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A Framework for Assessing the Role of Public Service Media Organizations in Countering Disinformation

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ABSTRACT

Public service media (PSM) are widely acknowledged as part of the variety of solutions to disinformation. The remit of PSM, formed around values of universality, equality, diversity, accuracy and quality, implies a responsibility to fight disinformation by producing fact-based news content and finding anti-disinformation solutions. In this article, we introduce a framework for assessing how PSM organizations are able to counter disinformation in different contexts. Our normative framework provides a triangulation of contextual factors that determine the role of the PSM organization in the national environment, the activities carried out to fight disinformation and expert assessments of the potential of PSM to reduce the impact of disinformation. The framework is illustrated with analyses of PSM from the Czech Republic (CZE), Finland, Spain and the United Kingdom (UK).

KEYWORDS

Public service media; information disorder; fact checking; policy; Czech Republic; Finland; Spain; United Kingdom

Introduction

In recent years, disinformation has posed numerous challenges in areas such as healthcare, election coverage and political journalism. The current debates and policies regarding remedies to disinformation have mainly focussed on changes in the governance and regulation of digital platforms (e.g., Harcourt 2021; Forum on Information & Democracy n.d.). For example, in December 2020, the European Commission proposed a major reform by putting forward the Digital Services Act and the Digital Markets Act, a set of new rules aimed at creating a safer and more open digital space in Europe. While the regulation of digital content distributors is essential, our starting point is the diversity of disinformation, as it calls for different responses from different actors. Herein, we want to broaden the discussion by assessing the role that public

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service media (PSM) play—or could play—in countering mis/disinformation in the digital age.

In academic research, the role of PSM organizations as a counterweight to the negative consequences of commercial platforms is generally acknowledged (e.g., Cushion 2019; Nielsen, Gorwa, and de Cock Buning 2019; Van den Bulck, Donders, and Lowe 2018), but their role as a response to mis/disinformation has not been systematically and holistically examined, nor have the specific activities and challenges of individual PSM organizations. The literature on PSM and disinformation has been limited to a few studies on PSM remit in the age of information disorder (Horowitz and Lowe 2020) and fact checking by public service broadcasters (e.g., Kyriakidou and Cushion 2021).

The basic remit of PSM, formed around the core values of independence, universality, diversity, excellence, innovation and accountability (EBU 2012), implies a responsibility to fight disinformation by both producing trustworthy content and finding anti-disinformation remedies. As Humprecht, Esser, and Van Aelst (2020) stated, a robust PSM is one of the key structural factors contributing to national resilience to disinformation. This idea is prominent in the resolution of the Council of Europe (CoE) (2019), which has called on its member governments to support PSM while also urging PSM organizations to prioritize countering disinformation (see also Rodríguez-Castro, Campos-Freire, and López-Cepeda 2020). The view of the CoE is unsurprising, given the central role PSM has in society, at least in many European countries. While trust in legacy knowledge institutions has declined globally (Edelman 2020; Newman et al. 2020), PSM are still associated with high levels of trust and value in many nations (Newman and Fletcher 2017; Newman et al. 2020; Sehl 2020) and reach a politically diverse audience (Schulz, Levy, and Nielsen 2019). Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted that amidst conflicting and ever-changing information, not only the consumption of news but also the appreciation of legacy media and journalism has increased in many countries (Newman et al. 2020).

In this article, we introduce a framework for assessing how PSM organizations meet the specific expectations of countering disinformation expressed by policy-makers and scholars. Disinformation refers to information that is false and intentionally created to harm people or organizations to achieve political goals or generate a profit (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017). However, we also aim to call attention to the wider disorders in the information environment (Bennett and Livingston 2018; Humprecht, Esser, and Van Aelst 2020) that currently pose a serious challenge to democratic societies. Next to disinformation, misinformation (false but not intentionally created) and malinformation (created to harm a person or institution) contribute to the so-called “information disorder” (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017) of public communication. Considering that information disorder has multiple causes and manifestations, it cannot be resolved by a single solution, such as fact-checking or the regulation of digital platforms.

Therefore, our framework provides a triangulation of *contextual factors* that determine the role of the PSM organization in the national environment, the *activities* carried out by such organizations aimed at fighting disinformation and *expert commentary* on the potential of PSM to reduce the impact of disinformation. The framework was illustrated here with analyses of PSM in four European countries: the

Czech Republic (CZE), Finland, Spain and the United Kingdom (UK). The article contributes to existing work on the social value and distinctiveness of PSM.

Our approach is normative, seeking to provide a framework that defines how PSM *could* and *should* emerge as the cornerstone of the fight against disinformation. Given that a European-wide policy mandate exists, a comparative analytical framework is needed to serve as a benchmarking tool to design the internal organizational strategies of PSM and national policies regarding disinformation as well as to inform good practices for countering disinformation in other media outlets.

PSM and Information Disorder

Recent literature has argued that support for PSM is part of larger media policy interventions designed to counter market-driven challenges, such as the concentration of ownership, overheated competition, declining content diversity and unequal access to media (Bajomi-Lázár 2017; Cushion 2019; Wardle and Derakhshan 2017). PSM have been hailed as the best antidote to media organizations over which government and business interests exercise undue power (Nelson 2017). Similarly, several policy documents, prompted by the increase in viral disinformation during the UK's referendum campaign and the 2016 US presidential election campaign, have recognized the need for diverse media ecosystems and acknowledged PSM as part of the variety of solutions to disinformation (e.g., Council of Europe (CoE) 2019; EU HLEG 2018).

These views emphasize that PSM should provide what the commercial media neglects. In practice, PSM should first commit to universally serving and engaging with all publics, including minorities and special groups like children, and then to providing a wide range of innovative quality content that caters to the diverse interests and voices of the public. There is evidence of such "distinctiveness" (e.g., Cushion 2019; Hendrickx et al. 2019). For instance, PSM, especially well-resourced PSM, effectively contribute to people's knowledge of public affairs and politics and mitigate the impacts of an increasingly polarized media environment (Aalberg and Curran 2012; Cushion 2019). However, as Goddard (2017) argued, distinctiveness should be understood as an ambition rather than as a shared quality trait for the evaluation of the role of PSM. Despite the key role of PSM in fighting disinformation as proposed in research and policy papers, it is not clear how or whether PSM organizations play this role in practice. The distinctiveness of PSM is affected, on the one hand, by the structural differences between PSM organizations and, on the other hand, by changing political and media environments.

The starting point of a comparative analysis of European public service media should be differences between PSM in European countries that affect how PSM are able to uphold independence (Hallin and Mancini 2004) or are trusted by the public. While the six core principles of PSM—*independence, universality, diversity, excellence, innovation and accountability* (EBU 2012)—are widely accepted, PSM organizations differ in terms of design, governance and funding. Clearly, these differences may have an impact on the extent to which these organizations can actually meet such public service obligations (Połńska and Beckett 2019).

These differences are shaped by the changing political and cultural contexts in which national PSM operate. Currently, PSM have come under increased pressure in European countries. PSM organizations have been accused of presenting unfair competition to commercial media companies, which have repeatedly called on authorities to suppress public service remits (Sehl 2020). Simultaneously, populist political actors have initiated attacks on the financial basis of PSM (Holtz-Bacha 2021). Such repressing measures could reduce the capacity of PSM organizations to innovate and produce quality content to remedy the consequences of disinformation. In certain countries, PSM may be especially vulnerable to political and business pressures. For example, in many Central and Eastern European countries, PSM organizations are used as propaganda channels to promote government policies. In Hungary and Poland, for instance, PSM organizations are under tight state control and have themselves become sources of disinformation (Dragomir 2019).

The performance of PSM is also challenged by the increasingly digital media environment. Although PSM organizations continue to view social media as an important opportunity for increasing their reach (Donders 2019), especially amongst young people, they are also becoming wary of these platforms due to the diminishing trust in them (Newman et al. 2020) as well as concerns about their culpability in facilitating information disorder (Sehl, Cornia, and Nielsen 2018). Therefore, many PSM organizations struggle with the dilemma of boosting their reach on commercial digital platforms, which are also key vehicles for disinformation (Sehl, Cornia, and Nielsen 2018).

Empirical Dimensions of the Framework

We propose a three-dimensional examination of the role of PSM in fighting disinformation that considers the context in which the organization operates, the content and services the organization provides and the interplay between the two as assessed by experts from both within and outside the organization. Accordingly, our research questions are as follows: (1) How do contextual factors impact the role of different PSM organizations in addressing information disorder? (2) What are the current key activities of different PSM organizations intended to concretely address information disorder? and (3) What can a comparative analysis reveal about the practices, challenges and potential of PSM in addressing information disorder? Methodologically, we combined descriptive secondary analyses of statistics and indices, a descriptive mapping of the PSM output, and an analysis of stakeholder interviews (Table 1).¹ These three dimensions were brought together to understand the approaches taken to counter disinformation not only in terms of content and services but also based on the media landscape, organizational resources and expert views on how disinformation should be addressed by PSM.

The *contextual* dimension of the framework was informed by the fact that each PSM organization is unique in its organizational design, funding model, ability to include digital services and relationship with its audience, political stakeholders and commercial competitors. This dimension focuses on factors that define the standing of PSM, including the role of media literacy in combating the effects of disinformation (Lessenski 2019) and the characteristics of PSM news audiences (Schulz, Levy, and

Table 1. Three dimensions of the framework for assessing the role of PSM organizations in countering disinformation.

Dimension	Focus of analysis	Material
Context of information disorder	Media landscape: Resilience to disinformation Characteristics of audiences Role of PSM	14 indicators from secondary sources (2018–2020)
Content by PSM	CoE mandate of different content and services	PSM content and services in case countries (2019–2020)
Commentary by experts	Assessments of best practices, challenges and future of PSM in countering disinformation	21 interviews: PSM representatives Fact-checkers Media literacy experts (spring–fall 2020)

Table 2. Contextual dimension of PSM in combating information disorder: Issues and sources.

Issue	Source
<i>National media landscape</i>	
Media freedom	World Press Freedom Index (Reporters without Borders (RSF) 2020)
Foreign intervention	Foreign Intervention on Social Media Index (Digital Society Project 2018)
Media literacy	Media Literacy Index (Lessenski 2019)
<i>Audiences</i>	
Internet access	Internet penetration (Newman et al. 2020)
Awareness of disinformation	Perception of false news (Eurobarometer 2018)
Trust	Trust in news media (Eurobarometer 2018)
Exposure	Exposure to disinformation (Eurobarometer 2018)
Confidence	Confidence in own ability to detect disinformation (Eurobarometer 2018)
<i>Public service media</i>	
PSM reach	Market share, reach or equivalent; annual reports or equivalent
PSM news reach	Weekly reach (%) online and offline (Newman et al. 2020)
PSM news consumption by age	Sources of news by age (Schulz, Levy, and Nielsen 2019)
PSM news consumption by education	Sources of news by educational level (Schulz, Levy, and Nielsen 2019)
PSM news, trust	Brand trust scores (Newman et al. 2020)
PSM and populist attitudes	Cross-platform audience mapped alongside populist attitudes (Schulz, Levy, and Nielsen 2019)

Nielsen 2019), as those factors can be expected to be central to resilience to forms of information disorder. In our framework, these secondary sources were not weighted indicators, but allowed for broad comparisons of the roles of PSM between the respective countries.

For comparative purposes, we chose 14 points of analysis using data from secondary sources (Table 2). These points consisted of key features of national media landscapes, audiences and PSM organizations.

The second dimension, the *content and services* of PSM, illustrates how PSM address the challenges of information disorder. The typology used to depict content and services was derived from the mandate by the CoE to PSM organizations and specifically from the content typology underlined by the council in its resolution. The challenges posed by information disorder have been noted and addressed by PSM organizations for some time (EBU 2018). Our framework mapped the most current efforts (2019–2020) of PSM following the CoE's (2019) stipulations regarding content and services by going through the case organizations' programming information concerning the following activities:

1. Quality and innovative communication practices, especially regarding news and current affairs
2. Specialized programmes containing analysis and comments regarding disinformation
3. Programming that stimulates critical thinking among audiences
4. Targeted online communication with young people
5. Projects and collaborations that address information disorder with other PSM organizations and national stakeholders

The purpose of the third dimension, *commentary* on activities carried out by PSM, draws on stakeholder interviews to reflect both the context (first dimension) and PSM output (second dimension), which deepens the understanding of the systemic and organizational constraints and opportunities for PSM. Since PSM are expected to assume a distinctive role in the fight against disinformation, the interviews give insights into how this expectation—and the presumed ambition of PSM—is met at the national level. The interview scheme focussed on experts who could elaborate on the issues and activities mandated by the CoE resolution and communicate different opinions on PSM and the state of information disorder either because they planned or engaged in such activities within the organizations or observed such activities professionally from the outside. Our study included 10 interviews from related research efforts² and 11 original interviews conducted between February and December 2020.³ These entailed a total of 16 public broadcast representatives, including editors and journalists, who were involved either in strategy and/or in practical work in commissioning and creating the type of content and services listed in the CoE resolution. Additionally, in each country, media experts outside of PSM who worked on combating disinformation by factchecking and other media literacy activities were interviewed to acquire outside expert assessments of the performance of respective PSM organizations. The interviews were analysed by the authors, and the findings were structured according to key themes. We focussed on (1) how the interviewees assessed the role of the national PSM in tackling disinformation, (2) how they assessed PSM programming and practices regarding disinformation and (3) how they assessed their collaborations with fact-checkers or other relevant groups/institutions.

Illustrating the Framework: Country Comparisons

To account for the diversity of contexts in which PSM organizations operate, we illustrated our framework with four European countries. The country selection was made using different categorization models of media systems, including the Hallin and Mancini (2004) model of liberal, democratic corporatist and polarized pluralist systems as well as its translation into comparable indicators (Herrero et al. 2017). Additionally, our choices were informed by the structural resilience to disinformation (Humprecht, Esser, and Van Aelst 2020) that has been found in two main clusters in Europe: polarized countries of Southern Europe (the polarized-pluralist media system in Hallin and Mancini (2004) model) and media-supportive and consensual countries that exhibit a

high resilience to disinformation (including both Northern European democratic corporatist and liberal countries, such as the UK and Canada).

We have chosen Finland to represent the media-supportive and consensual, resilient national media system. Finland also demonstrates characteristics of the democratic corporatist system, with its strong public broadcaster. Spain, in contrast, represents the aforementioned polarized countries. We also included the UK, given the image of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) as a paragon of PSM on the one hand and the current challenges that it faces on the other (Cushion 2019; Freedman 2018). The CZE represents Central and Eastern Europe, in which both the media aims (see Herrero et al. 2017) and the contexts for disinformation and resilience (Russ-Mohl 2018) differ significantly from those of Northern, Southern and Western Europe.

Finland: Strong PSM with a Focus on Education

Context

Of the four case countries, Finland is the most resilient to disinformation in terms of structural factors (Humprecht, Esser, and Van Aelst 2020, 505). This resilience has sometimes been attributed specifically to the combination of high press freedom and innovative media literacy policies as well as other educational and e-participation activities (Lessenski 2019). In 2020, the country ranked second on the World Press Freedom Index (Reporters without Borders (RSF) 2020).

According to a Eurobarometer study, despite the high internet penetration in Finland (94%; Newman et al. 2020), Finnish audiences are exposed to the lowest amount of misleading or false information in Europe. Moreover, Finns are ranked the third most confident citizenry concerning their ability to detect disinformation in the EU (Eurobarometer 2018, 6–9, 13, 16). Simultaneously, over 80% of Finns consider misleading or false news to be a problem for democracy (Eurobarometer 2018, 20). The country is not exposed to significant foreign disinformation campaigns (Digital Society Project 2018), although both Russian propaganda (e.g., Aro 2019) and global phenomena, such as QAnon (e.g., Sequeira 2020), have been present in Finnish digital spaces.

Finland has been called a “media welfare state” (Syvertsen et al. 2014) and is characterized by strong, institutionalized editorial freedom as well as the ideal of universal access to content and services, partly ensured by a robust PSM. Indeed, the Finnish Broadcasting Company (Yle) has maintained its central role in the Finnish media system and society despite the proliferation of commercial broadcasting and online media. In 2019, 96% of Finns accessed one of Yle’s services at least once a week (Yle 2019). Audiences tend to view commercial news outlets with markedly more scepticism than they do with Yle news (Horowitz et al. 2021). Similarly, Yle’s news audiences are not characterized by a particular educational level or political views (Schulz, Levy, and Nielsen 2019).

Content

Yle’s central role in Finnish society is exemplified by its relatively generous resources and numerous distribution channels. Yle’s net turnover in 2019 was worth €478 M, which is noteworthy in a country of 5.5 million inhabitants (Schulz, Levy, and Nielsen

2019). Yle hosts four television channels and six radio channels as well as a successful streaming service of its own in addition to its presence on the most popular social media platforms.

As a trusted news provider, Yle has devoted ample coverage to foreign interference—for example, the spread of Russian disinformation in Finland (Aro 2019). Several current affairs series and documentaries have addressed cases of information disorder. However, Yle excels in media and information literacy content with a long tradition of providing educational content for children and young people (National Audiovisual Institute KAVI n.d.) as well as advice on digital life for senior citizens and the general population. Yle's educational programming includes a special section on media and digital skills that encompasses discussions of false news, internet security, journalism ethics and regulations, coding basics and online classes for detecting disinformation as well as a series of articles and podcasts ranging from pandemic-related disinformation and misinformation to false news detection recommendations.

While Yle does face challenges in reaching young audiences with its news output (Schulz, Levy, and Nielsen 2019), much of its educational material is directed towards younger audiences. Specifically, Yle hosts a platform targeted towards schoolchildren on which they can safely explore content found on the Internet and learn media literacy. Furthermore, Yle Newsclass (*Uutisluokka*) is a set of resources that is intended to create a learning-by-doing experience in the journalistic profession, including fact-checking skills. Together with an amusement park, the company has announced plans to develop an on-location *Media World (Mediamailma)* for young children to learn media literacy (Rönkä 2020). In general, Yle seeks to address young audiences with distinct content and an online presence. Yle Kioski is a journalism content hub for younger audiences whose video content is featured on Yle's website, on social media platforms, including Facebook and TikTok, and on Yle's streaming platform, Areena. Yle has also developed several online and mobile games to highlight how disinformation is created and disseminated.

Commentary

Generation-based distribution strategies for offering trustworthy content are one of Yle's key activities to counter disinformation, according to a Yle strategist, the gamification of disinformation education is specifically the optimal way to reach younger age groups. Towards this end, the company has developed mobile and 3D games. The older population, on the other hand, is targeted with news content on TV, radio or the Yle website.

In contrast, focussed content strategies in news, like fact-checking, are not considered relevant. Commentary by internal and external experts points to Yle's approach, which entails targeted, short-term, fact-checking projects but also stresses routine journalistic practices as sufficient. Additionally, as one Yle journalist noted, creative formats for presenting news are no longer popular, and debates about disinformation seem to have brought back the old news values. Another Yle interviewee emphasized that the main fact-checking practice is embedded in high quality news work and enforced by journalists improving their professional skills constantly, as is done in an ongoing journalism project run by Yle. This approach to disinformation and news, while clear to

Yle interviewees, elicited criticism from an outside expert in fact-checking and media literacy who referred to a study of systematic fact-checking activities surrounding the 2018 presidential elections (Nieminen and Wiberg 2018) as indicating a lack of proficiency by both Yle and its commercial competitors.

Spain: The Challenge of Independence

Context

In contrast to Finland, with its homogenous pattern of news consumption, Spain is characterized by high levels of societal polarization and social media use for news consumption as well as populist communication, similar to other southern European countries (Hallin and Mancini 2004; Humprecht, Esser, and Van Aelst 2020), as reflected in a relatively low level of media literacy (Lessenski 2019). Only 57% of Spaniards trust the information they watch on television, and almost the same proportion believe that they come across disinformation in news content at least once a week (Eurobarometer 2018). Simultaneously, the Spanish population is not very conditioned by foreign disinformation campaigns (Digital Society Project 2018).

Spanish PSM consist of the public broadcaster Corporación De Radiotelevisión Española (RTVE) and a network of regional broadcasters. RTVE has been influenced by the legacy of dictatorship, and Spanish PSM organizations are highly dependent on the political parties in power (Boix et al. 2020, 21), both organizationally and in terms of funding through a state subsidy (Berumen and Arriaza-Ibarra 2015). Partly due to these practices of control, freedom of the press is relatively low compared to other European countries (Reporters without Borders (RSF) 2020). Therefore, in social media, Spanish PSM are questioned by platforms that demand freedom of information on television channels, such as “Plataforma TVE Libre.” In this sense, the Platform in Defense of Freedom of Information calls for RTVE reform and the granting of frequencies to community media, which is essential for information pluralism and the right to information (Parra 2020). As a result of citizens’ distrust, RTVE’s main channel, La 1, had an audience share of less than 10% in 2020 (Barlovento Comunicación 2020). The audience share of the public regional PSM (combined) averaged only 8%. The private TV channels, Telecinco and Antena3, led in audience share, with 15% and 12%, respectively.

Even though Spain has high internet penetration (93%), with 79% of the population actively accessing online news sources, PSM has limited itself to traditional broadcasting without taking advantage of the benefits social media has created in terms of audience engagement. This has permitted the unfettered growth of audiences for privately owned media companies on social networks (Hidalgo-Marí and Segarra-Saavedra 2017).

Content

While its audience shares are not large, RTVE runs seven television channels, six radio stations and three digital content platforms, two of which produce original content for consumption on both its website and its social media accounts. As part of its efforts to tackle disinformation, RTVE created Verifica Corporación De Radiotelevisión

Española (RTVE) (2019), a fact-checking task force focussed on verifying information circulated during the two election cycles that occurred during that year. During the current pandemic, the team's objective has shifted towards verifying facts with the goal of providing quality service to citizens (Ufarte-Ruiz, Galletero-Campos, and López-Cepeda 2020, 93). As part of this service, a phone number is provided for verifying data on the messaging app, WhatsApp. On the broadcaster's website, a new section has been introduced to allow citizens to access and compare data.

In its efforts to better connect with audiences with innovative content, in 2011, RTVE created the RTVE Lab, a digital platform hosting reports on various topics featured in interactive formats. In 2017, the station introduced the teenager-targeted broadcast series, PlayZ, with some of its content raising awareness regarding the negative impact of disinformation. Overall, except for the hashtag #VerificaRTVE created on Twitter to cluster content related to disinformation, RTVE did not have a specific platform covering information disorder.

The area in which RTVE has innovated the most in its attempts to fight disinformation is entertainment. Various series and talk shows have addressed disinformation and discussed ways to combat it. For example, *El Método* is a programme in which scientists fact-check information about COVID-19 (Alcázar 2020). However, specific programmes on disinformation in areas more related to the public service mandate, such as newscasts, are not prominent in RTVE's schedules.

In terms of collaboration, given the educational role the public service mission implies, RTVE has been exploring research agreements with universities and publicly run companies. Verifica RTVE collaborates with various international organizations involved in combating disinformation, such as the fact-checking wing of the European Broadcasting Union (EBU). Further, as a response to the information disorder surrounding the COVID-19 crisis, RTVE has initiated a series of collaborations with experts and sources of official information, such as the Medical Association of Madrid, to verify information and debunk hoaxes.

When it comes to regional PSM in Spain, activities related to fighting disinformation have been less intense. Worth noting is the 2018 initiative of several autonomous regional broadcasters to develop a guide entitled "Si dudas, no compartas" ("If you doubt, don't share"), consisting of advice about how to detect fake news. The guide reinforces various initiatives that have been developed in the past by these organizations, such as educational documentaries, interactive games and news reports exposing false information. These regional PSM organizations collaborate with external fact-checking groups to fight disinformation through various TV programmes.

Commentary

Spanish public broadcasters follow a platform-agnostic approach, having a "transmedia objective," meaning they address hoaxes through several platforms (such as social media, chatbots and digital entertainment programmes) simultaneously. Just like in Finland, media literacy and collaborations are also a part of the toolkit for combating disinformation. While a variety of organizations are involved in information and media literacy activities and collaborate actively with many stakeholders, external experts believe that it is the responsibility of Spanish PSM to promote media literacy among

the population. For example, an expert with the national news agency EFE stated that the role of PSM is to give people resources and tools for their everyday lives. The interviewees indicated that verification of news does not suffice; there needs to be an explanation of why something is false as well as efforts to make such information easily accessible to citizens.

However, to be able to convince the public of the integrity of their fact-checking, PSM organizations must first prove that they are editorially independent. In Spain, there is heated debate about the trustworthiness of PSM organizations, which influences how people view the role of public media in fighting disinformation. While all of the interviewees stressed that Spanish citizens expect PSM to play an active role in countering disinformation, they noted that PSM must first gain the citizens' trust by proving their impartiality. One RTVE employee explicitly noted that citizens want to be assured of the neutrality of fact-checking; that it is not dictated by the government.

United Kingdom: Pioneering with Fact-Checking

Context

PSM have historically played a major role in the UK, being accepted, appreciated and frequently accessed due to their professionalism and independence. The political independence of the BBC was secured by a set of structural and normative sources of support. Structurally, the BBC was created as a "formally autonomous system" rather than a politically affiliated one, which is an important distinction when compared to PSM elsewhere.

However, since its inception, the BBC has been subject to political pressure, which has intensified over the past decade due to a circle of powerful businesses associated with large private media organizations in Britain (Dragomir 2016). Despite these challenges, including the popularity of global streaming services, PSM still play a major role in the UK. As of 2019, the BBC and Channel 4, a public service publisher-broadcaster, were the first and third most popular broadcasters, respectively (BARB 2020, 29), with audience shares of 31% (BBC) and 10% (Channel 4 n.d.). Additionally, the BBC is by far the most trusted and popular news source in the UK, both online and offline (Newman et al. 2020, 62). In contrast to many other European public broadcasters, the BBC manages to reach more young people online than other news providers (Schulz, Levy, and Nielsen 2019, 15), but it is struggling to reach 16–24-year-olds. Although, the BBC has also been criticized for its impartial coverage of politics and public affairs, especially when it comes to polarizing issues like Brexit (Freedman 2018; Newman et al. 2020; Schulz, Levy, and Nielsen 2019, 27).

However, the UK context is contradictory when it comes to its resilience to disinformation and the degree to which PSM makes a difference in the fight against false news. Apart from the UK's strong public broadcasters, trust in news has declined significantly in the past five years (Newman et al. 2020, 20). Foreign governments also often disseminate false information on key political issues in the UK (Digital Society Project 2018). The British public tend to trust most news sources less than the EU average (Eurobarometer 2018, 6–9), with a significant majority of audiences viewing false news as a societal problem. One survey suggested that almost 40% of the British

public encountered false information in the media daily and another 30% on a weekly basis (Eurobarometer 2018, 20). That said, caution should be exercised when cross-nationally comparing the public's understanding of disinformation. Although British respondents said that they identified false information (Eurobarometer 2018, 16), the level of media literacy in the UK is well behind that of Northern Europe and even some Southern European nations (Lessenski 2019, 5). A comparative study suggested that the UK is vulnerable to disinformation (Humprecht, Esser, and Van Aelst 2020), which is compounded by contextual factors, such as decreasing trust in media and, as we explored, the pressure and challenges faced by PSM in the UK's media system.

Content

Compared to other European public service media, the BBC is a well-resourced broadcaster. Notwithstanding its vast international operations and local services, the BBC offers nine television and 11 national radio channels. Its streaming service, iPlayer, has been popular, especially during the COVID-19 crisis (BBC 2020, 29). The weekly amount of time spent on the BBC averaged over 17 h, a figure many times greater than any competitors, including Channel 4, the other public broadcaster that commissions its programming (BBC 2020, 16).

In the UK, many legacy media organizations collaborate in fact-checking, but some of the most active initiatives among broadcasters concerning disinformation have been undertaken by the BBC and Channel 4, which have established their own fact-checking services. BBC Reality Check started with somewhat limited resources in 2015, only to be reinvigorated during the run-up to the Brexit referendum in 2016 (Graves and Cherubini 2016, 9). Since then, and in the aftermath of the Brexit vote and its preceding campaign, a permanent BBC editorial team was assigned to Reality Check in 2017 (Kyriakidou and Cushion 2021). Additionally, Channel four launched FactCheck, the first political fact-checking initiative in Europe, as a blog covering the 2005 general election, turning it into a permanent feature in 2010 (Graves and Cherubini 2016, 6). Both fact-checking initiatives have positioned themselves as watchdogs of political actors and their claims. In the 2019 snap election, Reality Check and FactCheck were given regular slots on flagship news programmes (Birks 2019). In the days leading to the election, Reality Check was viewed as a vital editorial service by the head of BBC News for "fact checking campaign claims" (Unsworth 2019). During the COVID-19 pandemic, both Reality Check and Channel four focussed almost exclusively on the health crisis, regularly updating their content and challenging misinformation (Kyriakidou and Cushion 2021).

The BBC has also enacted the idea of fact-checking as a dialogue between PSM and its viewers (e.g., Ufarte-Ruiz, Galletero-Campos, and López-Cepeda 2020, 98). Allocating attention to fact-checking during periods of crisis can be seen as part of the public service mission of the BBC and Channel four and their commitment to providing citizens with facts instead of misinformation. Fact-checkers have also sought to make their presence stronger on social media platforms so that they can reach younger generations. Channel 4, for example, has a series of YouTube videos titled "FactCheck Explains."

Apart from news, BBC offers a variety of content that corresponds to the mandate of the CoE. The BBC has collected numerous resources for understanding the challenges posed by disinformation online under the title “Beyond Fake News” (BBC n.d.), including sections on related latest news, such as COVID-19, journalistic tools to detect false information, different forms of information disorder and different technologies used in fighting disinformation. The site encompasses special sections for young audiences and audiences around the world. A major collaborative effort is the BBC Young Reporter, which works with schools, colleges, youth organizations and charities to provide resources and BBC staff mentors in media literacy education with the aim of “encouraging young people aged 11–18 to share their stories and get their voices heard” (BBC 2021). Moreover, Channel Four has tackled disinformation in its current affairs programmes and through a short-lived comedy show. In 2019, it launched *Uncovered*, a weekly news show on Facebook Watch to address disinformation (Channel four n.d.).

Commentary

Similar to Spain, the UK interviews reflect the challenging, unique context in which PSM operate within a national media system. In the interviews, the problem of a so-called “information disorder” was mentioned as a broader question, requiring more impactful regulatory measures regarding stakeholders, including global platforms. Some interviewees stressed the complexities brought to journalism by digitalization; disinformation has always been a part of political communication, but the media ecosystem has shifted from a largely regulated media sector to fragmented, unregulated digital media spaces. As the BBC editor noted, this creates a challenge in which the gatekeeper control is lost, and journalistic choices become difficult in the fight against countering rather than exacerbating false information. Accordingly, and in contrast to the interviewees from Finland and Spain, the representatives of the BBC and Channel Four emphasized the importance of fact-checking in combating information disorder.

The Czech Republic (CZE): Multi-Stakeholder Collaborations

Context

The media system in the CZE is characterized by elements of its former communist state media (Herrero et al. 2017). The governing structures of PSM in former communist countries are highly politicized, and the systems by which state funding is allocated to the media lack transparency. In this type of media system, the political parties practically colonize the media outlets, using them as communication channels for their own interests (Bajomi-Lázár 2014). These countries are characterized by a situation in which media owners are involved in both politics and other industries. Since 2013, a group of powerful businesses has taken over most private media in the CZE (Dragomir 2019). Consequently, the CZE ranks lowest in terms of press freedom among the four countries covered in this study—however, it remains in a respectable position (40) out of all countries included in the index (Reporters without Borders (RSF) 2020). In contrast, the country scored low in terms of trust in the media and confidence in fighting disinformation. In 2018, citizens’ trust in legacy media was among the lowest in

Europe, which is due to the rising influence of oligarchs in Czech media (Giereł-Klimaszewska 2019).

With an internet penetration of 88% (Newman et al. 2020), the CZE is highly exposed to information flows. The proportion of Czech people who are confident that legacy media can fight disinformation is below the EU average (Eurobarometer 2018, 6–9, 13, 16). The CZE is also among the EU countries with the lowest share of citizens who view disinformation as a problem for democracy (Eurobarometer 2018, 20–21). This is a worrisome trend, given that the country is often targeted by false news coming from foreign sources (Digital Society Project 2018) and that the level of media literacy is low to mediocre (higher than most countries in Central and Eastern Europe but far below Western European countries; Lessenski 2019, 5).

However, the CZE is unique among the other countries in Central and Eastern Europe when it comes to the quality and independence of its public media. Their reputation of relative independence as well as the quality of content (drama, political and current affairs shows and documentaries) have garnered sizable audience figures for the Czech PSM. With an audience share of 30% (for all its channels combined), Czech public television fights for leadership in the television market against the largest privately owned broadcaster in the country. Moreover, Czech Television enjoys high levels of public trust, being one of the 17 European countries in which PSM are the most trusted news brands (Newman et al. 2020). This is remarkable given that the CZE is one of the six European countries with an overall low level of trust in national news (Eurobarometer 2018, 20–21). Czech PSM also cater to less-populist audiences more than private broadcasters (Schulz, Levy, and Nielsen 2019, 27).

Content

In 2019, the Czech public broadcasters Czech Television and Czech Radio operated with budgets that amounted to €371 M combined, which is a significant public media expenditure for a country of 10 million people. Czech Television operates six channels, including a generalist channel and thematic channels specialized in news, sports, culture, children's programmes and the arts. Operating separately from Czech TV, Czech public radio runs a total of 11 channels specialized in various areas, including news, cultural programming and youth and children's programming. The broadcaster also runs an international channel that caters to audiences abroad and a network of 14 regional stations that produce programmes designed for local audiences across the CZE. Additionally, the CZE is an exceptional case in Central Europe in terms of overall fact-checking experience, with numerous independent projects typically established by journalists or academics emerging in recent years. These projects not only focus on fact-checking but also on educational and research activities—often in cooperation with schools, experts, journalists and NGOs.

Czech PSM made their own contributions to these efforts in two forms: news coverage and media literacy projects. In an environment characterized by the increased penetration of false news from foreign sources as well as manipulative content disseminated by many domestic news media, Czech Television views fact-checking and media literacy as a core part of its public service mission. Both Czech Television and Czech Radio have increased their coverage of disinformation and false news in the

past two years, airing regular news and analytical reports about the topic. They have also sought to make the topic of disinformation more palatable to more of their audience. In 2019, for example, they ran “To se vi” (“That is known”), a humorous programme adapted after the British Fake News Show (Channel 4).

Furthermore, Czech Television has also used disinformation as media literacy material for its “Edu” web portal, an online platform hosted by the station’s website and touted by the broadcaster as the largest portal of educational videos in the country. Launched in April 2020, the platform offers pedagogical content related to several topics. In its “Media Education” package, the broadcaster introduces topics related to disinformation. The portal is popular among young viewers due to the breadth of the topics covered but also because of the manner in which it is structured, with information packages presented according to audience ages and interests. Characteristic of the initiatives tackling disinformation is their collaborative element. The Czech TV Edu project, for example, was created in collaboration with almost 50 experienced teachers and experts. The research for the programme, “To se vi,” was carried out by a group of political studies students.

Commentary

Despite the prolific array of fact-checking activities in the CZE, the role of PSM as a trusted source is still significant for both journalism and education. As one PSM journalist argued, audiences will pay more attention to disinformation if the topic is covered regularly in the news. Similarly, fact-checking is seen as an essential part of the process. Interestingly, based on the interviews, in CZE media literacy is seen as an essential task for PSM journalism. That includes the transparency of journalistic practices.

Furthermore, Czech Television has been able to attract young audiences with its online educational platform and non-traditional formats, due to the fact that children’s media environments and ways of learning are often based on video-form content. Different formats are considered powerful tools to educate the general audience as well. That is demonstrated by the show “To se vi” —which, accordingly its creative producer, was part of the long-term efforts to combat disinformation.

Czech Television has also increased its collaborative efforts in recent years, demonstrated in how the Edu online platform was created in cooperation with teachers from all over the country. However, more must be done to tackle disinformation. Based on the interviews, PSM could take even a more collaborative approach and tap into the significant resources now spent by so many NGOs and research groups.

Discussion

Based on our analysis, the policy recommendations of the Council of Europe (CoE) (2019) are difficult for all PSM organizations to implement. This is because they have different levels of resources, must respond to different audience needs and are shaped by different political contexts, especially in terms of editorial decision making, which makes it challenging to give cross-national normative assessments of whether the tasks stipulated in the CoE resolution are being adequately met. Regardless, the

comparative analysis of context, content and expert commentary highlights key empirical findings as well as the need to assess the role of PSM more widely in Europe.

The key aspect that unites our four case countries is that although their PSM have considered information disorder, none have branded themselves as the main counterforce against the disinformation phenomenon. This is a surprising outcome given the prevalence of debates over false news and disinformation in recent years and how well PSM performed during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic as go-to sources of information (EBU 2020).

Illustrating the three-dimensional framework with the case countries emphasizes several reasons for PSM avoiding claims of being a counterforce to disinformation. One reason is that each PSM organization is situated in a distinct national-global media landscape that impacts its role as the counterforce of disinformation. Another reason is that each PSM has a different organizational legacy and thereby different tools for combating false news (e.g., fact-checking); there is thus no common strategy—at least not one that would trickle down to concrete programmatic and service offerings. Therefore, while at the structural level robust PSM seem to contribute to national resilience against online disinformation (Humprecht, Esser, and Van Aelst 2020), the question is how they achieve such resilience. Is it because of the specific content and services they provide that address disinformation, or is it the robust legacy and familiarity of specific PSM brands that generally elicit trust (Toff et al. 2021)? Our framework indicates that while PSM in the case countries might exist in significantly divergent structural and organizational contexts, they nonetheless share some features and ambitions for distinctiveness.

Context

PSM organizations occupy a different yet distinct role in each case country. Finland does not battle with major flows of disinformation, and Yle, which is well resourced, enjoys a healthy audience share and high trust; meanwhile, in Spain, the challenge is the low level of audience trust in RTVE. In the UK, PSM are at the forefront of combating disinformation while also facing constant debates and uncertainty about their future, in particular the BBC. In the CZE, PSM offers a trusted source in a highly commercialized, disinformation-ridden media landscape.

Contextual factors may explain why Yle's main activities to counter disinformation draw from its legacy as a national media educator (National Audiovisual Institute KAVI n.d.), though Finland is internationally known for its strong policies and practices of media literacy education in schools, supported by many different actors (Macintosh and Kiernan 2019). In its day-to-day journalism, Yle relies on its strong news brand and quality journalism to suffice and does not see a need for a separate fact-checking unit. While information disorder is recognized as a problem, it is not pervasive enough to warrant special journalistic activities. In contrast, fact-checking has flourished in the CZE, the UK and Spain.

Looking only at the media landscapes and organizational contexts of PSM could easily lead to the conclusion that PSM organizations have very little in common, and that such a specific, European-wide CoE mandate is unachievable. Though all the case

organizations share the values of independence, universality, diversity, excellence, innovation and accountability (EBU 2012) in principle, their disparate contexts entail drastically different needs, pressures and opportunities for them to counter disinformation.

Content

Looking at their content offerings, it is hard to identify a specific “PSM tool” or strategy for combating disinformation. For instance, despite the existence of an international code of principles (The Poynter Institute 2016), the definition of fact-checking for PSM organizations seems to be fluid. In this study, the two countries with a strong tradition of PSM, Finland and the UK, had different approaches to fact-checking. Both the BBC and Channel four are at the forefront of fact-checking work in the UK, having developed highly specialized in-house fact-checking activities. Furthermore, Yle sees fact-checking as an activity that must be embedded both in its journalism work to ensure high-quality journalistic content and in its strategic developments. These differences echo the organization-specific differing external and internal factors that play into the configurations of PSM newsrooms (Sehl, Cornia, and Nielsen 2018).

However, the dimension of content and service offerings also shows that the CoE recommendations—innovative practices regarding news and current affairs, specialized programmes on disinformation, critical media literacy content, online communication for young people and collaborations with other stakeholders—belong in some form to the PSM programming palette in each case country. For example, the BBC, Czech Television and Yle all conduct novel experiments in media education. All organizations researched engage in multi-platform distribution and related innovations. This positions them as *de facto* multidimensional public service organizations rather than only national broadcasting news sources. This role has been highlighted especially in relation to the pandemic (e.g., Reuters 2021; Tuominen 2020).

Commentary

Concerning the CoE mandate, whether the PSM organization occupies a large market share or not, whether it is trusted or not and whether it has vast resources or not, it is expected to address information disorder by multiple means. Simultaneously, external media experts challenge PSM to increase their resources in the fight against disinformation. Despite differences in the contexts and organizational configurations among the countries studied, two basic strategies emerged: trusted journalism and educational content. The interviews echoed the argument that both media literacy and supporting trusted news organizations belong to the toolkit of fighting disinformation (Humprecht 2019). PSM are valued for their provision of reliable news and engaging educational content but also for delivering “industry value” (Mazzucato et al. 2020) by pioneering technological solutions as well as by developing journalistic standards and in-house education.

The PSM professionals’ ambition to both inform and educate audiences in a distinctive manner is similar to the approaches that PSM directors and managers in the

UK and the US have identified as strategies to counter competition and other challenges brought about by global platforms (Martin 2021). Even the most critical interviewees did not deem PSM powerless. However, they call for PSM “renewal” as collaborators with other activities and organizations working to remedy disinformation.

Conclusion

A three-dimensional framework was designed in this study to assess the role of PSM organizations in countering disinformation. More precisely, the activities of four significantly different PSM case countries were assessed regarding the CoE mandate and considering contextual issues as well as expert testimonies. The framework revealed how despite the global challenge of disinformation, each case country embodied different degrees of resilience against disinformation as well as the great extent to which the positions of the studied PSM organizations differed. It also highlighted that despite these differences, there were commonalities across the case countries in both programming and services for combating disinformation as well as in expectations that PSM would do so.

Only a few specific actions may be transferable from PSM to PSM, specifically in terms of journalism and media literacy as distinct PSM. First, governments should ensure that PSM are politically, editorially and financially independent so as to play a leading role responsibly and credibly in fighting disinformation. Spain is a case in point here, as the political bias of its PSM promotes the proliferation of hoaxes surrounding its credibility (Cabascango 2021).

Second, PSM should be encouraged or even required to collaborate with fact-checking groups and to become more involved in more meaningful ways in mobilizing the citizenry in its anti-disinformation efforts. This is because, ultimately, it is the impact of PSM on audiences that will make a difference in efforts to eliminate disinformation from the Internet. Yet, in their mission to influence public discourse and increase their reach and impact, fact-checking organizations depend on their relationship with established news media organizations while also seeking to avoid their material being used by partisan media for political purposes (Graves and Cherubini 2016, 25–26). In this context, PSM and fact-checking organizations are ideal partners due to their shared commitment to impartiality, as the case of CZE illustrates.

Finally, PSM should be allocated the necessary resources for producing quality content, lead in media literacy efforts and innovate in its online presence to increase its impact. More broadly, as PSM are not a normative or legal concept such as public service broadcasting, their capacity to innovate and collaborate may be hindered. While all of the analysed case organizations were engaged in multimedia, multi-platform activities as a way to battle disinformation, they shared no specific practices to do so.

The analysis concludes—as Humprecht, Esser, and Van Aelst (2020) also noted—that PSM alone are not likely to solve the problem of information disorder. Not every PSM is trusted, and many are routinely attacked for their coverage of politics and public affairs. In addition, PSM and policy makers have not yet been able to develop strategies to counter the dominance of digital platforms, which are the main venues for

spreading disinformation (Van Es and Poell 2020). However, the premise of PSM as a tool to counter manifestations of information disorder as a strategy is possible, even in highly different national contexts.

Notes

1. The research design and three-dimensional framework were piloted in a background report for the CoE (2019) and in a white paper (Horowitz 2018).
2. Seven interviews with news editors conducted in Stephen Cushion's project (e.g. Soo et al. 2020) and three interviews conducted for a Finnish study on trust in media (Horowitz et al. 2021) – one with a journalist and two with media literacy and media education professionals.
3. Four interviews from the Czech Republic, three from Finland (two from Yle and one from a media literacy/fact-checking expert of Faktabaari), one from the UK (from The Voice of Listener & Viewer) and three from Spain (one from RTVE, one from national news agency EFE and one representing fact-checking organisation Newtral).

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