How Should Media Organisations Adapt To The Future Now? Trends In European Public Service Media (#EBUVision2020 conference report)

Pushing Pavarotti: one way towards culture change

These are my live blog notes from the #EBUVision2020* conference in Brussels – 160+ public service media (PSM) executives from across the continent in a rather ornate Belgian theatre that once hosted Pavarotti. Cue various jokes about fat ladies singing etc.

I am the chair of one of the Vision2020 groups that led up to this event. I think the issues raised go way beyond just public-funded media.In the paired off warm-up session some key ideas came up in the answer to the question: "Why Are Public Service Media Valuable and Relevant To You?":

Social inclusion/responsibility, non-commercial, personal passion, options for the future, heritage of progressive collaboration, collective learning, useful, reliable, reflecting national identities.

Gerd Leonard

First keynote speaker futurist Gerd Leonard made people feel uncomfortable by comparing PSM to Amazon. Please the customer. But he then made them feel better by pointing out that everyone from doctors to musicians have also been disrupted.

'It's all about trust, relevance and being liked…Give someone the power to actually do something'

Ben Hammersley

Trapeze artist and media guru Ben Hammersley also tried to reassure the assembled strategic planners that 'everything will be alright' before going on to point out that if we'd planned the future 10 years ago we would have missed everything from the iPhone to YouTube to Netflix to Facebook. So what's the point of planning?

If we want to plan with integrity we need to go back to first principles – why do we need public service media? what does it do? We need to answer that before we answer what to do about social media."

He came up with three things PSM should do:

1. Create cultural artefacts with non-monetary value

This might means PSM doing less 'stuff' that appears cool and clever but isn't PSM. Change the way you define success, said Ben. He has quite a traditional message: 'Ratings and revenue are not the game to be playing.' So just because Facebook has millions of users doesn't make it competition for PSM. Fishing is also popular, but that doesn't make it a threat to PSM.

More challengingly Ben said that PSM should also be prepared to upset people – politically for example – if it's to be relevant to the public.

On digital. You are betraying future generations if you don't help the audience make their own artefacts. Attend to your archive and allow people to use it, for example. Your nations have paid for it. Become the key instigator of cultural creation and your place in history is secure. Give away the tools to create.

But, said Ben, the most important thing to do is 'calm down' [is there a t-shirt and mug for this?]. Yes second screen, social media etc is all here but it's too early to make decisions – the Internet is only 500 weekends old for most people. You are not a Silicon Valley start-up. Judge your success on what your grandchildren will say about what you left behind.

Alan Moore

Theatre of public service media dreams

Alan Moore riffed on the history of Lego as an organisation that had the courage to explore new and emergent means by which to create a new sustainable business. He urges PSM to embrace ambiguity, to 'deep listen' and learn and never rule out alternatives. Don't be Nokia ruling out a touch screen phone because you already have 40% of the market. 'Deal with the fear and get on with it'.
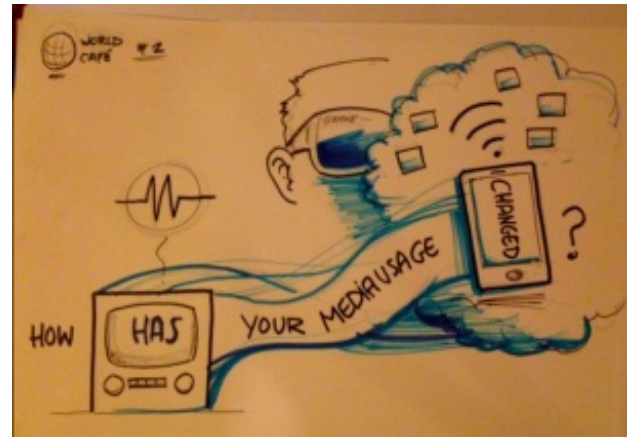
Open is the key, which many PSMs will find difficult. Open data, open apis, open source, mutuality as a business strategy [see my article – from 2009! – on moving on from 'fortress journalism']. Alan cited the US foundation-funded investigative journalism non-profit ProPublica as an example of this that provides public service media in a modern setting.

So that is what the futurists urged – how did the broadcasters respond?

They were very happy at the affirmation of public service ethics and reputation [surprise, surprise] but there was also frustration at how to translate general warnings about disruption into real policies within institutions that value what they have done for decades and are resistant to comparison with external organisations.

Q1: How has their own daily usage changed? How do public service media actually use media themselves?

All the public service media folk in the session I observed now use new devices and platforms – twitter, Facebook, non-linear TV, iPads. 'I'm not very good at xxxx, but I use it'. Often it's dependent on their role: a news channel person abandoned twitter when they moved to a different job. There was some frustration with the actual utility and quality of some of the technology and recognition . Time-shifting and mobility were both key. Many of the big shifts in their consumption have only happened in the last year/two years.

Q2: How are changes in the industry reshaping PSM?

The group I observed talked about a loss of dominance and control for PSM. Fragmentation. Shifting resources from pure programme making towards making content findable on all the new platforms/networks. [The 'How to be open?' problem again.] They spoke of the threat of commercialisation through who dictates the nature of new communications structures. 'I don't like it that the idea of PSM is set by Silicon Valley' said one media exec. Losing position as national media leader. But you can use this relationship by strengthening your national added value – especially with language but also with content. In the face of global competition stress your local character.

Q3: What role could PSM have in society in 2020?

The group I observed talked about the PSM as curator, facilitator, filter, to take complex stories and explain. To create a new relationship with younger people. Reference point. Social cohesion. Not just to worry about market share, but overall audience for content – can you find new audiences through new platforms. Have we really changed so much in this from 10 years ago? Will we have to change so much in terms of our role in 2020?

So what exactly IS 'ideation'?

Ideation Phase

The conference then moved into the 'ideation phase' with small break-out groups that rotated and interacted.

This involves taking a problem or dilemma and creating a future scenario that addresses it. They were asked to move from crisis, opportunity, solution.

Why would future generations use public service media?

It was interesting to hear adult broadcasters trying to understand younger audiences. In the group I observed views ranged. Some cited fresh evidence that younger people do still 'graduate' to grown-up PSM – 'they still watch linear TV and radio, it's the content that matters'. Others stressed that the networks/devices used by younger people are more than just different brands – they are different communities. The PSM brand itself might alienate. [is this new?] So it's not enough just to create good content, or even to brand it in the right way, you have to connect it into those new places where younger people live. One view was more pessimistic – might it be that PSMs are now seen as alien corporations and just aren't providing the right content in the first place?

What Could We Do To Benefit From A Network Society?

The group I observed was getting down and gritty. "We should ask the audience 'what are they discussing?'" [Why is this still seen as a radical concept?!] But there are barriers – legal, corporate, resource – but mainly cultural. There are also threats involved. What if the networked society decides it doesn't need PSM as it can get what it wants from the network (including commercial sources)? Inevitably this discussion headed towards 'curation' – can PSM become the network service? But as it approaches solutions the momentum slows… Hurrah! Another favourite metaphor meme emerges: 'we were in the cave but we moved out, we were in a tower but we came down." ['Fortress' anyone?] 'It's a mind-set thing'.

Some responses to these groups from other delegates:

- Why haven't you done it already?
- How do you change the mind-set?
- Who is we?
- Do you have to be part of the audience's lifestyle?
- Who is them?
- How do you avoid negative effects of network society?
- Conversation – about which topics?
- Are these issues relevant for all or just part of your organisation?

My take on day:

For me one of the big research as well as practical strategy questions that came out of this was this:

Why don't PSM work harder to identify other people or organisations or networks that share (some of) their values – that possibly create the same public value just as well, if not better – and that they should be connecting with? Instead of concentrating on preserving their own structures or adapting their processes, why not spend more time seeking connections with mutually enhancing sources of public service value? This might also address something else that occurs to me. People working in PSMs are usually talented, committed and hard-working. But they are not always the right people and they are certainly not diverse enough in skills and backgrounds.

* The EBU Vision 2020 is a research project that seeks to identify strategic challenges for public service broadcasters over the next decade and beyond. There are plenty of present day problems: loss of revenue, increased competition, declining trust, political hostility, technological change, market restructuring and much more. Though of course there are also strengths: skills, experience, ethics, innovation, public funding. But to add in the idea that everything will change again only adds to the burden. The Vision 2020 process hopes to come up with good ideas, practical solutions but mainly to get people thinking now about what comes next with more confidence and insight. Consensus with such a diverse group is impossible and even undesirable but everyone needs these opportunities to pause, reflect, reconsider and plan to act differently.

This was my report on an earlier stage of my discussion group of European broadcasters which raised a whole range of issues for this conference.

And these are the notes from my speech to Dutch public service broadcasters: A Strategic Approach to the New