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Media Policy, Economics and Citizenship

A Peculiar Model for Participatory Public Service Television

1 Introduction

The development of new PSB alternatives and the increasing participation of citizens in the definition and implementation of the public service broadcasting channel (PSB) has been put forward by several authors (see Raboy 1994, 1996; Achille/Miège 1994; Blumer 1993; Michell/Blumer; Sondergaard 1999, Collins 2002; Pinto 2003; Sousa/Santos 2003) as the way forward for the uncertain non-commercial television sector. Facing fierce competition and financially stretched, PSB operators face the redefinition of their traditional role. Depending generically on governments and/or on regulatory bodies, the reconfiguration of public television is perceived as inevitable, and the participatory argument has been integrated both in academic and political discourses.

The Portuguese PSB, *Radiotelevisão Portuguesa* (recently renamed *Rádio e Televisão de Portugal – RTP*), is no exception to this general framework. Neglected by the Socialists (in power from 1996 to 2002) and unable to solve its enormous debt problem, RTP was a natural candidate for restructuring by the centre-right governments¹ in office from April 2002 up until the Socialist's electoral victory in February 2005. Indeed, the Social Democrats perceived the restructuring of RTP as a major political goal. In the strategic document 'New Options for the Audio-Visual Sector' (2002), the government clarified its intention to reduce the existing two national generalist public service channels down to only one. RTP1 was to remain as a generalist channel, while RTP2 (renamed *Canal 2* and later *A Dois* or '2:') was to be

¹ The 15th and 16th Constitutional governments, led by José Manuel Durão Barroso (from April 2002 to 17 July 2004) and Pedro Santana Lopes (from July 2004 to March 2005), respectively, were supported by the Social Democrat Party and by the Popular Party.

handed over to civil society. According to the government, this channel, provisionally called 'Society Channel' ('*Canal Sociedade*'), would be a medium of direct communication between different partners and the public, without the state's intermediation.

This article tries to demonstrate that as far as the rhetoric went, citizens had the centre-stage in this new public service participatory model but political decisions tend to be far more intricate than what can be perceived from textual analysis of documents and discourses. Text and context are indispensable if one intends to start examining this specific political decision both in terms of its conceptualisation and implementation.

2 Economic context: RTP's technical bankruptcy

When the Social Democrats returned to power in 2002, RTP was technically bankrupt. The previous Socialist government (1996-2002) had seriously neglected its financial situation and therefore RTP was facing a major debt crisis. In short, the public service television company had no financial means to survive: it had no licence fee (abolished by the Social Democrats in 1992) and, since 1997, with the Socialists in office the second national channel, RTP2 was no longer allowed to have commercial advertising. The Socialists had also decided to reduce the advertising time of RTP1 to a maximum of 7.5 minutes per hour.

With the benefit of hindsight, the Socialist media minister (secretário de Estado), Alberto Arons de Carvalho, perceived the abolishment of commercial advertising in RTP2 as a mistake and the reduction of advertising time in RTP1 as the wrong message to the company given that it looked like a sign of unequivocal prosperity (Carvalho 2002: 35). In a book published immediately after the Socialists' withdrawal from power in 2002, Arons de Carvalho publicly explained the main reason for RTP's dramatic situation. The government (his own) took the decision by the end of 1996 of reducing RTP's advertising following pressure from the presidents of the two existing national private companies (Pinto Balsemão, head of *Sociedade Independente de Comunicação*, SIC, and Carlos Monjardino, head of *Televisão Independente*, TVI). 'Balsemão and Monjardino had presented this proposal as the only possible way of saving TVI from certain bankruptcy and to help SIC break-even' (Carvalho 2002: 35).

Indeed, the two main Portuguese political parties (Social Democrat Party and Socialist Party) had dramatically reduced the PSB's revenues without any consideration for alternative financial sources. The Social Democrats, in power from 1985 to

1996, believed that competition between private and commercial operators would on its own solve the problem. The Socialists (in power from 1996 to 2002) faced too many internal contradictory views on the issue and did not manage to develop a coherent strategic policy for the overall audio-visual sector. The Socialist's failure to work out a viable alternative for RTP led the Social Democrats – while in opposition – to call for the privatisation of the public service company.

In October 1997, the Social Democrat opposition leader, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, said that his party would put forward a law proposal concerning RTP's privatisation if the company's 'manipulation, partiality, injustice and inefficiency' were to be maintained (in Pinto et al. 2000). In April 1998 the Social Democrats presented a law proposal to Parliament concerning RTP's privatisation. Although these ideas did not become law, it became very clear that the most liberal Social Democrat party sectors intended to keep on fighting for RTP's total privatisation, while more moderate sectors would call for partial privatisation and/or for the allocation of so-called 'public service' tasks to private operators. Either way, the Social Democrats were henceforth perceived as having a clear intention of handing out (totally or partially) the expensive and financially adrift public service operator.

3 Looking for an alternative

Neglected by the Socialists and unable to solve its enormous debt problem, RTP was waiting there to be 're-designed' by the centre-right government which took office in 2002. The government's programme considered the restructuring of RTP as a major political goal and stated that one of RTP's national generalist channels should be privatised. Acting on such proposals, the Council of Ministers decided in May 2002 to set up a new public service television company with only one generalist channel.

The closing up of RTP2 – understood by the cultural elite as RTP's best channel – caused an enormous public outcry (see Pinto et al. 2003). With this the recently elected centre-right government's popularity started to receive some of its first identifiable blows as there was a public perception that the government was trying to implement a covert agenda of handing out RTP's second national television frequency to private interests.

Facing fierce opposition from various political and social groups, and despite all the previous pro-market arguments, hesitation started to set in. Trying to put itself together in a difficult coalition with the Popular Party (a right-wing party), the government started to consider that the privatisation of RTP deserved further thought.

The government's coalition was fragile and it soon realised that it was not in the best position to go ahead with such an unpopular and risky move.

Hesitation became increasingly evident and a task force was set up by the government to inform and to develop ideas on the future of the PSB. In September 2002, the working group – led by Helena Vaz da Silva – presented its results and argued against the privatisation of RTP. The report² supported the idea that RTP1 should continue operating as a generalist channel, and that the terrestrial frequency used by RTP2 should be neither privatised nor used for any other public generalist channel. The task force believed that the second national frequency should be put to use as an **'alternative service open to civil society in such terms that it could reinforce differences, universal principles, cohesion and proximity'** (2002, September: 6/bold HS/MP).

In December 2002, three months after the public presentation of the task force results, the government put forward its own proposal in a widely publicised report: *Novas Opções para o Audiovisual* (New Options for the Audio-Visual Sector, 2002). According to the document, Morais Sarmento, responsible for media oversight, clarified the government's intention to reduce the existing two national generalist public service channels down to only one. RTP1 was to remain as a generalist channel, while RTP2 was to be handed over to 'civil society'. Under these circumstances, the government accepted the task force recommendation not to privatise RTP2, but it framed the new public service channel outside RTP's scope. This would be the very first fundamental institutional change in RTP's national structure since the setting up of its second generalist channel in 1968 (cf. Sousa/Santos 2005: 64).

In Morais Sarmento's words, there were two possible alternatives for the second RTP channel: to remain an integral part of the PSB or to be privatised. But the government's most recent vision of a television public service model no longer could be expressed in this duality. The government's solution for the second RTP channel would go beyond the conventional state vs. market duality: 'between the state and the private sector, we have chosen civil society' (Presidência do Conselho de Ministros 2002: 15). Bowing to public opinion pressures and recognising the difficulty in handing over the then-called RTP2 channel to commercial interests, the government ended up saying that it would relegate RTP's second channel to 'civil society'. Details were scarce, however, on the 'civil society' concept, and on its implementation.

² Relatório do grupo de Trabalho sobre o Serviço Público de Televisão, September 2002. In addition to Helena Vaz da Silva (who died while the work was in progress), this group included university professors, journalists, and MPs.

4 The unusual 'Civil Society' model

Although the government's appointed task force on the PSB had already mentioned the necessary link between public service and civil society, it may be argued that the government managed to find a very particular solution for RTP2. The report *New Options for the Audio-Visual Sector* (Presidência do Conselho de Ministros 2002: 15ff.), presented the channel in the following terms:

1. The second channel aims to provide public service television outside the realm of the public service operator.
2. The second channel shall be open to civil society in what constitutes a challenge to all institutions willing to produce public service audio-visual content.
3. The second channel shall be a direct communication medium between different entities and the public without the state's intermediation.
4. For that purpose, institutional partners are to be chosen from different sectors. Not being a generalist channel, it will address demanding and segmented audiences.
5. The second channel has a particular mission regarding culture, education, social issues, amateur sports, religious confessions, independent productions, Portuguese cinema, the environment and consumer issues, audio-visual experimentation, and support for new creative formats.
6. The different partners' participation should have the following possibilities: content production about their sphere of activities; cession of rights concerning cultural events; shows, etc.; and financing or co-financing of particular programmes or the entire channel.
7. The PSB, *Radiotelevisão Portuguesa*, may also provide content for this channel, namely news programmes and documentaries.
8. In the initial stage, this channel will be managed by the PSB. RTP will be responsible for the channel's broadcast and it will guarantee the necessary human resources to integrate new partners.
9. All entities associated with the second channel will be part of an Accompanying Council (*Conselho de Acompanhamento*).
10. The proposed model for the second channel shall have an autonomous financial management. It should aim for its own economic self-sufficiency, and will have a global budget of 50% of that of the present RTP2 (then called Canal 2).
11. The objective of the progressive development of this model is its total autonomy, that is, the entities involved should assume the channel's responsibility and the broadcasting frequency.

Despite numerous uncertainties about the implementation of such a model, the government went ahead with it. Facing fierce criticism concerning the idea of a public service broadcasting entity outside the realm of the public service broadcaster, Morais Sarmiento went on developing his 'civil society' concept implied in the New Options for the Audio-Visual Sector report (2002). In December 2003, speaking³ at the ceremony to inaugurate the association of 'civil society' partners to the new channel re-named '2:', the politician responsible for media policy made a highly apologetic defence of the government's 'civil society' idea.

Morais Sarmiento argued that this model would work as a 'powerful engine for the improvement of our society and as a sign of the maturity of our democracy'. Considering channel '2:' a pioneering experience and an unprecedented change in Portuguese television history, he argued that for the very first time 'we will have a substantially different form of communication: a television channel without content mediation'. For the very first time, continued Morais Sarmiento, 'we have taken the risk of setting up a television channel whose mission is to develop a public service provided by the public itself'.

With these words, the government wanted to convince society of the generosity of such an offering. The state offers 'civil society' a public good (a national television channel), and it is now up to 'civil society' to organise itself and to fully contribute to the provision of public service audio-visual content. This would constitute what Morais Sarmiento called a 'non-mediated' and 'direct communication' between the sender and the receiver. 'It is our belief that Portuguese television will seriously improve with this direct communication because the sender and the receiver are truly close, and because television is taken to citizens, and citizens are taken to television'.

The media minister also perceived this idea as highly functional and as having enormous potential for all of society: it would stimulate active participation; it would contribute to the development of a more effective and more active citizenry; it would contribute to the development of a shared communication among citizens; and, last but not least, it would contribute to the general improvement of democracy. In sum, citizens would be both the providers and audience of their own programmes. In the government's 'revolutionary' perspective public service television would be in the hands of the public itself.

³ http://www.portugal.gov.pt/Portal/PT/Primeiro_Ministro/Intervencoes/2004331_PM_Int_RTP.htm

5 'Public service' outside the public service television operator

Considering the government's words, uncertainty arose among politicians themselves, academics, media critics, media operators, and other social actors (see Pinto et al. 2003). Unresolved issues were summed up by Fidalgo (2005: 29) in the following terms:

- Does public service television imply the existence of a public service operator?
- Can or should a public service be sub-contracted to private television operators?
- Is public service television mainly related to programming content, or does it also involve matters of ownership, management, and control?
- In relation to private television, should public service be a structured global alternative, or should it be a complement to commercial output?
- Should political responsibilities vis-à-vis television be centred on the setting up of formal conditions for the provision of public service programming content, or should it be the state's responsibility to become deeply involved in the definition of infrastructures, regulation, and control? (Fidalgo 2005: 29).

Although some of these questions have long been dealt with (though not necessarily resolved) in other Western democracies, they have been highly disputed in Portugal over the last few years. To fully comprehend the meaning of these heated discussions one would have to understand the complexities of RTP's history. Sousa and Santos (2005 61ff.) have argued that the public's general interest has never been a central preoccupation of RTP, either during the dictatorship or after the 1974 revolution. The general perception that RTP has always served the interests of the government of the day rather than citizens makes discussion about public service television particularly difficult. It is not easy to isolate any debate about public service television from RTP's role over the last 40 years. There was indeed an enormous scepticism regarding the centre-right government's intentions when it put forward the idea of handing out one of RTP's generalist national channels to 'civil society'. Without any consistent theoretical or working definition of 'civil society', the offering of the second national channel to this abstract sphere caused perplexity and distrust.

Taking the common sense usage of the concept, it could be inferred that such an expression would refer to institutions operating outside the state apparatus, and to entities which are not driven by market-oriented interests. This is, however, extremely vague in terms of identifying the sort of interests and forces which might have access to their 'public service' share, and on what terms. Furthermore, the term

does not clarify the role institutions such as public universities and other publicly-funded non-profit organisations might play in the new audio-visual arena.

The then managing editor of *Diário de Notícias*, Mário Bettencourt Resendes, quoted the head of the *Impresa* multi-media group, Pinto Balsemão, to emphasise that it is not likely that 'civil society' is interested in, or that it has resources to make use of this offer because it is hard to see the audience potential for a channel that probably will not be better than a 'sum of institutional propaganda broadcasts' (in *Diário de Notícias*, 19 December 2002). A few days later, in the same newspaper, Paulo Cunha e Silva argued that civil society did not know how to produce audio-visual content. To produce such content, he argued, 'technical skills and a highly professionalised culture are indispensable, and these are not compatible with amateurism' (23 December 2002). In another daily newspaper, *Público*, Eduardo Prado Coelho wrote: 'it is true that civil society had a Christmas present: it got a television channel. But to offer one television channel to civil society means absolutely nothing. What really matters is to know who is going to select civil society agents, who pays for the programmes, who coordinates their allocation, and who provides information services' (19 December 2002).

But the government's idea also had supporters. The Director of *Público*, a reference daily newspaper, and former member of the government's appointed task force⁴, José Manuel Fernandes, believed that an opportunity should be given to civil society. According to *Público*'s Director, the true reason why civil society was not trusted stemmed from an old leftist prejudice based on the idea that the people must be educated, and that only the state is good at doing this (23 December 2002). Along the same lines, Eduardo Cintra Torres, a well-known media critic and another former member of the government's appointed task force also believed that elitist arguments were being used to depreciate the government's initiative: the elites want the public service for themselves, but probably other spectators need it the most (*Público* 30 December 2003).

In fact, and despite other relevant changes in the audio-visual sector (e.g., the merger of public radio and television into a single broadcasting company), only the destiny of the second RTP channel managed to capture public and media attention. Columnists such as Vasco Pulido Valente (in *Diário de Notícias*, 21 December 2002) stated that the government's choice had a hidden agenda. Pulido Valente believed that, as defined by Morais Sarmiento, the second channel was 'still-born' and in these

⁴ Relatório do Grupo de Trabalho sobre o Serviço Público de Televisão, September 2002.

circumstances the government had managed to find a disingenuous way of handing it out to private interests (*ibid.*).

The government's intentions (or the differentiated motivations of individual members of the government) are not yet likely to be out in the clear, but two possible explanatory versions of this political decision became popular in the press. On the one hand, there was a view that the government could no longer say that the second national channel would continue under the RTP's umbrella. The government had presented itself as reformist, and media structural change was enshrined in the government programme and in internal documents and speeches. For some, this third avenue (civil society instead of state or private profit-driven interests) was a face-saving proposal to masquerade a simple reality: the second channel would go on as a 'normal' RTP channel, but the government could not say so. On the other hand, others argued that when this experience was over, the government would realise that a civil society-based channel was not viable and consequently it would end up being sold off (see Eduardo Prado Coelho: *Público* 20 December 2002).

6 'Civil Society' and public service with the public's participation

Although it is not our aim to discuss the concept of 'civil society' or the prolific literature which articulates public service television with the role social agents can play (Raboy 1994, 1996; Mitchell/Blumler 1994), we will very briefly put forward some elements which might contribute to the understanding of the implementation of the Portuguese new public service model from January 2004 onwards.

The Centre for Civil Society (London School of Economics) states that

"Civil society refers to the arena of un-coerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values. In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state, family and market, though in practice, the boundaries between state, civil society, family and market are often complex, blurred and negotiated. Civil society commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power. Civil societies are often populated by organisations such as registered charities, development non-governmental organisations, community groups, women's organisations, faith-based organisations, professional associations, trade un-

ions, self-help groups, social movements, business associations, coalitions and advocacy groups".⁵

As we perceive it, the 'civil society' concept incorporates the notion of the 'public sphere' (Habermas 1991; original version: 1962) where social actors, groups and organisations relate to each other and fight for their interests. The existence and performance of these actors confer vitality and density to individual and social life. It enshrines the notion of the freedom (i.e., non-coercive action) of belonging, freedom of participation, freedom of expression in a wide variety of organisations, and the freedom of organisations to develop their own activities. 'Civil society' also refers to a common share of interests, objectives, and values sustaining differentiated institutions, and to the organisation of benevolent action, mainly non-profit driven and based on volunteer work. Finally, it includes the notion of autonomy vis-à-vis the state, though the boundaries are not always clear.

In spite of the non-conceptualisation of 'civil society' by the government, it was quite clear that the new 'civil society channel' would incorporate a relevant role for non-profit cultural, social, and scientific organisations which were neither part of the state nor market-oriented. The government wanted – in discursive terms, at least – to put the public at the centre stage of the new television public service that would no longer be part of the public service broadcaster. The government also intended to facilitate expression, and to allow new voices to speak up for themselves in a direct form of communication (without state intermediation). Finally, there was the expressed intention to promote participation and qualified democratic values. These ideas are broadly coherent with a general view of civil society we have just referred to.

Several academics have also put the finger on the public's involvement when public service television models are being debated. Rumphorst (1999: 1), for example, says that as the name intimates, public service broadcasting is broadcasting **made for** the public, **financed by** the public, and **controlled by** the public (bold HS/MP; see also Fidalgo 2005; Pinto 2003). Rumphorst's (1999: 3) public-centred definition of public service broadcasting enshrines the idea that every household should be in a position of technically receiving the service, and that the PSB programming should address the entire population, even if not simultaneously. Public service broadcasting is made for the public and therefore it must serve 'only' the interests of the population, treating people as citizens rather than consumers. According to Rumphorst, the public is not only the beneficiary of public service broadcast-

⁵ http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/CCS/what_is_civil_society.htm (access: 07.07.2004).

ing, and its paymaster, but is also its controller. 'What, then, does control by the public mean? It means that representatives of the people ensure that the public service broadcasting organisation actually fulfils its public service mission in the best possible manner' (1999: 6).

In a book dedicated to the PSB debate in Portugal, (*Televisão e Cidadania* (Television and Citizenship) (Pinto et al. 2003)), Pinto argued that citizens' participation can be established at two distinct levels: a) at a substantive level, via contributions to productions, programming, and scheduling; and b) at a methodological level, via shared responsibilities, interaction, advice, and continuous evaluation mechanisms (2003: 47f.). The basic argument is that the quality of public service is not only dependent on the differentiation and excellence of its programming, but also on the processes and participatory mechanisms which contribute to the definition of the public service model and its programming content (Pinto 2003:48). The participatory modalities are extensively designed in Pinto (2003: 48ff.) and, in addition to the strong emphasis on media education, they range from individual action and associative intervention, to internal and external regulatory mechanisms (ibid.).

Though in different terms, academics have been arguing over the last few decades that the future of public service television services depends on their distinctiveness, and there is a relative consensus that in some form or another, citizens should play a role in this differentiation process. However, we have no knowledge⁶ of academics or other social actors arguing that public service television should be handed over to civil society (i.e., operating outside the realm of the public service operator and the realm of the market), and that programming should be made **by the public itself**. As we have mentioned before, the centre-right government wanted to transform RTP2 into a non-mediated channel: the public service operator should be in the hands of the public, and hence a direct medium between the sender and the receiver without the state's interference.

7 Discourses, law and the partner's contribution

Despite the government's (discourse and) determination to go ahead with what has always been presented as a pioneering experience, difficulties with this abstract

⁶ So far, we have no knowledge of such discourse or experience within the context of a public service generalist national television channel. Should any of the conference participants have any knowledge of a similar experience, we would be very grateful to hear about it.

model soon became evident. Having an absolute majority in Parliament, the government had the political strength to simply transform its objectives into law. However, significant nuances (though not necessarily in contradiction with previous discourse) were introduced in legal and regulatory instruments. The ensuing implementation of the model is yet another (and far more complex) issue.

The Television Law 32/2003, approved by Parliament on 22 August 2003, established two different types of public service television. The first one has been designated 'general concession' and will be administered by *Rádio e Televisão de Portugal* (formerly *Rádiatelevisão Portuguesa*) and for 16 years will be operated within the framework of a public service contract⁷. The second one, named 'special concession' of public service television (Article 51) and targeting specifically the previous RTP2 channel, was to have an 'autonomous concession' though it should remain under RTP's umbrella for eight years. After this period of time, this channel shall be handed over to an entity whose composition reflects the diversity of civil society, according to what will be enshrined in the special public service contract⁸ and in additional legislation.

The special public service contract made it clear that in terms of programming, this second channel should emphasise culture, science, research, innovation, charity work, amateur sports, religion, independent productions, national cinema, environment, consumer rights, and audio-visual experimentation. It would be up to the channel's direction, led since the very beginning by Manuel Falcão, and to the civil society partners to establish consensus regarding programming content. The special public service concession also established an 'Accompanying Council' which integrates the contributing partners with a formalised protocol with the channel. According to this public service concession contract, civil society is represented by the channel's official partners, and they are expected to voice their views regarding the channel's development (see Clause 6). Therefore, the Accompanying Council does not necessarily express the diversity of society itself, but the views of the social agents which were invited and have corresponded to the required conditions to become a channel '2:' partner.

Following a period of intense contacts, the channel's Director, Manuel Falcão, managed to aggregate around 50 partners right before the launching of the channel

⁷ The General Public Service Concession Contract was signed on 22 September 2003 (http://www.ics.pt/Ficheiros/Legisl/CCG_SPRTTP.pdf).

⁸ The Special Public Special Concession Contract was signed on 17 November 2003 (http://www.ics.pt/Ficheiros/Legisl/CCE_SPRTTP.pdf).

in January 2004. Currently, according to the channel's own data⁹, 66 entities have already signed protocols and are actively involved. This new channel has clearly increased the participation of social actors. The access of new social agents to the broadcasting scene has the potential to contribute to the proliferation of alternative formats, the representation of new interests, and the presentation of different perspectives. Manuel Falcão, the Director of the new channel, stated that programmes produced by new partners accounted for 23 hours of programming per week (in *Diário de Notícias*: 6 July 2004). The remaining programming schedule is broadly sustained by the previous RTP's second channel.

Governmental and non-governmental institutions are, in fact, involved (with their own means or through sub-contracting) in audio-visual production for Channel '2:'. These entities include governmental ministries, universities, foundations, charities, and other environmental, consumer, professional, business, sports, and media organisations. Among these partners, state agencies (including one public polytechnic institute) account for more than a quarter of all entities (26%). The three most important professional organisations (for medical doctors, lawyers, and engineers) and the four most relevant national foundations (Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Fundação de Serralves, Fundação Luso-Americana para o Desenvolvimento, and Fundação Oriente) are also important partners. There are four private universities among the partners as well. Although a detailed categorisation has not yet been made, it might be provisionally said that the majority (around 50%) of Channel '2:' partners are somehow involved in some form of social intervention (e.g., charities and social associations), and 17% are specifically dedicated to cultural activities.

Independently from the selection mechanisms, and despite all the criticism regarding the amateurism and the 'political party broadcast feel' of some programmes, the effective participation of these entities corresponds to an increase in the plurality of voices in the public space, and apparently amateurism in itself did not contribute to any decrease in audiences. The new channel started operating in January 2004 with a 3.9% monthly share, with this share rising to 4.3% during the following six months. In the first three months of 2005, its share rose yet again up to 4.7%¹⁰. Still, the lack of professionalism of some entities involved is recognised by the channel's Director himself (quoted in Eduardo Cintra Torres, *Público*: 6 July 2004).

Although the Channel '2:' partners considered the experience a positive one, there is an almost unanimous chorus of criticism regarding the absence of produc-

⁹ http://www.dois.tv/area_parceiros.shtml (accessed: 14 June 2005).

¹⁰ <http://www.marktest.com/wap/a/n/id~792.aspx>.

tion conditions (see, *inter alia*, dossier of *Diário de Notícias*, 6 July 2004). There are obviously well-off partners who contract out and put quality (broadcasting) programmes on the air, but there are also those who cannot afford independent productions and make their own audio-visual content with no adequate know-how or technical means. 'Production resources are necessary in order to collaborate in a different way', said the President of the League for Nature, José Manuel Alho (*Diário de Notícias*, 6 July 2004). The lack of financial support or production facilities for Channel '2:' partners has been the main concern, but the channel's Director, Manuel Falcão, argued that it is up to the partners to make 'a bigger investment' and that 'partners must organise themselves' (*Diário de Notícias*, 6 July 2004).

8 The citizen's role in a troubled economic context

If we look back at the recent history of RTP, it becomes quite clear that the development of this new 'revolutionary' civil society channel is intrinsically related to the PSB company's dramatic economic situation. The licence fee was abolished by the Social Democrats, and advertising time was reduced by the Socialists. The company could not pay off its debts and the government wanted to reduce its contribution. Willing to put the blame on previous Socialist governments (from 1996 to 2002), Morais Sarmiento explained RTP's deterioration over the past six years in the following terms (in *Novas Opções para o Audiovisual*, 2002):

- RTP's audience share decreased from 44% in 1995 to 28% in 2002;
- RTP was technically bankrupt with an accumulated debt of € 1.2 billion;

Independently from political responsibilities for RTP's current situation (see Sousa/Santos 2003), the Social Democrat government was not prepared to maintain the company's level of expenditures. Under these circumstances, and considering that privatisation was no longer a viable political option, the government developed a global restructuring programme that, instead of financing two national generalist channels, would end up financing only one. This strategy is also highlighted in the governmental slogan 'better public service for less money'. Indeed, in 2002, according to RTP data, the operational costs of the second channel reached € 52 million. The government expected a progressive decrease of the channel's costs to € 28 million in 2006, and an equally progressive financial commitment of both present and future partners.

This experience results mainly from immediate economic difficulties and from governmental hesitation regarding the destiny of the second RTP generalist channel.

This, however, does not necessarily mean that significant changes were not introduced in terms of programming. We have already mentioned the diversification of social actors involved in the public sphere, even if many institutions are an integral part of the state apparatus. Despite the much-criticised amateurism of some social agents, the channel's partners introduced a higher level of differentiation in audio-visual output, even if the channel is still generally maintained by RTP's structure.

Moreover, even if we put aside individual partners' productions, Channel '2:' is not a copy of the previous second RTP channel. Indeed, the overall programming schedule underwent significant changes. At least two areas deserved particular attention: programmes for children; and information broadcasts. A considerable investment was made in the qualification of programming for children through the setting up of a specific department with qualified staff. It is a clear strategic objective to provide a community service through children's audio-visual entertainment and education. This is to be done not only through the broadcasting of quality children's programmes, but also through its adequate placement in the programming schedule. Additionally, Manuel Falcão emphasised the simultaneous subtitling and Portuguese voice-overs in foreign programmes: 'it has already been tried in France and it aims to facilitate the programme's comprehension by children with hearing disabilities and to promote reading among children and young people' (in *Media XXI Sept/Oct 2003*: 33).

In the information arena, changes were also introduced. The Channel '2:' Director wanted news bulletins to be guided by journalistic criteria and not by editorial choices based on audiences (in *Media XXI Sept/Oct 2003*: 32). News services are attempting to develop clearer journalistic choices based on rigorous and more objective criteria. Social and political themes which commercial channels do not cover have also come to the fore, and debates have been informed by qualified analysts. Still, as we perceive it, information should be a crucial dimension of any public service and, despite the aspects we have just mentioned, no additional financial resources were allocated to news services. Quite the opposite in fact: news broadcasting time was reduced to half an hour per day, and RTP1 has been the main content provider for the new channel. Therefore, increasing editorial rigour has been attempted with fewer resources and within a more limited schedule time.

Overall, it can be argued that efforts have been made by the Director of Channel '2:' to provide cheaper but more diversified and qualified output. Despite difficulties, the role of the partners cannot be underestimated and they generally have perceived the experience as being positive. What is not so clear – at least so far – is the public's appreciation for this new channel (although audience shares have not gone

down). Indeed, apart from the direct participation of social actors, no regulatory body was set up to listen to and interpret citizens' suggestions and opinions. The Channel '2:' Accompanying Council only gives voice to the partners themselves.

The government's citizenship rhetoric was not accompanied by any regulatory mechanism in order to contribute to the development and updating of the public service concept and its implementation. Citizens (with production means and know-how) are expected to express themselves and to provide free-of-charge programmes for Channel '2:'.

Furthermore, the RTP's Advisory Council (Conselho de Opinião) created to represent the 'social complexity of contemporaneous society', saw its powers reduced by the Social Democrat government. In May 2002, when the Council of Ministers decided to set up a new public service television company with a single generalist channel and appointed a five-member top management team to implement the decision, RTP's Conselho de Opinião did not approve of the management team because no agreement was reached regarding the reduction of RTP's services. As the Advisory Council had the power to veto the team, the governmental coalition (with a Parliamentary majority) altered the Television Law in order to reduce the council's power.

9 From rhetoric to practice: concluding remarks

Public services in general and PSB in particular, have undergone major changes over the last two decades. Technological changes and ideology (competition, privatisation, and market deregulation) have played a fundamental role in the redefinition of public service television all over Europe. The Portuguese PSB is no exception to this general framework. What is quite new is the government's discourse and political decisions regarding RTP. In most countries, broadcasting evolved from a monopoly to a competition model. This also happened in Portugal in the early 1990's but now a 'third way' is being attempted, somewhere in the middle of the traditional state/market dichotomy. The government decided to offer a public service channel to 'civil society'.

It was presented as a revolutionary idea in the following terms: society itself would directly communicate to society through this new channel. This model would avoid intermediary actors, and society would find the means, the conditions, and the content to express itself in an unprecedented form. The delivery of one national public channel to civil society means that public service television shall be provided in two different formats: from inside, and from outside of the state. The concept is

therefore 'two-headed' in that the government defended two sides of public service broadcasting: one national channel within the realm of the public operator, and another one on the outside.

Given that this is a recent and on-going experience, we have no intention (or indeed mechanisms) to properly evaluate it. However, in these concluding notes there are aspects which might be underlined and discussed.

The first point we would like to make relates to participation itself. It is clear that Channel '2:' has taken steps towards some plurality in the sense that new actors, new voices, and new perspectives are on the air. What deserves particular attention are the partners' selection mechanisms, the channel's power structure, the processes related to the construction of the programming schedule, the financial sources for audio-visual production and distribution, the channel's news editorial control, and additional internal and external regulatory mechanisms. Neither the law nor the special public service contract adequately deals with such fundamental aspects.

Although the recruitment of Channel '2:' partners is not a closed process, it might be argued that traditional social and political power structures tend to be replicated in the new model. Considering the resources involved in audio-visual production, and the selection mechanisms which are in place, it is likely that social asymmetries are being replicated in the new channel. It is also worth mentioning that state agencies have a very significant impact on the channel's programming. On the one hand, the government argued that the state should minimise its role in the media domain in general, and in the public service sector in particular. On the other hand, more than a quarter of all partners are state agencies. Furthermore, the most active Channel '2:' partners are well-endowed foundations and highly influential professional associations. There is a glaring under-representation of labour organisations, unions, parent associations, and environmental and consumer groups.

In addition to this participatory fragility, the Channel '2:' model might be considered a 'conceptual island' within the coalition government's discourse and practices. Apart from this solution, the government has not developed any consistent policy towards the promotion of citizenship and public participation. Quite to the contrary, it might be argued that the governance style has been more compatible with a centralised decision-making process, and that the overall government's intervention in the media has not promoted independence and diversity.

Moreover, this model is in complete contrast with the public service tradition and with RTP's practice. Up to now citizens' participation in RTP has been extremely limited. There are no mechanisms to listen to audience views and suggestions (apart from correspondence and phone calls), and RTP's Opinion Council

(which is supposed to represent the viewers) had its powers reduced by the very same government which has offered a national channel to 'civil society'. In spite of this minimalist public participation tradition in Portuguese public service television, the government has decided for the most radical form of public participation in public service broadcasting.

The question which might be raised is, 'why this model?' Taking into consideration the overall context, why would the government decide for such a striking change? Though much is yet to be known, we would argue that the very first argument was directly related to RTP's finances. RTP was technically bankrupt and the government decided to transfer the production costs of RTP2 to the new channel's partners. The other possible explanation is related to the government's reformist approach. The coalition government had presented itself as a reformist one, and having put forward such a stern view of the second channel, it was left with no political conditions to withdraw. The privatisation of the channel became impossible due to intense social and political opposition. The third way (not in the state or in the market, but owned and managed by civil society) was the safest possible option. As the difficulties of the model's implementation became increasingly clear, the government maintained its course, and the TV Law (2003) itself incorporates the very same concept. However, the law states that the full implementation of the model would only happen in eight years. In eight years time, other politicians will re-evaluate the process and possibly make alternative decisions regarding it.

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