

Title:

The Public Service Value of Public Broadcasters' Marginal Online Activities

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Abstract:

Over the last decade, European public broadcasters have developed their internet presence from next to nothing into sprawling portals. Regulatory frameworks have not kept up. The situation constitutes a key challenge as these institutions move beyond traditional radio and television, and clearly illustrates the need for redefining the status and functions of public service media in a digital context.

This paper analyzes three different online-based services from three mainly licence fee funded public broadcasters: a game provided by the Norwegian NRK, a discussion forum from the German ZDF and a virtual online world service from the British BBC. All services are arguably located at the margins of a public service remit, and have been subjects of controversy. With a comparative approach, the paper contextualizes the services by looking at competing offers; scrutinizes the rationale behind them; and the criticism they have faced. The paper goes on to discuss an understanding of their place in the different remits grounded in cultural policy concerns, and with due attention given to the potential of new media platforms. By problematizing the limits of the licence fee funded activities, the paper aims to revitalize the debate on the functions of public service institutions beyond radio and television.