

Public Broadcasting: Between Commerce and Social Welfare – Why the Role of Public Broadcasters is so important in addressing Terrorism and War-related Issues at Major Sporting Events, and why it is so difficult to fulfill

*By Christoph Bertling**

This article examines the role of public broadcasters as important institutions in promoting democracy. It demonstrates why these public broadcasters are particularly important in addressing terrorism and war-related issues at major sporting events. However, fundamental difficulties in implementation have emerged, as the article will demonstrate in a second step. Public broadcasting institutions only fulfil their original task to a very limited extent. Accordingly, this discussion piece advocates a return to the fundamental values of public broadcasters providing information for the public good as important institutions of democratic, open, Western societies.

Keywords: *Public Broadcasting, Social Welfare, War- and Sports Reporting, Democracy*

Introduction

From its inception to the present day, sport in modern societies has been committed to the central idea of combining peace and civilization. Dictatorships, war, and terror are seen as antipodes of sport. This guiding principle of modern physical activity and leisure activities can be observed in many ways: We see this in Pierre de Coubertin's adoption of the ancient idea of Olympic Peace (Greek: Ὀλυμπιακή Ἐκεχειρία: "Ekecheiria – Olympic holding hands"). The founding father of the modern Olympic Games saw international understanding as a central role (cf. Wassong 2013). Since their inception, sports organizations have consciously and clearly distanced themselves from nationalist, paramilitary movements, such as early gymnastics in Germany (cf. Lämmer 1999). Human rights positions can be seen in the "Refugee Olympic Team" as well as in the importance attached to sport by human rights organizations. Amnesty International, the United Nations (UN), and many other organizations dedicated to maintaining world peace, upholding international law, and protecting human rights view sport as an important vehicle for their missions. Sport should not only entertain; through entertainment, sport should lead to peacebuilding, respect for human rights, and understanding between cultures and nations (see UNESCO 2024).

However, these ideological and philosophical perspectives often clash with real-political conflicts. Terrorism, war, and totalitarianism have had a significant

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impact on sporting events in the past and will continue to have a significant impact in the future. Numerous examples can be cited: the terrorist attacks by Palestinian terrorists at the 1972 Olympic Games (cf. Schiller & Young 2012), the stabbing attack on Monica Seles at the Rothenbaum tennis tournament in Hamburg in 1993, the bomb attack on the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta by an activist of the Christian extremist terrorist organization "Army of God," the bomb attack on April 15, 2013, at the Boston Marathon, the attack on the State de France stadium on November 13, 2015, by the "Islamic State" during an international soccer match, and Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.

Such terrorist attacks, bombings, and wars make lighthearted entertainment seem impossible in the moment they occur. Even if sports organizations often decide that competitions must continue in order not to capitulate to terror, war, and totalitarianism, other aspects inevitably come to the fore. In these cases, the public's primary concern is not entertainment, but rather information. In addition to providing lighthearted entertainment, it is of paramount importance in these cases to explain the background and dangers of such developments to the public. The public can and should no longer be entertained, but rather educated through in-depth, informative reporting.

In many countries, this task falls primarily to public broadcasters. Critical, independent reporting, supported financially and ideologically by society, is seen as a central pillar of democracy and is accordingly supported financially and ideologically by the general public through fees. In this context, journalism is referred to as a watchdog and educational function.

This article highlights the importance of public broadcasters in sports reporting in times of critical terrorism and war threats, as they are designed and able to publicize important social issues such as the impact of war and terrorism on sports and society in a highly commercial sports media world, thus bringing them into public discourse. Second, it demonstrates that this important watchdog and educational function is hardly fulfilled by public broadcasters anymore, as they themselves are caught in a spiral of commercialization. This, according to the third aspect of this article, could change if there were stricter restrictions on the multi-billion euro acquisition of sports rights by public broadcasters and stricter requirements for journalistic conduct at these media institutions. Accordingly, the article concludes with a plea. It calls for a return to the fundamental values of non-profit information by public broadcasters as important institutions of democratic, open, Western societies. Only in this way can sport be entertained and framed critically and contribute to a particularly great social welfare in society through the media.

Theoretical Background: Market Failure & Public Value

The public value approach offers a suitable theoretical framework. Public value refers to the value contribution and benefit that an organization provides to society. It is closely linked to welfare economic theories (see Gundlach 2011, a, b; Kiefer 2010, 2011; 2015; 2017).

The topic of public value can be placed in the broader context of the regulatory economics school of Nobel Prize winners Elinor Ostrom and Oliver Williamson (see Ostrom, 1991; Williamson 1975; 1991; Buchanan 1987; 1990; Buchanan & Tullock 2004; Hajek 2009). This field of research examines the significance of rules, institutional frameworks, and organizations for economic activity. The work of Williamson and Ostrom touches on fundamental questions of economic order: Why do companies exist? When does the state need to intervene? And under what circumstances are private solutions better?

Public Value answers the question of what makes an organization valuable to society. Crucial here is the new understanding of "value" creation, which only arises through appreciation and social acceptance. This places particular emphasis on the socially stabilizing or even transformative function of organizations. The term was originally coined by behavioral scientist Mark H. Moore: His concept aims to define value creation for the public sector analogous to shareholder value in the private sector.

This fundamental principle underlies the dual broadcasting system in European countries, i.e., the coexistence of private and public media companies. In practice, the public value concept has been particularly adopted by public broadcasters. These feel compelled to justify their public funding by demonstrating their contribution to the common good (see Moore 1995).

In times of war and terror, this contribution to the common good by public broadcasters also plays a central role in sports reporting, as it can be assumed that commercially oriented broadcasters do not provide in-depth, informative reporting in this area.

Comprehensive coverage of war and terror would destroy sport as an entertainment product—and thus as a valuable economic asset. Since private broadcasters operate under the primacy of economics, they will struggle to provide comprehensive, reflective reporting. This would damage their own cost-intensive media product and violate the basic economic principles of efficiency, monetization, and profitability. Even if they do not conceal acts of war and terror, they are increasingly concerned with marginalizing them and sensationalizing them in specific cases in order to profit economically in a voyeuristic manner (cf. Sonntag 2004; Josilo 2014; Imhof 2014). Such aspects can be found in so-called lower thirds, which are superimposed on live reports after terrorist attacks, and in minute-by-minute projections of death tolls. In addition, they rely on the power of images. War reporters for private broadcasters report that TV images of killed babies were not enough for the editors, who demanded that they film them with numerous flies on the dead bodies. Atrocities are even reenacted (Josilo 2014).

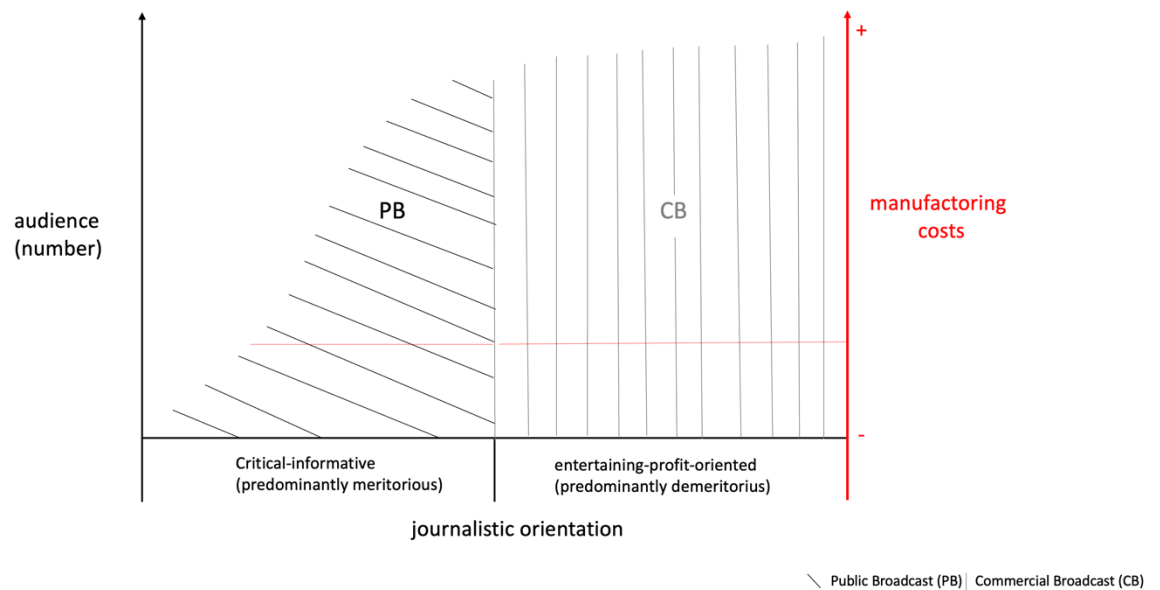
Such reporting does not help to activate important democratic and enlightening aspects through communication. According to Imhof (2006), whose understanding draws heavily on the normatively framed concepts of the public sphere of the philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas (cf. Habermas, 1990), three main functions of the public sphere in modernity can be identified, which journalism, as a special public arena, must accomplish. With the deliberative function of the public sphere, he points out that in the network of arenas and communication flows of public communication, problems and challenges of everyday life are constantly

ving for attention. In this way, the public sphere forms the "discovery and validation context of modern society" (Imhof, 2006:7). Through the public sphere, society can perceive its problems society-wide and attach importance to them, thereby influencing "will-formation and law-making processes" (Imhof, 2006:8). With the political-legal function of the public sphere, Imhof draws attention to the fact that all communication events in all other arenas should potentially resonate in the public sphere. With the integration function of the public sphere, Imhof makes clear that the public sphere is "crucial for the sustainable expansion (or narrowing) of identity constitutions in the form of citizens' belief in commonality." This 'multi-level' belief in community is essential for participation and loyalty dispositions, which provide the willingness to accept the unreasonable demands of majority/minority decisions and redistributions necessary for democracy" (Imhof 2006:10).

However, content that meets these demands is hardly marketable, as it is in lower demand among the population and is very costly to produce (see Bertling, 2025). Informative, in-depth reporting on the impact of war and terror on sports is in significantly lower demand than entertaining live sports formats. Thus, democratic and informative reporting on war and terror surrounding sporting events can largely be understood as merit goods. Reporting that promotes social welfare through education is more socially desired than demanded.

Public broadcasters are not subject to these market mechanisms. They were developed as the antipode to these market failure tendencies – for the general welfare. The public broadcasting we know today is the direct result of this societal aspiration. It was no coincidence that it emerged from a conscious decision for democracy, diversity, and responsibility. Journalists and media professionals were given a clear mandate: truth and transparency as the fundamental pillars of a functioning democracy.

As license fee-funded organizations, they are particularly encouraged to promote reporting that is neglected by private media companies. This basic idea is visualized in the following graphic (see figure 1).

Figure 1. *Conceptual Framework of a Dual Media System*

The graphic shows the relationship between viewership and program structure, as well as the orientation of public and private broadcasters. Private broadcasters (CBs) follow the market economy logic of attracting as many viewers as possible to their programs. To achieve this, they produce largely entertaining, profit-oriented, and more demerit-oriented programs. Public broadcasters (PBs), on the other hand, should produce critical-informative, merit-based programs that the CBs ignore, as they have less economic benefit from these. This concept not only ensures a broad spectrum of informative and entertaining communication, but can also be seen as overall cost-minimizing through cost sharing (license fees and advertising). This concept of a dual broadcasting system assumes increased welfare in terms of journalistic and financial aspects.

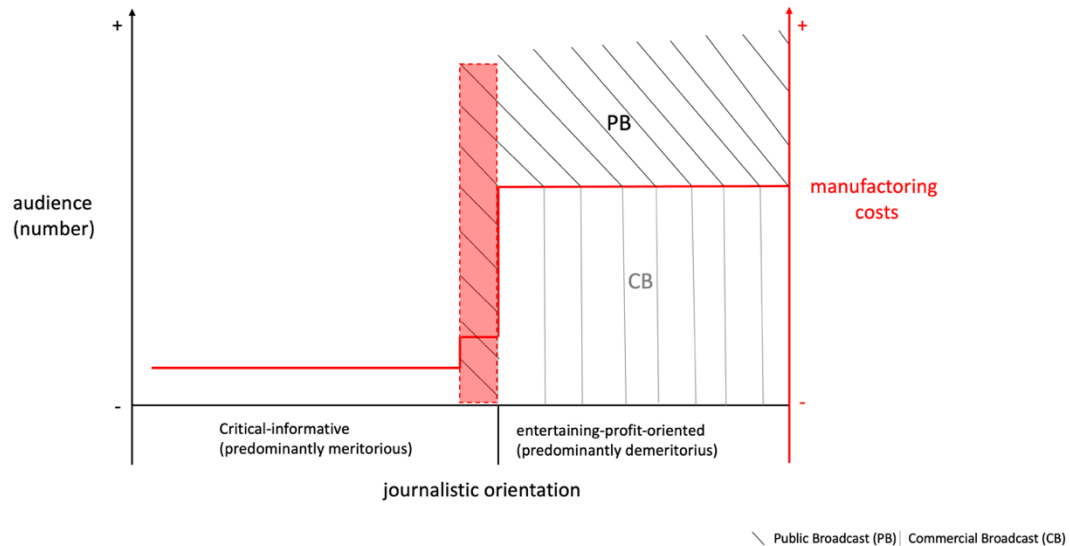
Public Value & Independence of Speech

A dual system therefore requires a strong public broadcasting system that responds to such aspects largely outside the market mechanism of supply and demand. Unfortunately, however, it can be observed that public broadcasters only partially meet this requirement. In many respects, they are trapped in a spiral of attention economics, licensing, and commercialization.

To legitimize their public funding, public broadcasters rely on appealing to the masses. If they fail to do so, the license fees would be questioned as public funds. Accordingly, they are increasingly focused on maximum reach. Because public broadcasters cater to mass tastes, they purchase very expensive licensing rights to sporting events. In doing so, they quickly lose their distance from the object of coverage, which now becomes their own, costly media product. Specific licensing conditions restrict journalistic approaches and thus the possibility of independent, critical reporting. Due to this orientation, public broadcasters often act like private

media companies. This leads to a homogenization of reporting that neglects critical aspects and merit-based goods. The following graphic illustrates this (see figure 2).

Figure 2. *Real Situation of a Dual Media System*



The graph reveals a rightward shift in journalistic focus, leading to the neglect of numerous merit-based reporting topics. The shift of public broadcasters toward the entertainment sector is creating a new financial and journalistic situation. Top licenses must be purchased, and thus a large portion of the budget is spent on programming. Furthermore, there is a dependency on sports organizers, who not only sell the licenses but also pass them on to the TV stations as PR products. Due to the rising cost of licensing top sporting events, fewer financial resources remain for addressing merit-based goods—such as in-depth, informative reporting on important issues (such as terrorism and war). This sector is experiencing severely limited, marginalized pseudo-reporting. From a financial and journalistic perspective, this results in limited, minimized social welfare.

Summary

Public broadcasters that fulfill their responsibilities within a dual media system are of great importance for social welfare and the democratic engine of society. Especially in sports reporting, we see a strong marginalization of important social issues. This becomes particularly evident when terrorism, war, and totalitarianism actually enter sporting events, and a profound, enlightening approach to the topic seems important. In private media companies, such reporting accounts for a negligible share. Public broadcasters demonstrate a greater focus on the topic, but these are produced with significant cost savings, broadcast times are shifted to low-reach times, and in many respects are staged in an unacceptable journalistic manner (see Josilo 2014; Imhof 2014).

But how can the situation be improved for the good of society?

It seems insufficient to appeal to the moral obligation and self-image of public broadcasters. It also seems important to question and change cost structures and dependencies.

- Restricting the acquisition of sports rights by public broadcasters can promote greater journalistic independence from sports organizations and thus the objects of coverage.
- Such a restriction on the acquisition of sports rights could lead to a dissolution of the overheated bidding market for sports broadcasting rights, and public broadcasters could strengthen merit goods across the entire journalistic field (politics, business, and culture) – through a redistribution of budgets and greater independence in many sports.
- A directive for public broadcasters could be aligned with the so-called EU television protection lists. The goal of this protection list regulation is to ensure that large segments of the population can receive specific top-level sporting events simultaneously on free TV. Legally, the exclusive broadcasting of these top sporting events on pay TV is therefore prohibited. The starting point is the understanding of sports broadcasting as a cultural asset. Other cost-intensive broadcasting rights could be left to the free market.

The importance of well-functioning public broadcasters is demonstrated by the fact that, in times of deep fakes and fake news, the public places (even) greater trust in these media outlets. This trust is of great value for democracy and social welfare. Accordingly, this discussion piece advocates a return to the fundamental values of public broadcasters providing information for the public good as important institutions of democratic, open, Western societies. Only in this way can sports be entertained and framed critically – for the benefit of an open, democratic society.

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