

The Romanian Public Television– A New Beginning. Proposals and Strategies to Defeat the Crisis

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Abstract

This article analyses the current situation of the Romanian public television versus other European public television networks. This analysis is complemented by several proposals regarding potential amendments to the functioning law of the Romanian audiovisual field (law 41/1994) and ideas towards a development strategy that would help the public television regain its leading position in the Romanian mass media. The proposals and ideas that are put forward are based and endorsed by the double role of the author, as professor at The National School of Political Science and Public Administration (SNSPA) and producer of several political programs within the public television network (including the first program entirely dedicated to the European Parliament, financed by a grant from the European Parliament).

Keyword: *public television, digitalization, development strategy, management, convergence of communication media, Internet television, programming strategies, business model in the mass-media.*

JEL classification: L20, L82

Introduction

Twenty five years after the fall of the communist regime in 1989, the Romanian public television needs significant change to allow it to further conduct its public mission. With debts of almost 150 million Euros, lacking an editorial strategy adapted to the rapid development of the Internet and considering the current geopolitical situation of Romania as the Eastern border of the European Union (EU) and NATO, the Romanian public television network in its current form risks to become a negligible presence on the Romanian media market or to disappear altogether. If this hypothesis holds, the greatest loser will be no other than the Romanian society (TVR, 2016). In the event of tense external contexts or the rather extreme situation when many commercial networks go bankrupt, the public television would become the main information provider to the Romanian society. In this context, a potential disappearance of the public television network would be completely undesirable and even dangerous for the population.

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Does an EU country need public television? One of the best answers to this question has been given by Georgina Born and Toni Prosser (2001, p.657), during a time when the BBC was under high pressures from the private sector. To answer this question, we first need to clarify whether the production and broadcast of programmes is a commercial activity or the expression of cultural norms and expectations. The obvious answer is both: commercial and cultural activity, with long term impact on social cohesion.

It is no secret that the public television network's activity has been permanently minimized and often denigrated in the Romanian public sphere. If such denigration coming from private channels can be justified through a commercial component - attempts to lower market share and to diminish the public television network's influence on its public - , the politicians' aggression towards the public television cannot be understood, as it was the very same politicians who tried, in a more or less visible manner, to control it by strategically placing people in management and budgeting boards. Numerous times, criticisms raised by politicians regarding the public television's editorial activity haven't been constructive, arising from a desire to correct the less positive aspects, but rather rooted in they wish to acquire full control, both over the financial and human resources. They have always wanted to make sure the convenient people are appointed in all important key positions, both in management boards and in executive roles. The political leaders after 1989 have been always lured by the possibility of having total control over the public television, following the same model of the Propaganda Institution that has been in place before 1989 (with close scrutiny and control of the single party and the Securitate).

Regardless of Romania's geopolitical situation and its long and difficult transition period from communism, the constant clash between the cultural and commercial component is source of many uncertainties which need an innovative legislative solution that targets three major values:

- the citizens' attitude (citizenship);
- the universality of the programs broadcast by the public television network;
- the quality of programmes.

A new functioning law of the public television needs to explicitly target the two sides of the individual, in order to discourage any „original” interpretations:

- Its role as “citizen”, who needs cultural products in order to grow as a person and thus contribute to the development of the society he lives in;
- Its role as “consumer”, who enjoys the liberty to choose the programmes he wants to watch, and who is protected from the permanent „battle” among commercial channels through the alternative that is represented by the public television network. Unlike the commercial channels, the public television network cannot be blackmailed with advertising budgets. A very good example here

would be the already famous conflict between RCS&RDS cable provider and Intact Media Group, which is very well known on the Romanian media market.

1. Public television channels in Europe: brief overview

The pressure exerted by the commercial channels on the public network is no surprise in Europe. The same can be said by the pressure exerted by the political sector. The pressure has existed and has continued to grow because the tremendous evolution of the digital technology has allowed for the development of a great number of commercial channels, which in turn has led to an identity crisis for public networks and to financing struggles: the constant launch of new commercial channels has happened without a matching, similar growth of the advertising sector. In Spain, the influence of the political on the public television, considered noticeably higher than in other European countries, has led to a detachment of the audience from the public service, both at the central and regional levels. This control is exerted through keeping the public television under constant financial crisis (de Miguel, Casado and et Ramón, 2013, pp. 51-65).

In Greece, the situation of the public television has been even more dramatic. On the 11th of June 2013, the Greek public television ended its broadcast, which was resumed after two years, in 2015 (TVR News, 2015). The interesting fact is that in 2016, the Greek Council of State, the highest administrative state institution (an equivalent of the Constitutional Court in Romania), has invalidated the reform of the audiovisual sector that had been proposed by the Greek Government, which was considered a serious defeat for Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, who instantly criticized this decision. With a majority of 14 judges out of 25, the Council of State invalidated the law from 2015 as unconstitutional. Most judges felt that the reform should be carried out by the Broadcasting Council, the independent institution that monitors broadcasts, and not by legislators (TVR News, 2016).

In 2008, France Television – the public French TV network, had a budget deficit of 116 million Euros, while in 2009, the deficit reached 135 million Euros (Ziare.com, 2008). France's then President Nicholas Sarkozy has imposed the elimination of advertising on the public television during prime-time (beginning at 20:00), as part of a more encompassing audiovisual reform. However, this turned out to be in fact the effect of an understanding he had made with Martin Bouygues, the main stakeholder of TF1, who had helped him during the electoral campaign. TF1 had previously been part of the French public television, which was privatized during the mandate of the former President – Francois Mitterand. Among the solutions for the financial recovery of the French public television, in 2012, French President Francois Hollande, Sarkozy's follower, was considering the extension of the broadcast tax to those who do not own TV sets, but watch these channels on their tablets or computers (Gandul.info, 2012). In 2012, the annual tax was 125

Euros in continental France, and 80 Euros in overseas territories. The tax was paid together with the French Residence Tax (Taxe d'Habitation).

In the EU, there are two organizational frameworks for the public radio and television networks:

- Integrated organizations that comprise both the radio and the television networks (this is the case in the UK, Spain or Germany)
- Separated radio and television organizations (the most well known example being France).

In Canada, outside the EU, the public TV and radio services are integrated in a media group. Although Canada has a powerful economy – has recently been included in the G20 - the public TV channel has found itself facing economic struggles. Therefore, in 2014, the country began an extensive restructuring process of its media sector, designed for a five year period, with a plan to suppress approximately 400 positions in 2014 from a total that could reach up to 1500 positions by 2020. The leadership of the public audiovisual sector has put forward a restructuring strategy which proposed that 154 positions be eliminated from the English service, 127 from the French side and another 115 from the administrative sector (Rador, 2014).

In Romania, similar to other European countries, the demand for audiovisual content grew much slower than the offer, which was encouraged by the development of digital technologies (Decruyenaere, 2012, p. 8). Between 1990 and 2016, the National Audiovisual Council (CNA) has released over 300 radio and television licenses, leading to audience fragmentation, which implicitly resulted in a decreased audience for the public network.

At the moment of this paper, in December 2016, Romania counts four main news TV channels: Antena 3, B1 TV, Realitatea TV and Romania TV, four main generalist TV channels: ProTv, Antena 1, Prima TV and Kanal D and various more local, regional and national channels, which offer a broad array of programs, which ensures a certain diversity of choices. The public television has the following channels: TVR 1 (generalist), TVR 2 (generalist, cultural, entertainment, movies), TVR 3 (regional, equivalent to France 3), TVR International (for Romanians living abroad) and TVR Moldova (in collaboration with a channel from the Republic of Moldova).

The rate of change in the media sector and the differences in performance between private and public media in different countries can be attributed partly to the respective country's economic situation (to the level of funding) and partly to the political attitude towards the public channel. It can easily be seen that in post-1989 Romania, the sole purpose of the political and coercive powers has been to have as much control as possible over the media; this statement takes into account the classification of powers made by J. Thomson (1994, pp. 6-12). At the same time, it is clear that the internal organizational barriers and the legal constraints have hindered Romania's and other countries' public television network's capacity to seize opportunities and successfully deal with the challenges posed by the rise of the online, more so than is the case for private channels. The 2016 Reuters study

regarding public television services from various European countries has identified the Finnish and British public television networks as success stories. The study took into account the public television networks from six European countries: Finland, France, the United Kingdom, Italy, Poland and Germany.

The Reuters study has also identified several internal and external conditions that the very high performing media organizations from Finland and the UK share. The external conditions are: "(1) they operate in technologically advanced media markets; (2) they are well-funded compared to other public service media organizations; (3) they are integrated and centrally organized public service media organizations working across all platforms; (4) they are rather isolated from direct political influence and enjoy more certainty regarding their mission as a public service, their financing capabilities, etc." (Sehl, Cornia and Rasmus, 2016, pp. 5-8). The two internal conditions are: (1) a pro-digital culture where new media are seen as opportunities rather than as threats and (2) senior editorial leaders who have clearly and publicly underlined the need to continually change the organization to adapt to a changing media environment (Sehl, Cornia, and Rasmus, 2016, Pp. 5-8). One can observe that success is to a great degree ensured by the quality of the management team, which still needs to be improved in the case of the Romanian public television service. „Internet is very important in every aspect nowadays to a high extend which means that people can't do anything without internet. Add to that, internet has direct impact on the behavior of people of all age, gender and educational background." (Enachescu and Tarabay, 2016, pp. 272 – 277).

Business models in the media market are strongly influenced by the rise of digital technology. The development of the Internet led to an unprecedented convergence of communication channels, as it reshaped all communication channels that have existed before. Traditional print media became audiovisual media, the voices on the radio being no longer anonymous, as cameras could easily be set up in the radios studios. Also, more interactivity was allowed between listeners and provider, as music could now be selected by the audience directly from the radio's website. Television has been partially transferred on computers and the emergence of multiplex platforms (online platforms where media content can be watched) dramatically changed the relation between consumer and broadcaster. Under these new conditions, the media business model has undergone radical changes without one being able to say that there is a single certain successful model. Three business models can be identified in France, which correspond to three completely different commercial types (Decruyenaere, 2012, p. 11):

1. Private and free TV channels like TF1 and M6, which are based on advertising revenue. This model is the most common in Romania as well.
2. Private channels that require subscriptions. In France for example, some private channels are exclusively financed through viewers' subscriptions. There are no such TV channels in Romania.

3. Public channels, financed almost exclusively through the audiovisual tax.

2. Public Television in Romania: proposals for a new functional model adapted for the digital Era

In Romania, according to law 41/1994, both the public radio and the public television find themselves under Parliamentary scrutiny which is expressed through the Parliament's election of the Administrative Board. Although in this case the State can be considered to be a stakeholder of the public television network, the Administrative Boards have been dismissed by the Parliament without there ever being any terms of reference to be evaluated against. Throughout this article, we discuss two alternatives for reshaping the Romanian public TV service (SRTV).

2.1. The amendment of the audiovisual functioning law 41 / 1994, in order to allow for the unification of the radio, television and news agency Agerpres

The most important argument in favor of this method of restructuring SRTV is the convergence of communication technologies, as one cannot go against the inevitable technological evolution anymore. This convergence means that all three communication channels mentioned above (radio, TV and print) become audiovisual. The second argument is that the model with the radio and TV channels combined is more widespread throughout the EU than the one with separated institutions. Third, this convergence could allow for a clearer career path for employees, which in turn would lead to promotions based on competences rather than on personal preferences and ties. Convergence would also facilitate a reorganization plan for the two institutions, resulting in the creation of a more accurate payment scheme for employees. Finally, convergence would enable a better management of information within the two sectors (radio and television) and the creation of a sales team to conduct analyses and research studies.

The success key of such a model is the creation of a very powerful financial department, complemented by a business department that can support, value and sustain the creativity of a large media institution. Unfortunately, the management of such a colossus would be very difficult for Romania, which lacks a strong previous expertise in the media management sector. Most probably however, the convergence of communication technologies - radio, television, mobile telephony, Internet, will impose this model in less than a generation.

2.2. Reshaping the public television sector while maintaining the current separation between the public radio and television network

One can perceive this as a transition stage towards an integrated institution – such as the model of the existent private media trusts – which comprise both

television channels and radio stations. This integrated formula allows for a better use of financial, technical and human resources.

Before opening the discussion about the proposals regarding the improvement of law 41/1994, here are some background ideas which target direct government action:

- a. Building a new office tower and upgrading the equipment for the public television network using EU funds. This requires an efficient, integrated project, with a time horizon of maximum four years;
- b. The clarification of the ownership of the regional studios and their headquarters, as well as the construction of new premises where the existing ones have been transferred back to the titular holders;
- c. Using standard technical guidelines to equip regional studios with digital technologies, in order to make them compatible with the other modern studios throughout the country;

In order for these three proposals (a, b and c) to be successful and to avoid setbacks, I believe they should be designed and carried out by a foreign independent company.

- d. Digitalizing the public television's archive, using part of the EU funds that are allotted to the cultural sector.

3. Additional proposals for the reformation of the public TV network

The proposals listed below (4.1 – 4.5) are based on maintaining the second framework (3.2) that keeps the separation between the public radio and television network. These proposals are based on four strategic objectives:

- Digitalizing the production chain by acquiring modern technologies;
- The integration of the new communication technologies with the news sector and their use for the improvement of the connection with the audience;
- The development of attractive formats, which can then be sold on European markets;
- Raising professionalism in the editorial and technical departments.

Determining the size of the public television can be done by referring to measurable, objective criteria, such as the country population size. For instance, France has 61 million inhabitants while its public TV network has 10000 employees. In Romania, following the same reasoning and maintaining the ratio, the public TV network could have up to 3000 employees. If we also take into account Romania's economic capabilities, an optimal number could be around 2300 – 2400 employees. Determining the overall dimension of this institution based on coherent and objective criteria would on the one hand enable comparisons between EU countries and on the other hand, help avoid accusations of having hidden agendas that go against or even fail to serve the public interest. Also, the correct budgeting of all projects the network is engaged in could play a role in determining the correct size of SRTV. Therefore, special attention needs to be

given to an accurate and proper budget, in order for the network to efficiently define its human and technological needs.

4.1. Amending law 41/1994 to make the introduction of terms of reference created by the Parliament and followed by the Council of Administrators mandatory. These terms of reference could also be used as evaluation instruments for the activity of the Council at the end of every year

At the present moment, the Council of Administrators designs an annual report which is either accepted or rejected by the Parliament, exclusively based on political reasons, with absolutely no judgment regarding the actual activity of the Council, and with no coercive measures in the case of major management failures. This, together with the complicity of the Parliament and all successive Councils of Administration that have been in place after 2000 has led to the current budget deficit of about 150 million Euros.

The terms of reference that the Parliament should create for the Council of Administrators have to be based on annual sociological research studies measuring the audience's satisfaction levels with the programs offered by the public television network (this mechanism has already been in place in France since many years). The study could also help identify other important aspects regarding the Romanian public's preference for certain formats, topics or types of programmes. The Parliament's control over the Council of Administrators should be exerted based on three elements: the terms of reference, a strong budget plan and regular measurements of audience satisfaction through the appropriate research tools.

The following proposals are based on the idea that the Executive Management and the Council of Administrators should be independent bodies, separate from each other. When debates regarding this issue took place in 1994, one of the strong arguments in favor of having these two boards led by one single person was that it is preferable to avoid the creation of two leading powerful positions that would find themselves in permanent confrontation. In reality, the Council of Administrators has always been controlled by the Board of Directors, with a single exception, between 2000 and 2004. Today it is obvious that the two positions must be separated, in order for them to control each other's activity. The Executive Management must have real management instruments at its disposal, while the Council of Administrators must have the chance to refresh the management team whenever it proves to be incompetent. The current selection process for managerial positions is purely a formality, as the winners are almost always known beforehand; the entire process is specific for the selection of civil servants rather than the selection of managers.

4.2. The modification of the channel's management: introducing editorial and economic objectives, in order to empower the management teams

At the moment, the managers of the Romanian public TV network have no clear objectives to fulfill and no interest whatsoever to simulate productivity. Accession to leadership positions is done through exams that are just a façade, and afterwards, there are no evaluation mechanisms to check the actual activity of these managers. Practically, what happens is that a managerial position, once achieved, can be for life. If we start to analyze the way managers have been named after 1989, we will rapidly notice that the executive power within the public television channel has been always held by a very limited number of people who took turns in leading the institution. This mechanism suggests through its mere existence that the true decisional power is in other hands, while the managers become simple spokespersons – very well paid ones, in fact. Furthermore, the editorial and economic objectives of each channel will also result from the general objectives set by the television network as a whole. In order to be able to work together with all other channels, each channel manager will have a minimum of two instruments: the work strategy of the entire television network and the information offered by an editorial division for news production. This division will also comprise an online component, under the acronym TVR Online. Also, the general internal regulations should limit the maximum number of mandates a manager can have to a maximum of two.

SRTV's strategies for the next mandate of the Council of Administration beginning in 2017 should be, in my opinion, the following: reconnecting with the audience, rejuvenating the audience through the intensive use of the new media forms and replacing the outdated equipment to enable a strong positioning in the online sector.

4.3. Rebranding the current "Programming department", which will become the "Department of Programming and Strategy"

This department will set the directive lines for each channel and will distribute the different TV productions towards the most appropriate channel for broadcast. One component of this proposal will be the creation of a separate department of editorial strategic planning that will develop new TV formats in advance, based on results obtained from sociological studies such as focus groups, questionnaires or structured interviews. Weekly reports will be elaborated in order to check the editorial equilibrium within the public television network. The fundamental change of the current department of programming should consist in the creation of strategies with one year in advance. Productions such as documentaries, interviews that are not related to particular events and children's programmes should be produced one year in advance; this strategy will eventually lead to a decrease in production costs.

The integrated editorial strategy must also take into consideration, from the very early stages of pre-production, the particular channel which will end up broadcasting the programme. To give an example: regional studios will produce a programme about Romanians abroad, which will be aired on TVR 3. The same programme will be aired a second time by regional studios, each studio airing its own production, and the third time it will be broadcasted by TVR International, with subtitles in one of the main foreign languages. If TVR News will be launched on the Internet, the format could then be also broadcast on this channel, with more subtitling options.

The integrated editorial strategy will also consider the following areas of development:

- 1) the development of editorial offers for mobile telephony;
- 2) the use of social media in order to make the news broadcasted by the public television channels available faster and more efficiently, in an era that is more than ever dominated by digital mass media (Sehl, Cornia and Rasmus, 2016, p. 39).

4.4. The identity of the SRTV channels

The identity of the various channels of the public television network is an issue that has been also raised at a European level, in several other countries. The identity of a public television channel has two dimensions: its identity compared to commercial channels and its identity within the public network. The identity of a channel is also determined by the dominant audience that it targets. Looking at the public television network, we propose the following identities of the existing channels, which can be verified through specialized sociological studies that identify the audience's desires and expectations.

TVR 1 has the potential to easily become the best generalist TV channel in Romania - a popular channel, with a positive approach, optimistic and quality-oriented. In order to attract more audience, it needs original formats that can reunite a large number of people from different generations; these new formats should be based on the population's psychological traits. Sports shows for example are a very good opportunity to attract a large array of spectators in front of the TV. TVR1's programming strategy must revive the pleasure of group viewing, as well as spark group discussions about the respective programs on social media. TVR1 should become media partner at sports, cultural or social events, in order to gain access to quality events which in turn would also contribute to the enrichment of its already unique archive. It has already been one year since TVR 1 has only broadcast reruns and news, achieving disastrous audience figures. The current infrastructure is not able to sustain a news channel and high quality informative programmes.

TVR 3. One of the main innovations of our proposal is to combine the resources of regional studios to produce a distinct channel – TVR3, which could broadcast a national news bulletin at 19:00 that would compete with the main news

bulletins broadcasted by commercial channels, while maintaining a cultural and touristic profile. This news bulletin should be especially concerned with the daily regional issues and, at the same time, provide a strong cultural component. TVR 3 projects the regional studios to a national level; these regional studios need to be strengthened and must be given concrete and measurable editorial objectives to follow.

TVR International targets Romanians who live abroad. Its profile needs to be enriched with programs from regional channels in order to provide the Romanians who have left their country with a more encompassing view on what takes place back home. The target audience should also encompass the local audiences from those countries on the receiving end of TVR International (foreign audiences), by broadcasting subtitled programmes, touristic promotion shows, programmes on investments, etc.

TVR News, exclusively online: the launch of an online news channel is another major proposal for restructuring the national public television network. This online channel would not need a functioning license from the National Audiovisual Council and is also fully innovative from a technological standpoint. This channel can capitalize on the productions of all other channels within the public network, can broadcast subtitled productions, having the potential to become a major instrument for country branding as it targets audiences from all over the world (O'Connor, 2011, p. 87-90). There would also be no need for hiring additional workforce: the channel will use the current employees from the News Department.

TVR Moldova is a television channel that has been created in partnership with a private entity from the Republic of Moldova. In addition, this channel can also benefit from news directly produced in Brussels, regarding the European Commission, the European Parliament and NATO. On the 5th of December 2016, the Government in Chişinău approved the draft proposal on the opening of a NATO Office in the Republic of Moldova.

4.5. Cost optimization

This subchapter is mostly tactical in nature, but cannot be overseen. Also, one has to note that the proposals listed below could have already been applied long time ago but have been repeatedly ignored, most probably due to incompetence.

a. Cost optimization requires a rigorous planning of the production of television programmes and could be the first measure to be implemented. A significant reduction of costs can be achieved by carefully establishing the production and TV schedule in advance. This way, production can be planned over a larger time span, in order to obtain productions of better quality. Summer months are currently not used for production purposes, which leads to an unnecessary agglomeration of productions in the autumn season, and implicitly, to very high costs which are difficult to sustain.

b. Intensive use of all programmes produced by the regional studios. These can be rotated and broadcasted alternatively across all channels of the television network following a schedule that allows the institution to make the most out of them audience-wise. However, in order for this to work, a standardization in terms of duration and format of the regionally produced programmes needs to take place, so that they become suitable for broadcast across all channels at any particular time.

c. Development of co-productions with foreign television channels, beginning with those from Central and Eastern Europe. Co-productions prove high professionalism of the media teams, high maturity and strength of human and technical resources, while being a very powerful method to accede to foreign media markets. Unfortunately, one cannot deny the current state of affairs in the case of the Romanian public television network: SRTV cannot sell any of its current productions because they are too narrow from a cultural perspective and too weak from an editorial standpoint.

d. Tracking budget allocation and its use through the implementation of adequate business-management software, together with penalties in case of going over budget with no clear justification.

Conclusions

The Romanian public television network finds itself at a crossroad in its existence. With debts of over 150 million Euros, an aged audience, an editorial and technical body that lacks professional perspective, a management that lacks incentives and has limited development possibilities, the public television network still has a chance to become the leader of an innovative and growing market, based primarily on creativity. The public television network must adopt a strategy for sustainable change, adapted to the digital revolution. The kind of institution that we envisage through the proposals that have been made in this article is employee-oriented, based on the reduction of hierarchies, on coherent management and on regaining the audience's interest and trust. The public television network is important for the Romanian media market, as it has been noticed that a competitive media market without the public component offers lower diversity of programme offering (Sonnac, 2011, p.174). Private media conglomerates tend to quickly remove programmes with little audience, thus depriving a certain audience of its favorite programmes, only because they are enjoyed by a smaller public.

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