



## Public Service Media and the Common Good

Flavia Barca

Associazione culturale ACUME

<http://www.acume.net>

<http://www.flaviabarca.it>

Rome

### Abstract

This paper attempts to identify the mission of public service media (PSM) if they are to reassert their role in the twenty-first century. It is argued that PSM still have, and must accept, the responsibility of planning both schedules and programs with the aim of encouraging people to make better choices for their own wellbeing, as well as promoting audience development, inclusion, and social awareness. It is also argued that this traditional mission must be renewed by identifying new instruments and new spaces for mediating a public debate that engages the productive and progressive forces of the country, from active citizen communities to cultural and scientific communities. Indeed, the role of PSM must be constantly negotiated in order to be fully participative and open to change. They must not only be able to maintain dialogue and accountability with respect to their audience, but also be open to outside ideas, influences and "hybridization". This role has become even more strategic in the new digital habitat. PSM must manage this transitional phase, promote digital inclusion, encourage the country to use new platforms and, above all, to use them proactively and consciously.

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Correspondence should be addressed to Flavia Barca. Email: [flavia.barca@fastwebnet.it](mailto:flavia.barca@fastwebnet.it)

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## Introduction

The decline in the reputation of public service broadcasting is closely linked with the general decline in reputation of all institutions of cultural development, whether they be schools, universities, scientific communities or cultural foundations. They are all affected by similar problems: a reduction in public investment (also partly affecting the quality of production/research/education), increased competition, a general loss in reputation of public officials and agencies and, more largely, in their role as intermediaries.

Overall we could say that an apparently equal sharing of information between countries and between social communities, as well as an increasing radicalization of the concept of customization, creates the impression that intermediaries are no longer necessary, whether these are political parties, schools, public administrators or broadcasters.

Digital means, at least in Europe and in those places where the digital divide is not so widely felt, effectively create new centralities and give citizens a sense of having instruments and a certain power that they did not have previously.

At the same time digital public discourse is increasingly affected by populism, bias, misinformation, trolling and various other attempts to transform the universe of mass circulation into a realm of mystification. Moreover, new economic actors which specifically operate in the domain of liquid communication, such as Google, Amazon and many others, set rules not only regarding the way information is distributed and shared, but which also impact on the quality of the information and this has much more to do with market interests than with any benefit for citizens.<sup>1</sup> Instead of laws, we have algorithms created by private enterprises.

This is why there is a clear need for a renewed legitimacy for existing intermediaries, and probably even a need for new ones, especially in a new digital environment, offering innovative solutions, and negotiating a new equilibrium between public institutions, citizens/communities and markets. This is why, as stated in the editorial of this issue, the transitional phase to a new paradigm (the very idea of transition meaning that the end is not yet known) requires elaboration on a cultural level.

This, in fact, is the intermediary role that public services media (PSM) can play in contemporary societies that have become increasingly liquid and complex. With citizens, communities and organizations on one side and scientific and cultural communities on the other, PSM can re-legitimize their role - and that of the public actor in general - and at the same time negotiate processes of transformation.

This paper will attempt to define this specific role. Chapter 1 discusses the renewed function of PSM in providing a 'nudge' (Thaler and Sunstein 2008) to welfare, social inclusion, identity and innovation, while Chapter 2 examines the importance of creating a new public discourse based on contributions from all parts of society, from scientific communities to new productive sectors of civil society. Up to now, little space has been given for listening and for expression as regards the latter. PSM thus have a dual function and this is why they are of such great importance: they are public institutions providing citizens with a service of prime value and, at the same time, they offer an essential *locus* for public discourse, representing a new means of shared knowledge production.

### Chapter 1. The Reasons for, and How to Deliver, Public Service Media

Public services are generally strongly regulated also due to the need to provide a high quality service. This means setting certain standards of quality and determining how they can be reached. The idea of quality with regards PSM involves not only the quality of the signal (whether TV, radio etc.), which is quite easy to evaluate, but also – and here things become more complicated – the quality of the programs broadcast. Unable to define the meaning of quality – a concept of great complexity involving cultural issues and thus usually left to public

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<sup>1</sup> What many define “the new extractive model” (Rushkoff 2016). See also (Morozov 2016) on the hidden costs of capitalism.

preference – public service broadcasting was *de facto* founded on, and distinguished by, its educative mission. Indeed, to “educate” was one of the three pillars of Reithian public service broadcasting,<sup>2</sup> along with to “inform” and “entertain”.

In the 1970s, however, PSM started grappling with the concept of education (as mentioned in the Introduction) which, when applied to the media, often calls to mind an authoritarian approach, a one-way flow of information characteristic of out-moded paternalism. The 1970s, in fact, were a critical period of transformation because in Europe the Welfare State model was being called into question, traditional ties between state and citizen were reaching crisis point (Barca 2007; Crainz 2005), while the emphasis on the centrality of the individual marked the start of that customization process which is now the basis of the new digital paradigm. These were the years of the growth of commercial television, while public services were put on trial, often regarded as the mouthpiece of an elitist and authoritarian culture (Barca 2007; Bourdon 2011). The myth of educational television began to crumble.

In contrast to the ‘hypodermic needle theory’ that had developed in first half of the twentieth century (i.e. the idea of a uniform, passive audience influenced by media messages), various scholars developed more complex concepts of engagement.<sup>3</sup> The problem is that such theories have been used to deny the effectiveness of using television as a hidden persuader (a much-debated issue in Italy when Silvio Berlusconi was both head of the government and owner of the main commercial media group of the country, Mediaset), and they therefore often undervalued the educational role of TV. If there is no such thing as ‘bad television’, i.e. endorsing questionable values and actions, then neither is there ‘good’ television, i.e. encouraging people to behave virtuously. The mission of PSM thus loses its very *raison d’être*.

This is one of the reasons why public service broadcasters at a certain point started to emphasize their economic role, that is, as sponsors of talent and audiovisual productions, and highlight their status as key economic actors in the cultural and creative sectors. During the 1980s and 90s many public services, including the public service in Italy, gradually abandoned their mandate to create and develop a space for public discussion, and launched themselves into full competition with commercial broadcasters. In the case of Italy, it is no coincidence that those years saw the dismantling of the RAI research department which dealt with cultural and scientific communities, evaluated scheduling and programming, and monitored the quality and the value of its own output. If PSM lose their formative role, if they lose their mandate to cultivate a more critically-minded citizen, well informed and capable of interpreting increasingly complex networks of meaning, if they lose the capacity to question a whole host of media methods and languages, then what distinguishes the public service from all the others? How can the license fee be justified?

In recent years, behavioral economists, sociologists and psychologists have provided notable input regarding this matter. In particular, behavioral economist Richard Thaler and legal scholar Cass Sunstein (who run the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs in the Obama administration) have identified a means to justify and explain the role of the state, that is, as the purveyor of a new “libertarian paternalism” that authorizes the public role in domains where people can be helped to make better choices (Thaler and Sunstein 2008). For them, a “nudge” is any small feature in the environment that attracts our attention and influences our behavior, and a “choice architect” is anyone who influences that behavior. Nudge theory helps the authors to replace the rational actor portrayed in economic models with a human being motivated by impulses and sentiments, which can be influenced negatively or positively. The claim is that as choice architecture is unavoidable, any public architecture of choice should tend towards the best option so as to benefit people’s lives.

This idea is extremely pertinent to the debate on the mission of PSM. While a totally neutral way of conceiving information or presenting the news remains a *chimera*, PSM have, and must accept, the responsibility of planning both schedules and programs that empower people by helping them to make better choices for their own wellbeing, and that promote audience development, inclusion, and social awareness. As scholars have noted,<sup>4</sup> the order in which news items are listed in a news program influences an audience’s perception of their relative importance. Likewise, the choice to exclude an item from the program may mean that it is

<sup>2</sup> John Reith was the founder of BBC <http://www.bbc.co.uk/historyofthebbc/research/culture/reith-1>.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, (Lazarsfeld et al. 1948) and (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Agenda-setting theory at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agenda-setting\\_theory](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agenda-setting_theory).

excluded from public debate. For this reason, there is a clear need for instruments that are both direct (information) and indirect (values and macro-concepts) which facilitate the understanding of social change, the world around us, and the enormous range of choice available; in short, there is a need for instruments of freedom (Barca 2016).

We can therefore envisage PSM as unique instruments dedicated to the common good (it is this 'uniqueness', combined with the 'common good', that gives PSM legitimacy and motivates the cost of the fee) and, for this very reason, useful in counterbalancing the less beneficial trends of the free market. To reach a larger audience, most commercial publications (whether print, television, internet or radio) dramatize events and thereby increase anxiety in the population. They may even create a sense of impotence (if everything is going wrong and there is no way out, then it is useless for me to try to do anything positive ...). As Thaler and Sunstein (*ibid.*) argue, markets, in spite of their many virtues, often give companies an incentive to endorse human weakness (in order to make a profit), rather than to try to eradicate it or minimize its impact. For this reason, commercial media groups tend to follow this natural inclination, i.e. profiting from human weakness, whereas the public service is called upon to try to remove, or at least reduce, such effects (Barca 2016).

Nevertheless, the point is not only providing citizens with the information that can best bring about their own wellbeing, but also providing them with the tools to analyze and decode the language of the media, which has become even more complex and obscure in the web environment. In this sense, PSM can play an even more strategic role in the new digital habitat, where we once more come across the same free-market schemes, albeit camouflaged in some cases by the libertarian principles of the web.

There is currently an interesting important debate regarding the algorithms that define the positioning of the news in social network sites and search engines. The fact that there is someone (the architect of choice that creates indicators and algorithms) who decides the friends we follow most on social networks or the main information that we find when we carry out a web search<sup>5</sup> should give pause for reflection. The idea of someone else 'choosing' for us may seem somewhat unnerving. This is something that has always happened if, for example, we consider a newspaper or the news on TV, but in the traditional environment we know who our architect of choice is (the editor of the newspaper or the television programme), while in the digital environment there is less transparency about who manages the agenda-setting as well as how algorithms work and the logic behind them.

The point, therefore, is 'who' is making decisions for us? Is it the market, choosing ways to maximize our consumer experience, or a public architect, whose mission should be to pursue welfare and social inclusion? Is it an architect of choice who should be judged by their ability to offer a return on society (ROI)?<sup>6</sup> Perhaps an architect with the mission to turn the new digital paradigm into a chance to increase social justice? As Licklider and Taylor, the inventors of the TCP/IP protocol, stated in 1968:

"For the society, the impact will be good or bad, depending mainly on the question: Will 'to be on-line' be a privilege or a right? If only a favored segment of the

<sup>5</sup> See, among others, (Moore 2016).

<sup>6</sup> "The term Return on Society relates to the various positive effects that PSM deliver to a specific society, group and individual: the idea that PSM is much more than a bunch of broadcasters delivering content to a wide audience measured in terms of market share and reach. It relates to our *raison d'être*, i.e. to the positive impact of content and services on: - Societies – by offering a platform for information and democratic debate, reflecting the diversity of national and cultural identities, supporting social cohesion, providing a guarantee for plurality, producing and promoting European and local cultural productions, and preserving cultural heritage - Individuals – by supporting citizenship (information, representation, participation) - Cultural organizations, other public institutions, the media eco-system, the economy, and employment. When we connect to the networked society we create more opportunities to deliver public value – to empower citizens, to enable communities to deal with social issues, to bridge the digital divide, and liaise with other parts of society that create public value. Developing the concept of RoS offers a strong instrument for measuring success and defining priorities in our programmes and services. It allows us to focus more on fundamental issues, relating to the lives of citizens and the future of humankind. It can also strengthen the legitimacy of our activities. In an increasingly competitive environment, we have to be more distinctive, deliver greater value for money, and perform more effectively" (EBU 2014).

population gets a chance to enjoy the advantage of 'intelligence amplification' the network may exaggerate the discontinuity in the spectrum of intellectual opportunity. On the other hand, if the network idea should prove to do for education what a few have envisioned in hope [...], surely the boom to human kind would be beyond measure." (Licklider and Taylor 1968)

In this sense the digital mission of PSM is twofold: on the one hand to promote digital inclusion, encouraging the country to use new platforms and, above all, to use them proactively and consciously and, on the other, to use public service platforms to promote choices and content that help people to make informed choices for their own benefit. Furthermore, we might well endorse Michele Mezza's belief (Mezza 2016) that PSM should test and produce their own algorithms –or, as Arcagni (2016) notes, their own software – something that would impact on national R&D and on the way that news search engines are conceived.

Of course a public choice architect must have a highly developed sense of what is attractive. Moreover, despite the critical opinions of many, the interesting thing is that truly good television is both intelligent and attractive. According to Carlo Freccero<sup>7</sup> the complexity and richness of television narrative in the US is based on the ability of American talent to use and reinterpret the European cultural tradition, which, ironically, European creatives seem to have lost or abandoned. This complexity, which makes US drama so profound, as well as so attractive, consists of elaborate languages, innovative codes, emotional complexity, and also a biting, albeit subtle, criticism of American society, that is a very significant *vis civica*. In this sense Andò claims that PSM should be attentive to web culture, and identify new trends and languages to define cultural states (Andò 2016). Original content, suited to the new complexities of television could be produced in creative factories by groups of creative talents that are free to innovate and develop new audiovisual and digital skills.

This strategic ability to reinterpret the past and build new narratives leads us to a final, extremely important concept regarding PSM: their role in research and innovation. In (Mazzucato 2013), Mariana Mazzucato analyses the role of the state in fostering innovation, demonstrating that even in recent years, all major innovations in sectors such as the internet have been promoted and financed by public institutions. What is more, the private sector only finds the courage to invest after an entrepreneurial state has made the initial high-risk investment. It is the state that leads the way, creates strategy, and is responsible for the direction of the change. Investment in the public service is therefore not *just* an investment in shared values but also in the construction of new scenarios of smart and sustainable development.

PSM, by envisaging new worlds, languages, and values, actually encourage their creation or at least facilitates their emergence. It gives voice to the excluded, but also to innovators, to cultural and scientific communities, and to those who fight for a more just and sustainable world.

## Chapter 2. The PSM Locus of Public Discourse. A Negotiated Function with the New Social Communities

The mission of PSM is therefore to govern choices. The idea of a nudge, or a 'gentle push', however, can be misleading, and suggest a one-way process, with little space given to citizen re-interpretation.

In reality the modern concept of education comprehends the idea of negotiation. That is, the educative process functions better when there is negotiation between the educator and the educated. The more they cooperate, the more there is 'engagement' with the information received. In the same way media audiences are active social subjects (Ang 1991). Both educator and educated are thus architects of choice, and the more they collaborate the more their relationship works. We could say that the more choice is negotiated, the better it becomes.

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<sup>7</sup> Carlo Freccero is a television expert and a member of the RAI board of directors. The text is taken from a public speech he gave (Treccani Seminar on Television, 11/02/2016 [http://www.treccani.it/webtv/videos/Conv\\_cultura\\_digitale.html](http://www.treccani.it/webtv/videos/Conv_cultura_digitale.html) [http://www.censis.it/5?shadow\\_evento=121108](http://www.censis.it/5?shadow_evento=121108)),

In order for negotiation to take place, there must be some available space to fill. If you offer content that is already fully replete it may easily be rejected, but offering a content where the consumer has room to fill the gaps and spaces with his/her own imagination and desires facilitates the sharing of values. These, however, are simply the basic rules of marketing. An enhanced level is reached when there is room for actual change, that is, when consumers are given the option of changing the content. This strategy is also very common in marketing nowadays: brands empower people to handle commercial products, transform and share them, and maybe even have an influence on the next generation of products.

Marketing often perceives and interprets processes and social change more quickly than public institutions, which may still be struggling to open their doors to transparency, active citizenship and new forms of participatory governance. This is the real challenge that PSM face today: to engage citizens in a new form of negotiation and leave room for change. This is crucial and today it is essential for at least three good reasons.

The first, already discussed in Chapter 1, relates to the importance of redefining the mission of PSM in line with the real needs of citizens. It is clear that defining these needs is a complex process even as Thaler and Sunstein intend it. It must start from a serious attempt to understand the processes involved in the transformation of society, the changes in the labor market, the disintegration but, at the same time, the strengthening of borders, the opportunities and threats that the meeting of different cultures and religions implies, the reasons for the crisis affecting traditional intermediaries (e.g. politicians, scientific communities), and the actors, instruments and methods of the new intermediaries (such as algorithms and their creators/administrators). The process must then continue, listening attentively to citizens' needs and constantly negotiating them. Listening and negotiation. While listening is not a new concept, it should be reappraised with the implementation of innovative methods. Traditional structures designed to study and analyze societies, the choices of the public, and the quality of programming, should find new instruments in order to investigate territories, ideas, and social groups, which have hitherto been excluded. Observation, however, is not enough to produce change. The next step is to negotiate new strategies and new meanings with all sections of society. Negotiation requires new instruments capable of perceiving new interlocutors and stimuli from the entire country. It requires talking to them, protecting and making sure that their ideas bear fruit, transforming their proposals into new projects and visions. If the time is not yet ripe for Michel Bauwens' vision of a "commonification of public services" (Bauwens 2013), I believe that what he proposes for the State can be applied to PSM, i.e. they become a Partner State with the aim of enabling and empowering independent social production regulated in terms of the common good, while systematizing participation, deliberation, and real-time consultation with citizens.

In this way PSM can, therefore, acquire some characteristics of a common good.<sup>8</sup> James Quilligan is very critical of the idea that a public service can work for the common good while having the hierarchical governance typical of most PSM. Nevertheless, I believe that in a transitional phase, traditional *public* institutions such as PSM can take on the role of the ferryman, conveying people, habits, needs and economic processes to a new dimension.

The crux of the matter is therefore to involve ordinary citizens and civil society groups in discussions regarding the mission and characteristics of PSM. This involves information and values that can be shared through forums and bottom-up initiatives, and a profound knowledge of the territories where highly localized projects (but with a clear national vocation)<sup>9</sup> can be achieved, and so on. In short, the goal would be to build participative PSM, not only able to maintain dialogue and accountability with respect to their audience, but also to be open to outside ideas and influences. In Italy, the daily newspaper *La Stampa* has recently created the role of 'public editor', that is, someone delegated to listen to users (on social media, and all dialogue platforms) and to transform their ideas into new projects, as well as discuss related issues in the company. This is a function that a specific unit might also take on in PSM

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<sup>8</sup> "One of the great challenges before us is to create powerful and broadly recognized distinctions between public goods and commons/common goods – the shared resources which people manage by negotiating their own rules through social or customary traditions, norms and practices" (Quilligan 2011).

<sup>9</sup> In countries where the public service has well-rooted and even local bases, as in Italy, this could revitalize local structures providing them with new functions.

(particularly those with little accountability or links with citizens, such as the RAI in Italy), thus increasing their accountability.

The second reason for rethinking the role of PSM is connected to the first, but regards the need to maintain a consolidated audience while thinking about the audience of the future. PSM must find the way to create a dialogue with those sections of the population that are abandoning traditional television in favor of 'do-it-yourself' scheduling. These viewers, particularly young people, look for extremely specific personalized programs that can be seen when and where they choose. The shift of PSM to digital, even when allied to the offer of various quality products, is not enough to attract this potential audience, which naturally migrates towards free surfing on the web, or towards competitors offering more attractive products. The most exclusive proposal that PSM can make in order to attract new viewers and to consolidate their traditional audience is to offer a public garden, identifying a community (or multiple communities) where people choose to live, share and produce. In order to keep this public garden attractive, however, schedules, products and services undoubtedly need to be completely rethought.

While such rethinking must be part of the participative process, there are few key ingredients that we can already suggest. This new public space must be extremely large and varied, offering a wide range of services, from a vast library of film, documentaries, drama series etc. to chat rooms, forums and an indexed news (video) store; PSM must reaffirm, transparently, its role as a public news gatekeeper. As we have already mentioned, there is a growing need for a reliable news-organizer, especially with regards complex information, and PSM should be there, ready to serve whenever there is the need to understand news or explore a news item in depth. This is even more the case in the new digital habitat, where in many countries PSM struggle to regain a strong identity as a distributor and validator of information,<sup>10</sup> and where private information intermediaries are putting on the pressure to increase their power in society (Moore, 2016).

Furthermore, people's desire to customize schedules, both for themselves and for others (technology will soon make it possible), and to participate in production and distribution processes (and even to find new productive and technological solutions – new PSM algorithms?), could be met by giving roles and space to “new productive communities of contributors” as Bauwens defines them:

“[T]he economy of commons-oriented peer production, first described by Yochai Benkler in *The Wealth of Networks* [...] consists of productive communities of contributors, paid or unpaid, who are contributing, not to privatized knowledge, but to common pools of knowledge, code and design, which fuels a new commons-oriented economy. It's the economy of open knowledge, free software, open design and open hardware, more and more connected to practices of open and distributed manufacturing. It's the economy fueled by the exodus from waged labor, into a freelance economy of young urban knowledge workers, who live from the market economy, but produce more and more for open knowledge pools.” (Bauwens 2014)

The close relationship between television and creativity is the third reason; there is a need to identify and create a new narrative and a new highly personalized, culturally specific – but also international – distribution potential. Being open is the key concept for any institution that is involved with creativity, since there can be no creativity without contamination. PSM need a new raft of ideas and projects, and the only way for this to occur is to open up companies to new ideas, new talents, new stories, and new cultures. In an increasingly multicultural Europe, public services must be open to new influences and to new ways of relating the world. Once again, the point is that the new communities are producers of values (social value, cognitive value, but also economic value for PSM).

Establishing an increasingly participative PSM effectively provides such media with a powerful intermediary role. This new centrality can only be fully achieved, however, if, as has

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<sup>10</sup> A recent report that examined how PSM delivered news in six European countries (Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Poland and the United Kingdom) showed that Public Service Media organizations have a large audience for offline news, but that in all countries except Finland and the United Kingdom, significantly more people get online news from social media than from public service media (Sehl et al. 2016).

already been suggested, the PSM become places of mediation for all *productive* and *progressive* forces. Places where the best ideas that emerge from new citizen communities join up with the research carried forward by traditional cultural and scientific communities, and also with new economic actors that favour a disintermediation of social functions and services. This will produce real public debate and create a new public discourse. In this way what might at first be seen as a danger, as the end of the traditional cultural elite, the end of the Enlightenment, is in fact transformed into an opportunity: to broaden the vision, making it even more open and inclusive. In every stage of any redefinition of a paradigm, knowledge is dispersed and then, from the chaos, a community emerges and shared knowledge is consolidated.

## Conclusion

This paper has attempted to identify two key steps that must be addressed by PSM if they are to reassert their role in the twenty-first century.

The first step is to study and understand social changes and opportunities, and the consequent risks these pose for citizens. A thorough scientific knowledge/awareness and precise analysis of the processes involved is of the utmost importance in addressing the profound change that is affecting societies and social relationships, values, public institutions and markets (the “new players and new leading forces” as Ricciardi states in the Introduction). Developments in research, the production of new ideas driven by specific values, an awareness of themes such as social justice, equal distribution, sustainable development, and a mindful interpretation of political and economic choices are the first objectives that PSM have to achieve.

The second step is to identify new instruments and new spaces for listening, and for mediating a public debate that engages the productive and progressive forces of the country, from individual citizens and local communities to cultural and scientific communities. This would involve both new and old intermediaries in knowledge formation processes whereas the function of such processes would not only be to identify new narratives and languages, but also to give a new form and a new life to the very existence of PSM in Europe. This means knowing that the concepts that underpin the very existence of PSM – public service, the nation state, and the European community – are being questioned and processed. It means knowing that while communication is a form of nation building (Mezza, 2016) – and the Europe of television was essentially a ‘national’ Europe (Bourdon 2011) – the nation state is, in fact, in crisis and, as the fates of the nation state and PSM are closely interrelated, it is hard to believe that PSM can maintain a strictly national identity for very long. And, finally, it means knowing that in this transitional phase the idea of Europe is stronger than ever but also in danger of being eroded by localism, economic interests, and a lack of agreement, particularly regarding the concept of ‘border’. In this context, a European public ‘discourse’ that is launched and shared by a network of public services could have a historic impact.

This is probably what all PSM must do today: legitimize their existence by launching a public debate on the meaning of public service and the common good in the twenty-first century and, at the same time, become a trustworthy platform of high quality information in order to navigate and deal with the complexity of this transition.

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