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ARTICLE

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Exploring the Value of Public Broadcasters' Marginal Online Activities

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Abstract / Across Western Europe, public broadcasters have built their internet presence into sprawling sites encompassing a multitude of services. This development illustrates the need for redefining the role of public service media in a digital era. The article scrutinizes dilemmas following the emerging EU competition law-inspired policy approach to public broadcasters' internet activities, and discusses the potential public service value of online communication. The article draws on three cases representing services seemingly far removed from redistribution of radio and television: an internet discussion forum (ZDF), a web-based game (NRK), and a virtual online world activity (BBC). These sometimes controversial experiments are well suited to challenge both accustomed perceptions of public service, and ideas about the potential contributions of online communication. By scrutinizing marginal parts the article explores the limits of public broadcasters' publicly funded activities. It thereby aims to revitalize the discussion about the functions of public service as a media policy tool.

Key Words / internet / media policy / online communication / public broadcasters / public service media

Throughout the past 10 years public broadcasters across western Europe have, by different routes, built their internet presence from next to nothing into sprawling sites encompassing a multitude of services. The development is a key part of these institutions' ongoing venture beyond broadcast radio and television, and clearly illustrates the need for redefining their roles in a digital era.

National media policy authorities have struggled to incorporate the new services into existing practices, or have looked for alternative ways to delineate public service broadcasting. The result has been markedly different framework conditions (e.g. Trappel, 2006). On a supranational level, EU state aid rules have served as a vehicle for diminishing such differences (Jakubowicz, 2004; see also Humphreys, 2007). Through a long line of cases originating in commercial actors' complaints about the funding of public broadcasters,

the European Commission's competition law perspective is in the process of permeating national regulatory frameworks. With regard to services on new platforms, though, this emerging approach has merely offered ad hoc regulations. Through analyses of recent cases, three tendencies are identifiable: (1) single internet services are assessed in isolation, not as part of an actor's menu or total public service output; (2) the internet is considered as an appendage to broadcasting, not an autonomous platform for public service; and (3) public broadcasters are merely supposed to supplement competing actors online, not unduly distort market conditions (Moe, forthcoming; see also Michalis, 2007; Mortensen, 2008). In today's situation, online initiatives from public broadcasters across Europe must be assessed against these criteria.

This, I shall argue, will not do. The EU-inspired approach does not completely disregard public service as a media policy tool beyond broadcasting. Still, it is incapable of grasping the full potential offered by new platforms. In fact, following this competition law logic, the innovative services – those exploiting the possibilities of online communication autonomously of broadcast programmes, and charting new territory for established media actors – are perceived as the most problematic. How can we more soundly conceive of the prospective values of such activities in a coordinated and comprehensive cross-platform public service media remit?

This article scrutinizes dilemmas following from the three identified tendencies of the emerging policy approach. In so doing, it draws on three cases representing the wide range of possibilities currently being explored by public broadcasters online, ostensibly far removed from mere redistribution of radio and television. The cases are services from western European institutions – an internet discussion forum from the German ZDF; a web-based game provided by the Norwegian NRK; and a virtual online world activity of the British BBC.[1] All are intentionally selected for their peculiarity. They are sometimes controversial experiments well suited to challenge both accustomed perceptions of public service and ideas about the potential contributions of online communication. By scrutinizing marginal activities, the article explores the limits of public broadcasters' publicly funded activities. It thereby aims to revitalize the discussion about the functions of public service media.

My perspective, then, differs from the emerging European policy approach. To understand the potential public service value of online communication, I will argue, we should weigh its autonomous role against the need for building elements of a public broadcaster's output into a wide-ranging, whole public service remit. The grounding for such a perspective, and a starting point for this article, is found in an argument for public service media online.

Outline of an Argument for Public Service Media Online

Public service broadcasting is a tool for media policy.[2] It exists to support functions deemed vital for media in a democracy: spreading important informational, educational and cultural content to all in a public sphere, transmitting concerns from the periphery of society, generating public debate and mounting pressure for the political system to respond. It is common to think of broadcasting as one-way simultaneous dissemination, and online communication as facilitating dialogue. Accordingly, public service broadcasters have been criticized for neglecting the task of facilitating communication between

citizens, and the internet has been praised as the solution (e.g. Coleman and Gøtze, 2001: 5; Kellner, 2004: 51). However, as descriptions of communicative forms, neither dissemination nor dialogue is exclusive to one technology, or a specific way to organize a medium. The functions of broadcast media and online communication should be recognized for their common characteristics, as well as individual features.

On the one hand, one can imitate – even approximate – dialogue on broadcast radio or television: first, broadcasters have always strived to make up for the distance to and isolation from listeners and viewers by mimicking dialogue, on television most notably through the effects of liveness (e.g. Peters, 1999: 217ff.). Second, the possibilities for broadcast audience participation, present and exploited from day one, are being developed ever more actively – be it through telephone call-ins, panel participation, SMS-polling or chat-programmes (e.g. McNair et al., 2003).

On the other hand, one might efficiently reach a wide public simultaneously with a message via the internet. A broad range of online services share characteristics of dissemination. This goes for vital website genres like the personal homepage; the corporate informational site; the news site; even the blog, as well as services like web-TV or web-radio. They are, at least potentially, about spreading information from one source to an infinite number of recipients. I do not disregard the obvious dialogic forms facilitated online. Rather, I point to a potential in internet communication, also for dissemination, and concurrently question the strict regulatory divide between broadcasting and online services. Both dialogic and disseminating modes online can be exploited in pursuit of policy aims. This could constitute a basis for public service media online beyond audio-visual content distribution.

The endeavours should seek to defy processes of enclosure in all forms. Enclosure, as I use it here, is about restricting media content and controlling uses. Online it encompasses subscription and pay-per-view services, absence of external links and constraints of proprietary software. It is about building walls around content by technical and/or economic means. The result is exclusion and confinement (e.g. Dahlberg, 2005a; Murdock, 2005), fragmentation of public life, and potential balkanization of public debate (e.g. Sunstein, 2007). Enclosure opposes the core public service broadcasting value of universality: content ought to be available for everyone, without geographical, social, economic, or technical impediments.

Crucially, when assessing whether existing public broadcasters should contribute to public service media online, we need to pay attention to how they utilize their competences from radio and television production and broadcasting – how they exploit their advantages as big cross-media institutions. The institutions need to make the most of these advantages to legitimize a wide-ranging remit online.

Since it acknowledges an autonomous role for internet activities, such an idea of public service remits is less restrictive than the EU competition law perspective. My argument for public service media online is neither meant as a universal answer, nor as a model applicable for all kinds of activities. Rather, it could serve as a framework for more detailed scrutiny of existing practices, and for exploring novel opportunities. This may in turn help make up a sounder base for future employment of public service as a media policy tool. With this in mind, I now turn to analyse problematic aspects of the EU-led policy approach's three identified tendencies, and to discuss the potential value of different internet activities in public broadcasters' undertaking of public service media online.

First Tendency: Assessing Individual Online Services in Isolation

While broadcast programmes surely are reviewed by their own merit, their place in a channel's schedule is also considered to be important. This understanding underlies public broadcasters' entitlement to transmit both large sports events and popular entertainment (e.g. Jakubowicz, 2004). The first tendency of the EU-inspired approach represents a significant departure from this trailed practice by singling out an individual part of a public broadcaster's online service and assessing it in isolation from the whole. To illustrate the challenges that follow, consider a case from the ZDF.[3]

The ZDF internet service has been developed since 1996. The main portal zdf.de is supplemented by shop.zdf.de, a separate site for merchandising sales. Neither of the sites carry advertising. Among zdf.de's pages is a section for user-generated content such as blogs, chats and discussion forums.[4] The latter service is divided into 46 different forums, some with subcategories, connected directly to specific ZDF programmes. Those focused on the German telenovela *Wege zum Glück* have the most posts, followed by the ones reserved for US daytime soap *The Bold and the Beautiful*. Both have over twice the number of contributions (nearly 200,000 each since 2005 and 2003, respectively) as the third ranking forums, those of current affairs programme *Frontal21*. Nine other forums are thematically labelled under the flagship news programme *heute* according to topics like 'CO$_2$ and cars' and 'smoking ban'.[5] Other categories include 'sports' and 'about the ZDF'.

Among all of these, one stands out: 'Too hot or too cold? Too dry or too wet? What do you think about the weather situation? Join the discussion!' This is the introduction to the weather forum. With 1334 contributions since October 2005, it is not particularly popular: it ranks well below the forum for a bi-weekly philosophy programme. In contrast to most of the others, the weather forum is not clearly connected to any past or present broadcast programme, nor is it addressing a specific programme genre offered by the ZDF. The company does forecast the weather, both on television and online. The forum is also accessible from the latter service. Still, there is nothing in the weather forum or its introductory text connecting it to anything outside itself. It is, basically, an online arena for talking about the weather.

An illustrative thread started in early May 2007 is titled 'Next week comes the rain – finally hurray!!!' The author suffers from hayfever, and craves some relief from the dry, sunny weather. 'It depends on where you live,' reads the first reply somewhat sarcastically, 'maybe you're out of luck, and it stays this disgustingly sunny'. 'Now is next week,' reports another user a few days later, 'and here (Alpine Foothills) we have had 35 litres of rain'. But, she or he reminds the readers, 'one cannot choose the weather!' and 'life and the weather are not request concerts!' Some weeks later a new post reads 'I'm happy about rain in May because the plants in the garden badly need some H$_2$0'. The short-term outlook for rain was a prominent subject in the forum during spring 2007. Another major issue was climate change. These discussions appear somewhat more elaborate. One post, titled 'Everyone does a little something and we save the world!' proposes a list of everyday things to decrease energy use and pollution in general. Responses range from flat-out ridicule (one adding 'do not sit in front of the computer for hours, even though it is fun reading ZDF-forums' to the 'avoid list') to expressions of support and concern. Proponents of the EU-influenced policy approach would object: why spend

public money on building, maintaining and moderating a forum just to have members of a small group sling sarcastic remarks at each other in public?

Theories of deliberative democracy are often criticized for ignoring everything except strictly political discussion (e.g. Crossley and Roberts, 2004). Yet, one need not subscribe to a postmodernist-inspired rejection of deliberative democratic theories' public sphere ideal to recognize the value of public communication that is not explicitly politically framed. What might be labelled aesthetic-affective modes of communication – incorporating informal conversations, expressions of passion, greetings, or storytelling – make use of an arsenal of rhetorical devices. They are all important for public debate (Brady, 2004; Dahlberg, 2005b: 113ff.). Aesthetic-affective modes of communication help build identities, enable empathy, and allow for the expression of marginalized voices. They can directly set the stage for rational deliberation. As such, they can 'strongly enhance acts of communication aimed at understanding that constitute the public sphere' (Dahlberg, 2005b: 118). This does not mean that anything goes. We should still shun forms of discourse that do not enhance democratic participation. But, we should acknowledge how social, cultural and democratic needs are being catered for through mediated communication seemingly far removed from rational deliberation.

This facilitates an argument for entertainment as an environment where citizenship can flourish, as presented for instance by Liesbet van Zoonen (2005).[6] Based on a discussion of entertainment fan communities, she claims that the relevance of popular culture for politics lies in 'the emotional constitution of electorates that involves the development and maintenance of affective bonds between voters, candidates, and parties' (van Zoonen, 2005: 66). It is implicitly in line with this view that entertainment broadcast formats facilitating informal talk – also directly involving user-participation – have been acknowledged as important for fulfilling public service remits across Europe.

The kind of talk found in the weather forum is far from any ideal of rational deliberation. Still, its value should not be flatly disregarded. It might be important for citizens to get to voice anxieties and opinions in a public forum with a low threshold. Arguably, my example can be seen as something close to miscommunication. On the other hand, the weather forum lets out diverse opinions and concerns and forces participants to deal with others' provocative input. John Ellis has used the term 'working through' to describe how television contributes to 'a constant process of making and remaking meanings, and of exploring possibilities' (Ellis, 2000: 79). 'Television attempts definitions, tries out explanations, creates narratives, talks over, makes intelligible, tries to marginalize, harnesses speculation, tries to make fit, and very occasionally, anathemizes' (Ellis, 2000: 79). On a micro-scale, with different foci, and in an even less authoritative way, discussion forums might serve as something similar. The weather forum *could* facilitate better understanding both of the world around us, and of others' point of view – supporting empathic feelings. As such, a discussion forum may also prepare participants and readers alike for other forms of public expression, both as speakers and recipients.

Consider the outlined argument for public service media online. Being quite clearly different from broadcast radio and television, discussion forums are among the better examples of how the internet can facilitate mediated dialogue between citizens. Media policy should recognize this potential and arrange for actors to exploit it. In so doing, there is no reason to enforce a stricter regime for public broadcasters' online services. Talk about medical problems or expressions of fear of climate change through passionate calls

for action in an online forum can be just as valuable as on television talk shows or in drama. If we recognize online communication's potential public service value on an equal footing with broadcasting, we should apply the method of assessment from the latter. The weather forum cannot be understood in isolation, as the emerging policy approach proposes. It is one of many specialized forums forming one part of the ZDF website's user-generated content, which in turn is presented as part of zdf.de. Despite differences in use compared to broadcasting it makes little sense to assess the weather forum out of context. However, this does not mean we have to approve of any discussion forum in a public service remit by default. Concrete measures could be taken to reinforce a forum's case for legitimacy.

First, design matters for the democratic potential of online discussion forums (see Jensen, 2003; Wright and Street, 2007). Moderation needs to be consistent, thorough and prompt. Whether by advance approval or firm monitoring of posts, a public broadcaster's forums should stand out as free of illegal expressions and safe – also for young users. Going beyond mere content moderation, public broadcasters could utilize (inter)active versions where the moderator takes an interventionist role (Wright, 2006: 555–6). Clearly, discussions about hay fever, or the results of a recent election, would benefit from expert input. While being careful not to heighten the threshold for entering a debate, public broadcasters should exploit this possibility to offer knowledgeable – maybe even provocative – input through posts in their own discussion forums. This might resemble what Lars Nyre (2007) has coined 'minimum journalism'. With active contributions providing background information by way of links to analyses online or upcoming broadcasts, the value of the old public broadcasters' expansion online may become clearer.

Second, the approach should be marked by use of hyperlinks that explicitly counter processes of enclosure: discussants could be tipped off about relevant information from as wide a range of actors as possible. This way, the service would be very different from what commercial actors are interested in providing. In sum, such measures would exploit the resources inherent in a large public broadcasting organization to improve the value of novel online services, and help integrate the output as a coordinated whole.

Instead of being put away at the bottom right corner of the website as in the case of the ZDF, an expanded section for participatory services and user-generated content could be cultivated. One aim should be to connect the parts at a level where public participation in a multitude of specialized discussion forums have direct impact on the agenda of broadcast programmes. Ideally, this would help to involve more or less isolated interest groups through disseminating modes of communication – possibly countering balkanization of public debate and processes of enclosure in general.

The case of the ZDF weather forum illustrates some problematic implications of the policy approach influenced by the EU competition law. Based on my argument for public service media online, I have emphasized how dialogic internet communication can be exploited through expansive use of innovative services, including themed discussion forums of diverse types. To exploit the potential inherent in public broadcasters as large cross-platform media institutions, we need to strike a balance between recognizing online services' autonomous place in a remit, and the necessity of integrating them in an organization's total output. This balance is as crucial as it is tricky, and brings us to the second tendency of the emerging policy approach.

Second Tendency: Online Services as an Appendix to Broadcasting

The second tendency is to require every part of an online service to just add to a specific corresponding radio or television programme. In the case of the weather forum, the ZDF might – post hoc – connect it to the television weather forecast. For other kinds of offer, it is not that easy. To better grasp the implications of this tendency, consider a service from the NRK.[7]

The NRK's internet endeavours began in 1995. Activities, including an online shop, are presented under the domain nrk.no. Since 2000, the site has carried advertising throughout, and has simultaneously been incorporated in the public service broadcasting remit (Moe, forthcoming).[8] Nrk.no stands out as more comprehensive than zdf.de. It shares characteristics with news sites, and is less tied to specific television and radio programmes. One of its main features is a subsite for youth, presented under the radio channel P3 brand. The subsite hosts a wealth of information, competitions, charts, chats, audio and video – mostly connected to popular music. In addition, it presents a collection of games, including the *Mujaffa* game.

Mujaffa is technically quite simple, with basic animation. It is browser-based (meaning no downloading or installation is required), based on Flash-technology, utilizes simple controls, and is easy to learn. Game developers refer to such applications as coffee-break games or casual games (IGDA, 2006). The game was licensed and adapted from the Danish public service broadcaster DR, which originally called it the *Paki* game (*Perker spillet*) on release in 2000. The avatar, Mujaffa, is a stereotype young male immigrant, complete with broken Norwegian slang. The object of the game is to control his BMW through different parts of the Norwegian capital, greeting friends, collecting gold chains and picking up blonde girls. Points are then spent on styling the car with flashy paint, a big stereo, new tyres and so on, before a new borough is explored on the next level.

The tendency to require online services to merely support broadcasting causes problems for *Mujaffa* since it is not clearly connected to any television or radio programme. Most remaining games on the P3-site originated in a segment of, or are based on characters from, a programme. Importantly, such ties are not emphasized by the NRK. Games are presented without much contextual information – some even without links to a specific show. For the imported *Mujaffa* no connection, implicit or explicit, exists. It is an extreme example of a general trend on nrk.no to offer content and services disconnected from broadcasting.

My outlined argument for public service media online ascribes an autonomous role for internet activities in the remit. Their legitimacy should depend on how they exploit the potential of online communication to fulfil public service media tasks. To a certain extent the NRK's practice does acknowledge this: a game is allowed to stand on its own, rather than being a mere appendix. Its prospective contribution to the remit based on the characteristics of online communication is therefore easier to spot. To discuss whether this could be a legitimate approach, let us consider responses to, and motivations behind, *Mujaffa*.

The game was originally launched in Denmark in connection with a popular radio satire show incorporating the game's elements in a parody hip-hop tune. It was quickly criticized as racist, and as confirming stereotypes and prejudices (see Rasmussen, 2003).

Similar reactions appeared from the Norwegian public after the adapted version was released there (NRK, 2002). Yet, the game got support not only through use – reportedly 1000 unique users per week through nrk.no in 2003 (Berg, 2003) – but also from commentators. In Denmark, it was called a 'candid parody of attitudes towards immigrants delivered in an appealing package' (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, 2003: 2). *Mujaffa* succeeded in 'creating a practice where the stereotype was ironized', and thus 'undermined' (Rasmussen, 2003: 12). The Danish computer industry even awarded it a mark of distinction and hailed its 'new perspective on an almost tabooed subject' (Eilertsen, 2001: 15). There are several ways to explain the game's appeal.

The theme sets it apart from most casual games. In contrast to classics like *Tetris* and *Microsoft Solitaire*, *Mujaffa* is social criticism. Games with such aims are sometimes grouped together as political or serious games (Prensky, n.d.). This broad category encompasses everything from elaborate explicitly educational or promotional games created for humanitarian campaigns (e.g. *Darfur is Dying* by MTV) or military interests (e.g. *America's Army* by the US Government), via political art as video games (e.g. *9–11 Survivor* by Brennan, Caloud and Cole), to simpler ones sharing the technical characteristics of casual games. *Mujaffa* is similar to the latter, but not as explicit in its political message as these games tend to be. *Mujaffa* is a casual game with a serious motivation. In addition, it is more elaborate than most serious browser-based games. Its structure is well integrated with its theme: there are several levels, plus the added element of upgrading the car, where most others make do with one task on one level.

In sum, the game stands out. It is innovative and makes creative use of easily available, cheap web-browser-based gaming technology to create an interactive application. The motive is to increase awareness and debate about a socially pertinent issue. It *could* legitimize chauvinism towards immigrant groups. On the other hand, it may be taken as a surprisingly simple and humoristic way to play out prejudices – experimenting with rhetorical tools that public service broadcasting entertainment has employed for decades. If so, it might contribute to a process of 'working through' (Ellis, 2000). The game could even confront the views of isolated groups – thus facilitating negotiation of antagonisms, or reconciliation. Such effects might be harder to achieve through traditional radio or television formats. Read in this way, the case illustrates a potential inherent online, and offers an argument for acknowledging internet services' autonomous role in public service remits.

On the other hand, it does not offer an argument for a relapse to assessing such online services in isolation. Imagine the game created by, say, a group of young male Norwegian computer enthusiasts, and published on their private website without much information. Our reception would of course be different. *Mujaffa*'s function depends on its sender and its role as part of the public service actor's total service. This illustrates the vital balance between acknowledging online services' autonomous place in a remit, and the necessity of integrating an organization's total output to exploit public broadcasters' advantages as established media actors. With this in mind, we may also point to some possible ways to strengthen the public service value of games like *Mujaffa* within my framework for public service media online.

First, nrk.no's presentation of games is confusing: from the front page, three different menus can take the user to two different gaming sites via different routes, and under different headings. Games do not need to be relegated to just one of the site's

objectives, nor be gathered in one place. They should, however, be presented within an interface that enables users to navigate with ease among them, and to and from other services offered by the institution.

Second, *Mujaffa* is presented with a striking lack of context. There is no room for interaction between users: no discussion forums or commentary fields are available, only a poorly built list of top scores. Also, the game is introduced without any historical background information. Inclusion of some paragraphs with references to the Danish original, mentions made in NRK radio or television programmes, and links to critics and fans would certainly be useful. This would also facilitate feedback and discussion of the game, its theme and motives.

Third, the legitimacy of games like *Mujaffa* in public service media remits would be easier to pinpoint if they were consistently countering processes of enclosure. In addition to providing generous links to external sites, this would mean opposing commercial logics. Games should be technically easily available, and ideally gratis. *Mujaffa* is based on free software, and has thus far been free of charge. However, in 2003 the NRK launched a version for mobile phones. This is sold for €3.5, a price comparable to offers from commercial mobile phone game providers. The decision gave rise to some internal debate about 'whether the NRK should charge money for humorously stereotyping immigrants' (in Berg, 2003). While claiming public service status on one platform, the NRK views it as a commercial game on another. This does not give evidence to a principled demarcation of the public service remit. I have argued for likening new platforms with broadcast radio and television when assessing public service value. This would entail offering games like *Mujaffa* at cost price also over mobile phone networks.

Mujaffa is not only marginal in terms of form, but also thematically controversial. It clearly solicits further research on actual uses. Nevertheless, the case brings light to the implications of the tendency to see an online feature just as an appendix. *Mujaffa* is illustrative of how innovative use of the internet may prospectively not only support public service broadcasting, but even extend it beyond radio and television. When discussing concrete online initiatives' public service value, then, we should seek to balance a dual consideration: their autonomous contribution as more or less novel forms of communication, and the extent to which they are embedded within a total remit. Still, one dimension is lacking: the relation to competitors. This brings us to the last identified tendency of the EU-led approach.

Third Tendency: Public Broadcasters as a Supplement Online

Why should services built on public money threaten to displace other actors? This objection to the way state aid distorts markets is a key argument for commercial lobbyists (see ACT, 2004: 19ff; VPRT, 2003), and a weighty concern in the emerging policy approach to public broadcasters' online activities. My outlined argument for public service media online could serve as a basis for countering this competition law-based dismissal. If the potential value of diverse online communication is recognized, there are ample reasons for assessing the market impact on new platforms differently: granting an online service an autonomous role means its own social, cultural and democratic value is considered – not its ability to support traditional broadcasting. To better illustrate the importance of

balancing a competition law logic with the potential value of online services in a coordi-nated public service remit, we may look at another case.

Second Life (SL) is a fully immersive three-dimensional online virtual world, a Massively Multiplayer Online Social Game (MMOSG). It is neither the first nor the only one, but among the most popular of its kind. Launched by the company Linden Research in 2002, by spring 2007 it boasted over 7 million registered accounts.[9] SL is not based on the world wide web. As a user – or 'resident' – you download and install a piece of software onto your computer, and use this to access the internet and enter the virtual space. You navigate by steering an avatar of your own choice. SL is not a game with scores, winners, levels, or an end-strategy. Rather, its semi-structured dynamic environ-ment is constantly recreated by the users. According to its official guide, it 'gives you the freedom to pursue your dreams and interests. For some residents, this means having as much virtual sex as possible; for others, it means shooting at other people, possibly while piloting a spaceship' (Rymaszewski et al., 2007: 13). And, 'personal flight and point-to-point teleportation are the preferred means of transport' (*Wired*, 2006: 1).

Despite such possibilities, more mundane activities have also received attention. SL has its own currency, exchangeable with real-life money. On an average day, $600,000 reportedly changes hands (Boyes, 2007). It is possible to buy land and build houses, and produce and trade all kinds of virtual goods. When Adidas opened a shop in SL, it followed competing brands in offering virtual shoes for very real prices. SL appears aesthetically quite familiar; the basic interface tends to simulate real-world environments – be it woods, persons or everyday objects.

The BBC[10] has made several high-profile ventures into SL, of which I will concentrate on one. In May 2006, Radio 1's free Big Weekend music festival in Dundee, in addition to airing extensive radio broadcasts and having a web presence, was also mirrored as a 'virtual party' on an island in SL.[11] A festival stage and other set pieces were created. Up to 400 residents could access the site simultaneously, interact with each other, get a free virtual radio player for their avatars, and experience 'audio streams and (almost) live video highlights from the real world festival' (joint venture partner Rivers Run Red, 2006: 2). During three days, some 6000 avatars stopped by. The experience might be described as a mix between three-dimensional first-person gaming and web browsing: the location was reached typically by teleportation from somewhere else in the virtual world. Once in the midst of the island, the avatar could walk, run or fly around to explore, interact and try out different services. The video transfer was activated through a media player and then watched by positioning the avatar within viewing distance of a virtual screen.

Although clearly an early mover, the BBC is not the only actor organizing concerts in SL. Videos of real-world performances abound. Some also take it one step further: in an August 2006 showcase, Suzanne Vega became the first major recording artist to perform live in avatar form. Commercial news providers have also been swarming to SL. In the autumn of 2006, Reuters set up a simulated news bureau to report on the virtual world. The agency publishes news from the real world to SL-users, and stories from the online world on a Reuters website (Reuters, 2006). Several broadcasters have also opened offices in SL, including the BBC's commercial competitor BSkyB. Sky News launched its permanent virtual newsroom in a simulcast of the show *Sunday Live*. In addition to explor-ing the facilities, audience members are allowed to participate by asking the programme guests questions (BSkyB, 2007). American ABC, to highlight another big actor, offers

something similar. Like the BBC, none of these private companies have incorporated any pay services. They are present with an implicit explorative attitude, and presumably trust that it will in the long run strengthen their brand and help reach audiences.

The BBC's expansion into SL clearly threatens to expel existing actors, and deter future entrants. Notwithstanding potential recruitment of new residents caused by the British broadcaster's entry, all commercial actors fight for the same users' attention. Time spent on BBC events, or watching BBC programmes, means less time spent on others' attractions. The institution's rationale for the venture is twofold. First, it generates public attention through media coverage. This might strengthen the BBC brand as innovative and dynamic, and also attract audiences to the company's services. Second, 'it's about providing interaction between our listeners' (Radio 1 interactive editor Daniel Heaf in Fildes, 2006: 2).

One might object that energy and funds should rather be spent on making the 30,000 attendants at the real festival, or the broadcasting audiences, interact better, instead of wasting it on a maximum of 400 simultaneous online users. The virtual festival was essentially redistribution of existing television content via the internet. This is online communication adapted for dissemination – for spreading from one to many. Real people were still watching audiovisual recordings of real people – they just watched via their internet-connected computers. The context included some minor game-inspired additions, like virtual gadgets and novel possibilities for audience feedback. Still, the service could be seen as merely supporting the social, cultural and democratic functions of broadcasting. Since the introduction of cable and satellite television distribution in the early 1980s, public service institutions, not least the BBC, have fought consistently for being present with their programmes on every available distribution platform. Web-TV could be considered an extension. And, in the present case, video in SL is web-TV, although in a three-dimensional environment as opposed to via websites' two-dimensional interfaces. As a consequence, the Radio 1 festival transmission could be seen as a legitimate experiment to exploit resources already invested in the festival and programme production. In effect, one could argue for the SL-activity's legitimacy as primarily the redistribution of existing broadcast content on a new platform to potentially new audiences.

Yet, if virtual online world activities are to be considered valuable for public service media remits despite potential market distortion, they must be more than utilizations of new technology to showcase an existing event or programme. This is not to disdain the experimental BBC services, which clearly represent cautious first steps. Rather, there is a potential offered by such virtual environments to combine the task of dissemination with facilitating dialogue among the public. This potential is worth considering.

First, the experience can be made richer and more rewarding for the virtual world users by developing more innovative services which facilitate dialogue. For instance, by building interactive models of television studios or newsrooms, users can get a behind-the-scenes look at media production. Further, visitors could have a go at news presenting – much as a typical visit to the institution's real headquarters would allow. A site could also feature three-dimensional reconstructions of real-life happenings such as natural disasters or historical events. BSkyB (2007) has already signalled plans along these lines. Importantly, visitors should be able to contribute their own narratives or opinions in written or audiovisual form – everything from news stories, via personal comments on current events to celebrity parodies. This way, places like SL could function better as

arenas for public dialogue between users. Ideally, more and more different voices might be heard under such circumstances. And maybe a fragmentation of public life could be somewhat countered.

Second, virtual worlds like SL could be employed for dissemination – not only of traditional broadcasting, but of virtual variants. In February 2007, the US independent production company LCMedia organized a SL exhibit to raise awareness about the crisis in Darfur. It included information on the situation and a photo exhibition. The initiators also gathered experts for a panel discussion at the unveiling of the exhibit. They all appeared in SL as avatars on a virtual stage. SL users witnessed the show from the audience gallery as it happened, or afterwards in a screening room in the company's virtual headquarters. A documentation of the panel discussion – edited much like a television production of a real live debate – is also available as downloadable video on websites outside of SL (LCMedia, 2007). Apart from revealing important technical shortcomings, this innovative use of real-time three-dimensional simulations surely brings new experiences. Though the actual impact of such a minor initiative was limited, there is a potential for developing the forms and for big operators like European public broadcasters to implement them.

A third and crucial step to facilitate online virtual world activities in a public service media remit is about connecting the dialogue and the dissemination. The first two points just given concern possibilities for using arenas like SL to facilitate dialogue among different groups of citizens, and for spreading content efficiently from a centre to the widest possible audience. What remains is to connect off- and online publics.

Consider the BBC festival: rather than settling for transferring video one-way from the event and facilitating interaction between SL-users, and between festival-attendees in Dundee, members of the two groups should be able to communicate with each other, and with radio and television audiences. This could imply interruptive video transmission of SL-action to both the festival and broadcasting publics, and assist, for instance, written communication between them. Potential uses are numerous: apart from voicing opinions about performances, different quizzes (with real or virtual prizes) could for example be constructed which presuppose collaboration between off- and online participants. For different programme genres or events, other services more directly geared at generating debate could be employed.

Furthermore, corresponding to the analysis of discussion forums' potential as part of public broadcasters' remits, the institutions need to exploit the unique competences and resources inherent in their massive organizations. When connecting off- and online in the present case, this could for instance concretely translate to letting professional journalists venture into the virtual world to present, give lectures, report and discuss. The point is that these institutions need to make evident and exploit the advantage of being well-established publicly funded, big media institutions. If they deliver little more than any commercial newcomer, it is harder to understand why we should expand their remits online.

Even with the measures suggested here, it is in no way obvious that SL should be a priority for public broadcasters. There are important reservations due to issues of enclosure. First, online three-dimensional games or simulations require expensive high-end computer equipment and broadband connections. This is far more advanced than web browsing. It is not for every PC user just to participate. Those unaccustomed to video games will have to conquer a steep learning curve once they actually log in. Thus, the

technical barriers in practice make all SL offers walled-off from the general licence fee payer. Such lack of universality has always been a criticism of public broadcasters' expansion into so-called new media. In my view, rather than restricting them from these services and platforms by default, public service actors could be used as tools for minimizing the constraints by developing user-friendly services on the platforms, and thus counter tendencies of enclosure.

Still, SL remains permeated by commercial interest. Real-estate development, production of different goods and all forms of commerce are the foci of much reporting from the virtual world. As noted, commercial media are also visibly present in SL. If venturing into such an environment, public service media need to stress their independence from commercial logics and counter processes of enclosure. This could also emphasize the uniqueness of their offers. A combined effort to be inventive and to counteract enclosure, then, should be a prerequisite for any expansion of public service media into arenas like virtual online worlds.[12] From this point of view, what I argue is that public broadcasters' *Second Life* ought to be strikingly similar to their first.

Conclusion

This article has taken up some implications of the emerging European policy approach to public broadcasters' internet services. Advocating an alternative, I have explored possibilities latent in novel forms of communication to advance the aims behind public service as a media policy tool. For this purpose, I have discussed the value of three marginal online activities.

When we assess the legitimacy of public broadcasters' online activities, I have argued, we are well-served by a dual consideration: acknowledging on the one hand the potential autonomous contribution of internet activities to public service remits, and on the other hand, connections between these activities and public broadcasters' complete and comprehensive output. This implies counterbalancing strict market impact logics, which relegate public service media to a mere complementary role on the internet. The basis for my perspective has been an argument for public service media online, geared towards a more nuanced view of the potential value of internet activities both for strengthening dissemination and for facilitating dialogue in the public sphere. Policy aims of supporting the functions of a public sphere in a way that counters processes of enclosure do not suddenly change in a digital era. Rather, I have reasoned, they should inform the deployment of public service beyond radio and television.

Crucially, the concrete organization of this media policy tool – including the extent to which existing broadcasting institutions should be employed – needs to stay specific to each society. My intention is not to pass any universal ruling on which services deserve public service status and which do not. Rather, the present analysis can serve as a basis for discussing specific demarcations. On a more general level, however, I have argued that there remains a multipurpose public service media potential in online communication. This potential is far from realized. One vital function is the opportunities to connect more or less isolated groups on- and offline through the combined use of innovative internet services and traditional radio and television broadcasts. As public service media develop further, it will be important to continue the scrutiny of both actual services delivered by public broadcasters, and their policy frameworks.

Notes

1 Public service broadcasting may describe varied forms of interventions into media markets (Syvertsen, 2003: 157). In different polities, it encompasses different, also purely commercial, organizational arrangements. My cases represent one kind: the publicly owned and mainly publicly funded broadcasting institution.

2 See Moe (2008) where a case for public service media online is substantiated at length with a basis in normative public sphere theory.

3 *Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen* (ZDF) was established in 1963 to complement the ARD – Germany's post-war construct now made up of nine regional public broadcasters under one nationwide umbrella. From the inception, the ZDF has enjoyed dual funding: the main source of the licence fee is supplemented by a limited amount of advertising money. Along with the ARD, the ZDF grounds its formal task of providing a so-called basic service in a series of Constitutional Court decisions establishing the importance of public intervention in broadcasting. The ZDF offers one main television channel with a videotext service, and is involved in several joint ventures on television (most also including the ARD) such as ARTE (cultural programming), Phoenix (documentaries) and KiKa (children's programmes). It has no radio service.

4 The following text refers to the site as of 29 May 2007. For the ZDF and the NRK I undertake what might be labelled a 'structural' or 'feature' analysis of websites (Schneider and Foot, 2004: 117; see also Fagerjord, 2006). However, my main interest lies in scrutinizing one specific part, and its place within the larger service.

5 All translations from German, Norwegian and Danish are my own.

6 Counter to my argument, van Zoonen seeks to distance herself from theories of deliberative democracy, which she labels 'the modernist response to the gap between political elites and everyday citizens' (2005: 148).

7 *Norsk Rikskringkasting* (est. 1933) is a state-owned limited company offering public service broadcasting pursuant to the Broadcasting Act. The NRK is funded by a licence fee and additional commercial income streams. This includes some sponsoring in television, but no advertising in radio or television. The remaining public service broadcasters in Norway (TV2, and radio channels P4 and Kanal24) are all advertising-funded. Apart from two television channels with videotext services and three main radio channels, the NRK provides several niche radio channels, and launched two auxiliary television channels in late 2007.

8 The following discussion refers to the site as of 1 June 2007.

9 The actual number of users is lower. During a week in June that year, ca. 400,000 log-ins were registered (Linden Research, 2007).

10 The *British Broadcasting Corporation* (BBC, est. 1922) operates four main television channels, five main radio channels and a plethora of additional services – commercial and non-commercial. It is regulated by a Royal Charter, last renewed in 2006. Primary funding still comes from the licence fee. Together with the advertising-funded ITV and Channel 4 (and S4C in Wales), the BBC constitutes the British public service broadcasting system. Bbc.co.uk was introduced as the BBC public service web outlet in 1997. It is Britain's most visited website, and is widely acclaimed, especially for its news service. It is more comprehensive than the Norwegian site, and includes all its parts – also discussion forums and games of different categories. The company has also initiated sites outside its main portal, like a digital curriculum (BBC jam) and a video archive (Creative Archive). In addition, the BBC offers a line of auxiliary, commercial websites (for example, radiotimes.com and bbcmagazines.com).

11 Another main venture was the *Money Programme* becoming the 'first BBC show to broadcast in *Second Life*' in 2007 (BBC, 2007a: 1). The flagship business affairs programme underlined one episode's theme of the economy of virtual worlds by simulcasting the show on BBC2 and at a SL cinema facility (operated by Rivers Run Red).

12 In another interesting initiative, the BBC is building its own virtual online world in connection with the children's television channel CBBC. According to the developers, it should 'allow digitally literate children to . . . create and share content', while being free of the 'financial aspects of other online worlds such as *Second Life*' (BBC, 2007b).

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