



PUBLIC TELEVISION AND INTERACTIVITY

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March 2013

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning let me introduce and clarify the notion of television, public TV and interactivity in the sense we are going to consider them now. I am going to draw your attention to the impact of digitization upon them.

Television, in its productive aspect, is the visual and audio content which is transmitted via electric or electromagnetic signals.

Public broadcasting which includes TV, radio and other electronic media outlets has the major mission to serve the public. Public broadcasters receive funding from diverse sources including license fees, individual contributions, public financing and commercial financing. On the contrary, the commercial media funding is fully dependent on private sources.

Interactivity is the situation in which two or more persons or forces act upon or in close relation with each other. In the sense of electronics and computer science it means allowing or relating to continuous two-way transfer of information between a user and the central point of a communication system, such as a computer or television network.

Generally, at the cross point of television, public broadcasting and interactivity stands the exchange of socially significant information for the sake of the public's welfare. This defines the social effect of public TV which uses the technological achievements of our time to establish direct bilateral communication with the audience.

When we speak of public TV and interactivity we should have in mind a number of principles that determine the primary mission of public broadcasting: that of public service, speaking to and engaging the citizen as part of a civil society.

THE MODEL OF PUBLIC MEDIA

The world has predominantly accepted the British model of public medium based on the following principles:

- universal accessibility (geographic) – covers the whole of the national or the community territory
- universal appeal – responds to the general tastes and interests of auditorium
- particular attention to minorities – takes into consideration their specific matters
- contribution to sense of national identity and community – keeps the unity of the nation
- distance from vested interests – does not conform with any influence of economic or political lobbies
- direct funding and universality of payment – transparency of funding
- competition in good programming rather than numbers – means emphasis on culture, education and good breeding to the public
- guidelines that liberate rather than restrict programme-makers – striving to prevent censorship and government interference

Public broadcasters in each jurisdiction may or may not be synonymous with state or government-owned broadcasters.

In some countries, like Great Britain, public broadcasters are not sanctioned by government departments, and have independent means of funding (i.e. not through government taxes) and, hence enjoy editorial independence. Most of European state broadcasters are funded through a mix of advertising and public finance, either through a licence fee or directly from the government.

Here, in Bulgaria, public TV is funded by the state and some advertising. Its budget is approved by Parliament and we hope that, at least, in most of the editorial activity it is independent.

Public broadcasting may be nationally or locally operated, depending on the country and the station. In some countries, public broadcasting is run by a single organization. Other countries have multiple public broadcasting organizations operating regionally or in different languages. In Bulgaria regional public media can be found funded by the respective municipalities.

INTERACTIVITY

HISTORY

The first time someone called into a TV program is thought to have been during NBC's Today Show. That was in 1959. Video conferencing pioneer Picturephone debuted at the World's Fair in 1964. Teletext service was the most popular form of early Interactive Television. The Teletext system which was developed by British engineers, became operational in 1976. In 1988, the BBC broadcasts "What's Your Story?", a children's TV program. Viewers were asked to call into the show and offer suggestions on what subjects the show should be about. The best suggestions were used to further develop the scenario.

Interactive TV in the world is widely popular on the commercial broadcasting sector: for advertizing, shopping, selling media products. One can see it in any kind of real-time voting by the audience. Perfect examples are some popular reality shows of today.

Apart from its economic effect interactivity is moving fast into the public sector and to the public interest. It is even increasingly used in education and healthcare in some countries.

ASPECTS OF INTERACTIVITY

Interactivity has a couple of aspects which are worth considering when we talk of it as a must of public media, especially television.

The technological aspects are based on the type of signal (analogue or digital) or on the medium that makes interactivity possible (terrestrial or satellite).

Otherwise we distinguish between two other types of interactivity. The one is defined by the TV working process, the other – by the practical function it has for society.

A. Interactivity within the TV work process

The first group may include bilateral (“telemost” – the BG term) or multilateral transmissions depending on the number of participants. They are commonly known as LIVE transmissions. These kinds of communication are most often used in news bulletins, TV discussions, sport programs (Olympic Games, for example) or other important international events. We all know that the moderator of a news cast can get in touch with a correspondent on the site of a particular event.

On the other hand a moderator can include viewers into his show. They can answer questions, share opinion and make evaluations or even vote. Information goes bilaterally from broadcaster to viewer and back from viewer to broadcaster.

Therefore, talking about interactivity of the public TV we shall not mean Interactive TV in its technological sense but would rather underscore the need of a “return path” which is characteristic of its information flow.

B. Proactive Communication with the Public

If we speak of the Bulgarian National Television it is the socially responsive mission that has distinguished it on the media market for the recent 15 years or so. The public organization has had to struggle the competitiveness of the commercial audio-visual media.

Nowadays with the soaring development of digital technology public television faces the task to retain its audience by intensive communication while satisfying the demands of often “over-satisfied” consumers of video products offered on the air and on the web. Therefore, in order to keep a sustainable position BNT should not just win the competition with the traditional media but meet the challenge of the new media and the social networks.

Opportunities to solve the above problems will come up with the terrestrial digitisation due to finish in Bulgaria by September. This technological novelty is the clue to a more adequate cooperation between the public TV (its signal is terrestrial) and its viewers who will thus feel freer to state opinions, to raise problems and discuss them.

The new technology will allow a true direct communication wherein the TV subject and TV object enjoy equipollence. Digital TV means accessibility to high quality signal and increased number of channels but the most important thing is that it becomes medium for distribution of new services and for the development of proactive communication with the prospect of user generated content.

1. Digital Interactivity Serves Society

Online communications build and enhance democracy.

European Commissioner for Digital Agenda Neelie Kroes came to Sofia last autumn to meet Bulgarian media workers. Later, back to Brussels Mrs. Kroes spoke of the journalists' fascination about online media where they had boasted to have found real freedom of self-expression.

Digital channels change and widen the interaction between the government and the citizens. This kind of relation facilitates the democratic freedoms of the people, stimulates transparency and the effectiveness of government with greater strength as compared to the traditional media communication. Hence, public TV which is called upon to be an active participant in this interaction should itself take advantage of the new media if eager to keep its hold on the audience.

Multiple digital channels make the return path easier and faster. The "back channel" can be by telephone, SMS (or mobile text messages), radio, cable or digital subscriber lines (or internet connection). Viewers can immediately react back upon anything they get excited about and then follow the response from the other side. Being the one side of the interactive dialogue public TV is committed to responsibility, transparency and accountability.

Social networks such as Facebook, Twitter or LinkedIn can be widely useful to this kind of interaction. We can remember the users' posts about the Arab revolutions to Twitter which were major source of information for the BBC two years ago.

2. Public TV is corrective to the government

As mediator between state institutions and society public TV is a corrective and catalyst to the governmental policy of principle and social responsibility. The synergy of public and television should facilitate the citizens' control on the government but have still a long way to go in this direction as far as our country is concerned.

Here, in Bulgaria, at the moment phone calls in TV shows are the most popular return path, especially when news is concerned but Skype is increasingly used as bilateral connection too. Often in urgent or disastrous situations viewers describe on the phone or send their own videos about certain developments. They can as well express their opinion of various topics on air or on the social networks.

Apart from its website Bulgarian National Television has its profiles in Twitter twitter.com/BNT_1 and in Facebook [bg-bg.facebook.com/bnt.edno](https://www.facebook.com/bnt.edno); www.facebook.com/BNT.Two. Most of its popular programs have their pages in the BNT Facebook profile. Some of these programs are "Your Money" www.facebook.com/vashitepari, "Panorama" en-gb.facebook.com/Panorama.bnt,

"Snapshot" bg-bg.facebook.com/Vkadur.BNT. An outstanding example is the TV show "Referendum" en-gb.facebook.com/referendumbnt where viewers vote upon suggested questions which are related to the social and economic issues being discussed in the studio.

NEW TV SERVICES RESULT FROM THE DIGITAL INTERACTIVITY

In the digital era the strife for auditorium is becoming highly dependent on the variety of services offered by the TV operators.

Nowadays the broadband IP connection is becoming return path. The rise of the "broadband return path" has given new relevance to Interactive TV, as it opens up the need to interact with Video on Demand servers, advertisers, and web site operators.