The kiss of death. Public service media under right-wing populist attack

Christina Holtz-Bacha
Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg, Germany

Abstract
With the surge of populism in Europe, public service broadcasting has come under increased pressure. The established media are considered part of the corrupt elite not serving the interests of the people. The public service media, for which pluralism is at the core of their remit, are a particular thorn in the side of the populists. Therefore, they attack the financial basis of public service, which is supposed to guarantee their independence. The populist attacks on the traditional broadcasting corporations meet with the interests of neoliberal politics and of those political actors who want to evade public scrutiny and democratic control and do no longer feel committed to democratic accountability. The assaults on the public service media are thus an assault on freedom of the media and further increase the pressure on the democratic system.

Keywords
Europe, freedom of the media, media and democracy, populism, public service broadcasting

Since he took office as UK prime minister in July 2019 and into the election campaign later in the year, Tory leader Boris Johnson inspired the creation of a new verb for the English language: to empty chair. First, in September, he skipped a press conference planned to be held together with Luxembourg’s prime minister whom Johnson left standing with an empty lectern (Boffey, 2019). Later in 2019, when the election campaign was in full swing, Johnson begged off from a TV debate on climate change with party leaders on Channel 4 that therefore substituted him with an ice sculpture (Waterson, 2019). Only about a week before Election Day, Johnson refused to be interviewed by BBC’s Andrew

Corresponding author:
Christina Holtz-Bacha, Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg, Findelgasse 7-9, Nürnberg 90402, Germany.
Email: christina.holtz-bacha@fau.de
Neil who is known for his inquisitorial style. After his competitors had already been quizzed by Neil, Johnson was the only one of the top candidates not to speak to Neil who literally empty chaired Johnson by talking to an empty chair (Crerar et al., 2019).

The example soon caught on. The co-chairman of the Conservative Party, James Cleverly, was empty chaired by Sky News presenter Kay Burley because he did not appear for an interview that she claimed he had agreed on (Woodcock, 2019). Finally, a few days before Election Day, BBC presenter Stephen Nolan empty chaired the Northern Irish Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) when the party did not send a representative to his show to discuss its manifesto (Bell, 2019).

The British PM’s empty chair episodes reflect a strategy that is typical of populist political actors and that Johnson, just as his US counterpart Donald Trump, is a master of using: bad manners. This strategy comes hand in hand with contrasting the (corrupt) elite and the virtuous people which is the ideological core of European right-wing populism. As far as the, by now so-called, mainstream media are concerned, the anti-elite stance as well as the bad manners strategy reflect the ambivalent attitude of populism towards the news media. While on the one side and independent of the increased relevance of the social networks, populists, as any other political actor, still rely on the big stage notably of television and thus try to sway the media in their favour, the populist anti-elite stance incorporates the established media and makes them the subject of constant criticism. Recently, public service broadcasting has become one of the main targets of populist attacks. With more and more populist parties entering parliaments and gaining also executive power, their assaults on public broadcasting rattle the foundations of West European media systems and threaten an important pillar of democracy.

**Populism and media – Media and populism**

Populism whether defined as (thin-centred) ideology or a set of ideas (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013), a discursive frame (Aslanides, 2016), or a political communication style that combines a specific form and content (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014), maintains a conflicting relationship with the news media that ranges from fierce attacks to their harnessing through specific attention-grabbing strategies.

Political actors, in general, need public attention for their agenda and for themselves and are, therefore, dependent on the media. That applies particularly to election campaigns when power is directly at stake and politicians hope for favourable coverage. The political marketing toolbox provides politicians with a range of strategies that serve to garner media attention and, as far as it is possible, to influence what is said about them, when and how it is said. These strategies are oriented towards the usual selection criteria of the media to increase the chances of overcoming the threshold to make it into the news. This is primarily a matter of frequency but even better if coverage is positive. The fierce competition in the political struggle for power on one hand and the autonomous decisions of an independent media on the other hand implicate that the political actors are more often than not dissatisfied with what the media do. Hence, criticising the media is on politicians’ daily agenda, allegations of biased and unbalanced reporting directed at the media are widespread in the political field and usually culminate in the run-up to an election.
While efforts to attract media attention and occasional discontent with media coverage are common to all political actors, the populists’ stance on the media has specific features. They have developed strategies that aptly exploit the selection criteria of the media and provide populists almost necessarily with special attention. Standing out above all is the ‘bad manners’ strategy, which is characterised by populists’ disregard for “appropriate” ways of acting in the political realm (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014: 392). The strategy derives from populist anti-elitism and serves populists to mark their distance to mainstream political actors (Moffitt, 2016: 8). Bad manners deliberately challenge the norms of established behaviour in the political field and thus also provide political actors with a possibility to present themselves as outsiders that are in no way entangled with the ruling elite. Bad manners also concern the relationship with the media and the interaction between politicians and journalists. Thus, bad manners are a strategy of provocation that extends to a political actor’s discourse, behaviour and appearance. It is a strategy that easily overcomes the attention threshold of the media because it correlates with important news factors such as conflict, negativity and surprise.

There are many examples for the successful employment of the bad manners strategy. The US President who did not want to give up his Twitter activities even after taking office and whose tweets attack politicians at home and abroad as well as the media and individual journalists, has become the prototype of the bad manners strategist. He also demonstrates that the strategy involves an offer for identification to his supporters because Trump’s attacks are legitimised by his claim to be the true representative of the people flanked by his ‘America first’ battle call. Much like Trump, Boris Johnson indulges in the role of the indomitable troublemaker, the empty chair episodes were just one case in point. As a former journalist, Johnson knows well how to seize the attention of the media.

Paradoxically, the bad manners strategy often comes along with criticism of the media. An example of this is the Alternative for Germany (AfD, Alternative für Deutschland) parliamentary group leader Alice Weidel, who during the 2017 German parliamentary election campaign walked out of a talk show on public service television under protest, when she felt cornered by another politician. Immediately afterwards, Weidel launched an obviously prepared press release on Facebook that accused the talk show host Marietta Slomka, who is also a news anchor, of being unprofessional and biased. Leaving the studio while the show was still running garnered her wide attention and subsequent media coverage. Her allegations against the broadcaster and the talk show host also allowed her to present herself as a victim of the hostile media.

Populist critique of the media, however, goes beyond the usual discontent of politicians with their coverage. Attacks on the mainstream media derive from the antagonism of the ‘pure people’ against the ‘corrupt elite’ (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013: 502) that is at the heart of and defines populism. Populists see themselves as the true representatives of the people and the general will while they denounce the elite as betraying the interests of the people. The elite are those that have power, ‘that is, they include most people that hold leading positions in politics, the economy, the media, and the arts’ (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013: 503). The media is accused of being part of the corrupt elite complex and serving the interests of the establishment. This antagonism is
perfectly reflected in Trump’s verdict that calls the (East Coast) media ‘fake news’ and ‘enemy of the people’.

In recent years, this distrust of the media led to journalists being excluded from press conferences, party conventions or other campaign events and thus barred them from doing their job (Holtz-Bacha, 2020). Similarly, fierce reactions to specific coverage through social media or singling out individual journalists cause all kinds of harassments that undermine the trust in the media and their credibility and threaten those who work for them.

**Assaults on public service broadcasting**

With the surge of right-wing populism in Europe and populist parties gaining political clout, public service broadcasting became a special target of populist media hostility. This primarily hurts Western Europe, whose media systems are still shaped by public service broadcasting, but it is also evident in Central and Eastern Europe, where broadcasting is particularly vulnerable because it was only released from the hands of the state during the transformation process from the 1990s onwards and did not reach full independence everywhere.

By now, since the introduction of radio for the general public in the early 1920s, public service broadcasting has a tradition of almost 100 years. The model, of course, was the BBC, first established as the British Broadcasting Company in 1922 and converted into the public service corporation in 1926. Almost at the same time, some of the Nordic countries followed a similar path and installed public broadcasting organisations though close to the state but with guaranteed editorial independence and funded by licence fees (Hujanen et al., 2013: 20). Germany started out with a broadcasting system in the hands of the state but after the Second World War broadcasting was built up as a public service organisation similar to the BBC model. In fact, it was Hugh Greene, future Director-General of the BBC, who organised the reconstruction of broadcasting in the British occupation zone and promoted the public service model for post-war Germany. Switzerland, where the SRG (*Schweizerische Rundspruchgesellschaft*) was founded as the umbrella organisation for the regional broadcasters in 1931 but only gradually received full editorial independence during the 1950s and 1960s, became a model in terms of social integration by combining the offerings for the different language regions under one head (*Schweizer Radio DRS*, n.d.).

When commercial broadcasting was introduced in most of Western Europe in the mid 1980s, all countries except Luxembourg had a public service broadcasting system albeit in different variants. Even more than 30 years later, public service broadcasting is still in a strong position in many countries and has been able to hold its own against commercial competition. However, when the European Union started to become active in media policy applying an economic rather than a cultural perspective, the public service model came under pressure. When commercial broadcasters lodged complaints with the European Commission because of alleged distortion of competition, the Member States aligned themselves with public service broadcasting and pushed for recognition of its important role for democracy and media pluralism. This led to the adoption of the ‘Protocol on the system of public broadcasting in the Member States’ in 1997, which also
confirmed their competence to decide about the funding of public service broadcasting. The Protocol became part of the Treaty of Amsterdam and thus European Union (EU) law.

There are several reasons why populists zero in on public service broadcasting. One is populists’ fundamental scepticism towards institutions that are to set limits on the exercise of power in democratic systems and thus provide for checks and balances. The other is the public service broadcasters’ commitment to pluralism which implies an integration function whereas right-wing populism practices exclusion.

Populists claim that any intermediaries stand in the way of the implementation of the popular will thus reviving the old question of who controls the controllers (e.g. Kriesi, 2014: 363; Mudde, 2013: 6; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017: 82). In its general informational function and more specifically in its role as a watchdog, a free media takes part in the control of political and economic power. As is reflected in the annual reports on freedom of the press presented by organisations such as Reporters Without Borders or Freedom House, the media faces numerous dangers even in mature democracies (most recent reports: Freedom House, 2019; Reporters Without Borders, 2020a). In this environment and because they are supposed to be independent of the state and economic influence, public service media are regarded as being best suited to uphold freedom of expression. Public service media act under a remit that makes them ‘an important public source of unbiased information and diverse political opinions’ and ‘can contribute greatly to the promotion of social cohesion, cultural diversity and pluralist communication accessible to everyone’ (Council of Europe, 2019). With their commitment to diversity and pluralism, public service media fulfil an integrating function for society that, however, runs counter to the populists’ concept of the ‘pure people’ that is conceived of as a homogeneous group, and the exercise of majoritarian power unrestricted by formal institutions (Galston, 2018: 11; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017: 91, 95). In the words of Galston (2018) ‘populism is the enemy of pluralism’ (p. 12), whereas pluralism is at the core of the public service mission.

Another reason for populists specifically targeting public service media is the perceived proximity of public broadcasting to the state, which suggests that it is part of the corrupt elite power complex. Although a common model in Western Europe and conceived to be editorially independent, public service broadcasting is structured differently in different countries and has left political actors with one or the other and more or less wide loophole for influencing its decisions regarding personnel or content. These differences primarily concern the granting of licences, the composition and competencies of the supervisory boards, and the appointment of the director-general and other leading personnel.

A constant worry since a couple of years now is the rollback of the democratic transformation of the former state broadcasting organisations in some countries of Central and Eastern Europe. In Hungary, where Prime Minister and Leader of the Fidesz party Viktor Orbán openly envisions the model of an illiberal democracy and draws close to authoritarian leadership, structural changes, implemented through the Media Act of 2010, brought about tighter government control of the public service media which ‘have been deformed into state media’ (Conclusions of the . . ., 2019). This was part of Hungary’s ‘illiberal media policy’ (Polyák, 2019: 297) and a crucial step in the country’s
de-democratisation process (Bogaards, 2018: 1486–1487) and Orbán’s further ‘drift towards authoritarianism’ (Reporters Without Borders, 2020a) contributed to the country’s considerable drop on the press freedom scales. Hungary fell to rank 89 on the 2020 World Press Freedom Index (Reporters Without Borders, 2020b) and thus, scores second to last among the EU member states leaving only Bulgaria behind.

With his media policy, Orbán also set an example for other countries which followed a similar path (Bustikova and Guasti, 2017). Poland is the most prominent case where the PiS (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, Party of Law and Justice) majority parliament passed the Small Media Act in December 2015, just 2 months after the election that brought the right-wing populist party back into government. The Act, followed half a year later by the establishment of the National Media Council in charge of appointing the supervisory boards of the public service media, yielded the government direct control of public radio and television (Klimkiewicz, 2019: 56–57; Połońska, 2019: 232–234). Like Hungary, Poland has fallen back on the World Press Freedom Index over the years, ranking 62nd in 2020 (Reporters Without Borders, 2020b). In both countries, public service broadcasting has lost much of the audience’s trust (Newman et al., 2020: 72, 77).

Structural changes of the media system, such as in Hungary and Poland, are achieved through legal measures and regulations supported by the parliamentary majorities of the governing parties. They serve to suppress opposing voices and undermine the independence of public broadcasting, which thus turns into a mouthpiece of the government supporting the autocratic ambitions of the leaders.

Equally worrying are attacks on the media in the established European democracies. A peculiar constellation developed in Italy in the mid 1990s with the ascent of Berlusconism. While Italy’s public broadcasting corporation RAI had always been a playing field of the biggest political parties, which, in the country’s notorious clientelistic practice of lottizzazione, divided the three TV channels among them and thus achieved a certain political balance, the situation changed when media mogul Silvio Berlusconi became prime minister and with the office gained influence on RAI and thus the main competitor of his Mediaset conglomerate. Conflict of interest became obvious in various cases and at different levels (e.g. Hine, 2001) until Freedom House finally downgraded Italy’s media system from ‘free’ to ‘partly free’ in 2004 which was the time of the second Berlusconi government.

In a populist move, Matteo Renzi, prime minister from 2014 until 2016, pushed for a reform to change RAI’s funding system and its governance structure. While Renzi vowed to reduce party influence, the 2015 reform strengthened the role of the government to the detriment of the parliament. The new rules determined that the director-general, vested with more powers with respect to the RAI board, would be appointed by the government. In addition, the number of the members of the board was reduced from nine to five with two elected by the two Houses of Parliament, two by the government and one by the RAI employees (D’Arma, 2019: 121). According to Miżejewski (2018: 251), Beppe Grillo, the founder of the Five Star Movement (Movimento 5 Stelle), contemptuously commented on the reform by comparing its consequences to the Polish policy vis-à-vis the public media.

Apart from the measures that were to make the RAI governance more effective, the reform brought changes for the funding system. In order to make evasion of the licence
fee impossible, it was combined with the energy bill. The additional income generated in this way was, however, offset by a reduction of the fee (D’Arma, 2019: 121–122). While Renzi lauded the fee in connection with the 2015 reform and as long as he was prime minister, he changed his mind with a view to the 2018 election and promised to abolish Italy’s ‘most despised tax’ (D’Arma, 2019: 122) if he won (Migge, 2018).

More recently, during the time of the populist coalition government consisting of the League (Lega) and the Five Star Movement, these parties sounded the attack mainly on RAI. Beppe Grillo, who himself made a career as a comedian at the RAI during the 1980s, proposed to privatise two RAI channels and to run the third without advertising. Luigi Di Maio, member of the same party and then vice prime minister, opposed Grillo’s proposal and instead suggested to transform RAI into an Italian Netflix and thus a mere streaming platform (Coletti, 2018). The League’s chairman and minister of the interior, Matteo Salvini, pressed for changes among the personnel on top positions of RAI. This move was accompanied by repeated verbal attacks on journalists in general, whom Salvini called ‘the worst brood’ and a ‘red gang’, the latter lumped journalists together with the judges and prosecutors of the country (Perrone, 2019; Schlamp, 2018).

Assaults on the financial basis of public service broadcasting are certainly the easiest and at the same time most effective way for political actors to tighten the strings on public service corporations and thus challenge the whole system. Depending on the different types of funding of public broadcasting in the European countries, the options for influencing the financial basis differ. In some countries, as for instance France, Germany, Italy, Norway and the United Kingdom, public service broadcasting is financed by a fee. In this case, more or less political interventions are possible depending on who makes the decision about an increase of the fee and what criteria are applied. In other countries, such as the Netherlands, Belgium or Spain, the broadcasting fee was abolished some time ago and replaced by funding through taxes. The latter case makes it easier for governments to limit the budget for the public service corporations and thus exert a direct influence on their functioning. In systems based on a licence fee, this usually is to be paid regardless of the actual use of the public channels and is therefore contentious and often unpopular with the audience.

As the switch from funding of public broadcasting through a fee to taxes suggests, some governments have already taken the fee out of the line of fire, a step that can be interpreted differently, either taken to avoid the constant debates about the legitimacy of the fee or for reigning the public broadcasters in. Populists jumped on the bandwagon and started to attack the public broadcasting system particularly by calling its financing and notably the fee into question. In fact, in some countries, populist pressure contributed to the transformation of the funding system. The focus on the financial basis of the public service media is a convenient disguise for underlying interests that arise from populists’ overall discontent with the system.

Because of its history and its exemplary character, attacks on the BBC are probably the most alarming development that also foretells uncertain times for the European public service model altogether. It was Margaret Thatcher during her time as prime minister who set out to replace the licence fee by advertising. However, the Peacock Committee established in the mid 1980s to review the BBC’s funding, other than expected advised against and instead proposed to look into the possibility of turning to subscription in the
long term (Tait, 2013: 2). Whereas, the abolishment of the fee was off the table, Thatcher’s government time and again challenged the BBC’s editorial independence in an ‘unprecedented record of confrontation, recrimination and censorship’ (Walters, 1989: 380). As Tait (2013) notes, Thatcher’s close and mostly secret contacts with the media organisations also determined the media policy of her successors.

When the House of Lords’ Select Committee on Communications and Digital delivered its 2019 report it not only called public service broadcasting ‘as important as ever’ and emphasised that ‘fundamental to the health of the PSBs is how they are funded’ but also expressed its concern ‘that the integrity of the licence fee as the guarantor of the BBC’s financial independence has been undermined’ (House of Lords, 2019: 4). The latter referred to and lamented the fact that the government decided in 2015 to end the funding of free TV licences for those aged above 75 years and later made it the BBC’s responsibility to decide the future of this practice. Since the full concession would account for 20% of its budget and therefore lead to reductions and cuts in its offer, the BBC finally decided to limit the funding of free licences to those households with someone above 75 years who receives Pension Credit and thus the poorest pensioners (BBC, n.d.).

Against this background and in view of the mid-term review process in 2022 and finally the renewal of the BBC’s charter in 2027, recent threats to the funding system put the corporation, whose funding is solely based on the income from the licence fee and the sale of rights, in a state of high alarm. In fact, Tory leader and prime minister, Boris Johnson is determined to overhaul the BBC’s funding system, albeit for dubious reasons. Already unhappy about the broadcaster’s Brexit reporting, he questioned the BBC’s funding system after quarrelling with the broadcaster about an interview during the UK election campaign 2019 (e.g. Das Gupta, 2019; Hughes and Nilsson, 2019; Taylor and Waterson, 2019). What is more, Johnson announced he was considering decriminalising evasion of licence fee payment and thus gave it the appearance of illegitimacy. Johnson’s move was in line with similar propositions that UKIP made for several years. In its 2015 manifesto, the party called for the decriminalisation of non-payment of the BBC licence fee and a review of its cost (BBC, 2015). Former UKIP Leader and founder of the Brexit Party Nigel Farage intensified his attacks on the public service system particularly after a row with the BBC over not having been invited to a discussion programme with the party leaders shortly before Election Day 2015 (Press Association, 2015).

The challenges coming up for the BBC are regarded such a serious threat that Director-General Tony Hall stepped down early in 2020 to bring a successor in place who can guide both the mid-term review and the charter renewal. On the occasion of his inauguration in September 2020, media experts, supporters and critical commentators of the BBC published ‘Notes for the new Director General Tim Davie’ (Mair and Bradshaw, 2020) to arm him with arguments for the battle ahead. Most of the chapters revolve around the funding of the BBC but also point to its role as a ‘signifier of British culture’ (Wyatt, 2020: 15) and ‘the nation’s glue for decades’ (Bennett-Jones, 2020: 20).

Trouble has equally been coming up for Channel 4. The broadcaster was launched in 1982 under the Thatcher government supplementing the two public service BBC channels and the commercial ITV. Channel 4 is publicly owned but gets its funding from advertising. The empty chair episode during the 2019 electoral campaign had
consequences. Annoyed because Channel 4 replaced Boris Johnson by a slowly melting ice sculpture during a debate on climate change, the Tories vowed to review the broadcaster’s remit (Waterson, 2019). It did not help the Channel 4’s relation to the government that its head of news and current affairs, Dorothy Byrne, called the prime minister ‘a known liar’ in a speech (Cocozza, 2019). In view of financial difficulties due to declining advertising revenues, the minister in charge of culture and media, John Whittingdale, sees a good opportunity to realise his long-promoted idea of privatising the broadcaster and recently floated the idea that the government might sell Channel 4 (Waterson, 2020). The minister’s remarks on this point suggest that the government has turned to Channel 4 because it sees no chance in the long term to abolish the licence fee and instead introduce funding through subscriptions for the BBC.

Johnson’s strategy of delegitimising the licence fee and using it as a lever to question the public service system in general has found its counterpart elsewhere. For instance, the Austrian Freedom Party (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs, FPÖ) used its time as a coalition partner of the conservative Austrian People’s Party (Österreichische Volkspartei, ÖVP) for repeated attacks on the public service ORF (Österreichischer Rundfunk) and particularly against the prominent journalist Armin Wolf, who had proven to be uncomfortable for the party’s representatives and whose replacement they finally demanded. At the same time, they strove to undermine trust in the public service broadcaster. For instance, then vice-chancellor and leader of the FPÖ Hans-Christian Strache was quoted saying, ‘You don’t even believe the time check on ORF anymore’ (Abdulaziz-Said and Stritzel, 2018). The complaints about the ORF were combined with demands for the abolition of what the FPÖ calls compulsory fees (Zwangsgebühren), suggesting that the ORF’s funding is illegitimate.

The German AfD uses the same term in its fight for the abolishment of the broadcasting fee that provides the predominant income of the two public service corporations ARD and ZDF and has the backing of the Federal Constitutional Court. While the party agrees that the broadcasting fee should be abolished, its politicians offer different and sometimes contradicting ideas for the future of the existing public service broadcasters, their remit, and alternative funding (e.g. ‘Die AfD will . . . ’, 2017; Hanfeld, 2020; Stadtlich, 2016; Wolter, 2019).

A unique case is Switzerland where the No Billag initiative succeeded to enforce a referendum in March 2018. At that time, Billag was the company that collected the Swiss licence fee. The No Billag initiative was supported by the right-wing populist Swiss People’s Party (SVP, Schweizerische Volkspartei) promoted the abolishment of the fee and thus challenged the funding of the public service broadcaster SRG SSR (Schweizerische Radio- und Fernsehgesellschaft). The acceptance of the initiative which also included a prohibition for the state to support any media funding would have also been in the interest of Christoph Blocher, a former vice president of the SVP and assumed of driving a ‘little Berlusconisation’ (Kleger, 2019: 121) of Switzerland. In the referendum, about 72% of the voters rejected the proposal. The No Billag initiative was also an impressive example of online activism for campaigning against public service media (Horz, 2018: 237). A survey showed that positive references to the features of public service in general and particularly the SRG dominated the reasons for voting against the initiative (Tresch et al., 2018: 28). While first of all applying to the Swiss media
environment, the overall outcome of the referendum and the reasons for voting against the initiative and the plan to abolish the licence fee nevertheless demonstrate that the exchange of arguments during the campaign can raise and foster support for the public service system and even a licence fee, that is the highest in Europe.

In some countries, where funding for public service broadcasting comes from a state budget, populists have successfully pushed for financial cuts in the last years. In particular, the Nordic countries, which have always been strongholds of the public service model, recently switched or plan to switch from financing their public providers through the licence fee to funding from the state budget. Denmark is a case in point. In 2018, the then Liberal Conservative government that was supported by the Danish People’s Party (Dansk Folkeparti), replaced the licence fee by funding through taxes. At the same time, it decided to cut the budget of the Danish Broadcasting Corporation (DR) by 20% until 2023 (Schröder and Orsten, 2019). As a consequence, DR had to shut down some of its channels and dismissed a considerable number of its employees (Hinde, 2018; Nünning, 2018). ‘Fascinated’ by the Hungarian and the Polish media policy, the right-wing populist Sweden Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna) felt also inspired by the example of Denmark and pressured for financial restrictions on Swedish public broadcasting and stronger control of its programmes (Allern, 2019). In a neoliberal approach and because of their new political alliance with the Sweden Democrats, the Swedish Conservatives (Moderaterna) and the Christian Democrats (Kristdemokraterna) finally argued for the same policy and warmed up to the idea of a narrower mission for public service broadcasting (Allern, 2019; Reporters Without Borders, 2020c). Since January 2019, the Swedish licence fee which had to be paid by those who owned a TV set and provided the financial basis for public service broadcasting, was replaced by an individual tax. However, while all other parties voted in favour of the new law, the Sweden Democrats rejected it at last arguing that it should have been preceded by regulation strengthening impartiality (Reporters Without Borders, 2020c).

Conclusion

Nearing its 100th anniversary, the BBC was and still is the prototype of the public service model. The main feature of public service broadcasting is supposed to be independence of the state and independence of commercial interests. Most other countries in Western Europe followed the example but did not necessarily adopt the pure BBC model. Instead, they built in gateways for influence by the government here and there or allowed for a certain amount of advertising. With its broad mandate, especially the commitment to diversity and balanced reporting, and its integrating function public service broadcasting became a cornerstone of the democratic system.

Until the opening of the broadcasting markets for commercial providers which mostly happened in the mid 1980s, public service broadcasting had a monopoly in these countries. There is no doubt that this comfortable situation has led to a system of mutual interests and dependencies, which, however, did not prevent political actors from lamenting supposedly biased reporting to their disadvantage, notably during election campaigns.

With the advent of commercial broadcasting, public service channels were drawn into competition for audiences and, wherever advertising was allowed, for advertising
revenue. This development also started a discussion about the legitimacy of licence fees that benefitted public service broadcasting. Although the public service idea precludes commercial interests, public service channels have been forced to compete with commercial providers. They thus carried out their own commercialisation, which in turn provided another reason for challenging the legitimacy of broadcasting fees. At the same time, this was grist to the mill of those political actors that favoured private providers and the free play of market forces.

Finally, the European Commission further added to the increasing pressure on public broadcasting. Following complaints from commercial providers who saw the quasi-guaranteed financing of public broadcasting as a distortion of competition, the Commission examined whether the broadcasting fees were inadmissible state subsidies. It combined the admissibility of licence fee funding with a set of conditions, in particular, the task for the EU member states to clearly define the remit of their public service providers and to ensure that all expenditure is within this framework and covered by this remit (European Commission, 2001).

In view of the ‘commercial deluge’ (Blumler, 1992a: 7) since the second-half of the 1980s, Blumler (1992b) pointed to ‘vulnerable values in West European broadcasting’ that were endangered by the introduction of mixed systems and economic pressure due to the new competition on the broadcasting market. These are features such as programme quality, pluralism, public service broadcasters’ contribution to cultural identity and the independence of commercial influences (Blumler, 1992b: 30–38). However, not least in the hope for their own advantage, politicians gave in to economic pressures and devised a media policy that put the values of public service broadcasting at risk.

Thus, with the onset of competition and the ensuing commercialisation process, which lawmakers allowed to happen instead of sparing public service media the fight for market shares, public service providers have been under pressure from different sides for a long time. Not least because of the close relationship in the elite power complex in which the weight has shifted towards the media in the course of the mediatisation process, public service media in particular struggle to defend their independence and fulfil the controlling function they have in the democratic system. As Freedman (2018) contends, this is in part because ‘public service media across the globe have been hollowed out’ (p. 11). As a consequence of the (self-) commercialisation of public service media and the self-interest of political actors who want to avoid the inconveniences that come along with critical media coverage, the public service model has lost many of its supporters. The Council of Europe remains as an almost lone fighter for the public service model which it regards as an indispensable pillar of the democratic system. For decades, the Council of Europe has tried to counter the market-oriented media policy of the EU but is in a weak position compared to the EU due to the lack of similar legislative powers. It has repeatedly warned of the unsatisfactory transformation of the former state broadcasters and even a rollback in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe as well as the dwindling independence of the public service media in Western Europe (Holtz-Bacha, 2011: 214–232). The populist assaults on public service media, therefore, hit a system that is already on the defensive.

The public service model with its ‘ethic of comprehensiveness’ (Blumler, 1992a: 7) and a remit that binds the providers to diversity and pluralism serves an integrating function for
pluralistic democracy. Research has repeatedly proven the superior performance of public service media over commercial providers. For instance, in an international comparison across countries, Aalberg et al. (2010; see also Curran, 2011: ch. 3) found that public service media tend to offer more news than their commercial competitors. In addition, in countries which feature strong public service media, both commercial and public service channels tend to deliver more news and current affairs programmes than in market-oriented media systems. There is also overwhelming support for the fact that public service media increase their audiences’ knowledge on various topics, influence perceptions and attitudes in a different way, and enhance the propensity to political participation (e.g. Aalberg, 2015; Curran et al., 2009; De Vreese and Boomgarden, 2006; Holtz-Bacha and Norris, 2001; Jacobs et al., 2016; Vaccari and Valeriani, 2018).

In the high-choice media environment, it has become increasingly difficult to raise awareness for the value of public service media and to legitimise fees or taxes that are independent of their actual use. In a study that explored the relationship between funding and audience performance in 17 European countries, Saurwein et al. (2019) found a correlation for both variables. Funding was measured as the overall amount of funding and the amount of public funding Audience performance was operationalised as market share, relevance of public service media as source of news and trust in their independence of external pressures. While the study cannot assess the direction of the causality, it seems highly plausible that the amount of funding has a positive impact on the audience performance or, as the authors indicate, both mutually influence each other. In any case, these findings provide an argument for sufficient funding of public service media appropriate to their remit. At the same time, the study suggests that a change of the funding system or reductions will result in a decline of their performance and thus offer an argument for their privatisation or abolition.

During the last years, media have lost trust and credibility even in countries that usually rank high on the freedom of the media indexes. As Freedom House points out in its 2019 report, populism is one of the reasons for the decline of press freedom even in established democracies (Freedom House, 2019: 1). The flood of disinformation spreading especially through the social networks that makes it difficult to decide what is right and what is wrong, demonstrates the need for the professional, non-partisan and impartial provision of news. In fact, crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic seem to remind people of the value of a media they can trust. As the Reuters Institute’s Digital News Report 2020 shows for a sample of six countries that weekly TV news consumption increased between January and April 2020 (Newman et al., 2020: 10). The use of online media also went up, the example of the BBC demonstrates that this includes higher traffic on websites or social media offered by traditional media (Newman et al., 2020: 11). In fact, the Report states that public service media remain by and large the most trusted brands. That is especially true in Northern European countries that have a strong tradition of independence. However, criticism takes its toll ‘especially when combined with anti-elitist rhetoric from populist politicians’ (Newman et al., 2020: 16) leading to a situation where trust in public service media remains high but distrust is growing.

Populists also take advantage of the fact that public service corporations are actually ‘creatures ultimately of the state’ (Blumler, 1992a: 12) and are even owned by the state in some countries. Their independence can therefore easily be questioned. In addition,
the sometimes intimate relationship between politicians and media that has emerged due to mutual interests and attraction seems to fit the populist verdict of a corrupt elite. Populism is about to give the public service model the kiss of death and that it also affects the BBC as its prototype is a particular cause for concern. The populist attacks on the traditional broadcasting corporations meet with the interests of neoliberal politics and of those political actors who fear public scrutiny and do no longer feel committed to democratic accountability. The attacks on the public service media are thus a serious assault on freedom of the media and further increase the pressure on the democratic system.

**Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**ORCID iD**

Christina Holtz-Bacha [https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3836-5959](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3836-5959)

**References**

Aalberg T (2015) *Does public media enhance citizen knowledge? Sifting through the evidence.* PERC papers series no. 13, December. London: Goldsmiths University of London.

Aalberg T, Van Aelst P and Curran J (2010) Media systems and the political information environment: A cross-national comparison. *International Journal of Press/Politics* 15(3): 255–271.

Abdulaziz-Said A and Stritzel S (2018) Österreich: FPÖ bläst zum Halali auf den ORF. [Austria: FPÖ sounds the mort.] *NDR.* Available at: https://www.ndr.de/fernsehen/sendungen/zapp/medienpolitik/Oesterreich-FPOe-blaest-zum-Halali-auf-ORF,orf148.html

Allern S (2019) KRONIKK: Høyrepartiene i Sverige til felles angrep på allmennkringkastingen. [Chronicle: The right-wing parties in Sweden jointly attack public service broadcasting.] *Universitetet i Oslo*, 26 November. Available at: https://www.uniforum.uio.no/leserbrev/2019/hoyrepartiene-i-sverige-til-felles-angrep-pa-allme.html

Aslanides P (2016) Is populism an ideology? A refutation and a new perspective. *Political Studies* 64(1): 88–104.

BBC (2015) Election 2015: UKIP manifesto at-a-glance. 15 April. Available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/election-2015-32318683

BBC (n.d.) Age-related TV licence policy. *Decision Document.* Available at: http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/reports/consultation/age/decision-document.pdf

Bell J (2019) Watch: How can you face down opponents if you can’t face me? BBC’s Nolan ‘empty chairs’ DUP in manifesto interview. *Belfast Telegraph*, 9 December. Available at: https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/politics/general-election-2019/watch-how-can-you-face-down-opponents-if-you-cant-face-me-bbcs-nolan-empty-chairs-dup-in-manifesto-interview-38766447.html

Bennett-Jones P (2020) BBC managers must stay one step ahead of the barbarians at the corporation’s gates. In: Mair J and Bradshaw T (eds) *Is the BBC STILL in Peril? Notes for the New Director General Tim Davie.* Goring: Bite-Sized Books, pp. 20–25.

Blumler JG (1992a) Public service broadcasting before the commercial deluge. In: Blumler JG (ed.) *Television and the Public Interest: Vulnerable Values in West European Broadcasting.* London: SAGE, pp. 7–21.
Blumler JG (1992b) Vulnerable values at stake. In: Blumler JG (ed.) *Television and the Public Interest: Vulnerable Values in West European Broadcasting*. London: SAGE, pp. 22–42.

Boffey D (2019) Boris Johnson humiliated by Luxembourg PM at ‘empty chair’ press conference. *The Guardian*, 17 September. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/sep/16/johnson-humiliated-by-luxembourg-pm-at-empty-chair-press-conference

Bogaards M (2018) De-democratization in Hungary: Difusely defective democracy. *Democratization* 25(8): 1481–1499.

Bustikova L and Guasti P (2017) The illiberal turn or swerve in Central Europe? *Politics and Governance* 5(4): 166–176.

Cocozza P (2019) Dorothy Byrne on calling Boris Johnson a liar: ‘Nobody has said it isn’t true’. *The Guardian*, 18 September. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/media/2019/sep/18/dorothy-byrne-on-calling-boris-johnson-a-liar-nobody-has-said-that-isnt-true

Coletti C (2018) Die strategischen Attacken der Populisten. [The populists' strategic attacks.] *Deutschlandfunk*, 10 July. Available at: https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/italiens-rundfunk-rai-die-strategischen-attacken-der.2907.de.html?dram:article_id=422449

Conclusions of the Joint International Press Freedom Mission to Hungary (2019). *International Press Institute*, 3 December. Available at: https://ipi.media/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Hungary-Conclusions-International-Mission-Final.pdf

Council of Europe (2019) Public Service Media. Available at: https://rm.coe.int/leaflet-public-service-media-en/1680735c27

Crerar K, Smith M and Bloom D (2019) BBC’s Andrew Neil savages Boris Johnson in bombshell ‘empty chair’ TV moment. *Mirror*, 5 December. Available at: https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/politics/breaking-andrew-neil-boris-johnson-21035260

Curran J (2011) *Media and Democracy*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Curran J, Iyengar S, Lund AB, et al. (2009) Media system, public knowledge and democracy. A comparative study. *European Journal of Communication* 24(1): 5–26.

D’Arma A (2019) PSM in Italy: Troubled RAI in a troubled country. In: Połońska E and Beckett C (eds) *Public Service Broadcasting and Media Systems in Troubled European Democracies*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 111–128.

Das Gupta O (2019) Kollegen sind immer mehr Drohungen ausgesetzt. [Colleagues are more and more exposed to threats.] *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 12 December. Available at: https://www.sueddeutsche.de/medien/bbc-unterhauswahl-1.4719822

De Vreese CH and Boomgarden H (2006) News, political knowledge and participation: The differential effects of news media exposure on political knowledge and participation. *Acta Politica* 41(4): 317–341.

‘Die AfD will “schlanke Bürgerfunk”’ [The AfD wants lean broadcasting for citizens.] (2017) *Deutschlandradio*, 18 April. Available at: https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/afd-ueber-rundfunk-die-afd-will-schlanke-buergerfunk.2907.de.html?dram%3Aarticle_id=384015

European Commission (2001) Communication from the Commission on the application of State aid rules to public service broadcasting. *Official Journal of the European Communities* 44(C320): 5–11.

Freedman D (2018) Populism and media policy failure. *European Journal of Communication* 33(6): 604–618.

Freedom House (ed.) (2019) Freedom and the media 2019: A downward spiral. *Freedom House*. Available at: https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FINAL07162019_Freedom_And_The_Media_2019_Report.pdf

Galston WA (2018) The populist challenge to liberal democracy. *Journal of Democracy* 29(2): 519–530.
Hanfeld M (2020) Die AfD hat nichts drauf. [The AfD doesn't have it.] Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. Available at: https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/die-afd-macht-ihrer-ganz-eigene-rundfunkpolitik-16766620.html

Hinde D (2018) Denmark: Cuts to funding threaten the future of DR’s public service journalism. Xindex, 27 July. Available at: https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2018/07/denmark-cuts-to-funding-threaten-the-future-of-public-service-journalism/

Hine D (2001) Silvio Berlusconi, the media and the conflict of interest issue. Italian Politics 17: 261–275.

Holtz-Bacha C (2011) Medienpolitik für Europa II: der Europarat. [Media policy for Europe II: the Council of Europe.] Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

Holtz-Bacha C (2020) Putting the screws on the press: Populism and freedom of the media. In: Krämer B and Holtz-Bacha C (eds) Perspectives on Populism and the Media: Avenues for Research. Baden-Baden: Nomos, pp. 109–123.

Holtz-Bacha C and Norris P (2001) ‘To entertain, inform, and educate’: Still the role of public television? Political Communication 18: 123–140.

Horz C (2018) Networking citizens. Public service media and audience activism in Europe. In: Lowe GF, Van den Bulck H and Donders K (eds) Public Service Media in the Networked Society. Göteborg: Nordicom, pp. 227–244.

House of Lords. Select Committee on Communications and Digital (2019) Public service broadcasting: as vital as ever. Available at: https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201919/ldselect/ldcomuni/16/16.pdf

Hughes L and Nilsson P (2019) Boris Johnson fires shot at BBC with hint at scrapping licence fee. Financial Times, 9 December. Available at: https://www.ft.com/content/3ddd2918-1a8e-11ea-9186-7348c2f183af

Hujanen T, Weibull L and Harrie E (2013) The challenge of public service broadcasting in the Nordic countries. In: Carlsson U (ed.) Public Service Media from a Nordic Horizon: Politics, Markets, Programming and Users. Göteborg: Nordicom, pp. 17–50.

Jacobs L, Meeusen C and d’Haenens L (2016) News coverage and attitudes on immigration: Public and commercial television news compared. European Journal of Communication 31(6): 642–660.

Kleger H (2019) Aufklärung über Demokratie. Populismus, Aufklärung und die Krise der Öffentlichkeit. [Education for democracy. Populism, enlightenment and the crisis of the public sphere.] In: Eisenegger M, Udris L and Ettinger P (eds) Wandel der Öffentlichkeit und der Gesellschaft. Wiesbaden: Springer VS, pp. 113–126.

Klimkiewicz B (2019) Reactivation: Reconsidering the role of the state in media ownership policy in Poland. In: Giannakopoulos A (ed.) Media, Freedom of Speech, and Democracy in the EU and Beyond. Tel Aviv: The S. Daniel Abraham Center, pp. 48–67.

Kriesi H (2014) The populist challenge. West European Politics 37(2): 361–378.

Mair J and Bradshaw T (eds) (2020) Is the BBC STILL in Peril? Notes for the New Director General Tim Davie. Goring: Bite-Sized Books.

 Migge T (2018) Renzi will Rundfunkgebühren abschaffen. [Reni wants to abolish licence fees.] Deutschlandfunk, 10 January. Available at: https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/italien-renzi-will-rundfunkgebuehren-abschaffen.2907.de.html?dram:article_id=407966

Miżejewski M (2018) The impact of the reform of the Italian public broadcaster RAI on the outcome of the 2018 parliamentary election. Zarządzanie Mediami 6(4): 251–271.

Moffitt B (2016) The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Moffitt B and Tormey S (2014) Rethinking populism: Politics, mediatisation and political style. Political Studies 62(2): 381–397.
Mudde C (2013) Are Populists Friends or Foes of Constitutionalism? Oxford: The Foundation for Law, Justice and Society. Available at: https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:fc657de0-ab0c-4911-8d2b-646101599b65/download_file?safe_filename=Mudde_0.pdf&file_format=application%2Fpdf&type_of_work=General+item

Mudde C and Rovira Kaltwasser C (2013) Populism. In: Freedon M, Sargent LT and Stears M (eds) The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 493–512.

Mudde C and Rovira Kaltwasser C (2017) Populism: A Very Short Introduction. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Newman N, Fletcher R, Schulz A, et al. (2020) Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2020. Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

Nünnning V (2018) Öffentlich-rechtlicher Rundfunk in Dänemark: Steuerfinanzierung und Budgetkürzung. [Public service broadcasting in Denmark: Financing through taxes and budget cuts.] Medienkorrespondenz, 27 March. Available at: https://www.medienkorrespondenz.de/leitartikel/artikel/gezielte-schwaechung.html

Perrone A (2019) Salvini exploits ‘lack of trust’ in Italian media: The reputation of Italian media is poor, which plays straight into the hands of the far-right politician. Index of Censorship 48(4): 42–44.

Polonśka E (2019) Watchdog, lapdog, or attack dog? Public service media and the Law and Justice government in Poland. In: Polonśka E and Beckett C (eds) Public Service Broadcasting and Media Systems in Troubled European Democracies. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 227–255.

Polyák G (2019) Media in Hungary: Three pillars of an illiberal democracy. In: Połońska E and Beckett C (eds) Public Service Broadcasting and Media Systems in Troubled European Democracies. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 279–303.

Press Association (2015) Nigel Farage steps up attack on BBC after Question Time row. The Guardian. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/may/01/nigel-farage-bbc-question-time-ukip

Reporters Without Borders (2020a) 2020 RSF Index: Europe’s journalists face growing dangers. Available at: https://rsf.org/en/2020-rsf-index-europes-journalists-face-growing-dangers

Reporters Without Borders (2020b) 2020 World Press Freedom Index. Available at: https://rsf.org/en/ranking/2020

Reporters Without Borders (2020c) Swedish Public Service broadcasting under fire. Available at: https://www.reportrarutangranser.se/hoten-mot-public-service/en/

Saurwein F, Eberwein T and Karmasin M (2019) Public service media in Europe: Exploring the relationship between funding and audience performance. Javnost – The Public 26(3): 291–308.

Schlamp H-J (2018) Italiens Krieg gegen die Pressefreiheit. [Italy's war against freedom of the press.] Spiegel Online. Available at: https://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/italien-krieg-gegen-die-pressefreiheit-a-1235774.html

Schroder KC and Orsten M (2019) Denmark. In: Newman N with Fletcher R, Kalogeropoulos A and Kleis Nielsen R (eds) Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019. p. 79. Available at: https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/inline-files/DNR_2019_FINAL.pdf

Schweizer Radio DRS (n.d.) Die Geschichte des Radios in der Schweiz von 1911–2008. [History of radio in Switzerland 1911–2008.] Zürich: Schweizer Radio DRS. Available at: https://www.srf.ch/unternehmen/content/download/3456150/file/Geschichte%20des%20Radios%201911-2008.pdf

Stadtlich S (2016) Was die AfD mit den Öffentlich-Rechtlichen vorhat. [What AfD plans for the public service broadcasters.] NDR, 24 April. Available at: https://www.ndr.de/fernsehen/sendungen/zapp/Die-Mediapolitik-der-AfD
Tait R (2013) Margaret Thatcher and media policy. *Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies* (3). Available at: http://cf.ac.uk/jomec/jomecjournal/3-june2013/Tait_Thatcher.pdf

Taylor M and Waterson J (2019) Boris Johnson threatens BBC with two-pronged attack. *The Guardian*, 15 December. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/media/2019/dec/15/boris-johnson-threatens-bbc-with-two-pronged-attack

Tresch A, Lauener L, Scaperrotta L, et al. (2018) *VOTO-Studie zur eidgenössischen Volksabstimmung vom 4. März 2018*. [VOTO study on the federal referendum of March 4, 2018.] Lausanne; Aarau; Luzern: FORS, ZDA, LINK.

Vaccari C and Valeriani A (2018) Dual screening, public service broadcasting, and political participation in eight western democracies. *International Journal of Press/Politics* 23(3): 367–388.

Walters P (1989) The crisis of 'responsible' broadcasting. *Parliamentary Affairs* 42(3): 380–398.

Waterson J (2019) Tories threaten Channel 4 after ice sculpture takes PM’s place in debate. *The Guardian*, 28 November. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/nov/28/ice-sculpture-to-replace-boris-johnson-in-channel-4-climate-debate

Waterson J (2020) UK culture minister hints government may sell Channel 4. *The Guardian*. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/media/2020/oct/06/uk-culture-minister-hints-government-may-sell-channel-4?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other

Wolter D (2019) *Die Forderungen der AfD zum öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunk. Auseinandersetzung, Antworten und Handlungsempfehlungen*. [The demands of the AfD for public service broadcasting. Discussion, answers and recommended actions.] Berlin: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung.

Woodcock A (2019) James Cleverly: Kay Burley empty-chairs Tory chairman during Sky News election interview. *Independent*. Available at: https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/kay-burley-james-cleverly-empty-chair-sky-news-election-video-tory-election-a9187141.html

Wyatt W (2020) Just imagine: The BBC is a broadcasting wonder and not to be discarded lightly. In: Mair J and Bradshaw T (eds) *Is the BBC STILL in Peril? Notes for the New Director General Tim Davie*. Goring: Bite-Sized Books, pp. 11–15.