

Editorial

Behind the whole gamut of contemporary questions at the heart of European and international media policy debates is the question about the contemporary role of the media. Is the public interest being served by their performance? And what public interest should media serve today? Should the public interest still be conceived only in terms of news and information programs, or can we find public interest content in other media genres, traditionally conceived as entertainment with little public value? Who decides what is socially useful and in the public interest? The aim of this thematic issue of *Media Research* is to begin to re-examine these issues in a comparative European perspective.

The issue of public interest and socially useful content is a topic with recurrent appearance in media policy discourse (Melody 1990, Freedman 2008). It has new importance in post-authoritarian societies where the issue of public interest (in regard to the role of the media as in all other contexts) was for many decades perverted under dictatorships of different political bent. The concept of public interest is only now emerging in these countries, conceptualized in specific cultural contexts, in relation to specific or common issues of media performance.

The research agenda based on these concerns was developed within the COST A 30 “East of West: Setting a New Central and Eastern European Media Research Agenda”. The first meeting of colleagues interested in this issue was in January 2009, as part of the COST A 30 meeting hosted by the Centre for Media and Communication Research (CIM), Faculty of Political Science, University of Zagreb. Members of the group, led by Zrinjka Peruško, debated the issue of public interest and social use of media programs, and decided to examine it from various angles. A focus on television developed almost unnoticed – showing again that in spite of the authentic need to examine the role and contribution to society, politics, and culture of the new media, the age of television is still with us. (And, television – if a bit redefined – will probably be the majority content on the new media platforms in the times to come).

Preliminary versions of the articles published in this issue were discussed in the Panel “Contemporary Media and the Public Interest: Genre and Format Diversity and Socially Useful Content” at the International Conference “Beyond East and West: Two Decades of Media Transformation after the Fall of Communism”. The conference marked the closing of the COST A30 “East of West” Action (2005-2009), and was organized jointly by the COST A 30, the International Communication Association, and the Budapest Centre for the Study of Media and Communication, which coordinated the action, on 25-27 June 2009 in Budapest.”

Each article examines a specific angle of the media in relation to the public interest. Three of the articles include empirical analyses of television schedules in the same week of March 2009, but each with a different highlight. Two articles are theoretical examinations of the public interest idea, one in its development and one in its contemporary and culturally specific application. The articles in this issue start with “Public Interest and Television Performance in Croatia” by Zrinjka Peruško. The paper empirically demonstrates public interest performance of Croatian commercial and public service televisions with national coverage. The author proposes a theoretical definition of democratic media performance in the public interest along three interrelated dimensions: content – socially useful and diverse, audiences – citizens and special needs or minority audiences, and social goals – inform the citizens for political participation and contribution to democracy. Diversity as a content quality in the public interest is conceptualized additionally in contrasting conceptualizations of pluralist and neo-liberal media policy in terms of openness versus reflective diversity. Peruško shows (expectedly) the prevalence of ‘socially useful’ genres and greater genre diversity on public service channels, and unexpectedly, that audience preferences (in terms of attention) show a lack of information program content, and an excess of fiction.

Auksė Balčytienė and Kristina Juraitė examine public interest and socially useful television in Lithuania in view of the factors influencing the television system and its production. In their article “Impact of Economic and Cultural Factors on Television Production in Small Nations” economic and parameters of journalistic culture are seen to be the key factors affecting contemporary media changes in Lithuania and other small Baltic nations. The finding that the entertainment programs prevail is repeated in this article as well, explained by the economic pressures in small media markets and editorial choices of contemporary media. The authors also examine, based on content analysis, the quality of news in terms of its contribution to the public interest defined as contribution to democracy.

Carmen Ciller Tenreiro examines the presence of the public interest in contemporary Spanish television. In her article “The Evolution of the Concept of Public Service and the Transition in Spanish Television”, Ciller shows the development of television in Spain from the monopoly of public service to regional television, private television channels and pay television platforms. The study of television programs in prime time shows the most important genres of television programming in Spain in terms of the public interest, which has changed to include genres not traditionally expected to perform this role.

Bjørn Sørenssen in “The ‘Socially Useful’ in Public Broadcasting: Between Idealism and Utilitarianism – the Griersonian Element in a Tradition” takes us back in media history to examine the concept of *the socially useful* in terms of its original

development in relation to public service broadcasting. In an interesting way the author contrasts the Reithian public service concept developed for radio broadcasting with the idea of documentary broadcasting programming as socially useful in the understanding of John Grierson.

Lilia Raycheva in “Television – the Fragile Virtual Shelter?” reviews the European and Bulgarian concept of the public interest in relation to a special audience – children. She finds that Bulgarian television stations mainly offer entertainment to children audiences, and programs of educational type and quality children’s programs are rare. The article examines the current developments of the Bulgarian national terrestrial TV programming with respect to protection of minors from harmful and inappropriate content, in terms of the European Convention on Trans-frontier Television of the Council of Europe and the Audiovisual Media Services Directive of the European Union, as well as regarding best practice of the international regulatory practices of European Platform of Regulatory Authorities.

The articles in this theme issue begin to fill a lacuna of our understanding of the contemporary challenges of television performance in the public interest. In a media environment where entertainment prevails, the life-world is saturated with media, entertainment becomes more than diversion, the private overcomes the public – the role of the media in democracy needs to be reexamined once again.

Zrinjka Peruško
Issue Editor