Public service broadcasting and the construction of a public sphere

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Abstract

In an age marked by multiple distribution platforms of content, oligopoly of media sectors and transnational nature of cultural industries it is not any longer enough for the public broadcast to inform, educate and entertain with independence and technical, ethics and aesthetics quality, as proposed by the British BBC in 1927. Public Radio and Television need to find a new social function that distinguishes them from the private media and justify state investment in communication. A rising number of scholars point out that this new function is the creation and strengthening of a broad media public sphere able to guarantee citizens a space for debate on common issues, a process that encourages citizen participation and transformative action. This article examines the role of public broadcasting in the twenty-first century according to the media theories influenced by the thought of the German philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas, whose concept of the public sphere has become central in discussions about building dialogic media spaces.

Introduction

Since the widespread diffusion of neoliberalism in the West developed democracies during the 1980's public broadcasting faces a serious identity and legitimacy crisis which has resulted in budget cuts and pressure for audience. In several European countries the public service media, which played an activity outside the profit logic in the twentieth century – a non-capitalist space within capitalism, as pointed by Mattelart (1974) – became a copy of private channels, with strong emphasis on easy entertainment. Light and popular drama, quizzes and sporting events won primetime, while cultural content and documentaries lost out on schedule. In Canada, as a desperate strategy to increase audience, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) started to show programs and popular films produced by the American commercial TV. In Latin America and specifically in Brazil – where legislation requires of public broadcasters an educational and cultural approach in order not to threat the commercial media hegemony – criticism against Public Service Media relates to political editorial interference, low rate audience and the transmission's little social and cultural impact.

The public broadcasting trivialization in Europe and North America and the political manipulation of state controlled media in developing countries has led scholars and journalists to declare at the end of the twentieth century – with regret or satisfaction – the

imminent death of the public media (Raboy, 1998, p. 167). In a changing and highly competitive broadcasting landscape, in which commercial companies begin to take public responsibility to fulfil legal requirements or to add value to their products, what is the need for state or public investments in communication? Specialized channels have offered - via cable, satellite, Internet and even terrestrial transmissions – informative and cultural programs similar to those produced by the public media. In Brazil, Canal Futura, a Roberto Marinho Foundation´s educational TV project via cable, satellite and UHF became a reference of private social investment. The channel has won several national and international awards for its community services and the public relevance of its content.

Liberals who advocate minimal state have compelling arguments against public spending on media. The free market, in the liberal view, is the ideal mechanism for the satisfaction of individual and social needs: more productive and efficient the market forces are superior to state intervention in the provision of public needs. A growing number of academics and international development organizations such as Unesco points out however a disturbing gap in both public and private media: the absence of a plural forum for discussion of collective issues able to encourage citizen participation, which is fundamental to a vibrant democracy.

Two major media phenomena have corroded the Western democracy foundations of in this century: the reduction of information spaces within global conglomerates and the market-based journalism increasingly divorce of their public responsibilities, with the news turning entertainment and entertainment turning news (Kovach & Rosensteil, 2007). By suppressing from content key public life issues or approaching them only from certain groups' point of view the dominant media accents exclusion and make agreements and solutions more difficult.

In Brazil, the political crisis that led to the president Dilma Rousseff´s impeachment in 2016 showed, for its turn, the damage of a hegemonic and partisan mass media to democracy. There was a lack of balanced and plural spaces of information and political discussion. While the mainstream press manipulated contexts, selected complaints, filed charges without evidence and imposed a one-sided view of the political and economic problems, the Brazilian public company Empresa Brasil de Comunicação (EBC), controlled by the federal government, took over the defence of the Presidential Palace, acting as a counterpoint to the conservative media in the war narratives.

The prevalence of infotainment – and of a journalism tinted by political interests in some countries – represents an opportunity for the strengthening of an editorially independent public broadcasting connected to the social aspirations. Several authors such as Marc Raboy (1997), Dave Atkinson (1997), Patricia Aufderheide (2000), Douglas Kellner (2000), Robert McChesney (2003) and Karol Jakubowicz (2007) advocate the revival of public media as an important step to guarantee a truly participatory democracy in which well-informed and organized citizens can act in a transforming way. This paper presents an exploratory analysis of the role of public media in the twenty-first century based on the thoughts of the German philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas, whose concept of public sphere – popular among western thinkers in recent decades

– boosted discussions on the media role as an "agora" in democratic societies. The aim is to provide context, theoretical perspectives and examples of successful actions for broadening the reflection on emancipatory communication spaces.

The public sphere concept

The understanding that one of the media functions is to offer an space for the discussion of public affairs in order to consolidate citizenship and democracy gained momentum in academic discussions from the philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas' thesis *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* published in Germany in 1962 and popularized in the 1980's after translation into English and other languages. Although many of the early liberal and liberal-democrats thinkers had pointed out the importance of independent media for democracy, the issue had practically disappeared in the most recent works of social and political theorists (Thompson, 2008, p. 67). Habermas research was therefore pioneer not only for establishing the bourgeois public sphere as a category that emerges from capitalist society by creating, for the first time, a space for the search of a rational consensus around public issues, but also for highlighting the importance of the press in the development of modern state institutions and its transformation along the twentieth century in a medium that manufactures public opinion and consensus to serve of the ruling elite (Gomes, 2006; Thompson, 2008).

Habermas thoughts, as pointed out by the American philosopher Douglas Kellner (2000), inspired many to imagine and cultivate more democratic, inclusive and egalitarian forums. His ideas gave a new stimulus to discussions about the democratization of society and the public sphere especially since the advent of interactive information and communication technologies. It is important to note however that the German philosopher and political thinker Hannah Arendt had already discussed the concepts of public and private sphere in her book *A condição humana* (The human condition) published in 1958. Arendt did not refer to the media as a modern public sphere, but contributed to the establishment of the concept of public space taken up and deepened for Habermas afterwards.

Arendt defines the public sphere in *A condição humana* as a space with two essential dimensions to the citizenship practice: the *appearance* (what can be seen and heard by others and by ourselves, a talking space where there is political freedom), and the *common world*, related to institutions, businesses, the world that brings together humans and prevents conflict with each other (Arendt, 2005, pp. 59-62). Disappointed with the Nazi-fascism, the author criticized mass society for having mischaracterized the public sphere by weakening the link that keeps people related to each other.

In Arendt's view the establishment of citizenship in the modern world depends on both the *common world* redemption and the creation of various visibility spaces (*appearance*) in which individuals can reveal their identities, exchange views and rescue relations of reciprocity and solidarity. Habermas, for its turn, emphasizes the public sphere not as space of visibility, recognition and exchange opinions, but as a space of dispute between speeches, an essentially political communication forum formed by private persons

seeking consensus on issues of collective interest based on the force of the better argument outside the political and economic power.

Habermas points out that this argumentative and rational public sphere, made of a thinking and critic public interested in the common good and able to counter to state power and to get together to discuss the rules of society and the state administration, only existed once in the history of mankind and for a brief period: the eighteenth-century Europe, specifically in England, France and Germany.

According to the author, the development of mercantile capitalism, the bourgeoisie economic rise and the Absolutism decline created the conditions for the emergence, in England, at the turn of the eighteenth century, of a new type of public sphere, very critical of the state, formed by private people gathered to defend their economic freedom and the state management rationality. The educated bourgeoisie (with economic hegemony, but without political power) interacted with each other and with the nobility (holder of public office by virtue of hereditary superiority), in a position of certain equality, in halls, cafés, tea houses and clubs, to discuss the regulation of civil society and gain their own political and human emancipation inspired by the Enlightenment ideals of equality, freedom and universality of rights.

The press, which was developed from the politicization of a public who claimed the right to be informed about the state acts, fuelled the exchange of ideas and information and had a preponderant role in the formation of the bourgeois public sphere and, consequently, in the institutional configuration of the modern state. The emergence of newspapers and other independent publications commenting on public life and criticizing the Crown and the Parliament changed the government nature, forcing it to publish its actions and held accountable for them. "The press established itself as a critical organ of a public that thinks politics: as a fourth state" (Habermas, 1984, p. 78).

The German philosopher notes that the space for rational argument and the constitution of an informed public opinion ends in the following century (1984, p. 213). With the democratic revolutions and the establishment of the bourgeois rule of law, the bourgeois public sphere was institutionalized. Constitutional laws were designed to ensure political rights, while disputes between individuals or between individuals and groups and the state began to be mediated by the legal system. The critical press is relieved of its pressure for freedom of speech and could thus abandon controversial positions and take the chances of trade profit.

In England, France and in the United States, the transformation of an engaged press in a commercial one occurs at about the same time, in the 1830s. Newspapers assumed the character of an enterprise that offers advertisement space and become saleable through the section devoted to news, subordinating themselves to the views of the market economy (Habermas, 1984, pp. 216-217).

The invasion of the public sphere by advertising – for commercial reasons – started around the nineteenth century and, according to Habermas, would not have to cause its transformation. Journalistic functions could have been kept separate from advertising activities, but this did not happen. "The journalistic- advertising representation of

privileged private interests was fully amalgamated from the beginning with political interests" (1984, p. 225). In addition, the rise of public relations activities in the early twentieth century had a strong impact on the media content. Public relations professionals started to use the media to influence the public opinion and to produce consensus and acceptance around a person, a product, an organization or an idea in order to maintain social control.

If in the pastime the press intermediated and reinforced the reasoning of private people gathered in public spaces, in the mass communication society, as Habermas notes, the media started to shape this reasoning. The public sphere, dominated by the media, becomes a means of advertising ideas and products, and competent criticism gives way to conformism. Instead of a public opinion formed in an open political debate interested in the common good what we see in the contemporary capitalism is, according to Habermas, an atmosphere ready to acclaim the elite private interests. With the decline of the public sphere, citizens become consumers focused more on buying goods and on their private world than in public issues and in democratic participation.

The young Habermas investigation on the public sphere has been the subject of intense criticism which led, years later, to clarifications and revisions. In his 1962 thesis the author had referred to the bourgeois public sphere as a stylization, recognizing its contradictions, but the model he adopted was considered by the critics as utopian. Critics argue that Habermas idealized the bourgeois public sphere to present it as an open and public forum for debate, when discussions were actually restricted to white, affluent and educated men. The German author would have ignored the importance of other public activities existing at the time involving plebeian social movements, labour unions and the women's struggle for political emancipation.

Political scientists and historians note that popular movements of great vitality were developed concurrently with the bourgeois public sphere and in opposition to it to represent the voices and interests excluded from that forum. Another strong limitation of Habermas' analysis pointed out by critics is that the German philosopher presented the media consumers as passive figures easily manipulated by media techniques, whereas communications studies have shown spaces of resistance and critical thinking by the receivers that decode the messages according to the level of education and knowledge and are also influenced by changes occurring in the social environment, such as in school, church or club (Avritzer & Costa, 2006; Brigs & Burke, 2006; Kellner, 2000; Thompson, 2008).

In the preface to the 1990 German reissue of his book, Habermas makes a review of his public sphere analysis recognizing that the dominant bourgeois public collided with the plebeian public and that he underestimated the importance of the non-bourgeois oppositional public spheres. So, according to him, rather than devising a liberal and democratic public sphere is more productive theorizing a multiplicity of public spheres, sometimes overlapping, but also in opposition. This relates to excluded groups spheres such as peripheral social movements as well as dominant settings as the Parliament and the media (Avritizer & Costa, 2006; Kellner, 2000).

In later works, Habermas continues to seek a genuine public sphere free of market interests and state bureaucracy to a more rational formation of will and opinion. In "Three Normative Models of Democracy" (1995), the author will defend the constitution of a new mechanism of social integration in addition to money and management: solidarity and common good guidance. This new power, based on civil society, would emanate from autonomous public spheres formed by fellows in opposition to the bureaucratic state and the capital.

Revival of the concept of media as public sphere

Habermas' ideas on the media social role and its transformation into a mechanism for *status quo* maintenance are based on the thoughts of two important thinkers of the Frankfurt School Critical Theory about the cultural industry, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. According to them, the public space had been transformed by large corporations into a space for passive consumption of entertainment and information. Habermas was also influenced by other authors who discussed culture and mass communication in the United States during the 1950s, including C. Wright Mills, who had studied the transformation of the public into mass in the contemporary consumer society and the media's ability to shaping behaviours and induce middle-class conformism (Kellner, 2000).

For Kellner, Habermas failed to think about the nature and social functions of the contemporary media, totally excluded by him from the democratic process and the possibility of contributing to democratic transformation. The American scholar notes that the creation of a genuinely participatory democracy depends on well informed citizens abled to argue and participate. Informed, active and organized, they can become a democratic political force:

> Habermas, [...] does not envisage how new media and technology could lead to an expansion and revitalization of new and more democratic public spheres. In fact – and this is the crux of my critique of his positions –, Habermas simply does not theorize the functions of the media within the contemporary public sphere, deriving his model more from face-to-face communication and discussion, rather than from media interaction or communication mediated by the media and technology. (Kellner, 2000)

Despite Habermas neglecting the communication technologies potential for the creation of democratic public spheres, many authors realize in the contemporary media the possibility of redemption of its function of "agora" as described by the German philosopher: a space for discussion of common interest issues able to influence political decisions in a world that involves a growing number of people and cultural and social groups whose meeting extrapolates the physical spaces and is increasingly dependent on the media arena.

Based on Habermas thoughts, the Canadian media researcher Dave Atkinson (1997), an Unesco consultant, defines the public sphere as a place of active democracy

in that everyone can express their views equally; a place which is protected from basic private and commercial interests and from the political power of government; a place where citizens find the information and the knowledge necessary to their development and adjustment to their cultural environment; a place where the public is formed by communication. In his view, it is essential to democracy that the media rescue these elements for exercising its social function.

Fackson Banda, a professor at the University of Rodhes in South Africa and an Unesco media and civic participation expert, notes that the concept of the public sphere offers the possibility to redefine the media functions in society. "This suggests that the media can play roles that are generally supportive of citizen participation and democracy" (Banda, 2009, p. 18). The academic points out that, to act as public sphere, the media must be open to all kinds of opinion and to all people, regardless of the position they hold in society and should thus include women, encourage voluntary participation of those who want to contribute to the formation of public opinion, facilitate the discussion of political and state actions and allow criticism of the State administration or any sector.

It is important, he said, that the mass media make room for different positions, without favouring a specific view and erasing alternative political perspectives. Banda also points out that the media should not ignore the existence of disagreement and political disputes, which reflect the existence of agonistic pluralism, an important indicator of democratic health of society. It is up to the media, thus promoting greater understanding and adherence to civic virtues of tolerance, respect and integrity when one cohabits with thoughts and opposing groups, which should be perceived as rivals and not as enemies.

The idea of the media as a public space (from the concepts of Habermas, Arendt and other thinkers of media role in democracy, as the pragmatic American philosophers John Dewey and Richard Rorty) also influenced the development of a new concept and a new journalistic practice in the United States in the 1990s, known as *Civic Journalism*, movement that adds to the traditional functions of journalism – to inform and to monitor - a third mission: to create and sustain a public debate for political awareness and social transformation (Band, 2009; Fernandes, 2008).

The concept of *Civic Journalism*, created by David Merrit, editor-in-chief of the small daily *Wichita Eagle*, from Wichita (Kansas), emerged as a response to the growing gap between different levels of government and American citizens as well as to the public apathy towards social issues in the 1988 presidential race as evidenced by the elections' low participation. To Merrit, the drop in newspaper sales in the same period also showed the gap between the media and the public, with the media giving more prominence to the political race than to the common interest questions. He and other pioneers of the *Civic Journalism* believed that readers were disenchanted with the American press by the way, sometimes, it went off their troubles. The editor of *Wichita Eagle* identified the need for a new journalistic practice to motivate Americans to exercise citizenship and to vote, which is optional in the US. The movement began supporting the vote on candidates committed to the community and the fight against poverty and drugs, moving on to also defend the journalism engagement in social causes in order to stimulate debate and the search for solutions (Fernandes, 2008).

The popularization of the Internet from the 1990s opened new possibilities for communication and for the setting up of a multiplicity of independent media public spheres:

> Cyberspace is much more inclusive than all previous media. It allows public expression to all individuals, groups, institutions and communities, including communities (virtual) that did not exist previously. To the detriment of ancient cultural elites, the geographic, economic, cultural and political barrels to the freedom of expression and association have almost disappeared. [...] Netizens may prove far more informed citizens, more politically active and socially conscious than offline citizens. [...] The cybercitizens expose the ideas on their websites and the dialogue practice has accustomed them to the discussion, to the public deliberation. (Lévy, 2003, pp. 375-376)

The Tunisian sociologist naturalized French envisage in the new "virtual agoras", with their mailing lists, electronic forums, debates and online polls on political and public issues, the possibility never seen before of strengthening of a culture structured by dialogue that can only favour in medium and long term the reasoned democratic spirit based on deliberation, "namely, the exercise of collective intelligence in the drafting of laws and in major policy decisions" (Lévy, 2003, p. 381).

Despite the enthusiasm for the Internet new public participation channels and for practices such as the *Civic Journalism*, these experiences still represent a powdered public sphere. Although fundamental to their communities and democracy, the microspheres do not meet the need for a broad public sphere, able to strengthen the social ties of a nation, which is only attainable by long reaching media and programs offered to a comprehensive public (Atkinson, 1997; Gomes, 2006; Raboy, 1997; Scannel, 1997).

The generalist broadcasting media still remains as the great national agora. The British media scholar Paddy Scannel (1997) refers to radio and TV as the most democratic means for their ability to reach those excluded from the letters world and the new and complex information technologies. Wolton (1990, p. 124) points out that the broadcasting, in particular the general television – because of the power arising from the image and the national networks big audience – build social ties between those who share the same content and references, and works as a society "mirror". Society sees itself through television.

When broadcasting encompasses community and egalitarian values not present in other cultural resources it promotes social cohesion and establishes itself as the main instrument of the public sphere. The problem identified by some authors is that the wide range media "is hardly willing to mediate, for civic love, the great discussion of the national political community" (Gomes, 2006, p. 58). They are "corporate entities governed by the profit motive and functioning largely to deliver eyeballs to advertisers" (Aufderheide, 2000, p. 101), which prevents them from functioning as a public forum for debate. In this sense, authors like Aktinson, Raboy, McChesney, Jakubowicz and Aufderheide advocate the need for democracy of a public media free from the interference of

economic and political interests, which enables the expression of all voices of society and the discussion of collective issues.

Changing paradigm

The definition of public broadcasting includes some basic elements established since the radio arrival in the UK and the creation of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), the first public radio company in the world. Its mentor John Reith saw the new electronic vehicle as a powerful communication channel able to educate, inform and entertain. The goal was not to air premium shows for advertising sale as occurred in the United States, but broadcast non-profit high quality programs, in content and form, devoted to raising the cultural knowledge and the level of information of the British public.

Several public broadcasting models have been developed over the years with different legal, administrative and financial structures, but the reithian model introduced some principles in 1926 often listed as precondition for meeting the public interest: universality (content accessible to all), diversity (programs to audiences with different interests), independence (editorial freedom) and distinction (high level content that justify public funding).

Since the 1990s, public media scholars emphasize, however, that the reithian principles presented above are no longer sufficient attributes to justify State investments in public communication, particularly as the private media already offers specialized channels with cultural and information programs similar to the ones financed by public funds. To truly fulfil a distinguished role the XXI century public media needs adding a new mission to the famous Reith triad: to promote participation and support the public debate.

Patricia Aufderheide, professor of Communication Studies at American University in Washington, questions the role of public media in contemporary society. According to her, public broadcasting can no longer be content to offer classical culture or to function just as an improved version of the commercial media:

> Is public television merely a specific instance of "the public interest", which all broadcasters pledge to serve? Is it enough that it merely be non-commercial and educational, as opposed to corporate or governmental? Is it to aid the democratic process of information getting and receiving, or to deliver the cultural cream? Or to make public the voices of the underrepresented minorities of a pluralist society? (Aufderheide, 2000, p. 104)

Aufderheide analysis of the American Public TV detects what it calls a "mission crisis", which occurs not only for lack of financial resources, but for ideological issues. According to her, the aspirations of several public broadcast directors are closer to the aspirations of commercial broadcasters (have a winning program audience) than the ideal of using the mass media as a tool of public life:

> A truly public television would have to become an institution whose first job
> is not to make programs, whether safely splendid or utterly outrageous, but

to fortify the public sphere. Assuming this challenge would mean forsaking the traditional role of a broadcaster, to become an organizer of electronic public space. It would foreground the struggle to establish relations among people whose difference are deep, with the goal of finding common ground to articulate and address issues that pertain to the common good. That organizing would be built into all processes of production and distribution. It would require a financial base protected from corporate pressures and government censorship, and an explicit mandate. That way, the measure of success would be the level of active citizenship, not membership contributions or ratings. (Aufderheide, 2000, p. 116)

Emeritus professor at the University of Westminster in London in the academic field of Media Studies, Nicholas Garnham, author of several books on broadcasting and former BBC director and producer, agrees:

The essence of public service broadcasting is the provision, to all citizens on equal terms, and as an enabling condition of such citizenship, of a site for the cultural expression. And exchange through which social identities are formed and of access to the information and debate upon which democratic politics must be founded. In order to fulfill this role the site should be as free from distorting effects of the exercise of economic or state power as possible. (Garnham quoted in Atkinson, 1997, p. 41)

For Georgie McClean (2008, p. 71), Australian communication and culture researcher, the great challenge of public service media is to contemplate in its schedule the cultural diversity and the ambivalence in national public life. "If [this issue it is] not responded to effectively, public broadcast claims to public value, legitimacy and relevance are undermined". According to her, the search for legitimacy becomes even more important in the face of private media renewed efforts to end state investment in communication. In the European Union, for example, the private sector has constantly argued with the authorities that public broadcasters do not deserve subsidies for producing similar content to private media and play the same social and marketing role.

In face of the private sector enormous pressure, public broadcaster and some European governments have mounted a vigorous defence of public service values and have obtained some legal support. Both the European Union Agreement on Trade in Service and the Unesco Convention on Cultural Diversity and Artistic Expression recognize the relevance and distinctiveness of services provided by public media. In some countries, such as Canada and the UK, efforts for public broadcasting recognition relied on the pressure by social movements and broad sectors of society. To reconcile the public media with the principles of fair competition and free market operation, the European Commission and Unesco made it clear that the purpose of public broadcasting is to provide the democratic, social and cultural needs of society and ensure plurality, including linguistic and cultural diversity (Buckley, Duer, Mendel & Siochrú, 2008; McClean, 2008).

McClean notes that the plural public sphere will never be perfect and complete, but it is crucial that public broadcasters open channels of expression and dialogue for different audiences. It is not easy to replace traditional and comfortable forms of vertical programming to a specific audience for creative multicultural approaches with different and attractive content. Tradition difficult realignment with the audience, but in McClean's view, there is no other way: "public broadcasting must respond to the continual requirement for reinvention with curiosity and creative vigour or be relegated to irrelevance as a relic of a past era" (McClean, 2008, p. 78).

For public broadcasters traditionally focused on the production of educational and cultural programs redefine themselves as mediator of a social debate in opposition to the message emitter role requires a good deal of boldness and coping with political and commercial interests. In a plural public sphere, all speak and can freely criticize the state in a dialogical process that may annoy the powerful. Governments, which often directly finance the public media, do not accept criticism and often use the "budget weapon" to pressure the schedule. On the other hand, attentive to innovation, the private media mobilize the government against any public alternative capable of attracting audience.

In Brazil, the creation of the Empresa Brasil de Comunicação (EBC) in 2008 – from the merger of several media outlets controlled by the federal government – showed the difficulty of putting into practice the precepts of a democratic and plural media promoter and mediator of discussions and reflections on public life.

If we examine the law n° 11.652/08 that created the company and established the principles and objectives of public broadcasting services operated by the Executive, we see that the proposed creation of the company was very much in line with contemporary thinking on public communication. EBC vehicles should provide mechanisms for public debate on national and international relevant themes; develop critical awareness of citizens; foster the construction of citizenship, the consolidation of democracy and participation in society; ensure spaces for display of regional and independent productions; direct production and programming for the promotion of educational, artistic, cultural, informational, scientific aims; stimulate production and ensure the diffusion, including in the World Wide Web, of interactive content, especially those aimed at the universal provision of public services.

Despite the law clear reference to Habermasian principles of public sphere, analysis of the schedule of TV Brasil, the EBC flagship, showed, at first, the lack of spaces for debate and deepening of political issues (Barros and Bernardes 2011; UFJF, 2011). With a strong past of educational programming, TV Brasil – formed by the old TVE of Rio de Janeiro, TVE of Maranhão and TV Nacional of Brasilia – found it difficult to incorporate the new mission, dedicating significantly more efforts and time to educational, cultural and children's programming. Regarding journalism, an analysis commissioned by the EBC Curator's Council to the Federal University of Juiz de Fora (UFJF, 2011) in the period before the political crisis that led to the impeachment of President Dilma pointed out that the station's news programs did not differ in relation to the ones offered by the private sector. They lacked depth and representation of different societal currents of thought. TV

Brasil journalism, according to the report, should seek a thematic selection in tune with the public interest, valuing less the official and commercial agendas and prioritizing the maintenance of political independence with greater variety of sources. The report recommended investments in ties with the public or with the organized civil society, which should become a more often information source.

The assessment attributed the lack of political debate to a possible fear among staff members of being accused of governmental PR. Another limiting factor can, however, be pointed out: the EBC General-Director appointment by the Brazilian President according to a management model that raises doubts not only about the company´s editorial independence, but also about the employment stability of staff members who dare airing any federal government criticism. This is a constraint found in almost all Brazilian broadcasters financed by local governments. Even the São Paulo TV Cultura, which holds a management structure considered to be the most similar to the independent public broadcasting model (as it is linked to a private foundation and not directly to the state government), has been constantly criticized for local political interference.

If the fear of annoying the Presidential Palace or of being accused of bias to the government inhibited the EBC further discussions on public interest issues in Dilma's first term (2011-2014), the political and economic instability in the second mandate (2015-2016) created an organization crisis that led to changes in the presidency of the company and in other senior positions. With the outbreak of the impeachment proceedings, the EBC was called to defend the government. The change in the editorial line has alarmed Board of Trustee members as well as defenders of the public media who did not spare criticism of the new position. Mariana Martins, a Brazilian journalist and member of the group Intervozes for communication rights wrote in the magazine *Carta Capital*:

> The reverberation of the editorial line taken by the Empresa Brasil de Comunicação (EBC) from the beginning of the political crisis and deepened last week has generated satisfaction on part of the company management, from the Executive Board to the Presidential Palace. Recurring programs with government supporters as guests have been shared by followers of the motto "against the coup". EBC is being seen as a "counterpoint" to the Globe in this process of news spectacularization – which I dare not call journalism. In social networks it has been mentioned as a refuge for those who are against President Dilma Rousseff impeachment and seek some diversity in television coverage. It is a fact that the company has agreed to seek further analysis on the events, through discussions in the studio on parliamentarian's speeches, street protests, the crisis and its many repercussions. However, the TV is still far from ensuring balance and diversity of views and information, key elements of public communication. (Martins, 2016)

Less than 48 hours after being confirmed in the Presidential Palace, Dilma´s successor Michel Temer published a Provisional Measure (PM) changing the EBC creation law. The PM dismissed the company's president appointed by Dilma to a four-year term

and the Curator's Council, the company's advisory and deliberative body (composed of 22 members, 15 them from civil society organizations) responsible for ensuring the public mission compliance. The measure was published on the grounds that it would be necessary to change the law to solve the problems generated by the "partisanship" of previous administrations. The extinction of the Curator's Council deprived the EBC, however, of its main mechanism for monitoring the principles and objectives of public communication, which was a strong setback for the already imperfect model implemented in 2008. The absence of civil society representatives on the EBC boards further strengthens the state character of the company.

However great the political constraints it cannot be assigned only to them the Brazil's difficulties in developing a democratic and emancipatory public media. It is also perceived in the country the lack of a deeper understanding of the role of the public media. A study by Zucoloto (2011) with 400 radio stations in the public field concluded that most of them are not fully focused on the public interest. There are similarities with the business models in many stations and only a few distinction spaces were identified. public broadcasters, the study said, continue to transmit elitists programs, excluding popular audiences.

One of Brazil's great challenges in the media field is therefore building references of a more plural communication guided by the public interest logic. We will find some successful examples of this movement toward a popular and emancipatory public media in the United States, where the National Public Radio (NPR) began to rethink its mission in late 1990s. In 1997, journalist Jeffrey Dvorkin became the network's Vice President of News and helped leading the transformation:

> We decided that we could not achieve everything we were mandated to do. So we asked the stations (in public radio in the US, the customers own the company), to choose their priorities: news and information, or cultural programming? The stations opted for news and information because, as they told us, nowhere in America can you get high quality news and information on the radio, other than on NPR. So we made the hard choices, sold off out cultural programs to other regional public broadcasters, and poured the money that remained into the news department. We were able to hire 45 journalists, expand out coverage, grow our national and international bureaus. In five years we tripled the ratings and deepened our ability to cover the stories....stories we believed Americans needed in order to be informed citizens. (Dvorkin quoted in Detoni, 2015, p. 187)

Currently at the University of Toronto Scarborough as Director of the Journalism Program, Dvorkin points out that a public broadcaster can be different and at the same time popular if it finds the courage to make clear choices about their service model. In Canada, public radio also opted for a less elitist programming more connected to the political, economic and social questions. While CBC Television, dependent on advertising dollars to supplement its budget, seeks to improve the ratings copying commercial

programs, CBC radio, with only state funds, invests in information quality programs, with great acceptance by the public. Ian Morrison, from the non-governmental organization "Friends of Canadian Broadcasting", a surveillance and advocacy group of audiovisual programming, says CBC radio is significantly aligned to the values of the public sphere and citizen participation. "Although far from perfect, it does serve as a public space encouraging citizens' access to and participation in civic life, both nationally, regionally and locally" (Morisson quoted in Detoni, 2015, pp. 197-198).

By embracing plurality, CBC radio saw its audience ratings increase, as happened with NPR. But there is an important point to note in this success story: to grow significantly in audience, NPR became the target of strong attacks from the commercial sector and conservative politicians. It is thus essential that the redefinition of the public broadcasters' mission engage the public and ensure the support of political and social organizations. What public broadcasting really needs is more "high profile champions, both inside and outside management", emphasizes Dvorkin (quoted in Detoni, 2015, p. 188).

Final considerations

The new technologies of information and communication, with its ample opportunities for interaction and participation, have forced the media in general to rethink their models of content production and transmission. The democracy of the Internet and the public desire for participation undermine the vertical communication and diffusion paradigm, while also opening an excellent opportunity for the public media repositioning in society. Embrace interactivity and participatory communication is not just to create spaces for questions, comments, polls or photos and videos posts, common practices in all vehicles. Democracy requires more robust means for debate on social and political issues in order to build understanding, agreements, tolerance. Public radio and TV, even in the Internet age, still have a role to play as a general public sphere able to go beyond the social sites and networks niches, although they should be used for the construction of the agenda, connection to new audiences and sharing content.

The concept of the public sphere, although under discussion since the 1990s in Europe and in the United States, came to occupy a central position in international studies of the XXI century on the media social function. From 1990 to 2000, the United Kingdom journal *Media, Culture & Society* published 58 articles on the media public sphere. From 2000 to 2013, were 247, most of them stimulated by the advance of globalization and internet massification (Lunt & Livingstone, 2013). There is solid theoretical reflection about it. It is necessary, however, creativity, boldness, courage and a strong commitment to the public interest to implement changes in programming able to promote the empowerment of the audience for a well-informed and argumentative participation in social life.

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