CHAPTER 12

Media Capture and Its Contexts: Developing a Comparative Framework for Public Service Media

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1 INTRODUCTION: CAPTURE IS EVERYWHERE

Far from retaining its independence from all vested interests, and delivering a critical and robust public interest journalism, the BBC is a compromised version of a potentially noble ideal: far too implicated in and attached to existing elite networks of power to be able to offer an effective challenge to them. (Freedman 2018, p. 4)

The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) is arguably the most revered—and heavily researched—Public Service Media (PSM) organization in the world. It has also served as a model of universality and quality

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for many emerging PSM efforts. As Des Freedman (2018, p. 11) argues, both the public service model and the reputation of the BBC have functioned as an antidote to the so called media capture, the concept that refers to media having failed to achieve or having gained and then lost autonomy and thus not exercising their core function of informing people (e.g., Mungiu-Pippidi 2013; Schiffrin 2018).

Even so, it could be argued that the BBC’s governance and financial arrangements point to elements of capture, and various studies on news have indicated that the corporation has at times reinforced the views of political and economic elites (Freedman 2018). Recently, developments in the UK have increasingly shown symptoms of even more concrete influence of political interests in the public broadcaster’s operations and editorial affairs.

The BBC, however, is by no means alone: signs of capture can be detected to various degrees in both emerging and mature PSM contexts (Dragomir 2019; Voltmer 2013; Wilson 2020), which points to the dual nature of the media capture phenomenon.

On one hand, the capture of PSM is context-specific and depends on a number of economic, political, and cultural realities (Milosavljević and Poler 2018). For example, media capture—and particularly the control of PSM—is especially pertinent in Central and Eastern Europe. The transformation of state media into PSM has generally failed, as governments in the region have maintained a tight grip on public service broadcasters thanks to their power to appoint key players in their governance structures and make decisions about their funding (Dragomir 2019; Milosavljević and Poler 2018; Ryabinska 2014). The experience in the Balkans highlights several tendencies that mark media capture by the region’s governments, including the absence of independent journalism. The lack of public interest content in these countries also has to do with fierce competition from commercial players (Dragomir 2019; Milosavljević and Poler 2018).

On the other hand, while contexts may differ, the economic and political pressures on PSM are strikingly similar (Syvertsen and Enli 2018; Voltmer 2013). PSM are often politicized for broader ideological purposes; for instance, PSM organizations tend to be demonized by populist politics (Simon 2019), and recent developments in countries like Australia, Denmark, Switzerland, and the UK indicate significant political hostility toward PSM. Furthermore, the rapid commercialization and digitization of media markets are not endangering independent media solely in young democracies; the challenges faced by commercial legacy media in the
digital economy have prompted questions about ostensibly unfair advantages enjoyed by PSM and their right to operate on commercial platforms (Van Dijck and Poell 2014), despite evidence showing that, contrary to what commercial competitors of PSM have argued, PSM seldom crowd out private media organizations (e.g., Sjøvaag et al. 2019).

One way to understand this interplay of similar but different manifestations of media capture is to deploy a four-component model to assess the degree of risk to editorial independence posed by media capture (Dragomir 2019). This model offers practical uses for companies and investors (to know when to enter and exit a captured market), journalists (to spot areas of serious risk to their autonomy), and regulators (to adjust the methodologies used to assess threats to media pluralism). The four components of the model are:

1. Regulatory capture (consisting of government control of the regulatory process that, due to the licensing powers of these authorities, affects the composition of the media market)
2. Control of PSM (consisting of mechanisms to control their governing structures and financial dependence on state bodies, which can turn these operations into government channels)
3. Use of state financing as a control tool (consisting of forms of public funding mechanisms, including public funding for state-administered media, state advertising, state subsidies, and market disruption measures, all of which are used to influence the operations and, indirectly, the editorial independence of media outlets)
4. Ownership takeover (consisting of forms of forceful takeover of commercial media through private enterprises close to the government)

For a country to exhibit the full extent of media capture, all these elements must be present. Using this model, media capture can be defined as a situation where a group of interests formed around a country’s political and business power takes over and abuses the key regulatory and funding mechanisms, the public media, as well as a majority of the privately owned media to control the journalistic narrative with the long-term purpose of maintaining their grip on power and, with it, access to public resources. The capture can appear in countries with both poor and better press freedom records, the difference being that in the former the capture amplifies existing forms of control over the media.
The scope of capture, however, can vary, depending on the degree of control in each area. Capture clearly appears when the government and allied corporate interests achieve a level of control in the media that secures their success in the next electoral cycle. However, media capture is not coextensive with a complete lack of independent media but can manifest itself in various forms and at various levels within a given environment. This variety of contexts and pressures, despite certain similarities, calls for frameworks “within which it is possible to place the particular context facing each country at a particular moment” (Schiffrin 2018, p. 1039).

With this chapter, we answer Schiffrin’s (2018) call and focus on PSM, which, in its ideal form, Schiffrin and others (Nelson 2017) see as the best antidote to capture. In reality, PSM is often the first media organization challenged by political forces. We purposely chose the concept of “Public Service Media”: while the established term is still “public service broadcasting” (PSB; see, e.g., UNESCO n.d.), highlighting the multimedia nature of PSM emphasizes new forms of media capture that have emerged in the wake of digitization (Schiffrin 2018). We recognize the importance of studying PSM as connected to public service broadcasting institutions, many of which have a long tradition of mainstream broadcasting activities that they continue to undertake. At the same time, the question becomes whether PSB needs a broad remit when the online media landscape is so diverse, or whether public service broadcasters further distort the news business in the hypercompetitive environment (Syvertsen and Enli 2018). In other words, the very concept of PSM is an argument against those wanting to limit its independence.

We are writing this chapter during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has challenged all public communication, independent journalism, and national budgets, factors that could both encourage and curtail the future capture of PSM. This, we believe, is another powerful reason to propose a model to assess PSM capture. We aim to do so using a matrix that takes into account not only the concrete, structural forms of capture but also the kind of media systems and related contexts in which PSM operate, as well as discursive or cultural capture; that is, public discourses about PSM and their legitimacy. We focus on Europe due to its long and established history of public service broadcasting and the existence of a variety of PSM configurations in the different countries of the region.
Media Capture in Europe

European media, and public service broadcasting in particular, have served as a benchmark for independent and public interest journalism, as in academic and advocacy writings on media reform against market-driven media (e.g., McChesney and Nichols 2010). However, Europe has been by no means immune to media capture, although establishing with precision the date of media capture’s appearance is difficult: elements of media capture appeared in various countries at many points in time over the past several decades.

Examples of high media ownership concentration and political interference abounded in the 1990s. Italy has always been cited as an extreme example of controlled media, because in the early 1990s, Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi dominated both the private media market through his own conglomerate Mediaset and influenced to a high degree, through his political position, the editorial position of Radiotelevisione Italiana (RAI), the country’s public service broadcaster. But that form of influence, or what scholars referred to at the time as the “Italian anomaly,” (Mazzoleni and Vigevani 2005, p. 869) has since evolved into media capture, an extreme model of control that characterizes an increasing number of European media systems.

In media-captured environments, political interest groups and powerful businesses join forces to take control not only of a specific private media holding but of most of the country’s privately owned media outlets. They not only try to influence the editorial perspective of the public broadcaster but also systematically purge public media of all critical journalists and manage these institutions as little more than state propaganda channels (see, e.g., Milosavljević and Poler 2018).

The first elements of media capture, particularly the growing role of the government in the market, whether directly through regulators, state media, and public resources or indirectly through groups of media owners associated with or indebted to the government, appeared in Central and Eastern Europe late in the first decade of this century. At that time, a global economic crisis combined with disruptive technologies that shook media structures worldwide to create an unprecedented opportunity for powerful governments and oligarchs to take over financially ailing media companies (Dragomir 2018). Those new realities alienated many of the foreign investors that had been operating across Central and Eastern Europe since the early 1990s. In the Czech Republic, for example, five
large foreign publishers, most from Germany, left the market during the late 2000s, selling their assets to a clutch of wealthy businessmen with close ties to politics and investments in a wide array of industries. One of them, Andrej Babis, later became prime minister.

However, the media capture phenomenon is hardly limited to Central and Eastern Europe. The model has expanded globally in recent years, embraced by governments because it gives them powerful mechanisms to control the mainstream narrative and boost their electoral clout. Two of the most captured media environments in the world (if we exclude failed states and outright dictatorships) are Turkey and Hungary. In Turkey, following a failed coup in 2016, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his allies took over almost all the country’s media. In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orban, with the support of a powerful oligarchy, has systematically taken over most of the media companies in the country. Europe’s eastern periphery—countries like Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia—is also experiencing capture, with a strong level of Russian involvement (Dragomir 2019).

Media capture is also becoming a predominant form of control in several Western European countries. In Spain’s otherwise vibrant media market, an increasing number of media outlets, including the public service broadcaster RTVE, lack the autonomy to cover relevant issues under pressure from the government and corporations, especially banking groups (Minder 2015). The rise of right-wing parties in many European countries also created an opportunity for politicians to cement their control of the public media.

Another important trend is the cross-border expansion of oligarchic structures across Europe. For example, companies close to Hungary’s Orban have recently invested in media outlets across Eastern Europe, including Slovenia, North Macedonia, and Romania. In the same five-year period, large financial groups from Slovakia and the Czech Republic made a series of major acquisitions across the region (Dragomir 2019).

3 Contextualizing PSM Capture for Comparative Assessments

The concept of media capture is well established. Country-specific studies ranging from nations in Central and Eastern Europe (Dragomir 2018b, 2019; Milosavljević and Poler 2018) to Hong Kong (Frisch et al. 2018) and Latin America (Márquez-Ramírez and Guerrero 2017) to Turkey
(Yeşil 2018) reveal two key observations discussed in the introduction. First, national media systems and contexts play an important role in the degree and forms of capture, and we can argue that each country is somehow a “special” case. Second, each situation still entails some consideration to both political and commercial challenges, including common themes that Schiffrin (2018, pp. 1035–1039) has described as new forms of capture: the challenges that digitization has brought about for the business models of journalism, the impact of the political transformations of the twenty-first century, and, in some cases, the role of philanthropy in funding journalism.

Following Dragomir’s (2019) four-part model, PSM is but one component in possible manifestations of national and structural media capture. At the same time, PSM may be subjected to other forms of capture, such as public funding mechanisms. The key questions become, “How to dissect and understand the various roles played in the capture of and possible hardships faced by PSM, and how to compare features of one national context to another?” In our framework, we examine PSM by taking into account the specificities of each media form, but not in isolation from different forms of capture. Our focus is on the independence of PSM and on the actors that challenge it. It should be noted that media capture is not equivalent to what has been identified as political parallelism, that is the reflection of political parties in the structures of media systems and organizations (e.g., Hallin and Mancini 2004). In this model, media capture is understood as the process of intensification of political influence (over PSM in this case) in different ways.

Even so, it is crucial to address the role of PSM in a national media system when assessing media capture and PSM. This involves not only market share or funding model but also the broader sociocultural meaning of PSM in its national context. Another dimension is the variety of public discourses concerning, and especially opposing, the national PSM organization in question. Here, the notion of “cultural capture” (Woodall 2018, p. 1183; see also Kwak 2014) is helpful for our framework. Voices critical of PSM do not equal or necessarily precede media capture. Nonetheless, given that PSM organizations are often challenged on different fronts by commercial competitors and political adversaries alike, debates in the media can highlight how and by whom the legitimacy of PSM is challenged and whether regulators internalize the views of particular interest groups. Finally, at the core is structural capture, which is the different concrete forms of media capture and specifically the capture of PSM.
While we assume no direct causal relationship between these dimensions, together they allow us to better reflect on different cases, identify trends and patterns, and find possible responses to capture. Given the complex nature of the causes of and forms of capture, we have chosen to focus on a descriptive, qualitative approach founded on a framework based on three core questions.

1. **National media system: What is the role of the national PSM organization in the given media system?**

   Here, the focus is on describing essential characteristics of the national media landscape from the perspective of the PSM organization: What is its position historically? What kinds of content and services does it offer? Who are its competitors? What does it mean for audiences? We also highlight some comparative research and key statistics to position PSM in a national context.

2. **Current public discourses: How is the role of PSM discussed in the media? What aspects of PSM are especially highlighted?**

   Here, we depict key themes from media publicity from the past five years, including questions of content (genres), viewpoints, access, multiplatform services, and funding. To create these common categories for the analysis, we used Finland as a case study and examined some 140 critical media commentaries about the Finnish Broadcasting Company from March 2015 through January 2020 (Yle 2020a). We deliberately focus on public discussions instead of policy analysis, as policies to curb PSM can be considered a part of structural capture.

3. **Structural Capture: (How) Are PSM subjected to structural media capture?**

   Here, we use the model developed in “Media Capture in Europe” (Dragomir 2019). Do we witness a governance capture of PSM? Is it about financial pressures or regulatory measures that impact PSM? Finally, how do other possible forms of capture directed at other media affect the role of PSM?
4 Testing the Framework: A Five-Country Assessment

Our starting point in developing a comparative framework for assessing PSM capture lies in the premise that contextual factors matter. Even the selection of case countries for this chapter follows that approach. To choose the countries for comparison, we have employed two operationalizations and extensions of the renowned Hallin and Mancini (2004) model of three media systems. One operationalization has translated the model into comparable indicators depicting the inclusivity of the press market, journalistic professionalism, political parallelism, ownership regulation, press subsidies, and the status of public broadcasting. That study found distinct models of media systems that they call Central, Northern, Southern, and Western clusters (Brüggemann et al. 2014). A related study looked at specific media system clusters in Central and Eastern Europe (Castro Herrero et al. 2017).

We build on this modeling of media systems for two reasons. First, the original model and its reiterations are centered on the relationship between media and politics, which is undoubtedly a key factor to consider when assessing PSM capture. Second, the clusters may assist in understanding developments within relatively similar situations and perhaps point to transferable solutions. Accordingly, we have chosen countries to ensure that each cluster is represented: Belgium from the Western cluster, the Czech Republic from the Eastern-Central cluster (Castro Herrero et al. 2017), Finland from the Northern cluster, Spain from the Southern cluster, and the United Kingdom from the Central cluster.

Despite the comparative statistical elements that have informed the clusters in the research discussed above, we apply these clusters as guides for selecting countries rather than as the essence of our comparisons. In the cluster model, the role of public service broadcasting is quantified by its market share and revenue (Brüggemann et al. 2014). To provide a more nuanced picture, we apply a qualitative descriptive approach of each country to map specific systemic affordances, discursive challenges, and manifestations of capture in each context.

4.1 Belgium

Belgium belongs to the Western media system cluster of European countries (Brüggemann et al. 2014; see also Hallin 2016), which are
characterized by a solid print media sector consisting of high-circulation newspapers that are both commercially driven and organized along party lines, a history of high political parallelism where media is seen as an institution with a mission close to parties and organized social groups, and relatively heterogeneous ownership regulation. The country sports a high Internet penetration rate of over 94% (Newman et al. 2020) and scores high in press freedom rankings; it was placed 12th on the Reporters Without Borders (RSF) 2020 World Press Freedom Index (RSF 2020).

The Belgian broadcasting market must be understood through the role that it plays in the broader Belgian society. Essentially, the Belgian broadcasting market reflects the structure of the Belgian state administration and society, which is divided into sociopolitical and linguistic pillars that exist and operate autonomously. In practice, the media follow these distinctions. As Belgium is divided into the country’s two main communities, Flemish- or Dutch-speaking Flanders and French-speaking Wallonia, control over broadcasting is in the hands of the ministries of culture or media in the two communities. Belgium has three PSM companies: Vlaamse Radio- en Televisieomroeporganisatie (VRT, targeting the Flemish community); Radio-télévision belge de la Communauté française (RTBF, the public media company catering to the Wallonia community); and Belgischer Rundfunk (BRF, the public broadcaster serving Belgium’s small German-speaking community).

Thanks primarily to the rules and regulations in place, Belgium’s PSM have generally been insulated from outside pressures and political control. For example, the VRT developed its own newsroom statute in 1998; it ensures the independence of newsroom management. Moreover, the governance structure of both VRT and RTBF not only is determined by legislation and government-determined institutional arrangements but also results from the corporate culture within these organizations (Donders et al. 2019).

The independence of public service broadcasters in Belgium is, along with other factors, responsible for their strong audience figures. Both VRT and RTBF are leaders in audience figures in their language markets despite strong competition for RTBF from other French-language channels. At the same time, they are recognized as the top brands among news media outlets (Reuters 2019).

Despite this resilience to political attacks and pressure, the PSM in Belgium have been confronted with painful reforms in recent years, aimed primarily at trimming their finances. RTBF continues to be funded by
license fees. Flanders, by contrast, ended its license fee in 2002 and replaced it with a government subsidy. In fall 2019, the government of the Flemish region announced plans to slash some €40m of the VRT’s budget. Such measures, which will lead to job losses, are expected to profoundly and negatively affect the broadcaster’s autonomy and editorial independence.

Although these setbacks are far from creating a discourse strong enough to destabilize the PSM in Belgium, the growing tendency of politicians to influence public media in that country has been worrisome (Raeymaeckers and Heinderyckx 2017). A report from the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) found a medium level of political pressure on PSM in Belgium, which is common in several European countries, but worse than in various Western and Nordic European countries with solid public media systems (EBU 2020b).

4.2 Czech Republic

The media system in the Czech Republic has followed an evolution common to other countries in Central and Eastern Europe, characterized by elements of the former communist state media, which stubbornly resisted change (Castro Herrero et al. 2017). The governing structures of PSM in these countries are highly politicized, and the systems of allocating state funds to the media lack transparency. In this type of media system, the political parties effectively “colonize” media outlets, using them as channels of communication in their own interest (Bajomi-Lázár 2014). These countries are characterized by a “business parallelism,” a situation in which media owners are involved in both politics and other industries (Zielonka 2015). Due to economic problems in these countries (stemming from low advertising revenues and a lack of press subsidy mechanisms), media systems in this Eastern model also have a high level of media ownership concentration.

Within the Central-Eastern European typology, scholars identified three cluster of media systems: an Eastern one bringing together countries such as Romania, Bulgaria, and Hungary, a Northern one specific to the Baltic countries and Slovakia, and a Central one that includes countries such as Croatia, Poland, Slovenia, and the Czech Republic (Castro Herrero et al. 2017). The Central group to which the Czech Republic belongs is characterized by the relative strength of PSM and lower levels of foreign ownership.
As a result of the changes in media ownership after the economic crisis that began in 2007, the Czech media system is now highly captured. Since then, oligarchic groups have increased their dominance of the media through a wave of takeovers that pushed most of the foreign media owners out of the market. Unlike common media capture cases, where governments and oligarchs first impose control over state-administered institutions and regulators, the oligarchy and its allied political groups in the Czech Republic targeted the private media first. Since 2013, a group of powerful businesses operating in a wide range of industries has taken over most of the country’s private media (Dragomir 2018b). In light of all these developments, it is not surprising that the Czech Republic ranks the lowest on the RSF Press Freedom Index among the five countries analyzed in this study, although it retains a respectable position (40th) in global terms (RSF 2020).

Unlike typical media capture cases, the Czech PSM have been the last to come under control. That was not necessarily a calculated decision of the Czech oligarchs, one of whom, Andrej Babis, became the country’s prime minister in 2017; rather, it is a consequence of the resilience that the Czech PSM company had built over the years. Czech TV, the country’s public broadcaster, is in fact one of the few public service broadcasters in Central and Eastern Europe that has managed to successfully stave off political attacks throughout the years. This reputation of relative independence and the track record of the Czech public media for quality productions (drama, political and current affairs shows, documentaries) have won them solid audience figures. With an audience share hovering around 30% for all its channels combined, public television fights for leadership on the television market with TV Nova, the largest privately owned broadcaster in the country. Moreover, the public service broadcaster is the news media brand with the highest recognition in the Czech Republic (Reuters 2019).

Nevertheless, as oligarchs have taken over most of the state structures during the past five years, attacks against the public media have intensified and, with them, an anti-public media narrative has emerged. The discourse against public media is captured (and led) by a string of private media that are visibly determined to tarnish the reputation of Czech TV, which is a major competitor in the local news production market. One of the most aggressive detractors of Czech TV is a group of interests around President Milos Zeman. Private media outlets
supportive of the president, with TV Barrandov the most vocal, have been waging critical campaigns against the public media, primarily focused on alleged mismanagement of public money. Czech TV gets most of its funding from license fees, a tax of CZK 135 (€5) a month paid by each household that has devices technologically able to access television content. Czech Radio, the country’s public service radio, is also funded to a large extent by revenues from (a separate) license fee of CZK 45 (€1.75) a month (Dragomir 2018b).

As in other countries, the narrative critical of the public media is also supported by political parties in the Czech Republic. The political rhetoric, however, tends to change significantly after an election, as the winning parties try to use their influence to gain access to the broadcaster while losing parties begin to attack the channel. In recent years, Prime Minister Babis has adopted a strategy of rapprochement with Czech TV in an apparent effort to win the support of the station’s journalists. In recent years, the station’s loudest critics have been left-wing and right-wing political forces (Dragomir 2018b).

4.3 Finland

Finland belongs to the group of countries that Trine Syvertsen et al. (2014) call “Nordic Media Welfare States.” These countries are characterized, among other things, by universal media and communications services, strong and institutionalized editorial freedom, and cultural policies for the media.

While the Nordic countries are by no means uniform in their systems and communications policy approaches, these characteristics align with the dimensions of the media system model for the Northern cluster (Brüggemann et al. 2014): the wide reach of journalism, professional journalism, low levels of ownership regulation, and relatively low political parallelism. In addition, the Nordics all feature robust public service broadcasting, the national importance and popularity of which has not dramatically declined with the expansion of commercial television (Syvertsen et al. 2014). Finland fits well into the Northern cluster. In addition to the above dimensions, it is notable that Internet penetration in Finland is at 94% and that the country ranks at the top in terms of press freedom year after year; in 2020, Finland was second on the RSF Press Freedom Index (RSF 2020).
The role of the Finnish Broadcasting Company (Yleisradio Oy, or Yle) in the Finnish media system and Finnish society, is central and has remained so, even with the proliferation of commercial broadcasting and online media. Television broadcasting in Finland started as a distinctive mixed system based on the coexistence of public and private media. The commercial operator MTV would broadcast on Yle-owned channels and partly fund public broadcasting. Broadcasting licenses were not granted to other parties. This de facto Yle monopoly ended in the 1990s with the so-called managed liberalization of television broadcasting, which led to the creation of a genuinely dual system (Hellman 1999). As in many European systems, a significant part of Yle’s funding was generated from license fees, but the fee was changed to a public broadcasting tax as of January 1, 2013. In 2020, this Yle tax is 2.5% of an individual’s taxable income, up to a maximum of €163 a year.

Today, Yle remains well funded and has a notable reach. Its revenues in 2019 was €478m, an impressive figure in a country with 5.5 million inhabitants; moreover, Yle’s funding level has not changed in recent years. In 2019, 96% of Finns accessed one of Yle’s services at least once a week (Yle 2019). Yle boasts four television channels and six radio channels as well as Yle Areena, its popular streaming service. Yle’s television channels accounted for 44% of the yearly audience share in 2019 (Finnpanel 2019). Both its broadcasting and online news are considered amongst the top news brands in the country (Newman et al. 2020, p. 69). Even so, Yle is struggling with and diligently seeking to solve the dilemma that many other PSM, including those in the countries examined in this chapter, are facing: how to reach younger audiences (e.g., Schulz et al. 2019).

While Yle has not been subjected to major attempts at capture, it has been at the center of public debates for decades. As Trine Syvertsen et al. (2014) note, Nordic public service broadcasting used to carry stigmas of both right- and left-wing biases, particularly in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. This was due to several factors, including “careful political journalism” resulting from the broadcasters’ overall loyalty to the “social-democratic order.” Today, Yle serves audiences with diverse political views. The average level of trust in PSM news is high across the left, center, and right of the political spectrum (Schulz et al. 2019, p. 25).

Nevertheless, the Finnish Broadcasting Company is frequently criticized in the media, mainly by other media and political actors. Most recent discussions focus on the lack of diversity in content and biased
political viewpoints. Many commentaries insinuate or openly allege that Yle may not be serving different audience groups equally, whether the issue is about age, language group, or region. There are also questions about Yle’s remit, as the broadcaster produces popular content that competes unfairly—thanks to the Yle tax—with commercial media (Yle 2020a).

According to an EBU report (2020b) on PSM and trust, Yle fares well when it comes to perceived political pressure. In fact, among the five countries examined in this chapter, Finland is the only one with low perceived pressure on its PSM organization. An example of the relatively mundane challenges faced by the Finnish Broadcasting Company is an incident that might not have made waves in other contexts but elicited a major debate over Yle’s role in 2017 and temporarily dropped the country’s Press Freedom Index ranking down a few places. The affair known as “Sipilägate,” named after the Prime Minister Juha Sipilä, involved his attempt to influence news coverage on the public broadcaster (Yle 2017):

The PM admitted to sending around 20 emails to a Yle journalist reporting on a government decision to award €200 million in additional funding to the cash-strapped mine. Just two weeks later, the stricken mine awarded a half-million-euro contract to a company owned by Sipilä’s relatives…. Sipilä reportedly applied pressure on the national broadcaster to kill further reporting on the matter, prompting two journalists to quit. They cited political pressure as the reason for their decisions, although senior management in the company denied caving to the Prime Minister’s demands.

In general, however, debates for and against Yle are part and parcel of Finland’s political debate culture. In early 2020, the fiercest foe was the right-wing True Finns party. In its program for media and cultural policy, True Finns claimed that Yle’s coverage of the European Union and migration issues are especially biased and that Yle offers services of little use, such as Swedish-language programming for that linguistic minority group (Karkkola 2020). The party’s highly unrealistic proposal was to do away with the Yle tax and introduce a pay service for television broadcasting. However, the shift from the license fee to tax-based funding for PSM could be a sign of laying the ground for pressure through funding decisions (Public Media Alliance 2019). While even commercial competitors like the largest Finnish daily Helsingin Sanomat praised Yle’s COVID-19
coverage in spring 2020 (Kanerva 2020), the corona-induced challenges to the economy and the state budget may affect Yle’s financing model, as the Finnish taxation system does allow for changes to the tax rate. Another sudden challenge emerged in June 2020, highlighting the challenges of Yle, even if it is the most trusted news source and a central actor in the media landscape. The Finnish Media Federation, an advocacy organization for private companies in the media and printing industries, had in 2017 filed a complaint with the EU Commission, claiming that Yle’s textual online content is in conflict with EU state aid rules. Three years thereafter the government, after (unpublished) discussions with the Commission, considered amending the Act on Yleisradio accordingly, to limit its text-based web content mainly to support its audio and video content. In practice, this might mean less competition to commercial online news providers (Yle 2020b).

4.4 Spain

As in other Southern European countries, the mass media in Spain have traditionally been seen as means of “ideological expression and political mobilization,” because of their involvement in the political conflicts that characterized the history of the country (Papathanassopoulos 2007). An important characteristic of the Southern cluster to which Spain belongs is a high degree of political parallelism (Brüggemann et al. 2014).

Spain’s PSM—both the national broadcaster RTVE and the country’s regional broadcast media—have been the targets of criticism for more than a decade, mainly because the politicization of these outlets has negative consequences on their reporting. In fact, government interference has characterized the Spanish PSM throughout most of its history (de Miguel et al. 2013).

The high level of capture of the PSM in Spain, as elsewhere, is achieved through two mechanisms: financing and by appointing the governing structures that manage and supervise the operations of these media. Spain’s PSM legislation does not include provisions to prevent the politicization of RTVE. In 2012, Spain’s parliament amended the law on public broadcasting to give itself the power to appoint the chair and members of the public broadcaster’s governing board through a simple majority instead of a supermajority (two-thirds of all legislators), as had been the case until 2012. Notably, the board chair has the power to appoint all the
key editorial positions. This procedure allows for the direct influence of politicians on the broadcaster’s editorial policies and practices.

The governing structure model of the regional PSM largely mirrors the RTVE model. Regional parliaments, or in some cases regional governments, are in charge of appointing the governing boards of the regional public media and their general directors who, as with RTVE, have significant power in their outlets; they choose the people who will fill their stations’ management structures (Fernández Alonso and Fernández Viso 2012). There are 13 public regional broadcasters, 12 of which are grouped in the Federación de Organismos de Radio y Televisión Autonómicos (FORTA), an alliance of regional public broadcasters. Some regional public broadcasters are actually for-profit corporations; others are public entities with an administrative structure similar to other public offices (Campos-Freire et al. 2020).

Beyond the power of appointment, the other mechanism used to control Spain’s PSM in Spain is funding. The Spanish government spends vast amounts of money on the media. While that is not necessarily a bad thing, it has a negative impact on the outlets’ editorial independence, particularly when those funds come with clear strings attached. In 2018, the government spent over €2bn on the media, including funding for RTVE and regional public media and financing for state advertising. That is nearly double the turnover of Atresmedia, the largest private media company in Spain (Campos-Freire et al. 2020).

RTVE is by far Spain’s largest recipient of government media funding. In 2018, some 37% of RTVE’s total budget of €916m came directly from the national budget, but the rest of its funding is also a disguised form of government aid, as it comes either from fees for broadcast spectrum rental or taxes imposed on private broadcasters and telecom firms. RTVE has been funded this way since 2009, when a law requiring the broadcaster to stop carrying advertisements took effect. The regional public service broadcasters had a combined budget upwards of €1.07bn in 2019, some 90% of which was contributed by regional governments (Campos-Freire et al. 2020).

Both the political influence in how PSM are managed and their privileged financial position have become key themes feeding a strong critical discourse around Spain’s public media system. This criticism is both internal (fuelled by the broadcasters’ own staff) and external (from various parts of civil society or industry players).
The criticism within the public media is triggered mainly by the political pressures that journalists working in these media must grapple with on a regular basis. Examples of reporters at RTVE mobilizing to stave off such attacks abound. In 2018, more than 50 RTVE employees launched an initiative to defend “an authentic free, independent and plural public radio and television” to “avoid abuse and reprisals” (Europa Press 2018). RTVE’s News Council, an internal body working to guarantee independence and unbiased information, has repeatedly reported cases of manipulation by political authorities. For example, between July 2015 and January 2016, a total of 113 cases of bad practices were recorded (Nortes 2018).

In 2019, plans to centralize RTVE’s news programming at its headquarters, which journalists feared would have led to more control, came under fierce critical scrutiny, prompting MujeresRTVE, a group of the outlet’s women reporters, to launch an online campaign denouncing political meddling in the broadcaster’s affairs (Herrera 2019).

Similar protests regularly erupt among the regional public media. In an unprecedented protest, the staff of CRTVG, the public service broadcaster in Galicia, took to the streets in September 2018 and called on the government “to stop meddling in the station’s affairs” (Media Power Monitor 2018).

The criticism and complaints of the journalists working in public media are exploited by the broadcaster’s enemies, whose goal is to shape a narrative that will tarnish or even ruin the PSM’s reputation in Spanish society. Two key players are central to managing this narrative: private media and political parties.

The attacks of private media against the public broadcasters were prompted until 2009 by RTVE’s competition for advertising revenue, which is the main source of funding for privately owned media. Once RTVE stopped airing advertisements in 2009, it was expected that these attacks would cease. Nevertheless, because part of the public media budget comes from a tax imposed on private broadcasters and telecom firms, this critical narrative has continued unabated.

“RTVE, like all television channels, is at the service of its owner, in this case, the government in power and this, in turn, coerces the private sector to finance it,” wrote Marc Fortuño, a journalist at El Blog Salmón, a digital portal. “The end result is a medium that serves as a transmission belt for the ideology of the government, especially in the news media” (Fortuño 2018). These problems often prompt experts and other observers to call for the closure of RTVE.
Political parties also exploit the critical narrative against public media for their own benefit. Ironically, though, their stance toward the public media is more tempered, as they know that the broadcaster will be a powerful tool if they take the reins of power. Criticism of RTVE’s programming has come from almost every part of the political spectrum at one time or another. In recent years, complaints have come from key opposition parties, including the right-wing party Vox and the Popular Party. The central theme of their criticism was the alleged manipulation of the editorial line of RTVE by the ruling Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party and Podemos, its junior coalition partner.

What is important to note, however, is that although the critical narrative surrounding the public media in Spain is clearly dominated and used to a large extent by opposition parties and receives ample coverage in the private media, the main arguments put forward by these critics hold true to a significant extent. That distinguishes Spain from highly captured media systems where such a critical discourse against PSM does not exist simply because an elite of politicians and oligarchs control both private and public media.

4.5 United Kingdom

In the media system cluster model (Brüggemann et al. 2014), the United Kingdom is an example of the Central cluster, defined by strong public broadcasting, strict ownership regulation, and low press subsidies. Indeed, public media has historically played a major role in British society, being accessed, accepted, and appreciated due to its independence and professionalism. The political independence of the BBC, which has made it extremely resilient to capture in many situations, was secured by a set of structural and normative sources of support. Structurally, the British broadcasting was created as a “formally autonomous system” rather than a politically affiliated one (Kelly 1983), which is an important distinction compared to PSM in other countries.

Much of the BBC’s resistance to capture has been achieved through regulatory arrangements that are largely related to its governing structures and its funding model. The powers of the BBC, for example, are laid out in a Royal Charter (rather than ordinary parliamentary legislation) that has usually been reviewed once every ten years. The broadcaster has a supervisory trust in place that watches for any threats to the BBC’s
independence. All key executive appointments, except for its Director-General, are made by the BBC itself. The broadcaster’s funding model is based on a license fee that all households in Britain equipped with audio-visual content-receiving devices must pay. All these rules enable internal editorial independence: only journalists have authority over journalists, and they all abide by editorial codes and guidelines (Blumler 2016).

Despite all these rules and mechanisms, BBC’s independence has never been absolutely guaranteed (Hanretty 2011). British politicians have routinely attempted to influence how the media—especially the popular BBC—cover their work. That has forced the BBC to carefully manage its relations with the government, which are not free from open conflicts between journalists and politicians or even threats by the authorities against the BBC (Seaton 2015). Throughout its history, criticism of BBC coverage that culminated in the resignation of its Director-General has come from both the Labour and Conservative parties. However, in most cases, the BBC has responded with aplomb, rarely tempering or changing its coverage under pressure, unless it admitted wrongdoing or sloppy reporting.

However, the past decade or so has seen an intensifying series of concerted attacks against the BBC from a circle of powerful businesses associated with some of the largest private media in Britain, particularly those owned by Rupert Murdoch, and the Conservative Party. That has led to a consistent bias in some of the BBC’s news coverage, particularly of the Labour Party (Dragomir 2016).

Although the BBC cannot be defined as a captured media, its editors and journalists still enjoying editorial freedom and independence, never in its history has the BBC come under such a targeted and fierce attack as under Boris Johnson’s premiership. A product of Conservative-leaning newspapers, Johnson focused his onslaught on the BBC’s funding model. In February 2020, he called for severe cutbacks at the BBC and confirmed plans to replace the license fee model (where households are legally obliged to pay the fee) with a subscription-based model, under which households will be offered the choice to pay the fee (PA Media 2020). Leading Conservative politicians suggested turning the BBC into a service that could imitate the success of Netflix, a video-streaming platform with more than 10 million UK users. However, the BBC and its supporters argued that it has a much wider focus than Netflix and reports on the news, which Netflix does not. The government’s initial plans were to sack
450 members of the BBC News team and slash roughly £80m of its budget by 2022.

Some British observers noted that Johnson’s ire was fuelled by the BBC’s unflattering coverage of the Tories in the 2019 elections. However, a more in-depth analysis points to a deeper dissatisfaction with the BBC in the wider circle of Conservative politicians and media. The attacks on the BBC come at a time of growing public dissatisfaction with the license fee, under pressure from subscription-based content providers.

One key theme in the narrative against the BBC is the idea of over-spending, which is used to negatively influence public opinion about how the corporation uses taxpayer money. These aspects have been excessively covered by some of the UK’s Conservative-leaning media, especially those run by News Corp, Murdoch’s media group. Headlines feeding into this narrative such as “Bloated BBC needs a boss who accepts it must change and represent more than the London media elite” (Wootton 2020) or “BBC paid out £1.6 million on flights in one year despite its push to go green” (Moriarty 2020) regularly appear in The Sun, one of News Corp’s key titles in Britain. It is partly these developments affecting editorial independence that placed the UK 35th (respectable, but well behind the top performers) on the RSF Press Freedom Index (RSF 2020).

The government’s plans to alter the BBC funding model will be extremely disruptive. In 2016, Damian Tambini (2016) wrote that “informal and pervasive timidity and self-censorship that may infect an organization that faces funding cuts, uncertainty about the future scope, and new funding burden, is worse than the prospect of direct editorial interference through regulation.” That appears to be precisely the thinking behind the 2020 wave of attacks by the Conservatives against the BBC. Dismantling the BBC funding model will not only weaken the broadcaster’s autonomy but will alter the very idea of public media in the UK. Moreover, it will have lasting repercussions on struggling PSM elsewhere that have closely followed and sought to imitate the BBC model, which is the case for many countries that have undertaken public broadcasting.

However, the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has led to significant changes in the narrative about the role of the public media. With Britons facing previously unimaginable challenges during the crisis, demand for accurate and objective news has surged since March 2020. Already recognized before the crisis as the leading news brand in the UK
(Reuters 2019), the BBC saw its audience, which was the largest in the country before the crisis at some 30%, grow by 44% between March and May 2020. Its iPlayer streaming service had a record 20.4 million requests to stream programs on March 23, 2020 (d’Ancona 2020).

Although this surge in popularity has changed the tone of the debate about the BBC, the corporation is still likely to face numerous challenges as consumption patterns and financing models continue to change. Even in the five months before March 2020, The Times reported that 82,000 households cancelled their license fees, either encouraged by plans (made public by the government before the crisis) to decriminalize failure to pay the license fee or forced by the financial challenges brought on by the crisis (Moore 2020). What the future of the BBC will look like is hard to predict, but its current financing model appears to be heading rapidly toward extinction.

5 NEW CONTEXT: DISCUSSION

[The BBC’s] role helping the population grapple with a world muted by the pandemic has started to pacify the BBC’s critics—a reversal in fortune when the public broadcaster started the year defending itself against attacks from both sides of the political divide and facing serious questions from Boris Johnson’s government about the future of its funding. Tsang (2020)

We are writing this chapter in a new kind of context during the COVID-19 crisis, which has also been called an “infodemic” (e.g., Charlton 2020), given its vast challenges of inadequate and patently false dissemination of information.

In this situation, it seems that the value of PSM is being rediscovered. The pandemic is likely to temper or even scuttle the plans to disrupt the BBC’s funding model, given the corporation’s role in keeping its viewers abreast of the latest developments. The BBC is not alone in experiencing an uptick in appreciation and audience. An overview of news audience figures from 29 members of the EBU reveals that the average viewing share of PSM evening news was up 20% in March 2020 over the first quarter of 2019. In addition, younger audiences began to tune in, with an average increase of 44% over 2019. The daily PSM online and YouTube reach peaked in mid-March 2020 (EBU 2020a).

Despite this growing popularity, PSM are paradoxically facing numerous threats; some are triggered by continuously changing markets,
technological advances, and antagonistic political voices, while others are sparked by the new realities that the pandemic crisis has created. In the UK, for example, although quality content is in high demand, harsh economic conditions are already forcing an increasing number of households to stop paying the license fee, which is likely to have a destabilizing effect on the BBC. The PSM financing model itself is being disrupted as the content industry rapidly evolves into a subscription-based environment. Moreover, whether genuinely prompted by the pandemic crisis or using it as a pretext, governments are showing signs of trying to control the public discourse even more by tightening their grip on national PSM.

The operation and remit of PSM are being shaped by both these emerging trends and the status and history of the PSM in specific contexts. Indeed, our framework for analyzing PSM capture in its contexts unsurprisingly reveals that the more deeply rooted the ethos and praxis of public service broadcasting is in a national media system, the more resilient PSM organizations are when facing pressure.

However, the framework calls attention to the fact that PSM are an essential front in the battle over meanings in political discourses and media policy decision-making throughout Europe. The more turbulent the economic and political conditions—precisely when independent, well-resourced media are most needed—the more likely public media organizations are to face hardship. Viewed through our model, the five countries examined, despite dramatic differences in context, exhibit the features discovered in other studies of media capture; namely, digitization and the political trends of the twenty-first century.

The proposed framework is by no means a predictive tool; nor does it signal that specific comparable quantifiable indicators could measure media capture. Rather, it showcases how easily PSM can be politicized and used in various ways as a symbol of bias, wasteful public spending, or the quality of content and reliability of information (Table 12.1).

Against this backdrop, the risk of destabilizing the BBC may not have completely disappeared with the pandemic. Even so, the framework depicted here may help to assess the state of media capture and prompt policy innovation in the post-crisis rebuilding era. Trust in the media is about not only the credibility of content but also the trustworthiness of the media—in this case, PSM—as an institution (e.g., Procházka and Schweiger 2019). This framework helps to assess the latter which we believe is a prerequisite of the former.
Table 12.1  Summary findings based on the comparative framework for public service media

|                  | Belgium | Czech Republic | Finland | Spain | United Kingdom |
|------------------|---------|----------------|---------|-------|----------------|
| **Role of PSM in**<br>**the national media system?** | Strong legal and cultural standing, despite linguistic divisions into different organizations and their varying models (including funding) (Western cluster) | Relatively strong standing in a highly captured media system (Eastern-Central cluster) | Strong, central, continued significant reach and trust (Northern cluster) | Significant national and regional player, but increasingly weakened by its highly politicized structure (Southern cluster) | Iconic cultural presence, with a set of structural and normative sources of support for independence (Central cluster) |
| **Main discursive challenges to PSM?**<br>No evidence that indicates a concerted attack on the role and operation of public media | Private media outlets supportive of the president waging critical campaigns against the public media | A recurring part of the political agenda: claims of distortion, especially regarding the challenging news market, bias, waste of public resources in an era of abundant digital content; challenged by populist politics | Critical voices by the opposition regarding both political influence in how PSM are managed and their privileged financial position; both reflect capture | Critical voices regarding elitism and biased content, mainly from political groups aligned with the interests of large commercial media conglomerates |

(continued)
Table 12.1 (continued)

| Structural capture? | Belgium | Czech Republic | Finland | Spain | United Kingdom |
|---------------------|---------|----------------|---------|-------|----------------|
| Low possibility: growing political influence and cuts in financial resources | High possibility: one of the few public service broadcasters in Central or Eastern Europe that has managed to successfully stave off political attacks, but under intensified public attacks (see above) | Low possibility: from license fee to budgeted public funding; narrowing the content remit online | In place: government interference is typical through financing and the appointment of the governing structure | High possibility: attacks on the funding model are already financially destabilizing the public media, creating room for political pressures and interference |

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