CHAPTER 5

Are Public Service Media Necessary in the Transmedia Era?

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1 Introduction

It all began on 29 November 2013, a date we will never forget. The truth is, we do not know why it happened that day, since there is nothing in particular in this history that had not forewarned us. The true tale itself is so extraordinary that it might be a worthwhile television production itself. The shutdown of a public radio and television corporation was broadcast live with the state security forces looking on, narrated live by a reporter in a corridor backed by a strikingly white-textured wall that suddenly turned green and then dark, just before photographers appeared in the image.
trying to immortalize those last seconds of broadcast. At that moment, in
the room known as the television corporation’s Control Central, the elec-
tricity was cut off and all of the technical apparatus stopped working
abruptly, some of which would be rendered useless forever after that action
was taken. The general electricity power cut stopped hundreds of devices
from working in a second, and it was also felt physically in the stomachs of
hundreds of workers who then joined the statistical ranks of the unem-
ployed in Spain. In 2013, unemployment in Spain came to well over six
million people. The number of Valencian citizens that were left without a
public communication service was just one million fewer. The situation
was not easy for anybody, but with the country gradually showing cracks
and a quarter of the active population unemployed, perhaps the closure of
a public communication service could be seen as a necessary way of ratio-
nalizing expenditure to maintain the public services that our heads of gov-
ernment said truly mattered to the citizens: education and health care.
The autonomous regional government’s ideologically conservative official
discourse stated that the public broadcaster was being closed in order to
keep schools and hospitals open. The exceptional nature of the event
served as a warning of the real danger faced by other public media in Spain
and the rest of Europe, as well as to identify the void that the Valencian
communication service effectively left on shutting down the public radio
and television corporation (López Olano 2018). In this context and to
avoid future temptations to close or privatize, it is worth posing the fol-
lowing question: Are public communication services necessary in the
transmedia age?

1.1 The Need for Public Media

The process of digitalizing the media is a phenomenon that is now com-
plete. Television has morphed into a hybrid with the Internet, and today
it is possible to consume television content via traditional means or mobile
devices. This digitalization has transformed the medium of television,
which has become much more permeable to new forms of production and
circulation of content (Salaverría 2018, p. 26). Every day, YouTube shows
us how any individual can attract global audiences from their own bed-
room (Gómez Domínguez 2019). It is in this context that audiovisual
public media coexist. In the European Union, they have been set up based
on a dual model in which public service acts as a counterbalance to pri-
vately owned media, but in the twentieth century public media are faced
with the difficulty not only of providing quality public service content but also of the need to involve the audience in it. Today, one cannot talk of public service television without effective participation from the citizens (EBU / UER Report 2015; Gómez-Mompart et al. 2015; Ribas et al. 2016; Wilson 2016). These new flows are becoming expensive to implement because public media are very regulated and they thus depend on legislation, which is inevitably always a step behind the social reality (Zallo 2016). Furthermore, it is not a simple task to modify the organizational culture due to very human factors such as conservative attitudes, the fear of change, or professional inertia. With this in mind, on a European level one of the greatest difficulties detected in maintaining public media’s relevance is the introduction of participation as one of the broad values in terms of legislation, governance, innovation, the creation of content, and an evaluation of the social contribution to the public service. In addition to this difficulty, there is the de-legitimization of the public sphere being suffered by democracies, aggravated by populisms, and the instability generated by changes in business models in the media. Amid this panorama of generalized crisis, which affects audiovisual public service, it would seem to be essential to reinvent the media strategy and take on a far-reaching transformation in which the transmedia narrative necessarily comes into play (Ellis and Greenbank 2015; Quintas-Froufe and González-Neira 2016). Let us examine the reasons why.

1.2 Public Service in the Transmedia Age

Transmedia is a concept that has become popular over the last 15 years, with its forerunner found in the concept of multimedia. Stemming from the latter term, and mainly fostered by Henry Jenkins, the term transmedia has been coined to describe the different way of circulating content today (Jenkins et al. 2006, 2015). The target is no longer a simple information receiver, but somebody who acts and re-disseminates the content. Nevertheless, linear narratives are still perfectly valid; the new media (social networks, instant messaging, and streaming platforms) coexist with the old (television, radio, and cinema). Even so, although the events we have mentioned took place in a traditional medium, it is important to be aware that today, once we have created content then the audience also has it and may disseminate it whatever way they see fit via different platforms and at a speed never before seen in the history of humanity. In a few seconds, an image or video can travel around the world and become viral.
The concept of transmedia narrative therefore describes a multitude of options available to the creator to construct their story. Until recently, stories were linear, one-directional, and linked to the medium through which they were going to be communicated. Now, however, a story can travel via different media and be enriched with contributions from the community at which it is targeted. Transmedia is an adjective that we can add to the term storytelling and which ultimately defines a radical change in our way of communicating. Narration or storytelling intertwines with technology and social participation, so that citizens cast aside their traditionally passive role, opening up a sphere of activism by creating content and participating in fora that often become public service proximity media capable of channeling citizen participation into social changes (Scolari 2018).

Even so, despite these new possibilities, the concept of transmedia raises some controversy because it is understood that the narrative can be cut up and therefore lose some of its unity. One transmedia strategy, however, does not necessarily involve cutting up the narrative; rather, each medium has to contribute something that is valuable and distinctive in itself. Each part must be narratively conclusive, while at the same time containing a clue (which may be implicit) that suggests to the audience that there is something further that they can access to enrich or complement the story.

1.3 From the Transmedia Project to the Product

Any audiovisual production entails great complexity. Thus, when an audiovisual product is included in a transmedia strategy, its complexity multiplies, and as a result the number of professionals involved also multiplies, swelling the budget necessary to produce it. These organizational difficulties would seem to put transmedia productions out of the reach of all but national and international television corporations or big entertainment franchises. However, there is a type of transmedia production called “project transmedia,” which involves drawing up a strategy for an audiovisual production through which we can work on a final deliverable, which may be a documentary, a film, or a series. At the same time, we use new media to distribute the necessary materials for the project’s pre-production, which until now were hidden (evaluations, location profiles, costume trials, etc.). These materials can be gamified via the social networks and hence serve to build or strengthen a community around the project.
Project transmedia involves putting together a strategy through which the different contents generated to create the main deliverable become independent products at the same time (podcasts with evaluations, profile on Instagram with costume trials, instant messaging to identify and gain loyalty among groups and organizations interested in our project, etc.). In the project transmedia strategy, parts of the production that until now were hidden now become visible, being turned into audiovisual contents that complement and add value to the final product. The project’s transmedia narrative enables the creative leap needed by any audiovisual production without excessively increasing its complexity. Hence, it would seem that in the current panorama of limited budgets for public media, the project transmedia format could be the appropriate one to implement new narratives, foster citizen participation, and innovate with new technologies and languages in an audiovisual public service. Implementing a “project transmedia” strategy in a public medium also enables greater efficiency in adapting to the panorama of audience fragmentation and to the demand for content, especially from the younger public, who seek formats with which they can interact via their mobile phones.

2 The Case of À Punt Mèdia

For some time now, it has been common to hear voices protesting that the cost per citizen of a paid subscription to a platform is lower than the maintenance costs for public media, and that with the Internet and the wide range of educational, cultural, and scientific content on offer within our reach, public television is no longer necessary (Campos-Freire 2016; Marzal-Felici and Soler-Campillo 2016). Very much on the contrary, it is precisely that excess supply that makes public radio and television corporations more necessary than ever, in order to preserve cultural diversity and identity while ensuring universal access to the content. In this context, in addition to the traditional aims of public service related to promoting culture and language, the quality of information and the construction of a public space, there is also the aim of fostering innovation and creativity. Thus, public communication platforms are called on to lead in implementing disruptive technological tools that open up new approaches to the news and ways for citizens to participate, with the aim of guiding them toward pro-social ends (Miguel et al. 2017).

In the case of the Valencia Community region, the disappearance of the public radio and television service (RTVV) brought home to people the
strategic worth of proximity public media as a motor for the audiovisual sector and creative industries (Galán et al. 2018). The closure also served to affirm the need to protect cultural identity, which in the case of the Valencia Community region is intimately linked to the use and promotion of Valencian as a co-official language in the territory. The existence of public radio and television corporations has been decisive for the growth of different cultural industries that generate wealth and employment. Nor should it be forgotten that regional public radio and television corporations are a fundamental tool to project cultural and linguistic identity. They should therefore also aspire for their proximity content to be distributed in some cases outside the region, too (CVMC 2017).

Finally, it should be remembered that the General Law on Audiovisual Communication of 2010 indicates that citizens have the right “to receive audiovisual communication in conditions of cultural and linguistic pluralism by means of protecting European and Spanish works, as well as those in different official languages, and Spanish cultural manifestations” (Azurmendi et al. 2011). With this perspective, proximity media should be understood as an instrument to bolster the social and cultural fabric, and therefore as an investment aimed at ensuring the quality of our democracy.

The old public radio and television corporation (RTVV), which shut down abruptly in 2013, was an archetypal example of one of the main problems suffered by European public television: dependence on the government, a lack of quality content, no transparency, and insufficient funding, aggravated by the financial crisis in 2008 and also by unprecedented political corruption (Marzal-Felici and Soler-Campillo 2016). À Punt Mèdia was launched four years after the shutdown. Its objective from the outset has been to take advantage of the situation as an opportunity to adapt the new public service platform to the new communications ecosystem. À Punt Mèdia has been founded within a public communications space that in many senses could be considered to be a paradigm of adaptation to the new environment: the content is articulated using a transmedia strategy that promotes and encourages citizen participation. Today, it is a public communication platform with nearly 500 employees, an annual budget of over 50 million euros and a potential audience of 5 million citizens. The case of À Punt Mèdia is unique because it has had the opportunity to implement its operational structure according to the requirements of the new multiplatform environment. The launching of a public communications service to be adapted to the new communication
environment in the Internet soon came up against an added difficulty: its employees mostly came from the old radio and television model, and have therefore had to adapt their work routines to the new digital environment, which requires more multiskilled job profiles. To do so, they have created new professional profiles such as data journalist, social networks expert, audiovisual editor, and more.

However, the most significant change has been to unify the workspace into a single newsroom in which content is produced for television, radio, the Internet, and the social networks, all in coordination (Soler-Campillo et al. 2019). The production and content-editing software has also been unified and the Dalet Galaxy platform has also been adopted, which enables tasks to be centralized, such as taking in audiovisual material, step outlines, and management of documentary archives. Working in a single newsroom enables a great many professionals from different disciplines to be included in the same physical space, such as producers, documentary makers, IT engineers, and so on, thereby helping work routines to take on a multidisciplinary perspective. This multidisciplinary profile is especially relevant when developing interactive content for mobile devices. Adapting content to the contexts of consumption via new interactive windows poses one of the fundamental challenges of the new corporation, because as happens in other territories such as Catalonia, Galicia, and the Basque country, one of the purposes of the public corporation is to normalize the use of the regional language. The use of Valencian in the content consumed via the social networks and mobile devices is practically insignificant. Therefore, À Punt Mèdia has set itself the task of trying to reverse this situation as much as possible as a priority basis for its activity. The new patterns of audiovisual consumption have taken up video as the preferred format for internauts. The youngest generations spend more time consuming content via new devices than via general viewing TV, and those habits are also occurring as regards radio. In order to adapt to this new situation, À Punt Mèdia has made an effort for its audiovisual creations to have an itinerary that does not end (and sometimes does not even begin) with being broadcast openly. Open content is transformed into online content that can be consumed, commented, and shared at any time from any place and screen.

The most important point is that À Punt Mèdia is now a reality that began its radio broadcasts in December 2017 and television broadcasts in June 2018. Furthermore, À Punt Mèdia’s à la carte content platform has also been created, which has exclusive content for children. The website
and children’s and youth’s platform are often used to première programs. Great progress has been made by the fact that À Punt Media’s schedule for children has been developed from the outset on the multimedia platform, adapting to the forms of online consumption that are mostly used among the youngest people today. *La Colla* is a children’s community via À Punt Media that brings together the world of content, programs, and entertainment online, on the radio, or on the street, as well as all of the television programs for the little ones. *La Colla* has its own mobile application for IOS and Android, and the content is available in the Smart TV ecosystem of the communication space (Arjona 2019, p. 26).

The series on the platform *La Colla* can be seen *à la carte* online or on its own app, which can be downloaded for free. The content is divided into the age ranges it is aimed at (pre-school or children’s) and there is a third section on the website to identify content in English. As for the content for the youth audience, the educational program *Rosquilletres* stands out, in both television and radio versions. *Rosquilletres* is a contest in which compulsory secondary school students (young teenagers and pre-adolescents) from schools all around the Valencia region compete by pitting their spelling skills against each other with Valencian words. There is also a musical section where the competitors have to see a video clip of songs by Valencian music groups who sing in Valencian; they have to correctly answer questions about the song they have heard. “The programme is used in secondary schools as a tool to boost learning of the Valencian language. In fact, it has created a link among Valencià teachers’ professional associations due to its usefulness in linguistic matters. During the 2018–2019 season, 420 students from schools around the entire Valencia Community region took part” (Arjona 2019, p. 28).

Together with the children’s schedule, another aspect that À Punt Mèdia has been working on as a priority is the news services. The old Canal 9 received a lot of criticism, and it has to be said often justifiably so, due to its bias and lack of objectivity in addressing information about politics or current affairs. This is why the heads of À Punt Mèdia have taken special care to distance themselves from the old practices of political manipulation, taking care to be independent and meticulous in the new services. An effort has also been made to include new languages and offer reports on in-depth topics that can be consumed via the website. There is noteworthy news coverage that is carried out via programs with special interactive formats of social significance, for example, related to corruption, evictions, and suicides.
The transmedia strategy is also used in producing programs like *69 raons* (69 reasons), which À Punt Mèdia co-produces in association with the audiovisual company from Castellón, Saó Produccions. The 30-minute program is a combination of fiction and reality to reflect on matters of concern to adolescents as regards affective and sexual relations. The format is an adaptation of the program *Betevè* from the Barcelona municipal television corporation. It is called *Oh My Goig!* (*Goig* means *joy* in Valencian) and is a pioneer in addressing sexuality for youths on public television. It has been broadcast since 2016. The program offers content adapted to the social networks, talks in schools, and television programs lasting 30 minutes that are first posted on the website and YouTube before being broadcast openly so as to stimulate debate in the social networks. In each chapter, matters related to the sexuality of youths are posed and debated.

*Una habitació pròpia* (A room of my own) also stands out among the programs scheduled due to its visual attractiveness and educational value. The literary pundit Irene Rodrigo heads the program, which can be found on television, radio, street posters, and content in the social networks. Like *69 raons*, there is also close collaboration with the regional Conselleria (Education Department), by which activities in schools are linked to the content in this multiplatform format. The strategy to introduce the format for *Una habitació pròpia* was gradual. It began on the radio, continued on television, remained on the streets with posters about the books and authors it dealt with, then fostered interaction in the social networks, and now it also organizes activities and workshops that are carried out in secondary schools. This program helps À Punt Mèdia lend visibility to its commitment as a public medium to disseminate literature and culture. In order to work on this kind of relationship with schools, universities, and social and cultural groups, the Department of Social Projection has been created, which works to streamline interlocution with relevant professional associations. Maintaining these communication channels with educational institutions has enabled them to create initiatives to receive ideas from universities that may help connect with a younger audience. One of the most noteworthy initiatives has been the Festival Talent Universitari, organized by the À Punt Mèdia public communication platform together with the Valencian university system and the private audiovisual sector. In its first two editions, the contest has achieved a total participation of 30 projects, of which 5 have been selected and presented by students to be broadcast by the public communication channel. This activity is also part
of a collaboration agreement between universities and the CVMC (Valencia Media Corporation, which founded and supervises À Punt Mèdia), by which common activities are organized periodically such as seminars, courses, and talks related to education for students and professional refreshers for the employees of À Punt Mèdia. Using these training activities and the forum for presenting audiovisual formats, universities and À Punt Mèdia work together to promote culture, science, and knowledge so as to lend visibility to the work of artists, teachers, and researchers, making a commitment to an equal presence of men and women while doing so.

3 Discussion

The rise of populist movements has benefited from a generalized rise in fake news that has found its way through the social networks: an underground relativism that makes it more necessary than ever for there to be quality public media with sufficient social relevance to counterbalance populist discourses. The crisis in the public media exemplified by the closure of RTVV and the creation of À Punt Mèdia (López Olano 2018) has clearly shown the fragility of the current democratic system. There is still much to do in Spain, since a state regulatory authority is yet to be created, and where applicable audiovisual committees for autonomous regions to supervise the work of public and private media (Donders 2011). The television Corporation À Punt Mèdia has set up its own Audience Council, whose purpose is to oversee compliance with the public service of communication and ensure that complaints and suggestions from citizens are effectively addressed by those responsible for this medium. In the time that the radio and television have completed their first months of broadcasting since 2017 and 2018 respectively, the Audience Council (2019) has seen a significant contribution made by À Punt Mèdia to recover and normalize the use of Valencian as a language of public use. Work has also been done to strengthen regional unity and stimulate culture, essentially through entertainment programs. Nevertheless, some shortcomings have been detected as regards the scarce economic resources the medium has at its disposal and the circumstance of having only one channel in an age of fragmented audiences, which makes it difficult to adapt to consumption patterns increasingly aimed at more specific content.
4 CONCLUSIONS

As we know, the communication products we consume are the result of a combination of different media. We are thus in a scenario of convergence in which the dominant screen is increasingly the one on mobile phones. In this context, is it still necessary for there to be public communication services? Should they adapt to the new environments of consumption? Let us see.

Every day, we read a news item which we then look into further through a video, which we then share in a social network in which we can end up signing to show support for a citizen-based proposal linked to the information. In addition to this change in consumption habits, in many new households there are no longer traditional television sets or transistor radios. This means that for Public Service Media to be relevant, it must aim its productions at the new windows. These new windows enable and encourage interaction from the user. They therefore open up the door to creativity that is to be found not only among traditional content creators but also among the audience, who can also create and propose content and even new media and communication channels. Hence, the role of public service communication should be to articulate communities and lead creation strategies that enable citizens’ activity in the Internet to be geared toward social ends. Creativity is no longer the domain of the creators that work for the industry. There are increasingly more people in the audience who can create and put forward content fundamentally aimed at new platforms. Under these circumstances, the hybridization of consumption and creation interfaces has collaborated up to the point that they are sometimes indistinguishable. Using an instant messaging app, we can launch a meme that will go around the world in a few seconds or see the highlights of the latest Champions League final.

The commitment to recovering the public radio and television service in the Valencia Community region has been implemented via a transmedia strategy in an attempt to be relevant in the current scenario and to have a presence in today’s media and the media of the future. This transmedia strategy involves defining content linked to topics that straddle the group’s different media and establishing a series of strategic actions linked to them. The aim must be to inform and entertain using the same media used by the users, in other words radio and television, but also new devices. Television, radio, and cinema are still very relevant media, but today they coexist with new screens that also need multimedia content. The
transmedia scenario calls for a change of model in which the audience become users and decide at all times if they wish to be active or not. To do so, it would seem to be necessary to bolster the management of proximity public communication media with staff and material resources from the R&D&i department or service. Innovation is essential in order to design strategies that make the presentation of content more attractive and which stimulate participation from citizens in creating and proposing content. The public service must have active participation from citizens in order to ensure that its social and educational projection meets the demands of the society that finances public media with its taxes.

Following the explanations above, the reply to the initial question of whether a public communications service is necessary in the transmedia age would seem to be clear. In order to halt the growing mistrust among citizens toward mass media, it is necessary for traditional media to cast off some of the traditional routines (journalism using statements, exclusive use of government sources, lack of contrasting information) so that they may provide innovative, quality content that can be shared in the social networks, while at the same time acting more and more as the dominant media platform. It is necessary to appeal more and more to citizens’ responsibility when they share information whose source’s reliability and truthfulness they have not been able to verify. New levels of commitment from citizens must be sought, and the audiovisual content should become a catalyst for social activism. It is a question of helping citizens to articulate themselves as regards initiatives related to culture, associations, and education. This can only be done in a credible, sustained way over time by managing public policies, which must lead the public information services. The wave of fake news that has fueled phenomena such as Brexit, the electoral success of populist parties in many European countries, and alarms about COVID-19 all reminds us of the importance of having quality information and entertainment. In the case of COVID-19, the continual rumors about new contagions and alarms about baseless remedies appearing in order to combat the epidemic have all plunged us into a kind of neo-Middle Ages in communication, where each individual inhabits their own bubble in which we comfortably give all our data to today’s equivalent of the feudal lord, the technological giant in question (Facebook, Instagram, or YouTube), in exchange for everything that the algorithm thinks we might or must think. Therefore, if the importance of the citizen is not to be reduced to a simple click, the result of an algorithm designed thousands of kilometers away, then we need quality public
communication spaces. In the case of regional television corporations such as À Punt Mèdia, we believe that the commitment must be to produce proximity content that ensures pluralism and diversity for citizens. In an ever more global world, it is increasingly important to respect diversity or even simply respect citizens as such and not as goods to be sold to an advertiser or a technological giant for the price of a few clicks.

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