

Dissemination and Dialogue in the Public Sphere – Exploring an Argument for Public Service Online.

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Abstract

Dominant democratic theories prescribe two ideal functions for the media: making important information available to all citizens, and enabling them to communicate with each other about relevant issues. The media, then, should both disseminate information and facilitate dialogue. As a key tool of media policy, public service broadcasting has arguably contributed to the former task – the dissemination. It has been heavily criticized for neglecting the task related to dialogic communication. Digitalization, especially the growth of online communication, constitutes a main rationale behind arguments that labels public service broadcasting an anachronism. Online communication, optimists claim, might boost participation, and also potentially make it fairer, thus bringing us closer to an ideal public sphere. Yet, on the same background, others argue for expanding the idea of public service broadcasting to include the new media platforms.

This paper takes such arguments as a starting point. It employs a normative public sphere theory, and critically discusses the contribution of broadcasting to the public sphere – as dissemination. It further scrutinizes the potential of online communication – imagined as dialogue – warning against the most optimistic visions of its contribution to the public sphere. I argue for untying the communicative forms of dissemination and dialogue from broadcasting and online communication, respectively. This way, the paper explores a basic argument for public service online.