

HABILITATION THESIS REVIEWER'S REPORT

Masaryk University

Faculty

Faculty of Social Studies

Applicant

Mgr. et Mgr. Marína Urbániková, Ph.D.

Habilitation thesis

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

Reviewer

Prof. Kate Wright

Reviewer's home unit, institution

University of Edinburgh, School of Social and Political Science, Media and Communication department

To whomsoever it may concern

I have no hesitation in vouching for the quality, originality and significance of this deeply impressive and coherent body of academic research. Dr Marína Urbániková is a highly respected member of the international research community, whose theoretical expertise, empirically-grounded insights, and constructive criticism are sought after in relation to Central and Eastern European PSM. This is why I invited her to participate in an eight country consortia to consider preparing for joint grant applications to Horizon in 2026-2027. Many of those present at the workshops so far have been full professors, and it is noticeable that Dr Urbániková is more than able to 'hold her own' amongst senior scholars.

This outstanding habilitation thesis has only reinforced my respect for Dr Urbániková's research. It is clearly and logically laid out, and admirably thorough, tackling the key challenges faced by public service media, including digitisation, political pressure, public trust and willingness to pay. Although some of the articles included in this thesis were co-authored, the research leadership demonstrated by Dr Urbániková easily clears the bar required to prove independence of thought and execution. Indeed, the ability to collaborate so fruitfully with others is another 'plus' in my view.

It is pleasing to see that Dr Urbániková has successfully achieved publication in so many, high-ranking journals, and even more pleasing to see that she has an equally strong command of relevant theory and mixed methods (including semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and survey research.) All of this bodes very well for her future career trajectory.

Indeed, if we had any openings at the University of Edinburgh, I would be trying to tempt her overseas! (Sadly, we do not...)

I will now proceed to outline what I see as being the original contributions of each area of work in turn before going on to indicate some questions that might perhaps be used.

Study 1

Rather than rehearsing (the well-worn) list of PSM values, this paper makes insightful theoretical contributions, focusing on what is most distinctive about PSM journalism, universality. The authors build on previous work by Iosifidis (2007) to outline three aspects of universality. These are 1/ the diversity of journalistic formats and genres 2/ equitable and universal access for all and 3/ comprehensive coverage (locally, nationally, regionally and internationally). In so doing, the authors offer an analysis that can be used in future research, and potentially, a new research puzzle, going forward. That is, if PSM journalism is distinctive in these three ways, why do the guidelines provided by PSM on specific areas (e.g., AI) give the impression of vagueness or isomorphism? (see Becker *et al.* 2015).

Studies 2, 3 and 4

These studies have, to my eyes, the strongest claim to be genuinely ground-breaking, world-leading work. To the best of my knowledge, Dr Urbániková was the first to publish on the internal disciplinary capture of PSM (RTVS): detailing not only journalists' perceptions of what happened, but a typology of how it happened via specific practices, how what happened related to varying interpretations of the meaning of 'public service' and 'objectivity', as well as how journalists tried to resist what they believed was increasingly politicised forms of control.

These studies resonate far beyond CEE to inform the broader field of research about media capture and democratic backsliding. For this reason, I discuss Dr Urbániková's work at length in my own monograph, *Capturing News, Capturing Democracy: Trump and the Voice of America* (Oxford University Press, 2024), and will cite it again in another article I am co-authoring on democratic resistance with Prof Daniel Kreiss (University of North Carolina). I particularly admire Dr Urbániková's careful wording of exactly what she could, and could not, claim on the basis of the empirical data she had. This is high-level scholarship indeed, which I have used as a model when coaching newly minted PhDs beginning to publish about capture in very different contexts (e.g., Ferreira (2025) who writes on the partisan politicisation of commercial news in Brazil). Dr Urbániková's work in this area also resonates with recent scholarship concerning PSM in Israel (Panievsky, 2025).

In the wake of recent events concerning BBC/Trump, I can see a further critical conversation forming about whether PSM are perhaps particularly susceptible to government capture because of the multivalence of terms like ‘public service’ and ‘objectivity’, which is also reflected in the following studies about audience perceptions.

Studies 5, 6 and 7

Audience studies tend to be the ‘poor cousin’ of media and communications research, and those that exist are often weak and overly generalised. Not so this research. There are several original nuanced and genuinely fascinating findings here: I am especially intrigued by Dr Urbániková’s insights into why trust and distrust are not simply the flip side of the same coin. At a time when some political actors attack the legitimacy of PSM, and spread audience distrust of them, this is vitally important work. Other research about PSM value, in the sense of willingness to pay, also has important implications for other PSM at a time of rising costs, budget cuts, and questions about whether PSM are outdated in a contemporary media environment.

Reviewer's questions for the habilitation thesis defence

Here now, are the questions I had in mind, which relate to all three of these areas of research. I hope they prove useful.

- Why do you argue that universality is such a distinctive, core feature of PSM journalism? How does AI threaten that?
- Can you explain what you see as being the tension between advocacy and universality?
- How and why should PSM promote national and European identity? What would happen if they did not?
- You argue that PSM has a special role in translating international events for a domestic audience. What challenges does this involve?
- Do you think that the multivalence (many meanings) of a/ ‘public service’ and b/ objectivity make PSM more vulnerable to capture than commercial media? If so, how might this vulnerability be addressed?
- Your work highlights the difficulty of ascertaining whether internal interference in PSM is politically motivated or not. Please expand on the difficulties this presents to a/ journalists and b/ researchers?
- What would you advise other researchers studying media capture and resistance to it in future? Any new research avenues to suggest?
- You suggest that by identifying particular patterns of interference, researchers might be able to make inferences about potential causes. Can you elaborate on that – what might be valid forms of interference?
- Since you starting writing about RTVS, several other studies have come out on media capture. How do you see your work as informing this new wave of work?

- Do you believe that your work on media capture could inform current debates about the governance of the BBC? If so, how?
- Your research into the attitudes of Czech audiences towards PSM suggests that any doubts about news can be offset by appreciation of high-quality non-news content. Do you think scholars have paid too much attention to PSM news, and not enough to non-news output?
- You argue that trust and distrust in PSM are “two largely related but distinct concept.” Explain?
- How generalisable do you think the results of your research into audience research are?
- I’m interested in this concept of ‘legitimacy-as-perception’, particularly since some audience members conceptualised ‘objectivity’ in a similar way to ‘false balance’. It is outside the scope of the study, but I wonder if you might be willing to speculate on how audience perceptions are manipulated to delegitimise PSM?
- I’d like to explore the correlation between socio-political trust in democratic institutions and willingness to pay (WTP). Are you saying that WTP declines as faith in democratic institutions declines? Is it therefore the case that broader de-democratisation would be hastened by dropping financial support for PSM? If so, then how can PSM challenge or halt broader de-democratising processes?
- How can PSM foster what you call a “payer mentality”, without pandering to any particular ideology?
- Are PSM in countries where citizens are less wealthy inevitable dogged by a lack of WTP?

Conclusion

The habilitation thesis entitled “Public Service Media in Uncertain Times: Normative Ideals, Institutional Struggles, and Public Perceptions” by Mgr. et Mgr. Marína Urbániková, Ph.D. fulfils requirements expected of a habilitation thesis in the field of Media and Journalism Studies.

Finally, thank you for giving me the opportunity to consider this habilitation thesis. It was a great pleasure to have the opportunity to read it, re-read some articles by Dr Urbániková that I already knew, and discover others that were new to me. In my view, she deserves to pass her habilitation defence with, as we say in the UK, “flying colours.” Indeed, I would be so bold as to suggest that Masaryk considers what they can do to support and fast-track Dr Urbániková as she moves towards full professor – she is such a shining star that otherwise, another institution is likely to come after her with a tempting offer!

Date: 1 December 2025

Signature:

