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## **The economics of public service television and the citizenship rhetoric\***

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### **Abstract**

Facing strong competition and financial hardship, Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) operators are redefining their role and re-inventing new futures. The Portuguese PSB, *Radiotelevisão Portuguesa* (RTP) is no exception and important changes have recently been introduced in the traditional ‘public service’ model. The centre-right government – in office since 2002 with a qualified majority – perceived the restructuring of RTP as a major political goal and, in an unprecedented move, it has decided to hand out one RTP’s generalist channel to ‘civil society’. This article looks at this political decision and its financial and economic implications. It argues that as far as rhetoric went, citizens had the centre-stage in this new ‘participatory model’ but it is economics rather than citizenry that is at the very heart of this strategy.

**Key words:** public service, television, economy, civil society, citizenship

The increasing participation of citizens in the definition and implementation of the Public Service Broadcasting channels (PSB) has been presented by several authors (e. g., Raboy, 1994 and 1996) as the way forward for the uncertain non-commercial television sector. Facing fierce competition and financially stretched, PSB operators face the redefinition of their traditional role. Depending generically from the governments and/

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or from regulatory bodies, the reconfiguration of public televisions is perceived as inevitable and the participatory argument has been integrated in the political discourse.

The Portuguese PSB, *Radiotelevisão Portuguesa* (recently renamed Rádio e Televisão de Portugal – RTP), is no exception to this general framework. Neglected by the socialists (in power from 1996 to 2002) and unable to solve its enormous debt, RTP was just there to be redesigned by the centre-right government<sup>1</sup> in office since March 2002. Indeed, the current executive perceived the restructuring of RTP as a major political goal. In the strategic document ‘New Options for the Audiovisual Sector’ (2002), the government clarified its intention to reduce the existing two national generalist public service channels to only one. RTP1 was to remain as a generalist channel whilst RTP2 (renamed *Canal 2* and later *A Dois* or 2:) was to be handed out to civil society.

According to the government this channel, provisionally called ‘Society channel’ (*‘Canal Sociedade’*) would be a medium of ‘direct communication and relationship between different partners and the public, without the state intermediation’. However, so far the second national channel is still far from any consistent participatory model but the government has already managed to substantially reduce costs.

This article aims to demonstrate the deep difference between political promise and political delivery. As far as the rhetoric went, citizens had the centre-stage in this new participatory model but as far as reality can show up to now it is economics rather than citizenry that is at the very heart of the new strategy.

### Looking for a less expensive Public Service

When social democrats returned to power in 2002, the audiovisual sector was perceived as a crucial area. The previous socialist government (1996-2002) has seriously neglected the Broadcasting Public Service (PBS)’s financial situation and therefore *Radiotelevisão Portuguesa* (RTP) was facing a major debt crisis. Indeed, RTP had no financial means to survive: it had no licence fee (abolished by the social democrats in 1992) and, since 1997, RTP2 was not allowed to have commercial advertising and RTP1 had its own advertising time reduced to a maximum of 7,5 minutes per hour.

With the benefit of hindsight, the socialist media minister (*secretário de Estado*), Alberto Arons de Carvalho, perceived the abolishment of commercial advertising in RTP2 and the reduction of advertising time in RTP1 as the wrong message to the company once it looked like a sign of unequivocal prosperity (Carvalho, 2002: 35). In a book published immediately after the Prime Minister’s (António Guterres) withdrawal from power, Arons de Carvalho has publicly explained the main reason for the RTP’s dramatic situation. The government (his own) has taken the decision of reducing RTP’s advertising after a diligence by the end of 1996 of the management

<sup>1</sup> The 15<sup>th</sup> Constitutional government, led by Durão Barroso, was supported by the Social Democrat Party and by the Popular Party.

board's presidents of the two existing national private companies (Pinto Balsemão, head of *Sociedade Independente de Comunicação*, SIC, and Carlos Monjardino, head of *Televisão Independente*, TVI. 'Balsemão and Monjardino have presented this proposal as the only possible way of saving TVI from certain bankruptcy and to help SIC to breakeven'<sup>2</sup> (Carvalho, 2002: 35).

Indeed, the two Portuguese main parties (Social Democrat Party and the Socialist Party) have dramatically reduced the PSB revenues without any consideration for alternative financial sources. The social-democrats, in power from 1985 up to 1996 believed that competition between private and commercial operators would on its own ending up solving the problem. The socialists (in power from 1996 to 2002), on the other hand, faced too many internal contradictory views on the issue and did not manage to develop a coherent strategic policy for the overall audiovisual sector. The socialist's failure to work out a viable alternative for RTP led the social democrats – whilst in opposition – to call for the privatisation of the public service company.

On October 1997, the social democrat opposition leader, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, said that his party would put forward a law proposal concerning the RTP's privatisation if the company's 'manipulation, partiality, injustice and inefficiency' was to be maintained (in Pinto *et al.*, 2000). In the very same year, during the budget Parliamentary discussion, the social democrats kept on insisting in this idea. On May 1998, the Social Democrat Party finally presented to the Parliament a law proposal on the RTP's privatisation (see Pinto *et al.*, 2000). Although this proposal did not become law, it became very clear that most liberal Social Democrat Party sectors intended to keep on fighting for the RTP's total privatization whilst more moderate sectors would call for partial privatisation and/or for the attribution of so-called 'Public Service' tasks to private operators. In either way, the social democrats were henceforward perceived as having a clear intention of handing out (totally or partially) the expensive and financially adrift public service operator.

Neglected by the socialists and unable to solve its enormous debt, RTP was just there to be redesigned by the centre-right government in office since 2002. The government's programme considered the restructuring of RTP as a major political goal and stated that one of the RTP's national generalist channels should be privatized. Not differently from what has been said and written, in May 2002, the Council of Ministers decided to set up a new public service television company with only one generalist channel. The closing up of the RTP2 – understood by the cultural elite as the best RTP's channel – caused an enormous public outcry (see Pinto *et al.*, 2003) and the recently elected centre-right government's popularity started to decline as there was a public perception that the government intended to hand out the RTP's second national television frequency to private interests.

<sup>2</sup> Our translation. For practical reasons, all information in Portuguese used in this paper was translated by the authors. We do apologise if, in any case, we do not express the full meaning of the original text or speech.

In fact, whilst in opposition, the social democrats have argued for RTP's privatisation and presented a law proposal to the Parliament. However, and despite all the previous pro-market arguments, hesitations started to rise. Trying to put itself together with a difficult coalition with the Popular Party, the government started to consider that the privatisation of RTP deserved further thought. The government was not in the best position to go ahead with an unpopular and risky move.

So, hesitations became increasingly more evident and a task force was set up by the government to inform and to develop ideas on the future of the PSB. On September 2002, the working group – led by Helena Vaz da Silva – presented the results and argued against the privatisation of the RTP. The Report<sup>3</sup> sustained that RTP1 should continue operating as a generalist channel and that the terrestrial frequency used by RTP2 should be neither privatized nor used as another public generalist channel. The task force believed that the second national frequency should be put to use as an 'alternative service open to civil society in such terms that it could reinforce difference, universal principles, cohesion and proximity'.

In December 2002, three months after the public presentation of the task force results, the government put forward its own proposals in a widely publicised Report: *Novas Opções para o Audiovisual* (New Options for the Audiovisual Sector, 2002). Accordingly to the document, the responsible for the Media Tutelage, Morais Sarmiento, clarified the government's intention to reduce the existing two national generalist public service channels to only one. RTP1 was to remain as a generalist channel whilst RTP2 was to be handed out to civil society. In these circumstances, the government accepted the task force recommendation not to privatise RTP2 but it framed the new public service channel outside the RTP's scope.

In Morais Sarmiento's words, there were two possible alternatives for the second RTP channel: to remain as an integrant part of the PSB or to be privatised. But the government's most recent vision of a television public service model no longer could be expressed in this duality. "Between the state and the private sector, we have chosen civil society». Bowing to pressures and recognising the difficulty in handing out RTP2 to commercial interests, the government ended up saying that it would attribute RTP's second channel to 'civil society' but details were scarce on the 'civil society' concept and on the implementation of this model.

### **The Civil Society peculiar model**

Although the government's appointed task force on PSB had already mentioned the necessary link between public service and civil society, it may be argued that the government managed to find out a very particular discourse about the future of RTP2. The Report *New Options for the Audiovisual Sector* (2002: 15-16), presented the channel with the following objectives and characteristics:

<sup>3</sup> Relatório do grupo de Trabalho sobre o Serviço Público de Televisão, September 2002.

i) The second channel aims to do public service television outside the realm of the public service operator.

ii) The second channel shall be open to civil society in what constitutes a challenge to all institutions willing to produce public service audiovisual content.

iii) The second channel shall be a direct communications medium between different entities and the public without the state intermediation.

iv) For that purpose, institutional partners will be chosen in different sectors. Once the second channel will not be a generalist one, it will look for demanding and segmented audiences.

v) The second channel has a particular vocation for culture, education, social action, amateur sports, religious confessions, independent production, Portuguese cinema, environment and consumer issues, audiovisual experimentalism and support for new creative formats.

vi) The different partners' participation should have the following possibilities: content production about their sphere of activities, cession of rights concerning cultural events, shows, etc., financing or co-financing of particular programmes or the entire channel.

vii) The PSB, *Radiotevisão Portuguesa*, may also provide content for this channel, namely news programmes and documentaries.

viii) In the initial stage, this channel will be managed by the PSB. RTP will be responsible for the channel's broadcast and it will guarantee the necessary human resources to integrate new partners.

ix) All entities associated to the second channel will be part of an Accompanying Council (*Conselho de Acompanhamento*).

x) The proposed model for the second channel shall have an autonomous financial management. It should aim for its own economic self-sustenance, and will have a global budget of 50% of the present RTP2 (then called Canal 2).

xi) The objective of the progressive development of this model is its total autonomy, that is, the entities involved should assume the channel's responsibility and the broadcasting frequency.

Despite numerous uncertainties about the implementation of such model, the government (with a Parliamentary majority due to a coalition between the Social Democrat Party and the Popular Party) went ahead with this new model. Facing fierce criticism concerning the idea of a Public Service Broadcasting outside the realm of the Public Service broadcaster, Morais Sarmiento continued developing his 'civil society' concept implicit in the New Options for the Audiovisual Sector Report (2002). On December 2003, in a speech<sup>4</sup> delivered during the ceremony to inaugurate the adherence of 'civil

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.portugal.gov.pt/Portal/PT/Primeiro\\_Ministro/Intervencoes/2004331\\_PM\\_Int\\_RTP.htm](http://www.portugal.gov.pt/Portal/PT/Primeiro_Ministro/Intervencoes/2004331_PM_Int_RTP.htm)

society' partners to the new channel renamed '2:', the responsible for the media made an highly apologetic discourse about the government's 'civil society' idea.

Morais Sarmiento argued that this model will work as a 'powerful engine for the improvement of our society and to the maturity of our democracy'. Considering channel '2:' a pioneering experience and an unprecedented change in the Portuguese television history, the government's responsible for the media argued that for the very first time, 'we will have a different substantial form of communication: a television channel without content mediation'. For the very first time, continued Moraes Sarmiento, 'we have taken the risk of setting up a television channel whose mission is to develop a public service provided by the public itself'.

With these words, the government wanted to convince society of the generosity of such offering. The state offers 'civil society' a public good (a national television channel), and it is now up to 'civil society' to organise itself and to fully contribute to the provision of public service audiovisual content. This would constitute what Moraes Sarmiento called a 'non-mediated', a 'direct communication' between the sender and the receiver. 'It is our belief that the Portuguese television will seriously improve with this direct communication because the sender and the receiver are truly close and because television is taken to citizens and citizens are taken to television'.

The media minister also perceived this idea as highly functional and as having an enormous potential to the entire society: it would stimulate active participation, it would contribute to the development of a more effective and more active citizenry, it would contribute to the development of a shared communication amongst citizens and, last but not least, it would contribute to the general improvement of democracy. Summing up, citizens would be both providers and the audience of their own programmes. In the government's 'revolutionary' perspective: the public service television would be in the hands of the public itself.

Without any consistent theoretical or working definition of 'civil society' the offering of the second national channel to this abstract sphere caused perplexity amongst media analysts and academics. Indeed, nor the government neither the government's appointed task force on the restructuring of the Public Service have elaborated on the concept. Indirectly, it can be inferred that, in this case, the concept refers to institutions operating outside the state apparatus and not driven by market-oriented interests. This is obviously insufficient to identify the sort of interests and forces which might have access to their 'public service' share and in what terms. Furthermore, it does not clarify the role institutions such as public universities and other publicly funded non-profit organizations might play in the new audiovisual arena.

The then Director of *Diário de Notícias*, Mário Bettencourt Resendes, quoted the Head of the Impresa Multi-media group, Pinto Balsemão, to emphasise that it is not likely that 'civil society' is interested or that it has resources to use this offering because it is hard to see the audience potential for a channel that probably will not be better than a 'sum of institutional propaganda broadcasts' (in *Diário de Notícias*, 19. 12. 2002). Few days later, in the same newspaper, Paulo Cunha e Silva argued that civil

society does not know how to produce audiovisual content. To produce such content, he argued, ‘technique and a highly professionalized culture are indispensable and this is not compatible with amateurism’ (23. 12. 2002). In another daily newspaper, *Público*, Eduardo Prado Coelho wrote: ‘It is true that civil society had a Christmas present: it got a television channel. But to offer one television channel to civil society means absolutely nothing. What really matters is to know who is going to select civil society agents, who pays for the programmes, who coordinates their allocation and who provides information services’ (19. 12. 2002).

But the government’s idea had also some support. The Director of *Público* daily newspaper and former member of the Public Service task force, José Manuel Fernandes, believed that an opportunity should be given to civil society. According to the *Público*’s Director the true reason why civil society is not trusted is due to an old leftist prejudice that is based in the idea that the people must be educated and that only the state is good at it (23. 12. 2002). On the same line, Eduardo Cintra Torres, a well known media critic, also believed that elitist arguments were being used to depreciate the government’s initiative: the elites want the public service for themselves but probably other spectators need it the most (*Público*, 30. 12. 2003).

In fact, and despite other relevant changes in the audiovisual sector (e. g., merger of public radio and television in a single broadcasting company) only the destiny of the second RTP channel managed to capture the public and the media attention. Columnists such as Vasco Pulido Valente (in *Diário de Notícias*, 21. 12. 2002) stated that the government’s choice had a hidden agenda. Pulido Valente believed that, as defined by Morais Sarmiento, the second channel was a ‘still-born’ and in these circumstances the government managed to find a dissimulated way of handing it out to private interests (in *Diário de Notícias*, 21. 12. 2002). The government’s intentions are not likely to be found out but two explicative versions of this political decision became popular in the press. On the one hand, there was a view that the government could no longer say that the second national channel would continue under the RTP’s umbrella. The government has presented itself as a reformist one and the media structural change was enshrined in the government programme and in other ulterior documents and speeches. For some, this third avenue (civil society instead of state or private profit-driven interests) was a mere way of masquerading a simple reality: the second channel would go on as a ‘normal’ RTP channel but the government could not say it. On the other hand, there are those who argue that when this experience is over, the government will realise that a civil society based channel is not viable and consequently it will end up being sold out (see, inter alia, Eduardo Prado Coelho, *Público*: 20. 12. 2002).

### **From rhetoric to practice: a six months experience**

Despite the enormous potential, complexity and ambiguity of the civil society concept, we do not intend to discuss it here in any detail. For the very limited purpose of this paper, we will mention some dimensions that might help us to examine what has

been argued by the government and what has been implemented since January 2004. The Centre for Civil Society (London School of Economics) says that 'Civil society refers to the arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values. In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state, family and market, though in practice, the boundaries between state, civil society, family and market are often complex, blurred and negotiated. Civil society commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power. Civil societies are often populated by organisations such as registered charities, development non-governmental organisations, community groups, women's organisations, faith-based organisations, professional associations, trade unions, self-help groups, social movements, business associations, coalitions and advocacy groups'<sup>5</sup>.

As we perceive it, the 'civil society' concept incorporates the notion of 'public sphere' (J. Habermas) where social actors, groups and organizations relate to each other and fight for their interests. The existence and performance of these actors confer vitality and density to individual and social life. It enshrines the notion of freedom (non-coercive action) of belonging, freedom of participation, freedom of expression in a wide variety of organisations, and freedom of organisations to develop their own activities. 'Civil society' also refers to a common share of interests, objectives and values sustaining differentiated institutions and to the organization of benevolent action, mainly non-profit driven and based on volunteer work. Finally, it includes the notion of autonomy vis-à-vis the state, though the frontiers are not always clear.

In spite of the non-conceptualisation of the 'civil society' by the government, it was quite clear that this option would comprehend a relevant role for non-profitable cultural, social and scientific organizations which were neither part of the state nor market-oriented. The government wanted – in discursive terms, at least – to put the public in the centre stage of the new television public service that would no longer be part of the public service broadcaster. The government also intended to facilitate expression, to allow new voices to speak up for themselves in a direct form of communication (without the state intermediation). Finally, there was the expressed intention to promote participation and the qualification of the democratic values. These ideas are broadly coherent with a general view of civil society as we have just referred to.

Indeed, it should be recognised that the six-month experience (from January 2004 up to July 2004) of the new channel 2: demonstrates a considerable increase in the participation of social actors. The access of new social agents to the broadcasting scene has the potential to contribute to the proliferation of alternative issues, the representation of new interests and the presentation of different perspectives. Manuel Falcão, the Director of the new channel, stated that programmes produced by new partners account for 23 hour programming per week (in *Diário de Notícias*: 06. 07. 2004). The remaining programming schedule is broadly sustained by the previous RTP's second channel.

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/CCS/what\\_is\\_civil\\_society.htm](http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/CCS/what_is_civil_society.htm) (access: 07. 07. 2004)



Around 60 governmental and non-governmental institutions are currently involved (with their own means or contracting out) in audiovisual production for channel 2. These entities include governmental ministries, universities, foundations, charities, and other environmental, consumer, professional, business, sports and media organizations. Amongst these institutions, 13 are foundations and superior education institutions (public or private), 11 are integrant part the government, 10 are professional organizations and 17 are directly related with social beneficence.

Independently from the selection mechanisms and despite all the criticism regarding the amateurism and the ‘political party broadcast’ look of some programmes, the effective participation of these entities corresponds to an increase in the plurality of voices in the public space, and apparently the amateurism by itself did not contribute to any decrease in audience rates. The new channel started operating in January 2004 with a 3,9 monthly share and its monthly share rose to 4,3% in June. Still, the lack of professionalism of some entities involved is recognised by the Channels Director himself (quoted in Eduardo Cintra Torres, *Público*, 06. 07. 2004).

Although the Channel 2: partners considered the six month experience positive, there is an almost unanimous chorus regarding the absence of production conditions (see, inter ali, dossier of *Diário de Notícias*, 06. 07. 2004). There are obviously well off partners who contract out and put on air broadcasting quality programmes but there are also those who cannot afford independent productions and make their own audiovisual content with no adequate know how or technical means. ‘It is necessary production means in order to collaborate in a different way’, said the President of the Nature League, José Manuel Alho (*Diário de Notícias*, 06. 07. 2004). The lack of financial support or production facilities for the channel 2: partners has been the main concern but the channel’s Directed appointed by the government, Manuel Falcão, argued that it is up to partners to make ‘a bigger investment’ and that ‘partners must organize themselves’ (*Diário de Notícias*, 06. 07. 2004).

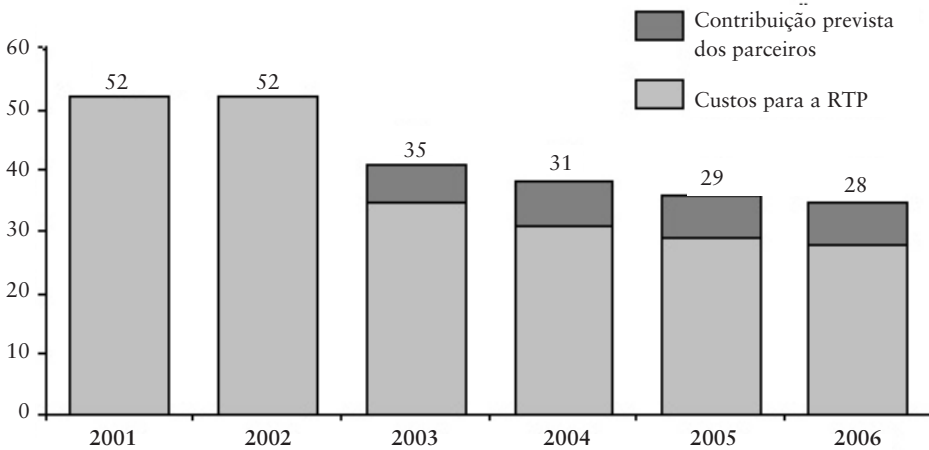
Indeed, if we look back to the recent RTP’s history, it becomes quite clear that the development of this new ‘revolutionary’ social society channel is intrinsically related to the PSB company dramatic economic situation. The licence fee was abolished by the social democrats and advertising time was reduced by the socialists. The company could not pay its debts and the government wanted to reduce its contribution. Willing to put the blame on the previous socialist governance (from 1996 to 2002), Morais Sarmiento explained the RTP’s deterioration over the past six years in the following terms:

- The RTP’s audience share has decreased from 44% in 1995 to 28% in 2002;
  - RTP is technically bankrupt with an accumulated debt of €1200 million;
- (in *Novas Opções para o Audiovisual*, 2002).

Independently from the political responsibilities for the RTP’s current situation (see Sousa and Santos, 2003), the social democrat government was not prepared to maintain the RTP expenses. In these circumstances, and considering that privatisation

became a tough political option, the government developed a global restructuring programme that instead of financing two national generalist channels would end up financing only one. This strategy is also notorious in the governmental slogan ‘better public service for less money’. Indeed, in 2002, according to RTP data, the operational costs of the second channel were €52 million. The governments expects a progressive decrease of the channels costs to €28 million in 2006 (figure 1) and an equally progressive financial commitment of both present and future partners.

Figure 1 – Evolution of total second channel expenditure



Figures: € Millions

Source: RTP

This experience results from immediate economic difficulties and from governmental hesitations regarding the destiny of the second RTP generalist channel. However, significant changes were indeed introduced over the last six months. We have already mentioned the diversification of social actors involved in the public sphere, even if many institutions are integrant part of the state apparatus. In any case, and despite the much criticised amateurism of some social agents, the channel's partners introduced a higher level of differentiation in the audiovisual output. But, so far, these partners only produce around four hours per day. Therefore, the channel is still grossly maintained by the RTP's structure.

This does no mean that, apart from partners' production, channel 2: is a copy of the previous second RTP channel. Indeed, the overall programming schedule underwent significant changes. At least two areas deserved particular attention: programmes for children and information. A considerable investment was made in the qualification of programming for children through the setting up of a specific department with qualified staff. It is a clear strategic objective to provide a community service through children's audiovisual entertainment and education, not only through the broadcast-

ing of quality children's programme but also through its adequate location in the programming schedule. Additionally, Manuel Falcão emphasised the simultaneous subtitling and Portuguese voice-over in foreign programmes: 'it has already been tried in France and it aims to facilitate the programme's comprehension by children with hearing disabilities and to incentive reading amongst children and young people' (in *Media XX*, September/October 2003: 33).

In the information arena, changes were also introduced. The channel 2: Director wanted information bulletins to be characterised by journalistic criteria and not by editorial choices based on audiences (in *Media XXI*, September/October 2003: 32). Over the past six months, it is observable that information services attempted to develop clearer journalistic choices based on rigorous and more objective criteria. Social and political themes – which commercial channels do not cover – have also come to the fore and debates have been informed by qualified analysts. Still, as we perceive it, information should be a crucial dimension of any public service and, despite the aspects we have just mentioned, no additional financial resources were attributed to information services. Quite on the contrary, the information broadcasting time was reduced to half an hour per day and RTP1 has been the main content provider for the new channel. Therefore, increasing editorial rigour has been attempted with fewer resources and within a more limited schedule time.

Overall, it can be argued that efforts have been made by the channel 2: Director in order to provide cheaper but more diversified and qualified output. Despite difficulties, the role of partners cannot be underestimated and they generally perceived the experience as being positive. What is not so clear – at least so far – is the public appreciation (though audience rates have not gone down) for this new channel. Indeed, apart from the direct participation of social actors, no regulatory body to listen and interpret the citizens' suggestions and opinions was set up.

The citizenship rhetoric did not provide any efficient regulatory mechanism in order to contribute to the development and up-dating of the public service concept and its implementation. Citizens (with production means and know how) are expected to express themselves and to provide free of charge programmes for channel 2: but no ideas were developed regarding the education neither for audiovisual production nor for the critical reading of the audiovisual narrative and contents. Media education and media literacy were not on the agenda.

Furthermore, the RTP's Advisory Council (*Conselho de Opinião*), supposed to represent the social complexity of contemporaneous society, had its power reduced by the social democrat government. On May 2002, when the Council of Ministers decided to set up a new public service television company with a single generalist channel and appointed a five-member top management team to implement the decision, the RTP's *Conselho de Opinião* did not approve the management team because no agreement was reached regarding the reduction of RTP's services. As the Advisory Council had the power to veto the team, the governmental coalition (with a Parliamentary majority) altered the Television Law in order to reduce the council's power.

It should be referred that the existing channel 2: has an Accompanying Council (*Conselho de Acompanhamento*) led by Fundação de Serralves. This council is supposed to guarantee the channel's quality and diversity but it has no specific resources and it does not represent citizens but the channel's partners.

### Concluding remarks

Public services, in general, and PSB, in particular, have undergone major changes over the last two decades. Technological changes and ideology (competition, privatization and market deregulation) have played a fundamental role to the redefinition of public service television all over Europe. The Portuguese PSB was no exception to this general framework. What is quite new is the government's discourse and political decisions regarding RTP. In most countries, broadcasting developed from a monopoly to a competition model (it also happened in Portugal in the early 1990's) but now a third possibility is being attempted. The government decided to remove one channel from the public operator and to offer it to 'civil society'.

Indeed, the social democrats in power since March 2002 (led by Santana Lopes since 17 July 2004<sup>6</sup>) decided to reduce the RTP's generalist channels from two to only one. This second one went to 'civil society': 'a medium of direct communication and relationship between different partners and the public without the state intermediation', as the government put it.

Apparently, it looked like a quite revolutionary idea and it was presented as such: society itself would directly communicate to society. Television was to be produced by consumers themselves. Senders and receivers would be part of the same body. This model would avoid intermediary actors and society would find the means, the conditions, and the content to express itself in an unprecedented form.

In any case, social agents were selected and the experience is underway. Channel 2: is clearly a more plural space: new voices, news perspectives are on the air. The overall programming has also been altered and, comparatively with the previous second RTP channel, it can be argued that more attention has been paid to children's programmes and the journalistic criteria in the information services look clearer.

However, to offer a television channel to civil society does not necessarily mean that citizens will be better and equitably served. Indeed, the 'civil society' discourse is no guarantee of sustained quality and diversity. What deserves serious attention is the selection mechanisms of social agents, the channel's power structure, the processes related to the construction of the programming schedule, the financial sources for audiovisual production and distribution, the news editorial control and the regulatory mechanisms. Furthermore, it is not clear who is supposed to take the responsibility for the development of a strategic view for the channel's future.

<sup>6</sup> In 22 July 2004, José Manuel Durão Barroso was elected by the European Parliament to become the next President of the European Commission. Santana Lopes is currently the Prime Minister of the Portuguese government. The Social democrat Party and the Popular Party coalition is to be maintained.

So far, and despite some positive aspects we have just mentioned, channel '2': is still far from any consistent participatory model. The state offered 'civil society' a public good (a national television channel) and it is now up to 'civil society' to organise itself and to fully contribute to the provision of public service audiovisual content. In discursive terms, citizens had the centre-stage in this new participatory model but up to now it seems to be economics rather than citizenry that is at the heart of the new strategy.

To sum up, it can be argued that the government has developed a 'direct communication' rhetoric (citizen to citizen; civil society to civil society) but, despite few interesting dimensions, this is still far from any consistent model. It is very likely that social asymmetries shall be replicated in channel 2: because the 'participatory openness' does not appear to be consistent with a balanced access to the new medium.

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