

# What Role Can Citizens Play in Ensuring Good Governance and the Principles of Public Service in Broadcasting?\*

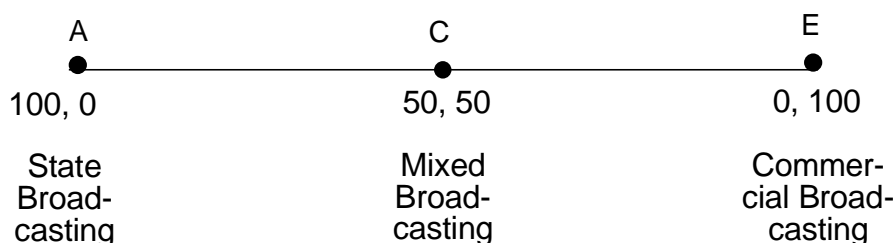
Manfred Kops

EURALVA, European Alliance of Listeners' and Viewers' Associations

## 1. What are the Principles of Public Service Broadcasting?

Before I come to the question what role citizens can play in ensuring good governance and the principles of public service in broadcasting, I would like to recall some words about these principles themselves. In economic textbooks one hardly finds any reflections on this. There usually only the market and the state are distinguished as alternative institutions for the provision on goods, the first one being based on the principle of maximizing private earnings, the second one being based on (democratically legitimised) state power. With regard to our subject this either would mean commercial broadcasting or state broadcasting as pure forms, or it means "mixed" broadcasting that combines both elements (and consequently combines market and state revenues). Figure 1 shows these options as a one-dimensional space, ranging from pure commercial broadcasting on the one (right) side (E, with 0 % state revenues, and 100 % market revenues) via several "mixed" broadcasting (e.g. C with 50 % market revenues and 50 % state revenues) to pure state broadcasting on the other (left) side (A, with 100 % state revenues, and 0 % market revenues).

Figure 1:  
State Broadcasting and Commercial Broadcasting

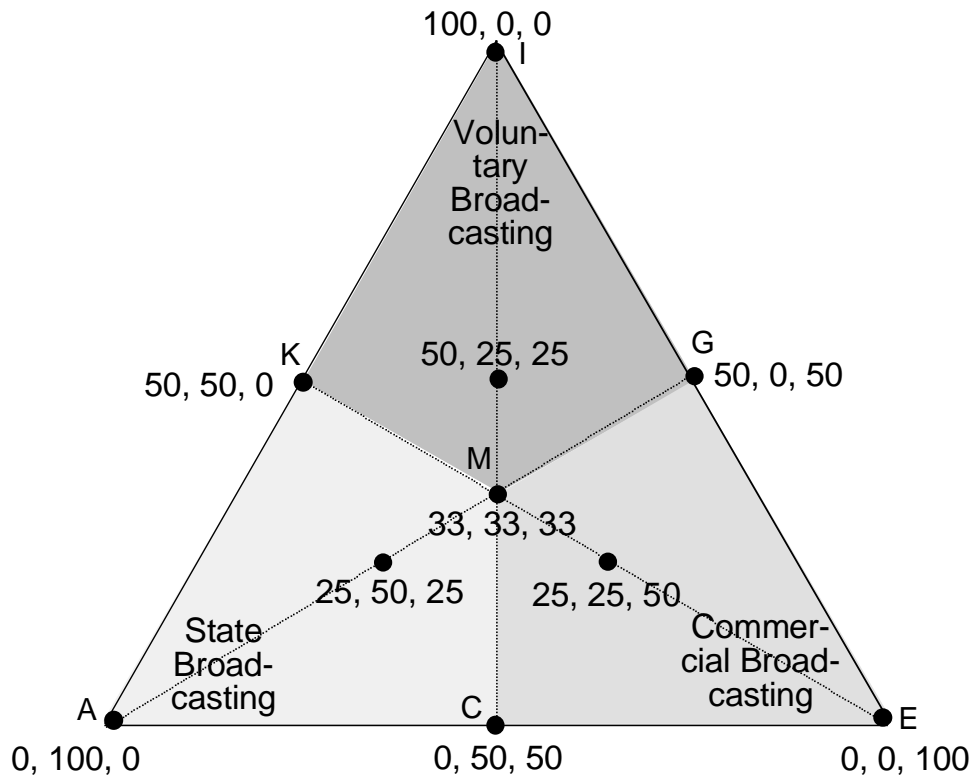


Public service broadcasting cannot be positioned anywhere on this axis. It is constituted by a third institution which exists besides the market and the state: the so called voluntary sector. Although many activities, like family live or religious, social and cultural activities, mainly belong to this sector (which also with regard to its economic product in many countries is equally important than the market and the state), most economic textbooks ignore this sector totally. In contrast, sociological textbooks usually deal in greater detail with it. It is based on intrinsic, non-profit motives of the actors being organized by means of non-market and non-governmental (but collective) rules of decision making. Important fields of this sector include the activities within families and neighbourhoods, collective religious activities, and the voluntary activities within charities, educational, cultural and leisure organisations. As far as these activities are not purely private but also have public effects, these elements of the voluntary sector also are called the civil society.

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Figure 2:  
Voluntary Broadcasters, Commercial Broadcasters, and State Broadcasters

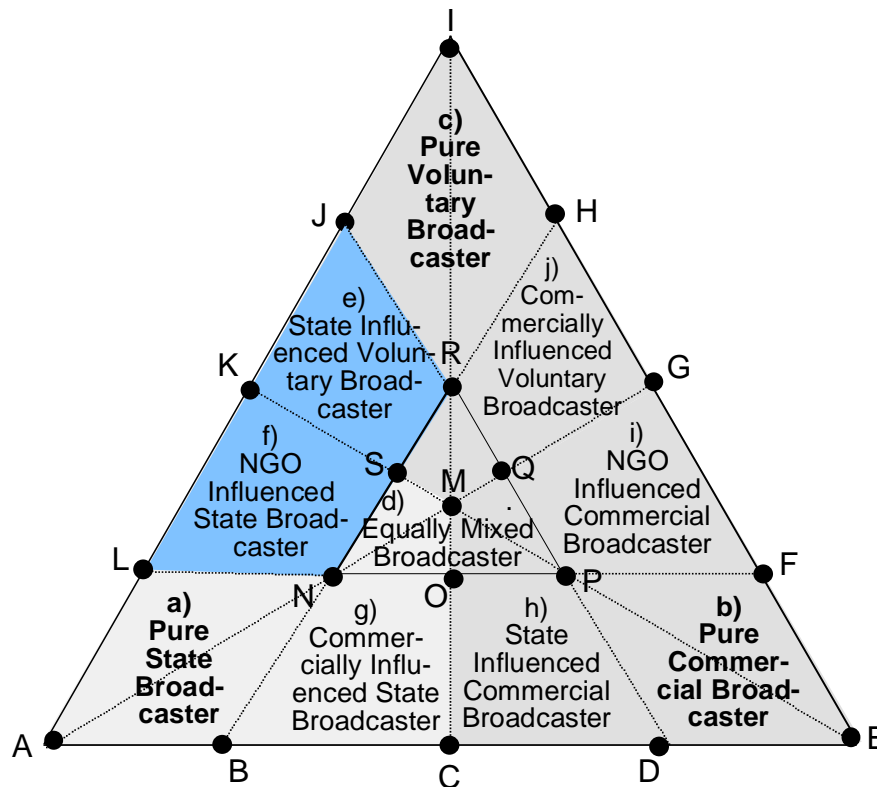


Also broadcasters run by citizens that voluntarily provide resources in kind or in cash have to be allocated to the voluntary sector in this sense of a non-governmental and non-profit sector (see figure 2). They are based on the citizens' believe that there are certain values or contents, i. e. of political, religious, cultural, or educational character, that should be communicated to the public, and on the intrinsic motive to promote this communication by voluntarily contributions in kind (like journalistic or organisational assistance) or in cash (donations).

Experiences in all countries have shown, however, that such "pure" voluntary broadcasters are not able to provide high quality programmes of a sufficiently wide range, not even in countries in which the citizens realize and highly appreciate the benefits of independent broadcasters. Instead they rely on revenues from the market and/or from the state. By that they combine elements of the voluntary sector with elements of the state (e.g. the state's power to enforce public revenues) and with elements of the market, making public service broadcasting a hybrid system.

Figure 3 illustrates this. There public service broadcasting is located in the area JRNL (the blue area). In this area there is an influence (with regard to the financial incentives: there are revenue shares) of both the market and the state; but this influence remains minor (in figure 3: less than 50 % of the overall influence/revenues) compared to "pure commercial broadcasters" (area EDPF) and compared to "pure state broadcasters" (area ALNB). Public service broadcasting in this definition primarily is located inside the voluntary sector, or – in other words – inside the civil society.

Figure 3:  
Public Service Broadcasting As a Hybrid System,  
Combining Elements of the Voluntary, the State, and the Commercial Sector



The members of the civil society are the natural allies of public service broadcasters. They pursue the same targets to organize a society by non-governmental non-profit rules as the voluntary sector. And on the other hand they need public service broadcasters as capable stake holders of the civil societies' targets. This constitutes a reciprocal responsibility: Public service broadcasting has to provide its voice for the civil society, especially when the institutions of civil society are threatened, and the institutions of civil society have to support public service broadcasting – including a benevolent critical control if public service broadcasters disregard its mission, e. g. by serving state interests or by commercialising themselves.

The location of public service broadcasting inside the civil society, as shown in figure 3, illustrates that it is endangered by two sides: by its market partners that pursue own commercial interests; and by the state that tries to settle and secure its power by means of the mass media. Thus there is a twofold risk that the public service elements are crowded out either by characteristics of state power (and state control) or market power (and market control). From this regard public service broadcasters have to seek the near of the market and the state in order to gain the resources necessary for its mission, but on the same time they have to keep in a sufficient distance from both poles – a task equally complicated as Odysseus' passage between Skylla and Charybdis.

## **2. How Can Citizens Ensure the Principles of Public Service in Broadcasting?**

These general remarks lead to the question what role citizens can play in ensuring good governance and the principles of public service in broadcasting. Viewers' and listeners' associations, like the VLV, are at the core of this responsibility. As far as I understand the VLV – and this would correspond with our German Initiativkreis – it observes the activities of its public service broadcasters with goodwill, but also with the intention to criticise activities that conflict with its mission. With regard to the actual political decision in Germany, not to raise the license fee by the amount suggested by the independent commission (which offends our basic law), our German Initiativkreis for instance recently has organized a conference to elucidate the important and varied merits of public service broadcasting for our culture, and the necessity to sufficiently fund it. But we also did not hesitate to criticise that German public service broadcasters themselves jeopardize its legitimacy and financial basis when substituting more and more cultural programmes for minorities by popular programmes for majorities.

From that regard it is a good idea if associations of the viewers' and listeners' do not cooperate too intensively either with the state or with the market. Otherwise they could suffer the same fate that they try to avoid for public service broadcasters, the object whose independence they try to protect and to support. Also the viewers' and listeners' associations therefore should withstand the temptations of the market and the state. As far as I know, the VLV is a good example also in this regard. This is the more notable as viewers and listeners associations, like the voluntary sector in general, usually suffer from the same scarcity of resources that was already mentioned for pure voluntary broadcasters.

Although well organized viewer and listener associations can play a prominent role to protect public service broadcasters both from external and internal temptations, this function cannot solely be fulfilled by them. I will not offend the VLV by saying that the political and social influence of such associations is much too small for that. And in many other countries such associations are even weaker or do not exist at all. Instead all members of the civil society, all citizens have to support and control public service broadcasting, both as individuals and in their roles as members of the different institutions of civil society – e. g. as family members, as members of neighbourhoods and religious groups, of consumer and labour unions, and of educational, cultural, or charitable organisations. This can and must complement their roles as members of the political sphere, especially as voters in political elections, and their roles as members of the market sphere, especially as critical consumers.

Interestingly, in Germany for instance, as a reaction on the political interferences in the determination of the license fee, many institutions of the civil society have supported public service broadcasting. The Deutsche Kulturrat as the main association of cultural institutions and of people working in the cultural sector, for instance, has appealed to politicians not to damage the legal process by which the amount of the license fee is determined by an independent commission, and it also has appealed to public service broadcasters not to cut programmes for minorities as a reaction to the rejected increase of revenues from the license fee. Similar appeals were made by the churches and the labour unions.

These actual examples illustrate that the civil society has to support public service broadcasting in difficult times. This includes the protection and elaboration of the legal framework by which public service broadcasting is constituted and guaranteed,

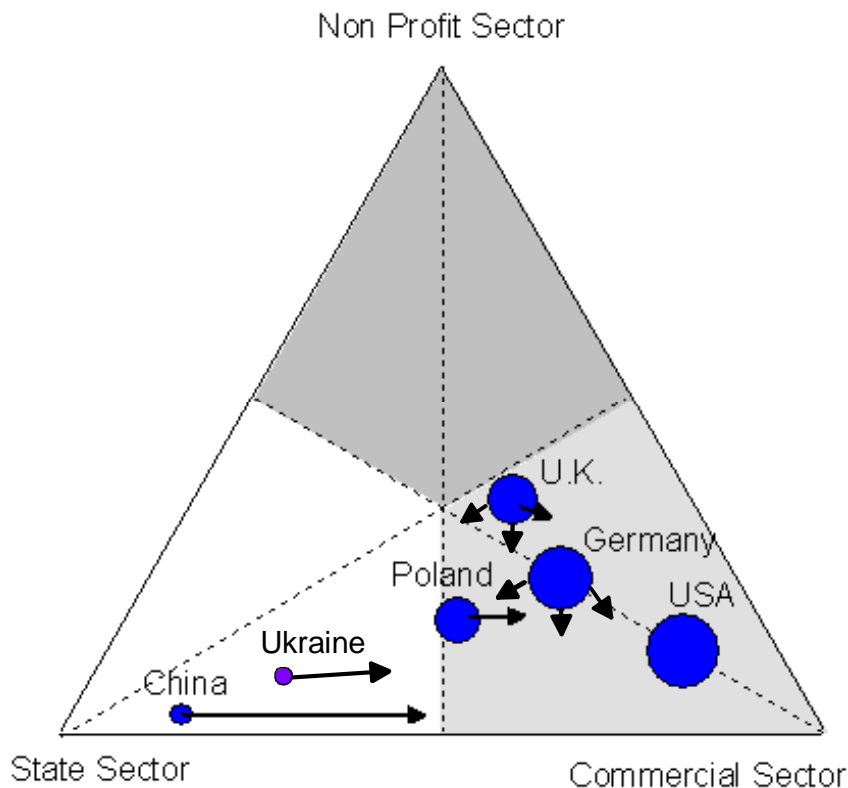
but it also has to include the control if the legal framework is kept. The independence of public service broadcasting not only is a matter of the legal culture but also, maybe even more, a matter of the political culture. The civil society must prevent and foster this culture – together with the state, but sometimes also against it.

### 3. How Can Citizens Ensure the Principles of Public Service in Broadcasting? Some International Aspects

The threats for public service broadcasting are manifold. They include attempts from the state and from the market, evident attacks and hidden temptations, seductions by external and internal actors. Different examples have been mentioned in the earlier sessions already. In some countries the temptations of the market seem to be most risky, in other countries the state seems to be the most dangerous opponent. Consequently, also the necessity and the ways to assist public service broadcasters differ. In some countries the members of the civil society primarily need to assist public service broadcasters in their struggle against state influence; in other countries they primarily should combat public service broadcasters (self) commercialisation.

Such an international comparison of broadcasters would be advisable. It could unveil, for instance, that public service broadcasters in the United Kingdom and in Germany in general are well positioned in the core of the civil society, sufficiently far away both from the state and the market pole (see figure 4).

Figure 4:  
Broadcasting Between the Market, the State and the Voluntary Sector



However, also in these countries there are some recent developments that should worry us. Firstly, there is a slow but gradual (self) commercialisation as audience shares gain importance and as programmes for minorities, e.g. cultural and educa-

tional programmes, are sacrificed to the cost of mainstream programmes. In the graphical presentation of figure 4 this appears as a (small) shift towards the market pole. Secondly, there are indicators that the state in both countries has intensified its attempts to gain control over its public service broadcasters, in Great Britain e.g. by re-defining the public service mission and the recruitment and competences of the regulating authorities, in Germany e.g. by politically injuring the decision rules about the determination of the license fee. In figure 4 this results in a small shift towards the state pole; and both movements together lead to a downward shift further away from the voluntary sector and the civil society. This trend may be small, and at the time being it hardly can be proofed quantitatively. But it has to be observed with care and awareness, as a slow but steady motion towards one of these poles in the long run also in these countries would jeopardize the independence of public service broadcasting.

Compared to the BBC or the ARD the broadcasters in other countries are much more endangered, however. In the former communist states of Eastern Europe or in China, for instance, the state still plays a dominant role, jeopardizing independent – especially politically independent – programmes. In these countries the reasons that caused broadcasting to be merely state broadcasting also have prevented that a civil society could have been established there, which now could help to found public service broadcasters or to transform state broadcasters into public service broadcasters. Under these conditions all attempts to release broadcasters from state control automatically lead to its commercialisation, especially as the market (as the only existing alternative institution to the state) in these countries has gained a high popularity and as there are not yet sufficient experiences with this institution to be able to evaluate its limits and deficiencies. The positive willingness to release the broadcasters from state control therefore has to be accomplished by wearisome attempts to establish and strengthen a viable civil society.

In other parts of the world, like in North and South America, broadcasters are faced with the opposite problem: There the market dominates and – at least from our perspective – steps away from the market would be appropriate to generate the independence it needs to talk about “public service broadcasting”. But here again the institutions of the civil society often are too small or too weak to assist public service broadcasting in this process of emancipating from the markets pressures.

A major reason for the commercialisation of our society in general and our broadcasting systems in particular is the decreasing importance of physical input factors. Former spatial limits for production and consumption have disappeared, and the potentials and pressures for a global, worldwide economy have increased. International organisations, like the European Commission and the World Trade Organisation, try to pave the way for free trade in worldwide markets.

For goods that cannot only be provided according to market rules such an increasing commercialisation and globalisation bears severe risks. The VLV conference last year partly was devoted to these problems: for instance to the crowding out of programme content for minorities, also for regional and local minorities, the domination of programmes from countries that due to large domestic markets are able to dump its programmes abroad, and the increasing incentives to produce internationally competitive market programmes (i.e. documentaries or sports) to the disadvantage of programmes that are in the core of the public service mission, but hardly can be refinanced on (international or even national) markets.

Whereas the supporters of the market try to reach its targets by international cooperation, most combaters of an excessive commercialisation mainly act on the national or even sub-national level only, as many institutions of the civil society are rooted in the family, the neighbourhood, in working and leisure groups and in other local spheres. To become more capable to combat international threats also the civil society has to organize more internationally.

With regard to certain threats for public service broadcasting, like the WTO's "General Agreement in Trade and Services" (GATS) or the European Commissions attempts' to interpret the license fee as an illegal state grant it seems necessary that also the few existing listeners' and viewers' associations cooperate more intensively with each other. The VLV has recognized this by founding the European Alliance of Listeners' and Viewers' Associations (EURALVA), which consists of organisations from Great Britain, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Norway, and Portugal, and which cooperates with associated organisations in Australia and Canada. This is a useful and potential core institution which could and should intensify the attempts to support the idea and principles of public service broadcasting internationally and which could and should combat the challenges that definitely will increase in due time.

The VLV's International Conferences traditionally have contributed to this mission. VLV's international partners from EURALVA are happy to be invited to this – the tenth – conference. We are sure that it will be as successful as the former VLV conferences, and we are willing and happy to circulate its findings and messages to the members of our associations.