livio & Cohen, 2018).

The third group of factors relates to the perceived characteristics of the media and media content. Trust is negatively associated with perceived news media corruption (Pjesivac, 2017), perceived undue political and commercial influences (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019), and perceived journalistic errors (e.g., sensationalized or understated stories and stories that lack essential information; Wilner et al., 2022). On the contrary, trust is enhanced by the perceived correspondence between actual events as experienced in person and the media coverage of these same events (Livio & Cohen, 2018), and, according to some studies, by greater journalistic transparency (Curry & Stroud, 2021), although other studies find that transparency does not play a role (Karlsson et al., 2014; Tandoc & Thomas, 2017). Moreover, in one of the few qualitative studies on trust,

Knudsen et al. (2022) revealed that ordinary citizens refer to four main themes when explaining their understanding of trust in the media: truthfulness, thoroughness and professionalism, independence, and objectivity.

Another useful source of insight into the sources of audience trust in the media is various scales that measure the levels of trust and credibility (for an overview, see Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019). These scales are typically, as Prochazka and Schweiger (2019) note, multi-item measures of trust in the news media and similar constructs, which are based on quality perceptions (e.g., balance, objectivity, honesty, accuracy, timeliness). They presume that trust in the media is linked to the assessment of its quality. This is also the premise of this study.

2.3. Audience Assessment and Trust in Public Service Media

In many countries, PSM enjoys a high level of public trust. For instance, PSM news is the most trusted source of news in 25 of the 27 EU member states, with the only two exceptions being Hungary and Poland (European Broadcasting Union, 2022). Even in times of increasing online offerings, citizens in various European countries consider PSM to be highly important (Just et al., 2017; Sehl, 2020).

This does not mean that the popularity of and trust in PSM is universal. Although many citizens rate the informational quality of PSM’s news service better than that of most other media outlets, some are skeptical of its independence and the quality of its journalism, they are critical of political and economic influences, and they are dissatisfied with how PSM fulfils its role (Just et al., 2017; Reiter et al., 2018; Sehl, 2020). Schulz et al. (2019) show that the audience for PSM news in eight European countries is primarily older and educated. When it comes to trust, PSM news is often less trusted by younger audiences, those with lower education, ethnic minorities, people with right-wing political orientation, and people with populist attitudes (Jöesaar et al., 2022; Picone & Donders, 2020; Schulz et al., 2019).

In addition, people who sympathize with populist parties not only trust PSM less but also have different expectations. Their trust is more closely linked to their perception of how well PSM represent their in-group values and attitudes, while the trust of people who are not sympathetic to populist parties is more closely linked to their perception of how well PSM adheres to the normative standards of journalism, like impartiality and objectivity (Smejkal et al., 2022). Still, across Europe, there is a strong positive relationship between the perceived freedom of PSM from political pressures and the level of trust in it (European Broadcasting Union, 2022). Using Spain as a case study, Campos-Rueda and Goyanes (2022) argue that citizens still expect the PSM to fulfil traditional values: independent and qualified journalism that delivers accurate and unbiased information.

2.4. Trust in the Media and Public Service Media in the Czech Republic

In the Czech Republic, the level of public trust in the news is among the lowest in the world. Only 34% of the people claim to have trust in the news overall. This ranks it 37th out of 46 surveyed countries (Newman et al., 2022). There are several possible reasons: the perceived lack of media independence due to oligarchization, political ownership of media outlets, and commercialization; the rise of disinformation media that accuses the mainstream media of withholding important information; and attacks on journalists by populist politicians (Urbáníková, 2022). In addition, the historical legacy of low interpersonal trust compared to Western countries and citizens' dissatisfaction with the state of the Czech society, along with the recent upheavals caused by the war in Ukraine and the Covid-19 pandemic, may also bolster distrust in media (Urbáníková, 2022).

However, the Czech PSM seems to be an island of trust in the sea of distrust. Czech Radio and Czech Television are the two most trusted news sources for Czech citizens: 58% and 56%, respectively, stated that they trust their news (Newman et al., 2022). As elsewhere in the world (Sehl et al., 2022), PSM is a thorn on the side of Czech populist and extremist parties and parties with authoritarian tendencies (Gosling, 2020). However, unlike in Hungary or Poland, the Czech PSM has so far resisted the pressure and maintained its independence from political power, despite various attempts to bring them under political control in recent years ("Concerns over increasing meddling in independence of Czech public broadcaster," 2021).

3. Data and Method

To learn more about the reasons for the audience's trust and distrust in PSM, and to explore the relationship between the concepts of trust and distrust, this contribution uses the Czech Republic as a case study and aims to answer two research questions:

RQ1: How do people explain and justify the extent to which they trust and distrust the Czech PSM?

RQ2: To what extent are the reasons for trust the same (just inverse) as the reasons for distrust, and to what extent do they differ?

To gain an in-depth understanding of what trust and distrust entail for the public, we adopted a qualitative approach and used the focus group method, which is a form of group interview about a predetermined set of discussion topics that is guided by a moderator (Bryman, 2012). We conducted four discussions, three online (via a video conferencing platform) and one in person (in the capital city of Prague due to its relatively easy accessibility from other regions). The ratio between the number of online and in-person focus groups was determined

by data from the Czech Statistical Office (2022), according to which four-fifths of Czech households have a computer or tablet and a similar proportion have access to the internet. The in-person focus group was attended exclusively by those who indicated during recruitment that they use the internet less than once a month.

Each focus group had six participants. The participants roughly replicated the structure of the Czech population in terms of gender, age, education, region, and the size of residence. The purpose of this approach was to achieve a sufficiently diverse sample of participants, without any claim to generalize the findings to the whole population. The participants were recruited by a professional market research agency. They were informed in advance of the research topic, their informed consent was obtained prior to the discussion, and they were financially rewarded for their participation. The discussions were held in November 2022 and the length of each was approximately 100 minutes.

The discussion guide (see the Supplementary File) included the topics of payment for media content and for PSM, the perceived importance of PSM, expectations for PSM, recommendations for PSM management, and trust and distrust in PSM. The participants were first asked to rate their level of trust in Czech Television and Czech Radio on a scale of 1 = *full trust* to 5 = *no trust* (for each medium separately) and to think about the reasons that led them to their indicated level of trust. This was followed by a detailed discussion of their reasoning and justification.

An audio recording and field notes were taken of each discussion. The recording was then transcribed verbatim and coded in Atlas.ti software. Thematic analysis, "a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79), was used to analyze the data. The coding and data analysis was performed in two steps to increase the validity and reliability of the findings. The authors first inductively coded the discussions independently of each other, compared and discussed the codes, and then developed the final code structure and consolidated the codes into several content domains.

4. Findings: Trust and Distrust in Public Service Media

The participants ($N = 24$) expressed more trust than distrust for Czech Television and Czech Radio, with a higher level of trust in the latter than in the former. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being *full trust*, Czech Television achieved an average score of 2.8 (i.e., 39% declared trust, 30% were neutral, 30% declared distrust) and Czech Radio had an average score of 2.1 (i.e., 74% declared trust, 10% were neutral, 16% declared distrust). The study focused on the analysis of the underlying reasons for trust and distrust. Based on the explanation that the participants provided for their level of trust in the Czech PSM, we inductively identified a number of factors that lead to trust and distrust (Figure 1). We categorized them according to the

disagreed on how they judged PSM performance in this regard. Here, the match between the media coverage and their personal experience proved to be an important criterion. Some participants argued that, although they do not have the opportunity to personally verify all of the news, the PSM news coverage is consistent with their own empirical experience:

Back in the days when it [the war in Ukraine] wasn't even talked about here, I already knew a man who was sending there [to Ukraine] bulletproof vests and things like that because his relatives were simply in life-threatening danger. So, I believe that they [PSM] are trying to be objective to the highest possible degree.

Conversely, other participants stated that they do not trust PSM because its news coverage is not consistent with their personal experience. One of them said: "A lot of the information I hear doesn't match what I know about it." Deeper questioning revealed that these participants did not suspect PSM of falsifying information or lying; rather, the problem seemed to be a different perspective on news selection. When the participants illustrated instances where PSM "did not tell the whole truth," they repeatedly used examples that did not conform to media logic and the media's common judgement of what is newsworthy. For example, when it comes to the war in Ukraine, one participant complained that Czech Television shows places where fighting is taking place but does not show places where there is no fighting:

I really have sources directly from Ukraine, and it is not as Czech Television portrays it....Yes, there is a war there. Terrible things are happening there, but they just generalize it to the whole of Ukraine. But Ukraine is a huge country....This is where I simply disagree with Czech Television, with what they are pushing into people's heads about what is happening there.

Next, we identified three reasons that are unique to trust. Some participants justified their trust in PSM on the grounds that, first, PSM news is fast and up to date, second, it delivers relevant information and hard news, and, third, PSM presents the news without sensationalism and excessive appeals to emotion. Here they contrasted PSM's news coverage with the news coverage provided by commercial television, which they perceived to be too emotionally tinged (e.g., commercial channels want to "make sure everyone watches it and is moved by the baby or the cat and dog at the end") and focused on irrelevant and sensational information (e.g., "They [Czech Television] are better than Nova or Prima...because, when you watch it, you see only murders, only violence, only something like that, but you don't learn much").

4.2. Trust in Journalists: Impartiality and Expertise

Trust in PSM is also based on trust in its staff. The participants agreed that, to be trusted, PSM reporters and moderators should be sufficiently professional. They emphasized two dimensions of professionalism: impartiality and expertise. Some justified their trust on the grounds that PSM journalists manage to maintain impartiality and they have a high level of expertise (i.e., they are knowledgeable about what they do, tend to be well prepared for interviews, are able to respond to the interviewee's answers, and seem to have a good understanding of the topic). For instance, as one participant explained, discussions at Czech Radio "are conducted very professionally, they are not biased, no one is foisting anything on anyone....I think the moderators are capable and have good qualifications for their position."

From the perspective of other participants, PSM journalists fail to maintain impartiality, which then leads to their distrust of PSM. They mentioned interrupting guests, jumping in, being aggressive when asking questions, repeating the same question, and misinterpreting what a guest says (e.g., "putting something in the guest's mouth without the guest meaning to say it") as indicators of the lack of impartiality. One participant summarized it as follows: "I ask a person a question, I comment on his answer, but I don't impose my own opinions, which unfortunately happens on Czech Television today and every day."

4.3. Trust in Public Service Media Organizations: Independence and Supervision

Trust also derives from trust in PSM as an organization. At this level, the participants reflected on the structural position and regulatory framework of PSM. As elsewhere in the world, the Czech PSM is supervised by specialized bodies, specifically the Czech Television Council and the Czech Radio Council (i.e., these are the bodies through which the public's right to control the activities of PSM is exercised). Some participants justified their trust in PSM by the existence of these councils and the stricter oversight that PSM are subject to compared to that of commercial media: "For both institutions, there are those councils above them that, if something were to happen, would step in. This is not the case with the commercial media. I don't trust them very much, I must admit." On the contrary, the opposite, where the activities of media councils would lead to distrust, was not noted.

In addition to the existence of media councils, the second (and related) factor at the systemic level was the broader independence of PSM from political power. Some of the participants who trusted PSM justified this by its systemic independence from political power, which stems, among other things, from the regulatory framework. On the other hand, some critical participants argued that the Czech PSM is, in practice, too subservient to politicians. For example, the Czech

parliament (i.e., the Chamber of Deputies) directly elects the members of the media councils, who then elect the directors general of PSM. The lack of an adequate barrier between PSM and politics was a reason for distrust among some participants: “Czech Television is not objective, Czech Television is governed by the Chamber of Deputies, the majority, I mean the majority in the Chamber of Deputies. That means Czech Television is not objective and the news is not objective.”

4.4. What Else to Consider: Media Skepticism and Non-News Content

In addition to the reasons for trust and distrust related to the three levels—message, source, and PSM as an organization—the analysis revealed two additional important aspects, one specific to building trust and the other to distrust. First, it seems that the reputation and trust in PSM can be enhanced and strengthened by high-quality non-news content. Even the participants who otherwise had many reservations about PSM usually appreciated its non-news programs, such as documentaries, films, series, entertainment programs, sports, and educational programs.

Second, distrust in PSM is not necessarily the result of a negative assessment of its performance. It may reflect a personal tendency towards skepticism. The testimonies of several participants suggest that complex and polarizing issues, such as the war in Ukraine and the Covid-19 pandemic, have led them to be unsure about what to believe. This, coupled with the inability to personally verify information, leads to the tendency to distrust PSM and the media: “I don’t think there’s anything that’s 100% true, certainly when it comes to the war in Ukraine or the Covid...because everybody thinks something else....There’s nothing 100% reliable, so I don’t completely trust anything that’s said anywhere.”

5. Conclusions

The four focus group discussions with the Czech public revealed several reasons that lead to trust and distrust in PSM. In line with previous literature (Fisher, 2016; Strömbäck et al., 2020; Williams, 2012), they can be grouped into three main categories: trust/distrust in the message (i.e., the PSM content), trust/distrust in the source (i.e., the PSM journalists), and trust/distrust in PSM as organizations. In general, the participants justified their trust or distrust with references to traditional journalistic standards as described in previous literature (Campos-Rueda & Goyanes, 2022; Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019; Knudsen et al., 2022; Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Livio & Cohen, 2018; Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019; Wilner et al., 2022). In addition, we identified two aspects that are specific to trust/distrust in PSM: the existence of an oversight board as a guarantee of PSM quality and the systemic independence of PSM from politics (i.e., the perceived effectiveness of the regulatory framework).

The participants agreed on the importance of four key aspects that can lead to both trust and distrust, depending on how they assess the actual PSM performance in this regard: objectivity, the provision of truthful information, the professionalism and impartiality of PSM journalists, and the systemic independence of PSM organizations from politics. While the distrustful participants justified their position on the grounds that PSM is not objective, does not provide truthful and verified information, has journalists who are not professional and impartial, and the PSM organizations are not sufficiently systemically independent from politics, the trusting participants argued the opposite. We also identified several reasons that were exclusively related to trust but no reason that would lead solely to distrust.

Interestingly, the participants declared higher trust in Czech Radio than in Czech Television, mainly due to the perceived higher objectivity. Without further research, it is difficult to say to what extent this assessment actually reflects the different degrees of adherence to the principles of objectivity by Czech Television and Czech Radio, to what extent this assessment can be influenced by the rhetoric of populist politicians who question the objectivity of Czech Television but not so much of Czech Radio, and to what extent radio, as a medium, can make it easier to maintain the appearance of neutrality and impartiality due to the absence of visual components (e.g., the sympathies or antipathies cannot be deduced from body language).

This study has several implications that are worth discussing. First, it supports previous literature (Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019; Tsifti & Cappella, 2005), which suggests that, when audiences think about and evaluate “the media,” they often actually refer to the news media. Similarly, the participants in our research justified their trust and distrust in PSM primarily on grounds related to its news content. This does not mean that they would reduce PSM to news and current affairs. On the contrary: Even those who otherwise had many reservations about the functioning of PSM usually appreciated its non-news programs, such as documentaries, films, series, entertainment programs, sports, and educational programs. This is an important message for PSM management because it means that the reputation and trust in PSM can be enhanced and strengthened by high-quality non-news content. If PSM wants to maintain legitimacy and popularity, in addition to the mission to inform, it should pay equal attention to the other two parts of the Reithian triad (i.e., to educate and entertain), because audience goodwill built upon these two pillars can mitigate potential dissatisfaction with the news.

Also, the media should think better about their strategy for dealing with opinions and information that can be labeled as conspiratorial or disinformation because, as this study shows, simply ignoring them weakens the trust of part of the audience. Ideally, these elements should be given space and refuted.

Second, one of the most obvious differences between trusting and distrusting participants was the latter's demand for the coverage of anti-system views for the sake of media objectivity. Their distrust in PSM stems from the lack of doing so. This is consistent with studies that examine low trust in PSM in Western Europe, where authoritarian populists accuse PSM of being biased against their anti-system views (Holtz-Bacha, 2021; Sehl et al., 2022). Thus, although our study is based on data on PSM audiences in the Czech Republic, its conclusions may have more general validity.

Third, the declared distrust in PSM is not necessarily the result of a negative assessment of PSM performance or the belief of malicious intent on the part of the PSM. It may also reflect a personal tendency towards skepticism. For some participants, this tendency seemed to be reinforced by two recent agendas in particular: the war in Ukraine and the Covid-19 pandemic. In both cases, these are highly polarizing issues where it is difficult to verify the information personally, which leads to a general uncertainty among several participants about what to believe and a feeling that no medium (not just PSM) can be fully trusted. However, being skeptical and critical does not necessarily equal a total rejection of the media as such (Quiring et al., 2021).

Fourth, our findings are consistent with the model of trust developed by Mayer et al. (1995), according to which trust is related to the trustor's propensity to trust (e.g., as we show, personal tendency towards skepticism plays a role here) and to the (perceived) characteristics of the trustee: its ability (i.e., the perceived professionalism of PSM journalists), benevolence (i.e., the perceived intention of PSM to benefit the public, as, e.g., some participants believed that the PSM deliberately withheld some information), and integrity (i.e., perceived adherence to the usual standards of journalistic quality and ethics). As our study demonstrates, systemic guarantees of ability, benevolence, and integrity can be added as additional factors that go beyond this model. Some participants justified their trust by the existence of an oversight board to guarantee PSM quality and by the regulatory framework that maintains the independence of PSM from politics.

Fifth, the reasons that lead to trust in PSM were not identical (only inverse) to the reasons that lead to distrust; some of the identified reasons led to both trust and distrust, but others led only to trust. Our findings seem to suggest that trust and distrust are not two sides of the same coin, but rather two largely related but distinct concepts, as Engelke et al. (2019) suggest. However, interpretive caution is necessary here. The participants were given the task of first declaring their level of trust or distrust and then explaining their reasons, so it is possible that the reasons given have the character of a backward rationalization of trust as a deeper and more stable attitude.

In addition, although some reasons were given only by participants to justify their trust (e.g., the provision of timely and relevant information without sensationalism),

this does not necessarily mean that these aspects (if PSM fails in them) cannot lead to distrust. It may only mean that the distrusting participants do not have reservations about PSM's performance in this regard, but this is not enough for them to trust it. Thus, several concepts were conflated in the participants' statements: trust/distrust and the actual assessment of the PSM performance (overall trust/distrust was not always a perfect reflection of how participants evaluated PSM performance; even those who declared their distrust appreciated some aspects of PSM and vice versa). However, as Prochazka and Schweiger (2019) note, while trust is related to perceptions of quality, these are two distinct concepts. All of this points to the breadth and vagueness of the concept of trust, which seems to have the character of the deeper attitude and orientation of the individual (not necessarily based on a rational assessment of media performance) and which then serves as a projection screen for all sorts of reasoning and interpretations.

To separate trust and performance assessment, further qualitative studies could focus on trust and distrust in the media, in general, without reference to a specific medium. For example, the participants could be asked what qualities and characteristics a media outlet should generally have to be trusted, and conversely, what characteristics lead to distrust. However, such an abstract discussion may be more challenging for participants. Another option would be to discuss trust and distrust in different media outlets so that deeper common reasons can be better identified and more easily distinguished from specific quality assessments.

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by the Czech Science Foundation (Grant No. GA22-30563S). We wish to thank all of the research participants for their time, and Lucie Čejková, Lukáš Slavík, Iveta Jansová, Alžběta Cutáková, and Františka Pilařová for their help and assistance in conducting the focus group discussions. We would also like to thank the issue editors and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on the earlier draft of the manuscript.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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7. Study VI: The Value of Public Service Media: What Does the Public Expect?

Urbániková, M., & Smejkal, K. (2025). The value of public service media: What does the public expect? *Media, Culture & Society*. Advance online publication.

<https://dx.doi.org/10.1177/01634437241313039>

This study is excluded from this document due to publication agreement restrictions.

8. Study VII: Understanding The Willingness to Pay for Public Service Media: Testing the Role of Socio-Political Trust and Partisan Selective Exposure

Urbániková, M., Goyanes, M., & Smejkal, K. (2025). Understanding the willingness to pay for public service media: Testing the role of socio-political trust and partisan selective exposure. *Journalism*. Advance online publication.

<https://dx.doi.org/10.1177/14648849251339823>

Understanding the willingness to pay for public service media: Testing the role of socio-political trust and partisan selective exposure

Journalism

2025, Vol. 0(0) 1–19

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DOI: 10.1177/14648849251339823

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Abstract

The ability for public service media (PSM) to fulfil its roles is based upon the public's willingness to financially support it. This study investigates the determinants of the willingness to pay (WTP) for PSM by the public in the Czech Republic, contributing to existing literature by exploring the socio-psychological antecedents and focusing on the Central and Eastern European region, both of which have not been studied before. The results indicate that PSM consumption, expenditure on commercial media, and socio-political trust positively affect WTP. In addition, selective partisan exposure positively moderates the relationship between expenditure on commercial media and WTP for PSM.

Keywords

Czech Republic, funding models, partisan selective exposure, paying behaviour, public service media, socio-political trust, willingness to pay

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In the modern world, which is shaped by technological advances, public service media (PSM) plays a pivotal role in fostering informed citizenship, promoting cultural diversity, and serving as a cornerstone for democratic and well-informed public discourse (Donders, 2021). However, political, social, and technological changes have placed PSM under pressure in many countries (Holtz-Bacha, 2021), with consequences that include persistent stagnation and the erosion of its funding (EBU, 2023a).

In Europe, the traditional source of funding for PSM has been a licence fee, although, in the past decade, several countries have moved to state budget funding (e.g., Norway, France, and Slovakia). In countries where direct payments from the public (hereafter referred to as “fees”) have been retained, discussions centre on what the fee level should be and who should pay it (e.g., Switzerland and the Czech Republic). As PSM relies on public funding for its existence, this study explores the determinants of the public’s willingness to pay (WTP) for PSM.

While the literature on citizens’ payment behaviour for media content, in general, is extensive (see O’Brien et al., 2020, for a comprehensive overview), the body of work on the public’s WTP for PSM remains relatively scarce, particularly in Europe. In the context of PSM, WTP is a distinctive concept, as PSM is considered a public good rather than a private good (Chivers and Allan, 2022). Unlike payments for commercial media content, fees for PSM are compulsory and determined by political decision-making rather than individual choice. In the long term, this political decision must be supported by societal consensus and popular backing to ensure its legitimacy and viability.

This paper not only contributes to the scarce literature on WTP for PSM, but, in addition to previous studies (Grammel and Gründl, 2018; Háló et al., 2023; Ichikawa and Tsuji, 2016; Lin et al., 2013; Park and Park, 2014; Reiter et al., 2018; Schlegel and Seufert, 2012; Sehl, 2023), it also pays special attention to the effects of the socio-psychological antecedents that have not been studied before: socio-political trust and partisan selective exposure. These factors are significant because they help reveal the audience’s underlying needs and motivations associated with WTP for PSM. Additionally, while previous studies have been conducted mainly in Western Europe and Asian countries, this paper focuses on the Czech Republic as a representative of post-communist countries in the Central and Eastern European (CEE) region. The concept of PSM is relatively new here compared to Western countries, which may result in distinct audience attitudes and perspectives that could influence the determinants of WTP for PSM.

PSM funding

Public service media are non-commercial and non-state-controlled entities dedicated solely to providing public service by informing, educating, entertaining, encouraging public participation, and promoting social cohesion (UNESCO and WRTC, 2001). Adequate funding, historically provided through licence fees, is essential to fulfil this mission. However, this model is under scrutiny in various countries (EBU, 2023b). Only a minority of European Broadcasting Union (EBU) members (21 of 54; 39%) continue to use the fee model (EBU, 2023b), even though it is considered more stable, predictable,

and transparent, and less susceptible to political pressure compared to state budget funding (Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2021).

Beyond the survival of the public fee model, its economic viability is a pressing issue because fee levels are typically set by politicians who are often reluctant to raise them to keep pace with inflation. The average fee across EBU countries has decreased by 19% since 2018, partly due to the abolition of fees in countries where they were above average (EBU, 2023b). Between 2012 and 2021, despite a modest increase in nominal PSM operating revenues in EBU countries (regardless of the funding model), real revenues dropped by 4.4% due to high inflation (EBU, 2023a). On average, PSM costs EUR 3.26 per citizen in EBU markets, making it significantly cheaper than pay TV and subscription video-on-demand services (EBU, 2023a). Given that the public fee model is under pressure, the question arises as to what factors influence the public's WTP for PSM.

Paying for media and PSM

From a broader perspective, the importance of exploring the WTP for media content and its drivers has increased in the age of digital media. Traditional media organisations struggle with monetizing online content while, at the same time, the internet provides a vast range of free news alternatives. When it comes to consumer paying behaviour, previous scholarship (Chyi and Yang, 2009; O'Brien et al., 2020) distinguishes between consumers' past payments (PP; i.e., whether or how much they paid in the past for a product), their paying/purchase intention (PI; whether they would pay for a certain product), and their willingness to pay (WTP; the maximum amount they are willing to pay) for media content.

In terms of the determinants that influence consumers' paying behaviour with regard to digital content, O'Brien et al. (2020), in their systematic literature review, distinguish between three groups of factors: consumer-based factors, product-based factors, and economic factors. Their findings suggest that gender (i.e., being male), education, media use, news interest, medium/format (i.e., print and bundle), customization, perceived quality, specialization/niche, and income have positive impacts on at least one of the PP, PI, and WTP categories. On the contrary, age, price, and "free mentality" have a negative effect on at least one of the categories (O'Brien et al., 2020).

Paying for PSM is a specific sub-topic within the scholarship that explores consumers' payment behaviour for media content. Unlike payments for commercial media content, fees for PSM are compulsory and PSM is understood as a public good rather than a private good (Chivers and Allan, 2022). Therefore, previous scholarship has mostly focused on the perceived value it brings to citizens rather than on their purchase intentions (PI) or their payment preferences (PP). To measure this value in economic terms, two methods are typically used: WTP, which, as mentioned above, captures people's willingness to pay to maintain a given level of the provision of services; and WTA, which captures the financial amount people would consider adequate as compensation for no longer being able to receive PSM services (Finn et al., 2001). However, the latter approach is much less commonly used in scholarship on PSM (for exceptions, see Finn et al., 2001; Tsuji, 2006).

The predictors of WTP identified in prior studies can be divided into four main groups. First, *socio-demographic characteristics* present mixed results. The effect of gender and education is largely found to be statistically nonsignificant (Delaney and O'Toole, 2004; Lin et al., 2013; Háló et al., 2023; Sehl, 2023), although, according to Grammel and Gründl (2018), women and those with higher education levels exhibit higher WTP for PSM. Age has been shown to positively affect WTP in some studies (Delaney and O'Toole, 2004; Grammel and Gründl, 2018; Tsuji, 2006; Tsuji and Miyahara, 2007), whereas others found either the opposite effect (Háló et al., 2023; Sehl, 2023) or no statistically significant effect (Lin et al., 2013). Occupation plays a role, according to Tsuji (2006) and Tsuji and Miyahara (2007), which indicates that managers, specialists, and professionals demonstrate higher WTP. Conversely, factors, such as city size and parental status, do not significantly impact WTP (Delaney and O'Toole, 2004; Tsuji, 2006).

Second, (*perceived*) *product-based factors* show that satisfaction with PSM, perceived quality, and perceived independence all have positive effects on WTP (Delaney and O'Toole, 2004; Grammel and Gründl, 2018; Háló et al., 2023; Lin et al., 2013; Park and Park, 2014; Sehl, 2023; Tsuji, 2006; Tsuji and Miyahara, 2007). Also, citizens who support the idea of PSM (Grammel and Gründl, 2018), see it as a public good (Park and Park, 2014), and approve of the licence fee model for PSM funding (Grammel and Gründl, 2018) have higher WTP.

In practical terms, a positive attitude toward—and a favourable evaluation of—PSM are reflected in the consumption of and reliance for news and current affairs, which also positively influence the WTP for PSM (Delaney and O'Toole, 2004; Grammel and Gründl, 2018; Háló et al., 2023; Lin et al., 2013; Schlegel and Seufert, 2012; Schwer and Daneshvary, 1995; Tsuji and Miyahara, 2007). Only two studies found PSM news use (Sehl, 2023) and the PSM viewing/listening time (Tsuji, 2006) not statistically significant.

Third, *economic considerations* results are mixed. Participants with higher incomes have higher WTP, according to multiple studies (Delaney and O'Toole, 2004; Grammel and Gründl, 2018; Háló et al., 2023; Schlegel and Seufert, 2012; Tsuji and Miyahara, 2007), although some studies (Lin et al., 2013; Tsuji, 2006) found it not significant. Furthermore, according to Grammel and Gründl (2018), regular spending on print media predicts higher WTP, spending on streaming services predicts lower WTP, and spending on pay TV is not statistically significant. Expenditure on news and entertainment services also leads to mixed results: it has positive effects according to the study by Sehl (2023) but negative effects according to the study by Háló et al. (2023). However, in the latter case, the authors examined paying intent (i.e., whether citizens are prepared to make a direct payment for PSM), rather than willingness to pay (WTP), which is conceptually different. Additionally, the contexts differ; the study focused on Spain, where PSM is funded by the state budget and advertising and results in citizens being less familiar with the idea of direct payments for PSM. By contrast, Czech PSM has been funded through a licence fee since its establishment in 1992.

Although previous studies on the relationship between expenditures on commercial media content and WTP for PSM have yielded inconsistent findings, we build upon the broader argument that the coexistence of PSM and commercial media is not a zero-sum game, and that strong PSM does not necessarily have a negative effect on commercial

media. In fact, previous empirical literature shows little to no support for the “crowding out” effect (for an overview, see [Sehl et al., 2020](#)). Specifically, data from 28 EU countries reveal no significant negative correlation between the reach of online PSM news and commercial news or paying for online news ([Sehl et al., 2020](#)).

Beyond the lack of support for the “crowding out” argument, we propose that WTP for media content and services—whether for PSM or commercial media—stem from the same underlying factors. Similar to the concept of the “free mentality”, which refers to consumers’ aversion to accepting any price other than zero for media content and services ([O’Brien, 2022](#)), we hypothesize the existence of its counterpart: a “payer mentality” that extends to both PSM and commercial media. We assume that individuals who perceive meaning and value in media content, and those who are willing to pay for it, apply this willingness broadly to various types of media, including PSM. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1: Expenditure on commercial news and entertainment services is positively associated with WTP for PSM.

Fourth, *socio-psychological factors* may also play a role in WTP for PSM. While political trust has a positive effect on WTP ([Háló et al., 2023](#)), interest in news, political interest, and political ideology were found to be not statistically significant ([Háló et al., 2023](#); [Sehl, 2023](#)). However, compared to other factors, socio-psychological variables have been largely overlooked in previous research, which prompted our study to examine them more closely. Specifically, we focus on two variables that have not previously been explored in the context of WTP: socio-political trust and partisan selective exposure.

Socio-political trust refers to the confidence that individuals have in the functions and intentions of social and political institutions, leaders, and processes. It is composed of social trust, which is an orientation people have about others, and political trust, which is an orientation people have toward the state and its institutions ([Williams, 2020](#)). We draw on previous literature that suggests that trust in the news media is closely linked to how the public views political institutions ([Hanitzsch et al., 2018](#)) and assume that, as PSM is supposed to be one of the key societal institutions within the public sphere with the mission of contributing to democracy, its support is associated with the overall trust that people have in society and its institutions. On the contrary, if people feel that the social and the political systems do not work for them, their distrust will also extend to PSM and decrease their willingness to pay for it. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H2: Socio-political trust is positively associated with the WTP for PSM.

Finally, this study focuses on partisan selective exposure, which is defined as the tendency to seek media content that aligns with one’s ideological views while avoiding content that is ideologically incongruent ([Tsfsati, 2016](#)). Prior research suggests that partisan selective exposure has increased over time, contributing to the polarization of political attitudes ([Rodríguez et al., 2017](#); [Stroud, 2010](#)). This trend is worrying, because democratic societies rely on citizens being well-informed about a diverse range of public

issues and being exposed to various perspectives—which is, at the same time, an essential mission of PSM. Therefore, understanding the attitudes of the growing group of citizens who engage in partisan selective exposure is both socially relevant and crucial for the future of PSM.

Previous studies indicate that partisan selective exposure fuels oppositional media hostility (Peterson and Kagalwala, 2021) and that it is linked to heightened perceptions of bias within “the media” and the overall media system (Barnidge et al., 2020), as well as to assumptions of stronger influences on journalistic work (Obermaier et al., 2023). This raises the question of how it relates to the WTP for PSM. We posit that, in general, the tendency for partisan selective exposure may be positively associated with the WTP for media outlets that align with an individual’s views. However, if PSM fulfils its mission, it may be perceived as oppositional or hostile by audiences that are strongly inclined toward partisan selective exposure, especially in the current climate of populist attacks that accuse PSM of being part of a corrupt elite (Holtz-Bacha, 2021). We therefore hypothesize that

H3: Partisan selective exposure is negatively associated with the WTP for PSM.

In addition, to gain more detailed insight into how partisan selective exposure affects WTP for PSM, this study seeks to explore whether the interaction effects of (a) expenditure on news and entertainment services, (b) socio-political trust, and (c) partisan selective exposure (as a moderator), predict WTP for PSM (i.e., the dependent variable). Specifically, we are interested in whether the individual’s level of partisan selective exposure reduces or increases WTP. Given the lack of prior research examining the link between partisan selective exposure and WTP for PSM, we pose research questions rather than a priori hypotheses:

RQ1: How does partisan selective exposure affect the relationship between citizens’ expenditure on news and entertainment services and WTP for PSM?

RQ2: How does partisan selective exposure affect the relationship between the socio-political trust and WTP for PSM?

The case and the context: PSM in the Czech Republic

The Czech Republic, a CEE country, is home to two publicly funded PSM organisations: Czech Television (ČT) and Czech Radio (ČRo). They were established in 1992 and both evolved from their state-run predecessors, which were part of the communist-era propaganda system. Both Czech Television and Czech Radio hold strong and stable positions in the media market. Radiožurnál, the main news station of Czech Radio, is the most-listened-to radio channel in the country (Czech Radio, 2024), while Czech Television, a full-format broadcaster with extensive original programming, has the largest audience share in the television market (Czech Television, 2024). ČT and ČRo are the two most

trusted news sources in the Czech Republic, with 62% and 59% of citizens, respectively, expressing trust in their news (Newman et al., 2024).

However, the popularity of ČT and ČRo is not uniform. Viewership and listenership are more prevalent among older, highly educated individuals, those with a self-identified right-wing political orientation, and those who consider their household economy as good (Urbániková, 2024). The main criticisms focus on a lack of objectivity and balance (Macková et al., 2024; Urbániková and Smejkal, 2023). Specifically, previous research suggests that ČT is perceived by the public as having a rather liberal, right-wing, and pro-Western orientation (Macková et al., 2024; Urbániková, 2024). Also, similar to trends observed in other countries (Holtz-Bacha, 2021), Czech PSM faces fierce criticism from populist and extremist political parties. Despite these challenges, Czech PSM has managed to maintain its independence from political influence, resisting various attempts to bring it under political control (Štětka, 2022).

ČT and ČRo are funded through fees, which must be paid by all households and companies that own traditional television and radio receivers or internet-connected devices (low-income households are exempt). In 2023, the Czech government submitted a proposal for new legislation that—for the first time in 20 years—increased the monthly radio and television fees (to EUR 2.19 and EUR 5.97, respectively) and introduced automatic indexation linked to inflation. This proposal was accompanied by a broad public debate on the funding of PSM, which was ongoing during our data collection; accordingly, public WTP for PSM is a particularly timely issue in the Czech Republic. Ultimately, the legislation was passed by the Czech Parliament in the spring of 2025.

Method and measures

Sample and data collection

This study is based on a survey conducted on a research sample of 1700 respondents who were selected through quota sampling. They are representative of the Czech population, aged 18+, in terms of gender, age, education, size of residential area, region, and frequency of internet usage. The data source for quota selection and data weighing was the Czech Statistical Office. Data collection techniques included computer-assisted web interviews (CAWI) that targeted daily and almost daily internet users (accounting for 76% of the completed questionnaires), and computer-assisted personal interviews (CAPI) that targeted infrequent or non-users of the internet (accounting for 24% of the completed questionnaires). The surveys were conducted by a total of 65 interviewers. These proportions were based on data on internet usage in the Czech population (CSO, 2023). Data collection was conducted by a third party (FOCUS - Marketing & Social Research) in December 2023.¹ Prior to data collection, a pilot study with 65 respondents, who represented various socio-demographic groups, informed adjustments to three questionnaire questions. The average completion time was 28 minutes.

Measurements

Dependent variable: Willingness to pay. To measure WTP for PSM, respondents were asked the following question (inspired by Grammel and Gründl, 2018; Sehl, 2023): “Imagine you are a member of the Chamber of Deputies and have the power to determine the monthly television fee for Czech Television per household. How much should this television fee be—what amount per month do you think households should pay? As before, the television fee would remain the main source of income for Czech Television. Advertising revenue would remain very limited, and Czech Television would not receive any contribution from the state budget.” The analogical wording was used in a separate question for the licence fee for Czech Radio. The wording was chosen to elicit respondents’ personal opinions while prompting them to consider the broader societal consequences of their decisions, acknowledging that PSM creates both individual and social value.

Following the format used by Grammel and Gründl (2018), respondents could choose the appropriate amount for the fee with a horizontal sliding bar, moving the button from the left (0 CZK per month) to the right (1000 CZK per month; i.e., approximately 40 EUR). The maximum sum was determined by an open question posed in six focus group discussions with the Czech general public that were conducted prior to the questionnaire survey. The maximum amounts for the television and radio fees stated during the focus group discussions were multiplied by four to ensure that respondents had a sufficient range of options to consider. Both questions were placed at the beginning of the questionnaire to mitigate effects caused by question sequencing. To elicit spontaneous responses, respondents were not reminded of the current television and radio fees. The resulting dependent variable is the average of the proposed fee for Czech Television and Czech Radio (Spearman-Brown = .916, $M = 119.28$, $SD = 143.38$, median = 79.75).

Independent variables. *PSM consumption* was measured by asking how often respondents usually watch ČT and listen to ČRo (separately), including their websites/social media accounts/apps, on a 5-point scale that ranged from 1 = every day or almost every day to 5 = never (Spearman-Brown = 0.663, $M = 3.04$, $SD = 1.19$).

Expenditure on news and entertainment services was measured by asking the following question: “How much does your household typically spend per month on payments for different media? This can be one-off payments and subscriptions” (inspired by Háló et al., 2023). Respondents were asked about the following items (with examples of specific media outlets): newspapers and magazines (both print and online); TV stations only available through paid operators; platforms for listening to music; platforms for watching videos; and individual content creators. For each item, respondents could choose from a 5-point scale from 1 = 0 CZK to 5 = more than 1000 CZK (Cronbach’s alpha: 0.497, $M = 1.44$, $SD = 0.41$).

Political interest was measured by asking “To what extent are you interested or not interested in politics and public affairs?” (5-point scale, 1 = not at all to 5 = very interested; $M = 3.32$, $SD = 1.16$).

Political ideology was measured by asking “In the context of politics, people often talk about the left and the right. Where would you personally place yourself on this scale, where one is the far left, seven is the far right and four is the centre?” ($M = 4.09$, $SD = 1.42$).

Socio-political trust measured trust in “most people in the Czech Republic”, “people in my neighbourhood, friends, acquaintances, colleagues, neighbours”, “the government”, and “the President” (5-point scale, 1 = no trust at all to 5 = full trust; Cronbach’s alpha: 0.630, $M = 2.76$, $SD = 0.74$).

Partisan selective exposure was measured by asking respondents to express their levels of agreement with the following statements (inspired by Tsfati, 2016; Obermaier et al., 2023): “If possible, I avoid media offerings that express views other than my own on important issues”, “I do not find it helpful to read articles and comments that express views other than my own”, and “I try to expose myself only to media whose messages on important issues match my own views” (5-point scale, 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree; Cronbach’s alpha: 0.834, $M = 2.8$, $SD = 0.98$).

Control variables. The control variables included age ($M = 50.54$, $SD = 17.27$), gender (51% women), the education level (primary school = 12%, secondary school without a diploma-qualifying exam = 35%, secondary school with a diploma-qualifying exam = 35%, university = 18%), and the economic situation of the household (measured by asking “How would you rate the financial situation of your household?” on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = we can afford everything we need and still save a lot of money to 5 = often the income is not enough and we have to borrow money; $M = 3.12$, $SD = 0.94$).

Data analysis

To explore the hypotheses and answer the research questions, we conducted a hierarchical multiple regression (IBM SPSS Statistics 29) followed by moderation analysis (PROCESS v4.2, Model 1; Hayes, 2022). The hierarchical multiple regression was used because it allows for the examination of the relationships between independent and dependent variables by gradually adding variables to the model and evaluating their contribution to the explained variance of the dependent variable. Specifically, the regression analysis was conducted in four blocks: (1) control variables (i.e., age, gender, education, economic situation of the household); (2) political attitudes (i.e., political interest, political ideology); (3) PSM consumption; and (4) tested variables (i.e., socio-political trust, expenditure on news and entertainment services, and partisan selective exposure). Zero-order correlations are reported in Appendix 1.

After conducting a hierarchical multiple regression, we performed two moderation analyses. In the first model, the interaction between partisan selective exposure and expenditure on news and entertainment services was tested. The second model tested the interaction between partisan selective exposure and socio-political trust. Before performing the moderation analysis, we recalculated all of the variables included in the models into Z-scores to obtain standardized coefficients. The conditional effects of the moderator were shown for values of the mean and ± 1 SD from the mean. The correlations

between the variables, VIF, and tolerance had acceptable levels, indicating that the assumption of no multicollinearity was met in both analyses (De Vaus, 2002). After a list-wise deletion of missing data, 1261 cases were tested in the model.

Results

The results of the hierarchical multiple regression are summarized in [Appendix 2](#). Model 1 explained 4.1% of the variance in WTP for PSM ($R^2 = 0.041$), which suggests that basic demographic factors have a modest, yet significant, impact on WTP. Model 2 added political interest and ideology, slightly increasing the explained variance to 4.9% ($R^2 = 0.049$). Model 3 introduced PSM consumption, significantly increasing the explained variance to 8.2% ($R^2 = 0.082$), which suggests that media-related variables play a more substantial role in predicting WTP for PSM. Finally, Model 4 added expenditure on news and entertainment services, socio-political trust, and partisan selective exposure, which led to a further significant increase in the explained variance ($\Delta R^2 = 0.048, p < .001$). This model accounted for 13.2% of the variance in WTP for PSM ($R^2 = 0.132$), which indicates that the three variables significantly contribute to explaining why individuals are willing to pay for PSM.

Regarding H1, in the Model 4, expenditure on news and entertainment services emerged to be positively related to WTP for PSM ($\beta = 0.213, p < .001$). These results support H1 and suggest that individuals who spend more on different media products are more willing to pay for PSM. H2 predicted a positive relationship between socio-political trust and WTP for PSM, which was indeed supported ($\beta = .083, p = .004$). This suggests that individuals with higher levels of trust in people, generally, and in political institutions are more willing to pay for PSM. According to H3, partisan selective exposure was expected to be negatively associated with WTP for PSM; however, H3 is not supported by the data because the effect of partisan selective exposure is not statistically significant ($\beta = 0.042, p = .113$).

In addition to socio-political trust and expenditure on news and entertainment services, other variables proved to be significant. Gender ($\beta = 0.065, p = .017$ in Model 4) and PSM consumption, whose effect was significant in both Model 3 and Model 4 ($\beta = 0.190, p < .001$ in Model 3; $\beta = 0.165, p < .001$ in Model 4) are positively related to WTP for PSM. This suggests that women and people who consume more PSM are more willing to pay for them. Political ideology, specifically a respondent's right-wing orientation, also had a positive effect, although the strength of this effect diminished with the introduction of additional variables ($\beta = .092, p < .001$ in Model 2; $\beta = 0.080, p = .004$ in Model 3; $\beta = 0.056, p = .045$ in Model 4). By contrast, age ($\beta = -0.152, p < .001$) and education ($\beta = -0.056, p = .043$) showed a negative relationship with WTP for PSM. Thus, these results, across all models, suggest that younger individuals are more willing to pay for PSM. The same applies to those with lower levels of education, although this effect was only evident in Model 4 and it was very weak and borderline significant.

Finally, we asked whether partisan selective exposure moderates the relationship between expenditure on news and entertainment services and WTP for PSM (RQ1), and between socio-political trust and WTP for PSM (RQ2). Regarding the first moderation

Table 1. Moderation effect of partisan selective exposure on the relationship between expenditure on news and entertainment services and WTP for PSM.

Model	WTP for PSM	<i>p</i>
Block 1: All prior blocks in Appendix 2		
ΔR ²	13.2%	
Block 2: Moderation		
Partisan selective exposure		
Expenditure on news and entertainment services	.066	
ΔR ²	0.5%	0.007
Total R ²	13.7%	

Note. The point estimate of the moderation effect is a standardized coefficient. Moderation effects based on bootstrapping on 5000 samples with bias-corrected confidence intervals set at 95%. All four previous blocks were entered as covariates in PROCESS_v4.2 for SPSS.

Table 2. Conditional effects of the focal predictor at values of the moderator.

Partisan selective exposure	Effect	SE	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI (LLCI)	95% CI (ULCI)
−1 SD (−1.011)	0.126	0.037	3.392	0.001	0.053	0.199
Mean (−0.023)	0.191	0.026	7.378	0.000	0.140	0.242
+1 SD (0.965)	0.256	0.034	7.582	0.000	0.190	0.323

Note. The moderator variable (partisan selective exposure) is shown for the values of the mean and ±1 SD from the mean. Statistically significant *p*-values in bold.

(RQ1), the results shown in [Table 1](#) indicate that the moderation effect between partisan selective exposure and news and entertainment services is significant ($\beta = 0.066, p = .007$; $R^2 = 0.137$). However, in the second moderation model (RQ2), the moderation effect was non-significant ($\beta = 0.012, p = .611$; $R^2 = 0.132$).

To examine the interaction in more detail, [Table 2](#) reports the conditional effects for WTP for PSM. The moderation effect can also be seen in [Figure 1](#). It suggests that, for individuals with higher levels of partisan selective exposure, an increase in expenditure on news and entertainment services more significantly increases the amount these individuals are willing to pay for PSM. By contrast, this increase is less pronounced for people with lower levels of partisan selective exposure.

Concluding discussion

This paper contributes to the still-scarce literature on the predictors of WTP for PSM, drawing attention—for, to our knowledge, the first time—to a country in the CEE region as a case study. Additionally, it focuses on the socio-psychological factors that affect WTP, which have been largely overlooked in previous research (O’Brien et al., 2020).

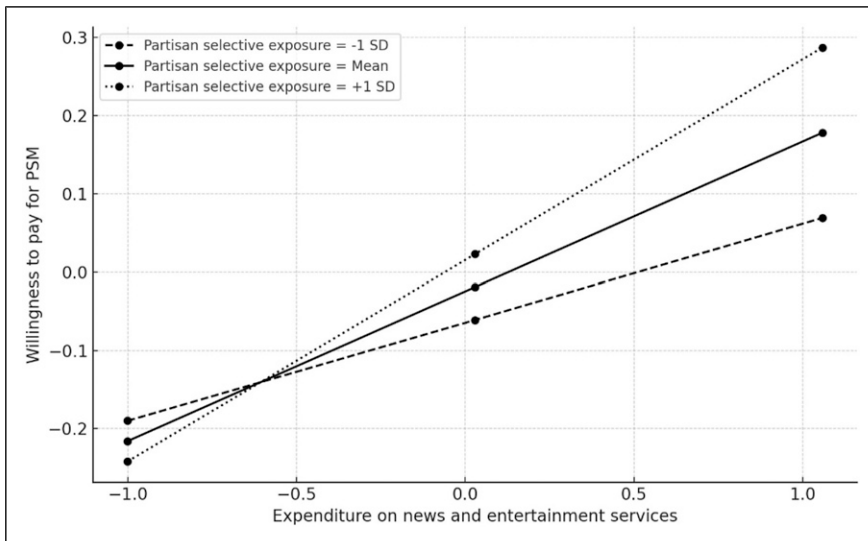


Figure 1. Moderation effect of partisan selective exposure on the relationship between expenditure on news and entertainment services to WTP for PSM. Note. The graph was created using ChatGPT, an AI model based on GPT-4 by OpenAI, employing the model's capabilities for data analysis and visualization. The visualization was created based on the data outputs from the analysis performed in PROCESS_v4.2 for SPSS.

Beginning with sociodemographic variables, our data show that women are more willing to pay for PSM, which is contrary to several studies that found the effect of gender to be non-significant (Delaney and O'Toole, 2004; Lin et al., 2013; Háló et al., 2023; Sehl, 2023) and which is in line with the study by Grammel and Gründl (2018) from culturally- and geographically-close Austria and Germany. Additionally, younger people are willing to pay more for PSM, which is consistent with studies by Háló et al. (2023) and Sehl (2023), and contrary to studies that found the opposite effect (Delaney and O'Toole, 2004; Grammel and Gründl, 2018; Tsuji, 2006; Tsuji and Miyahara, 2007). This difference could be explained by historical factors: in the past, the predecessors of Czech PSM were state media that were funded directly from the state budget, so older generations may have a less pronounced habit for paying for its content. Political ideology, specifically a respondent's right-wing orientation, also had a positive effect.

This study adds to a growing body of research that suggests that PSM consumption positively affects WTP for PSM (Delaney and O'Toole, 2004; Grammel and Gründl, 2018; Háló et al., 2023; Lin et al., 2013; Schlegel and Seufert, 2012). This suggests that, to maintain financial viability, PSM must attract the broadest possible audience, which aligns with the principle of universality (UNESCO & WRTC, 2001).

Also, our findings indicate that, in terms of paying for media content, PSM and commercial media do not represent opposing forces in a zero-sum game. While previous research has produced mixed findings on the relationship between WTP for PSM and

payment for commercial media content and services (Grammel and Gründl, 2018; Háló et al., 2023; Sehl, 2023), our data, in line with H1, indicate a positive effect of paying for commercial media on WTP for PSM, which aligns with Sehl's (2023) findings. This contributes additional evidence against the assumption of the "crowding out" effect between PSM and commercial media (Sehl et al., 2020). We assume that, as a counterpart to the "free mentality" (O'Brien, 2022), there is a segment of the audience with a "payer mentality" that perceives media content and services as valuable goods worth paying for, regardless of whether the producer is a commercial or public service medium.

This study pays special attention to socio-psychological antecedents that have not been studied before, specifically socio-political trust and partisan selective exposure. In line with H2, the data show that socio-political trust is positively associated with WTP for PSM, which is similar to findings by Háló et al. (2023). Two explanations are possible: first, given PSM's role as a key societal institution within the public sphere and its mission to contribute to democracy, PSM may be widely perceived as part of the "system". As a result, trust in the socio-political system may align with positive attitudes toward its core components, leading to a willingness to provide financial support for PSM. Second, the specific Czech context may play a role. At the time of data collection, a right-wing, pro-EU, pro-NATO government was in power, and a pro-EU, pro-NATO president held office. Simultaneously, previous qualitative audience research suggests that ČT is perceived by the public as a pro-democratic, pro-Western, pro-European medium, with a lean toward liberal (cultural values) and right-wing (economic values) orientations (Macková et al., 2024). This correspondence may provide another explanation for the positive effect of socio-political trust on WTP: if PSM is perceived as neutral or aligned with the orientation of the current political leadership, then individuals with higher trust in this leadership are more willing to pay for PSM.

Furthermore, we hypothesized (H3) that partisan selective exposure would be negatively associated with WTP for PSM, given that PSM aims to be balanced and pluralistic, while partisan selective exposure involves hostility toward media that do not reflect one's views (Peterson and Kagalwala, 2021). Nevertheless, H3 was not supported by the data, because the effect of partisan selective exposure was not statistically significant. An explanation for this—particularly in light of the moderation analysis that follows—could be that individuals with high levels of partisan selective exposure may be found among opponents of PSM (e.g., supporters of populist political parties that accuse PSM of being part of a corrupt elite; Holtz-Bacha, 2021) and among its supporters, thus mutually cancelling out the effect. This interpretation is supported by the absence of a statistically significant relationship between the level of partisan selective exposure and political orientation along the right-left and liberal-conservative axes, as well as the political party selected in the last election (i.e., coalition/opposition/parliamentary).

The moderation analysis indicates that partisan selective exposure indeed plays a role in WTP for PSM, although indirectly. While the moderation effect of partisan selective exposure in the relationship between socio-political trust and WTP for PSM is not significant (RQ2), it is significant in case of the relationship between expenditure on commercial news and entertainment services and WTP for PSM (RQ1). For individuals with higher levels of partisan selective exposure, an increase in expenditure on

commercial news and entertainment services more significantly increases the amount these individuals are willing to pay for PSM. In contrast, this increase is less pronounced for individuals with lower levels of partisan selective exposure. This suggests that, for individuals with a “payer mentality”, the tendency to partisan selective exposure goes hand in hand with an extra willingness to support the medium of their choice, also financially. This is broadly in line with prior research, suggesting that partisan audiences exhibit higher levels of loyalty (Ksiazek, 2016).

Consequently, such a moderation effect suggests that there are audiences for whom Czech PSM content aligns with their ideological views and, conversely, excludes perspectives with which they disagree. There are two possible, non-mutually exclusive explanations for this, similar to those for the link between socio-political trust and WTP for PSM. The more optimistic view is that audiences may seek ideological alignment with broader values, such as democracy, diversity, plurality, and independence—the core principles of PSM—as opposed to, for instance, disinformation and conspiratorial media outlets. The more pessimistic view is that ideological alignment might refer to specific political ideologies, such as particular positions on the political spectrum (e.g., right/left wing, liberal/conservative), or even party politics, which would suggest the presence of a (perceived) systemic bias within Czech PSM. This would go against the PSM mission, which is to be pluralistic by design, serve the entire public, and strive to present a balanced mix of perspectives.

The possibility that the second explanation could also be at play is indicated by previous qualitative audience research suggesting that ČT is perceived by the public as leaning toward a right-wing orientation (Macková et al., 2024), as well as by a questionnaire survey showing that both ČT and ČRo are perceived by approximately a fifth of the population as having a right-wing bias (Urbániková, 2024). At the same time, expenditure on news and entertainment services is positively associated with a right-wing political orientation (see Appendix 1). Thus, this could mean that for those willing to pay for media content (who are more often right-wing), the tendency toward partisan selective exposure may increase their WTP for PSM because they perceive PSM as effectively reflecting their (right-wing) political orientation.

However, it should be emphasized that the main portion of the Czech public, though not a majority (approximately 40%), considers the content of both ČT and ČRo to be neutral and balanced, and roughly a third does not know or has no opinion (Urbániková, 2024). Furthermore, the perceived bias is based on the audience’s subjective viewpoint and does not necessarily correspond to the actual content. Notably, opposition political parties have long accused Czech PSM of showing bias towards the current (right-wing) government, and this rhetoric may have influenced the public perception of PSM. Each year, the news content produced by Czech Television undergoes an external analysis, with only a very small percentage of news items being found to not meet the legal requirement of balance. According to the latest analysis conducted by Media Tenor for Czech Television, only 3.1% of the 1000 randomly selected stories in 2023 were found to lack balance (Media Tenor, 2024).

This study’s implications for media policy and management are clear: WTP for PSM is primarily driven by PSM consumption and a general willingness and ability to pay for

news and entertainment. This finding reinforces the need for PSM to provide high-quality offerings across different genres and formats for various societal segments, which are distributed through diverse channels and platforms to ensure broad relevance and consumption. More specifically, prior research indicates that citizens expect PSM to provide added value as an alternative to commercial media by offering ad-free content that prioritizes quality over ratings and by being subject to stricter oversight to ensure impartial news coverage (Urbániková and Smejkal, 2025). They also see PSM as a national counterbalance to multinational VOD platforms, emphasizing the preservation of national traditions, language, and original programming (Urbániková and Smejkal, 2025). Furthermore, when it comes to paying for news and media content, PSM and commercial media are in the same boat—both need society to perceive quality media content and services as valuable and worth paying for. Finally, while catering to partisan audiences by providing the version of reality they prefer and avoiding alienation by allowing space for other perspectives may work as a business strategy for commercial media, it directly contradicts the mission of PSM.

Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to Prof. Manuel Puppis for his valuable feedback on the draft manuscript, and to the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Czech Science Foundation under Grant No. GA22-30563S.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Note

1. According to the rules of the ethics committee of Masaryk University, ethical approval was not required because the research project did not involve the use of biomedical techniques or vulnerable research subjects.

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