Public services without a public? How Public Service Broadcasters in the Western Balkans interact with their audiences

¿Servicios Públicos sin público? Cómo los PSB interactúan con sus audiencias en los Países Balcánicos Occidentales

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Abstract

Struggling to cope with structural societal changes, digitalized news production, and the modified habits of fragmented media publics, public service broadcasters are expected to redefine the logic of their operations in order to regain the trust of citizens and engage them. This paper looks at how public service broadcasters in seven countries of the Western Balkans have embraced new approaches, technologies, and online channels to foster interaction with their audiences. This includes the analysis of their structures, the popularity of offline programmes, and the use of online channels to reach the public, on the basis of evidence, experiences and specific findings collected during the period 2014-2016, as part of the project implemented by the University of Fribourg (Switzerland) and the Centre for Social Research Analitika (Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina).

Resumen

Habitamos un contexto complejo en que los medios requieren (1) abordar cambios sociales significativos en las sociedades, (2) la digitalización de la producción de noticias y (3) las modificaciones en los hábitos de los fragmentarios públicos. En este entorno los medios de servicio público han de redefinir la lógica de su proceder de cara a la recuperación de la confianza entre la ciudadanía, restaurando los vínculos. En este artículo se observa cómo los medios públicos de siete países de los Balcanes occidentales adoptan nuevas aproximaciones, tecnologías y canales en línea para incrementar la interacción con su audiencia. Ello incluye

el análisis de sus estructuras, la popularidad de sus programas emitidos offline y el uso de los canales online para llegar al público, a partir del análisis de usos, experiencias y hallazgos puntuales recopilados durante el periodo 2014-2016 como parte del proyecto implementado por la Universidad de Friburgo (Suiza) y el Centro de Investigación Social Analitika de Sarajevo (Bosnia-Herzegovina).

Keywords

Western Balkans, public service broadcasters (PSBs), audiences, interactions, popularity.

Palabras clave
Balcanes occidentales, medios de servicio público, audiencias, interacciones, popularidad.

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1. Introduction

The transformation of former state television corporations into public service broadcasters (PSBs) was among the most viable changes needed in the process of media democratization in the Western Balkan states. As agreed at the Thessaloniki conference in 2003, politically this region includes the following seven countries: Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and, since 2007, Kosovo. Based on European standards and principles and the experiences of developed Western countries, these states have tended to introduce models that have proven to be genuinely functional abroad, but have barely performed their envisaged role in a new, not entirely democratic, environment.

At the beginning of the transformation process, in late the 1990s and early 2000s, it was believed that, in order to perform its intended democratizing role, public service broadcasting should provide a public forum for diverse communities and individuals to express and contrast their ideas, and thus benefit from this interaction. Providing diversity and enabling dialogue (rather than imposing consensus) is a way of forming a culturally aware, pluralistic and mature citizenry (Born and Prosser, 2001, p. 675). In this regard, the relationship between PSBs and their audiences has been considered as crucial.

The role of citizens as an essential part of today's dispersed communication networks has been further elaborated within the 'network society paradigm' resulting from the intensive structural transformation of society influenced by technological and digital development (Castells and Cardoso, 2005, p. 4). According to Castells (2005), "the capacity to decentralize performance along a network of autonomous components" empowers actors, including individuals, who have nothing to do with the state or the business sector to overcome the historical limits and become more influential and visible in the public arena (Ibid., 2005, p. 7). This is the realm in which all societies, including the Western Balkan states, have been gradually transforming their social structures.

In practice, public service broadcasting in the Western Balkans has demonstrated hitherto what Ytreberg calls a 'patronising elitism' characterized by an unbalanced relationship in which PSBs (their top management, editors, etc.)

or other actors, such as politicians and media experts, decide for the audience what is worthwhile, good, valuable and relevant to society and democracy (Ytreberg, 2004; Ytreberg and Sundet, 2009). Both national media policies and PSBs have yet to recognize the importance of interacting with audiences in order to perform their public role, maintain trust, and build new relationships.

The aim of this paper is to analyse the current practices of PSBs in seven Western Balkan states, the dynamics of interaction with their audiences, their initiatives to engage the public, and the use of new platforms and technologies to broaden the reach of their content. This analysis is based on the core assumption that the mission of PSBs in a networked and digitalized society is not only about producing and supplying diverse content from different sources, but also about making sure that audiences are engaged and interact while using it. This question is especially relevant in an age of audience fragmentation, individualized and personalized content consumption, the rapid development of online platforms, etc.

In this paper, evidence and findings from seven nationwide case studies, conducted from 2014 to 2016 as part of a joint project implemented by the Analitika – Centre for Social Research (Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina) and the University of Fribourg (Switzerland), were used and contextualized for their analysis. The main idea is to take a look at how PSBs interact with their audiences at three different levels: at a structural level (with the focus on specialized internal bodies whose job it is to communicate with audiences); at a popularity level (relating to the offline programming of PSBs); and regarding their online reach (including an analysis of their online content on websites and social networks). One of the shortcomings of this specific study is the lack of systemic and comparative data on media audiences, above all on their consumption habits and information needs, at a regional level.

2. Public media within the 'network paradigm'

The 'network society paradigm' has essentially changed the notion of public media. Public service broadcasting has become a contested concept and its position is not taken for granted any more. Its legitimacy and remit have been the subject of much debate, as have its funding sources and models and

the way in which it should perform its role in an ever-changing media landscape. Advocates of PSB, in search of convincing arguments, see "public service media as an ideological and political choice in favour of democracy" (Donders, 2012, p. 25), whose rationale should be found in the non-market realm and democratic ideals. Due to the fact that contemporary services providing public value in communication no longer have anything to do with the traditional notion of 'broadcasting' (Moe, 2011, pp. 52-68) and are not limited to one platform, scholars (Bardoel and d'Haenens, 2007) have redefined the concept as public service media (PSM), which is currently much in use.

As envisaged by the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), the only hope that PSBs have of retaining their mission and influence is to redefine their essential functions (EBU, 2012; Lowe, 2016) and to adjust their structure, functioning, outputs, and outcomes to digitalized logic. When redefining roles, PSBs should maintain their core values, such as universal reach, independence from the business and political establishment, programme excellence, content diversity, accountability for its services, and innovation in the use of new technologies and online platforms (EBU, 2012).

The overabundance of information, shorter attention spans, and new forms of gate-keeping, as well as unique possibilities for filtering and navigating, all affect media consumption (European Commission, 2013; European Parliament, 2008; High Level Expert Group on Media Freedom and Pluralism, 2013). In order to be truly informed, "citizens must venture outside of a personal comfort zone of established beliefs and tested opinions and expose these to diverging and conflicting opinions and ideas" (Helberger, 2015, p. 1328). To this end, citizens need to be guided and PSBs are still the only institutions in the media landscapes capable of performing this role. Furthermore, PSBs must operate as trusted and reliable information sources and leverage new technologies and communication channels to increase the popularity and reach of their content, as well as to interact with their audiences.

In today's world, where media operate beyond 'broadcasting' logic, interaction has become the key indicator of the active relationship of PSBs with their audiences. Moreover, this interaction depends on the type of media involved, their characteristics, and the extent to which their audiences are fragmented. An audience is not a static entity, but diversified. Passive recipients of media content no longer exist, since they tend to network, communicate and generate

their own content. Therefore, as the EBU (2012) has highlighted, PSBs need to switch their operation from 'delivery' to a two-way approach involving dialogue and interaction. This could be achieved through content, the use of online channels and platforms, social media, and innovative approaches. They also need to develop a corporate culture that recognizes interactivity and audience demands as an opportunity and which embraces changing values and mind-sets that will ultimately make their employees more flexible, agile, communicative, and citizen-oriented (EBU, 2012).

For the sake of the analysis proposed here, interactivity will be operationalized through three main aspects. At the structural organization of PSBs, the issue of whether or not and how they interact directly with their audiences and the sub-structures or units that currently exist to achieve this, will be examined. Following this, the popularity of their terrestrial programmes will be analysed, while also taking into account the level of trust that citizens currently have in them. And lastly, the strategies that PSBs implement to maximize their online presence and reach in order to engage their audiences, especially the younger generations (an important aspect according to the EBU, 2012, pp. 75-87), will be covered.

3. Organizational structures and interaction of public service broadcasters

In the Western Balkans, PSBs are organized around traditional structures that significantly influence their performance and interaction with citizens. These structures, characterized by their massive size and rigidness, have been mostly inherited from the previous socialist system. The organizational charts of the majority of them have too many levels (for example, middle management) which slows down internal communication and decision-making, with far too many office workers and employees (ranging from 800-900 in Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina to 3000 and 3800 in Croatia and Serbia, respectively). Top-down hierarchical decision-making processes make the lower hierarchical levels and, especially, citizens feel powerless and alienated.

News production is decentralized and loosely coordinated, with no integrated newsrooms in practice. Neither do PSBs use potentials of

convergence nor do they apply digital technology to news production. To date, only the Croatian PSB has strategically approached its internal restructuring in order to introduce integrated newsrooms, and while the development strategy adopted by the Serbian Radio-Television Vojvodina (RTV) includes similar plans, they have yet to be implemented due to the lack of resources and political and financial instability.

The structures around which PSBs have traditionally been organized include very few mechanisms for audience interaction. In most cases, citizens rarely have a voice or chance to engage. In some cases (Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia), several institutions, civil society groups, and professional associations are entitled to nominate candidates for the managing or consultative bodies, but the final decision regarding their appointment is made by political representatives in their respective parliaments, in a process that is usually far from being transparent. In the case of the Croatian Programme Council, where NGOs had a direct voice in the nomination of candidates, this 'civic' and inclusive model failed to work in practice, since the council became hostage to the private interests of its members (Stantić, 2003; Popović, 2004). Meanwhile, in Macedonia decision-makers curbed the role of NGOs by introducing the Association of the Units of the Local Self-Government (ZELS) under the "guise" of civil society (Trpevska and Micevski, 2017). In the case of Bosnia-Herzegovina, state (BHRT) and entity (Federal RTV) broadcasters have no established Programme Councils, while the role of RTRS's Programme Council is all but limited to an advisory role.

In order to engage audiences, PSBs need to establish a separate body that regularly contacts, collects and analyses feedback, proposals and complaints from viewers with regard to its programming. An analysis of their internal structure shows that out of 10 broadcasters in seven countries, only three – Croatia, Albania, and Montenegro – have created such a specialized body. In Croatia, the HRT established a telecommunications council of consumers in 2011, as an autonomous and independent agent subordinated to the Programme Council, pursuant to Article 32 of the HRT Act. In Albania, the aim of the Council for Viewers and Listeners is to hold RTSH accountable to its public, it which end it submits an annual report to the Steering Committee, the Albanian Media Institute (AMA), the Ministry, and the Parliamentary Commission for Education and Means of Public Communication (Bino and Kadia, 2017). In

Kosovo, albeit provided for in Article 36 of the RTK Act, such a body was never created by the RTK Board (Miftari, 2017). In Macedonia, this role has been played by the MRT's Programme Council which is obliged to protect the interests of the public regarding overall programme content and also to receive audience feedback and suggestions in this regard.

4. Trust, popularity and online reach

Among the main challenges for PSBs in the digital era is to develop effective ways of delivering public service news, either through its own or via third-party platforms (search engines, social media, video hosting sites, and apps) (Sehl et al., 2016, p. 10). This is in line with the ongoing trend among media audiences, which are fragmented and have more sophisticated consumption needs, towards migrating online. Since there are no systematic studies on media audiences and their habits in the Western Balkans that could be used for their comparative analysis, estimates have to be based on the data provided by the Eurobarometer or the EBU. In some countries (Albania), there is no data on TV ratings, while in others (Bosnia-Herzegovina) available data are regarded as suspect and unreliable. PSBs still have a significant share when it comes to traditional broadcasting and linear viewing, whereas their online presence and influence is modest. Available data from the Western Balkans indicate trends in media consumption and audience habits similar to those on a global level: according to Internet Live Stats, there has been an increase in Internet penetration (ranging from 54% in Serbia to 74.2% in Croatia), in the use of the Internet and online social networks among the young (aged between 15-24), a slight decrease in linear TV viewing (Eurobarometer, 2014, pp. 13-21) and, consequently, a rise in non-linear viewing (Ibid.). Additionally, the use of smart phones and other devices to access information is constantly increasing, and there is also an evident demand for more personalized and on-demand content (Statista, 2016).

According to the Eurobarometer (2014, 2015), the level of confidence in the media is lower in the Western Balkan states, except Albania whose citizens have showed the highest level of trust in all types of media for the past several years. Citizens in the region have more confidence in the Internet and

social media than in radio and, in last place, TV. In this respect, the sharpest drop in confidence in TV has been recorded in Montenegro and Serbia. Online social media are the most trusted, even though the net trust index is generally negative (Eurobarometer, 2015, p. 48). Moreover, it should be noted that information on Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina has not been made available in recent Eurobarometer reports.

5. Popularity of terrestrial programmes

Notwithstanding the fact that the popularity of their programmes is waning, in the Western Balkans PSBs are still popular as offline information sources. As can be observed in Table 1, in all these countries PSBs have a significant audience share ranging from 20-22% (Serbia, Kosovo, and Montenegro) to 28% in Croatia (including all four HRT channels). The situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina is much more complex. Its public broadcasting system consists of three broadcasters – BHRT at a state level, and FRTV and RTRS at an entity or sub-state administrative unit level. While all three broadcasters have audience rating of 24%, the nature of the country's political and, subsequently, media system makes it practically impossible to claim that these broadcasters have created an unique platform (Ahmetašević and Hadžiristić, 2017). Due to the strong ethnical ties and dominant ethno-politics, the state-level broadcaster – BHRT – have never developed into a medium capable of attracting a wider viewing public (its audience rating in 2016 was in the region of 5%), despite having been symbolically associated with the country's state-building process backed by the international community (Ahmetašević and Jusić, 2013). On the other hand, Federal TV is the most popular, mainly due to its newscasts, but also partly to its intensively commercial programme schedule.

The popularity of PSBs in Macedonia and Albania far surpasses the average of 20-22%. In Macedonia, the marginalization of public service broadcasting is a process that started in the 1990s, when private TV stations started to operate. Yet the main reason for the loss of confidence and continuous fall in viewing figures is the political influence that all previous governments have exerted on the editorial line of PSBs (Trpevska and Micevski, 2017). In the case of Albania, the colonization of broadcasters and partisan content, accompanied

by a lack of technical investments and innovations, has led to a fall in their popularity and reliability (Londo, 2013, p. 42).

TABLE 1. PSB vs. private television ratings in the Western Balkans

	PSB share (year(s))	Main commercial competitor share
Albania	No information	No information
Bosnia-Herzegovina	PSB total: 24% (2016) FTV: 12% RTRS: 7% BHT: 5%	OBN: 12% Pink: 10% Program plus: 9% Hayat: 6%
Croatia	HTV: 28.9% (2015) – all 4 channels	Nova TV: 23.5% (2015) RTL: 14.5%
Kosovo	RTK: 52% (2009) to 22% (2014)	KTV: 28% (2009) to 24% (2014) RTV 21: 22% (2009) to 22 % (2014)
Macedonia	MTV 1: 6.6% (2013) MTV 1 and 2: 5,8% (2014)	Sitel: 28.6% Kanal 5: 12.8% Alsat M: 5.3% TV Alpha: 3.2%
Montenegro	RTVCG1: 22% (2013)	TV Pink: 27.4% TV Vijesti: 20.4% Prva TV: 14% (2013)
Serbia	20% to 26% (until 2016), with an average of 20-22% (2016)	TV Pink: 24% Happy: 12-14% (reality shows)

Compared to the period when PSBs occupied a privileged position in the market (since the dual system was only introduced in the second half of the 1990s), their popularity has decreased. Since the 1990s, a decade during which

it registered the largest audience share, the Croatian PSB has gradually lost ground to the country's commercial TV stations (Car, 2005; Car and Andrijašević, 2012). Not only the overall viewership of PSBs is decreasing, but also the popularity of their news programmes (Agency for Electronic Media, 2015). In the case of Kosovo, the overall viewership has declined (from 52% in 2009 to 22% in 2014) especially during prime time, also as a result of fierce competition from the commercial television channels RTV 21 and KTV, with soap operas and other entertainment programmes (Miftari, 2017). In 2002, Bosnia-Herzegovina's Federal TV had an audience share of 30.1%, but by 2015 this had dropped to 11.5% (Hrnjić Kuduzović and Šahinpašić, 2016: 134).

Available audience indicators and research in the Western Balkans show that the main reason why PSB content is still popular has nothing to do with its quality, distinctiveness, or exclusivity, but quite the opposite, i.e. its commercialization. The Serbian RTS managed to become the most popular TV station after becoming a PSB in 2006, partly due to the fact that the management introduced several entertainment programmes and reality shows in order to compete with its commercial counterparts. Montenegro's PSB attempted to increase its ratings by purchasing the exclusive broadcasting rights to the most popular sports programmes and series (Ružić, 2017). Furthermore, competition from private TV stations has ultimately led to drop in programme quality across the board, a lack of investment in journalism, and a general fall in popularity affecting all its programmes (including newscasts).

6. Reach and presence via online platforms

The online presence and reach of the region's PSBs vary greatly. Not all have strategically embraced the opportunities to develop online services. As Table 2 shows, only those in Serbia (RTS) and Croatia (HRT) have managed to develop websites with a noteworthy reach that rank amongst the most popular domestic online sources. There has been a significant development in the case of RTK in Kosovo and RTRS in Bosnia-Herzegovina. As to the former, available data indicate that RTKlive.com has had a certain degree of success in retaining online audiences and in particular the audience in diaspora, since more than 60% of its visitors live abroad (Miftari, 2017).

TABLE 2. PSB websites - rankings and trends (top six websites)[1]

| PSB	Web address	Global ranking	Domestic ranking	Trends
Serbia	www.rts.rs	15.390	35	Decrease from October to July 2016 Increase from July 2016 Visitors: 49% Serbia, 9.4% Bosnia-Herzegovina
Croatia	www.hrt.hr	22.923	41	Increase from October to January 2016 Decrease from February to August 2016 Visitors: 56% Croatia, 9.3% Bosnia-Herzegovina, 5.4% Serbia
Bosnia-Herzegovina (Republika Srpska)	www.rtrs.tv	114.378	109	Increase from December to August 2016 Visitors: 66% Bosnia-Herzegovina (Republika Srpska), 11% Canada, 6% Serbia
Kosovo	www.rtklive.com	114.319	No information	Visitors: 60% Albania (no information on Kosovo), 16% USA, Germany and Canada
Montenegro	www.rtcg.me	271.142	104	Decrease from December to August 2016 Visitors: 35% Montenegro, 27% Serbia, 18% Croatia

The statistics of these websites show a continuous drop in visits and reach during 2016. Exceptions to this trend include the websites of RTS in Serbia (during July and August 2016, as a result of its coverage of the Rio Olympic Games) and RTRS in Bosnia-Herzegovina, due to the TV channel's

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relative popularity in the Republika Srpska as a whole and to the fact that, as a newly established online medium, it has had no problem in attracting audiences.

Traffic data show that users visit some pages directly and access others through research engines, social networks, and external links. Graphic 1 shows how the websites of PSBs in Montenegro (67%), Serbia – RTS (56 %), Macedonia (54 %), and Kosovo (52 %) are visited mostly directly, BHRT (72%), Federalna (62%), and the Albanian RTSH (47%) are mostly accessed through research engines, RTV (17%), RTS (16.2%), and Montenegro (16%) through social networks, and RTV (19%) and Macedonian (12%) through external links (Alexa, 2016).

GRAPHIC 1. Website traffic sources
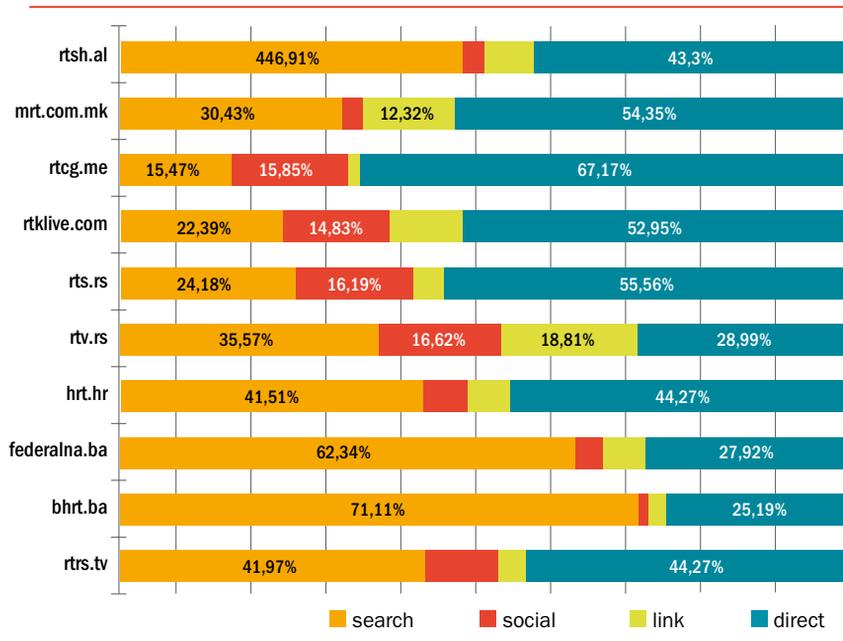
Source: www.alexa.com

Most of the websites, as the qualitative analysis indicates, are conceptualized as platforms for dissemination and do not include tools to interact with users. The analysis has included the following aspects: content (including information format and layout, frequency of publishing, and specialized services);

interactivity (mechanisms for two-way communication and user engagement, website dynamics, and the use of links and hypertext), and functionality (user-friendliness, browsability, language options, etc.) (Isanović, 2010, pp. 257-258).

TABLE 3. Website analysis

RTSH Albania	PUBLIC BROADCASTER LINK: www.rtsh.al	
CONTENT	INTERACTIVITY	FUNCTIONALITY
Only the most important daily news News organized in sections No video news Section for prime time news No on-demand video Only financial reports for 2014 and 2015 available	Static website Contacts are provided User interactivity limited to sharing No register / login option	Easy to browse Search engine Only in Albanian No options for visually impaired persons

BHRTV	PUBLIC BROADCASTER LINK: http://www.bhrt.ba/	
CONTENT	INTERACTIVITY	FUNCTIONALITY
Hourly news update News organized in sections News presented in various formats Live TV and radio Financial reports available	Well organized, simple, partly static website Online survey Contacts are provided Users can share content on various social platforms No register/login option	Easy to browse Search engine Cyrillic and Roman alphabet options No options for visually impaired persons

RTV FBiH	PUBLIC BROADCASTER LINK: www.federalna.ba	
CONTENT	INTERACTIVITY	FUNCTIONALITY
Selective hourly news update News in sub-sections are not updated Financial reports unavailable	Well organized, simple, but partly static website News organized in various sub-sections Possibility to comment on news but not to share it	Easy to browse Search engine No options for visually impaired persons

TABLE 3. Website analysis (Continuación)

RTRS	PUBLIC BROADCASTER LINK: www.rtrs.tv	
CONTENT	**INTERACTIVITY**	**FUNCTIONALITY**
Hourly new update	Dynamic website	Somewhat difficult to browse
Video news items are rare	Comment and sharing options	Search engine
News organized in sections	General (not personalized) contacts provided	Cyrillic and Roman alphabet options
Specialized portal djeca.rtrs.tv	No register/login option	No options for visually impaired persons
Section with financial reports		

HRT Croatia	PUBLIC BROADCASTER LINK: www.hrt.hr	
CONTENT	**INTERACTIVITY**	**FUNCTIONALITY**
Hourly new update	Dynamic website	Easy to browse
News presentation in several formats	Contacts are provided, including a special watchdog link	Search engine
News organized in sections	Possibility to share and comment on news	Only in Croatian
Specialized platform 'hrti.hr'	No register/login option	No options for visually impaired persons
On-demand content		Option to download mobile app
Section with all financial reports		

RTK Live Kosovo	PUBLIC BROADCASTER LINK: www.rtklive.com	
CONTENT	**INTERACTIVITY**	**FUNCTIONALITY**
Hourly new update	Unique news presentation format	Easy to browse
Video news items are rare, but online news programmes are available	Website not fully dynamic	Search engine
No specialized platforms	News presented in different sections (regional, local, sports, etc.)	Filtered information in six languages
No on-demand video	Contact information	No options for visually impaired persons
Section with all financial reports	Users can share but not comment on news	
	No register/login option	

TABLE 3. Website analysis (Continuación)

MRT Macedonia — PUBLIC BROADCASTER LINK: http://www.mrt.com.mk/

CONTENT	INTERACTIVITY	FUNCTIONALITY
Only the most important daily news (not during the weekend) News not visually divided in sections Video news items are rare Specialized on-demand platform (MRT Play) for watching news online No section with financial reports	Unique news presentation format Static website Contact information Visitors can share but not comment on news No register/login option	Hard to browse Search engine Information only in Macedonian No options for visually impaired persons

RTCG Montenegro — PUBLIC BROADCASTER LINK: http://www.rtcg.me/

CONTENT	INTERACTIVITY	FUNCTIONALITY
Hourly new update News organized in sections Video news items are rare Live TV and radio No specialized platforms No on-demand video No section with financial or regular reports	Unique news presentation format Static website Contact information provided, special complaints form available for downloading No register/login option	Easy to browse Search engine Sitemap Selective information in three languages Options for visually impaired persons

RTS Serbia — PUBLIC BROADCASTER LINK: www.rts.rs

CONTENT	INTERACTIVITY	FUNCTIONALITY
Hourly new update News organized in sections Video news items Live TV and radio Financial reports for 2009 to 2012 are missing	Various news formats Dynamic website Contacts are provided Possibility to share and comment on news Blog inactive since 2014 Option to register	Complex, rather hard to browse Search engine Sitemap Only in Serbian Cyrillic and Roman alphabet options No options for visually impaired persons

TABLE 3. Website analysis (Continuación)

RTV Serbia	PUBLIC BROADCASTER LINK: www.rtv.rs	
CONTENT	INTERACTIVITY	FUNCTIONALITY
Hourly new update News organized in sections Video news items Live TV and radio Financial reports available	Various news formats Dynamic website Possibility to share and comment on news Specialized audience engagement services (WAP, blog, email subscription, audio coverage) No register/login option	Easy to browse Search engine Selective information in nine languages Options for visually impaired persons

As can be seen from the evidence, the websites of PSBs are designed to support news produced primarily for TV and radio channels. Only that of HRT in Croatia features elements of a prospective and interactive, stand-alone web platform. Although news is posted regularly on the PSB websites analysed here, it is mostly information that has already been broadcast on TV and radio. There is a predominance of textual information, with but a few websites posting multimedia content (the websites of HRT and RTS stand out in this regard), while only those of HRTi (Croatia) and MRT Play (Macedonia) have apps. Content and formats are mostly adapted to online consumption, although some multimedia elements are unavailable (infographics, interactive maps, bulletins, hypertext, etc.). Hypertext options are only partially available – the news published is more isolated than clearly linked to complementary information that could serve as a background (RTK, MRT, and RTV do not provide these links either). News archive search options are fairly few and far between, when not totally unavailable.

As to their visual image, the majority of the websites have recently been re-designed with moderately developed mechanisms and tools for audience interaction. The websites of HRT (Croatia) and RTK Live (Kosovo) have a simple design, with dynamic coverage and a transparent, user-friendly news feed. HRT posts news in multiple formats, updates this section more frequently, and generally offers more options for interaction. All the

websites are linked to their respective social network profiles, with options for sharing and liking (except Federalna.ba), commenting (this option is unavailable on Macedonia's MRT and RTK Live), or offering users the chance to express their opinions (through surveys or complaints like on the website of RTCG). Contact information is provided in a separate section, usually in a depersonalized form (HRT, RTRS, RTS, RTSH, RTK Live, MRT, and RTCG), but very rarely with personal names and emails (BHRT and Federalna.ba). Only HRT (Croatia) includes a link to the watchdog contact information. There are no forums, online games, or other tools for generating revisits.

Most of the websites are functional and easy to browse. Several feature a modern user-friendly design (HRT and RTK Live), whereas others are too complex (RTS, MRT, and RTRS) which diminishes their transparency and effectiveness. All have search engine, but only a few have a sitemap (RTS and RTCG). Some websites offer content in several languages (even in eight in the case of RTV), but most only provide complete information in the primary language, while content in others is selective and filtered (RTCG, RTK Live, and RTV). The websites of RTCG, RTRS, and RTV provide a font size option for visually impaired persons.

PSBs use social networks in several ways, Facebook pages and YouTube channels being the most common (as indicated in Table 4).

TABLE 4. Overview of social networks (at the end of 2016)

		Facebook (likes)	YouTube (subscribers)	Apps
Albania	RTSH	30,225 (TVSH) 4303 (TV News)	4763 (RTSH)	Only Radio Albania
Bosnia-Herzegovina	BHRT	775 (BHRT) 3509 (BHRT Multimedija)	366 (BHRT)	No
	FRTV	21,448 (Federalna TV)	1071	No
	RTRS	28,442 (RTRS Vijesti) 6261 (RTRS)	No information	Yes

TABLE 4. Overview of social networks (at the end of 2016) (Continuación)

		Facebook (likes)	YouTube (subscribers)	Apps
Croatia	HRT	40,740 (Moj HRT, community) 33,144 (HRT Vijesti)	3133 (main channel)	Yes (provided on website)
Kosovo	RTK	294.918 (RTK Live)	78.886 (main channel)	Yes
Macedonia	MRT	6107 (MRTV)	92 (main channel)	No
Montenegro	RTCG	14.833 (RTCG portal) 7808 (RTCG1)	No information	Yes (provided on website)
Serbia	RTS	307,808 (RTS portal)	12,049 (main channel)	Yes
	RTV	31,376	62,756 (main) 166,836 (Drzavni posao)	Yes (provided on website)

RTK Live and RTS (Serbia) have the most popular Facebook pages that are very active and engage the public in a fairly dynamic way. On the other hand, those of BHRT and MRT are not so popular. In the case of HRT (Croatia), the PSB has several Facebook accounts generating news and information – the two most popular being HRT and HRT news (Vijesti) – and dozens of others relating to specific shows that are not connected or jointly coordinated. While HRT and MRT have specialized platforms for videos and multimedia, the Kosovan PSBs and RTV in Serbia use YouTube as a platform for uploading videos. Both PSBs have a large number of subscribers, while RTV's popular show "Državni posao" (in English, "State job") currently has more subscribers than any other PSB YouTube channel in the region. Not all PSBs have developed apps for smart phones. HRT and RTCG recently launched improved versions of their apps, and both promote them on their websites, as with RTV. In Albania, only a radio app is available, while BHRT, FRTV, and MRT still have not developed apps.

7. Discussion and concluding remarks

PSBs in the Western Balkans have gone through a double transition. The first has involved the conversion of former state-controlled media into genuine public service broadcasters. And the second has to do with the advent of technology and the ever-changing media environment in which PSBs now operate and compete with commercial broadcasters. One of the biggest issues for PSBs today, and not only in the Western Balkans, is their precarious relationship with their audiences. In the era of digitalization and decentralization, societies are highly fragmented, so PSBs are confronted with the challenge of remaining universal, while also providing specific content tailored to niche audiences in order to foster interaction.

In order to achieve this goal, PSBs need to be seen as trustworthy and reliable information sources, to actively introduce new technologies, as well as production and distribution logic, in their day-to-day operations, and to interact with their audiences on a regular basis. Interaction thus becomes an essential requirement for them if they are to be recognized and trusted and to remain popular. In light of the practices of seven PSBs in the Western Balkans, the following conclusions have been reached.

The traditional organizational structures of PSBs in the Western Balkans are hindering their efforts to interact with their audiences. Initially, they were modelled on their European counterparts with a longer tradition in this regard, but this proved to be a failure due to the fact that transplanting successful models and structures from one environment to another is no guarantee of success. Furthermore, at an institutional level the lack of corporate culture, professionalism and motivation means that they are unable to cope with the new demands shaping institutional dynamics that would make them more flexible and receptive to ongoing trends. Their rigid structures have prevented them from developing efficient mechanisms and establishing permanent bodies to communicate and interact with their audiences on a regular basis, which generally speaking has led to their distrust and rejection of traditional forms of public media. Restrained in the 'traditional paradigm', all operations and decision-making processes are top-down, which has also distanced audiences from PSBs, since this has made their services and programmes indistinguishable and unattractive.

Notwithstanding the general decline in trust in traditional media in the Western Balkans, terrestrial and offline PSB programmes are still fairly popular. This lack of trust has to do with several factors, including the legacy of the recent past, their unattractive content, political colonization, and the dearth of efficient strategies to respond to ongoing media and information consumption trends. In the 1990s, during the Balkans War, some of these broadcasters were heavily misused as propaganda tools. The textbook case is Radio-Television Serbia that was tightly controlled by the government of Slobodan Milošević. Afterwards, when RTS began to implement its transformation strategies, its reputation was already badly damaged. Nowadays, the majority of these PSBs have been colonized and instrumentalized by political actors, through the appointment of top management and funding (some of these media are state-funded).

On the other hand, when it comes to ongoing trends in media markets, the top management of these PSBs has not strategically embraced the fact that the public, especially youth, is migrating online, demonstrating different consumption habits and having new expectations. Their online presence is still limited, with websites that serve as a support to TV and radio channels, and limited options for audience engagement and interaction. PSBs are rarely included among primary online information sources (with the exception of Serbia and Croatia). Instead of regarding this as a strategic opportunity, they have invested modest resources in their online platforms resulting in a limited reach and influence and a general lack of innovation.

Compared to other content providers, including commercial media and some online websites, PSBs in the Western Balkans do not provide distinctive, relevant, or high-quality content that would help them to regain the trust of citizens and to engage them. Instead of producing diverse content, broadcasting it, and making sure that their audiences recognize the value of investment and excellence, they have preferred to play it safe. In order to bolster their popularity, they have chosen the easy path by producing more entertainment and reality programmes, at the expense of newscasts, documentaries and especially children's, cultural and drama programmes, with an overall drop in quality content.

Finally, PSBs have not made the most of opportunities to broaden the reach of their content through partnerships with other organizations and institutions of various types (academic, consumer, creative and cultural) beyond

their institutional boundaries. These types of partnerships could help to create a 'digital commons' in order to increase their public value and share their content with these institutions. Taking into account the fact that all these PSBs have fairly rich and valuable archives that have not yet been digitized, partnerships and cooperation of this type could make their work more visible and relevant, while maximizing the exposure of their content.

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