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Public service media in the platformised context: innovation, universality and recommendations

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Abstract

This article analyses the innovation strategies of public service media (PSM) in Catalonia, Spain, within the platformised context. Specifically, this study examines three items: (1) innovation, (2) universality, and (3) recommendations, to understand how PSM are dealing with these trends at regional and local levels. The methodology used is qualitative, consisting of document examination and in-depth interviews with managers of the regional and local PSM and the Catalan regulatory authority, following an exhaustive literature review. The results show that the regional and local PSM's capacity to lead innovation in the Catalan communication space is limited. Digital adaptation is taking place using already developed technological resources, with these services being outsourced to private companies. Moreover, the study shows that there is a lack of cooperation between the two PSM levels: regional and local. Concerns relating to data collection and recommendation systems were identified, in terms of preserving the public value and universality.

Keywords

PSM, platformisation; innovation; recommendations; universality

Los medios de servicio público en el contexto de la plataformización: innovación, universalidad y sistemas de recomendación

Resumen

Este artículo analiza las estrategias de innovación de los medios de servicio público (PSM, por sus siglas en inglés) en Cataluña, España, en el contexto de la plataformización. En concreto, el estudio examina tres aspectos: (1) la innovación, (2) la universalidad y (3) los sistemas de recomendación, con el objetivo de comprender cómo los medios de servicio público afrontan estas tendencias en los ámbitos regional y local. La metodología empleada es cualitativa y combina el análisis documental con entrevistas en profundidad a responsables de los medios públicos regionales y locales, así como de la autoridad reguladora catalana, tras una exhaustiva revisión de la literatura científica. Los resultados muestran que la capacidad de los medios públicos regionales y locales para liderar la innovación en el espacio comunicativo catalán es limitada. La adaptación digital se está llevando a cabo mediante recursos tecnológicos ya desarrollados, cuyos servicios son externalizados a empresas privadas. Además, el estudio pone de manifiesto la falta de cooperación entre los dos niveles de medios de servicio público, el regional y el local. También se identifican preocupaciones relacionadas con la recopilación de datos y los sistemas de recomendación, especialmente en lo que respecta a la preservación del valor público y la universalidad.

Palabras clave

Medios de servicio público; plataformización; innovación; sistemas de recomendación; universalidad

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1. Introduction

For many years, scholars have been analysing the challenges that public service media (PSM) face in the digital era (Moragas and Prado, 2000; Armstrong and Weeds, 2007; Ferrell Lowe and Bardoel, 2007; Bardoel and d'Haenens, 2008; Donders, 2012; Ferrell Lowe and Steemers, 2012; Gulyás and Hammer, 2013; Sehl, Corina and Kleis Nielsen, 2016; Galán-Cubillo et al., 2021). In addition to the traditional main goals, another goal for PSM is innovation, which involves their adaptation to online consumption patterns and their findability in a globalised media market where big platforms wield the lion's share of power.

This study analyses the challenges that PSM face in regard to digitalisation and, more specifically, in the platformised context, these are understood as a phenomenon of platform expansion. Most platforms are multinational companies that have been able to modify communication ecosystems (Helmond, 2015; Pérez Tornero, 2017). Platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2018; Lee, 2019; Cañedo and Segovia, 2022) gives massive power to digital companies that, besides collecting user data, exploit their "financial strength, strong research capability, and market dominance to set a political agenda" (Brevini and Swiatek, 2021, p. 66). According to Bonini et al. (2021, p. 50), "big international tech corporations already represent the new intermediaries of cultural and creative industries", and Unterberger and Fuchs (2021) alert us to how the dominant commercial Internet platforms endanger democracy in a landscape dominated by "surveillance, advertising, fake news, hate speech, conspiracy theories, and algorithmic politics" (p. 10). In that context, PSM are more important than ever, with new challenges to be addressed in order to operate in such an ecosystem.

Innovation must be embedded into PSM dynamics to make them capable of dealing with the logics governing communications. PSM are crucial to the preservation of social cohesion and to democratic needs. This applies to PSM at state level as well as to those at regional and local levels with smaller coverage areas that respond to cultural proximity (Straubhaar, 2008) and identity articulation (Billing, 1995; Schlesinger, 1991, 2007). In the case of Catalonia, in Spain, PSM serve specific linguistic and cultural needs, distinguishing them from Spanish broadcasters and global platforms. In a context of dominance of transnational digital platforms in global communication spaces (Martin, 2021), Public Service Media with proximity approach become more indispensable PSM to prevent news deserts and contributing to social cohesion (Rodríguez-Castro *et al*., 2024).

In stateless nations (Guibernau, 2002) with minority language communication spaces, PSM have a role to play in normalising and promoting the use of a language (Gifreu and Corominas, 1991; Gifreu, 2014), and face the challenge of operating in a media landscape where regional governments usually do not have full political powers for communication policymaking (Prado and Marin, 2020). To continue developing their functions, regional and local PSM must participate in the digital dynamics that big platforms dominate, and this study looks at how this strategy is being developed.

2. Objectives and methodology

This article analyses the innovation strategies of public service media (PSM) in Catalonia, Spain, within the platformised context. Specifically, this study examines three items, adapting the topics studied by Raats et al. (2022): (1) innovation, (2) universality, and (3) recommendations. The aforementioned research draws upon insights from PSM literature to identify three core themes that guide its inquiry: platformization, people, and politics. Aside from the political dimensions – which encompass the political context, as well as PSM governance and funding – this study focuses on the remaining two pillars (platformization and people), adapting them to this specific case study: innovation, universality, and recommendations. In this framework, innovation and recommendations are linked to the implementation of public service OTT platforms, while universality (associated with the 'people' pillar) is identified as a pressing challenge for public media distributing content via digital platforms.

The aim is to understand how PSM are dealing with these trends at both regional and local levels. It also considers the trend of recommending content and of big data and algorithm usage to see how PSM outlets are developing their strategies.

The study of these three items brings relevant knowledge about challenges of PSM at sub-state level (small PSM outlets) regarding the current debates around streaming services and public media, with a solid international literature review that serve the analysis.

The research questions are:

> RQ1. What challenges are local and regional PSM facing in the platformised context to be adapted to the new on demand consumption habits?
>
> RQ2. What strategies are Catalan PSM adopting in the platformised media ecosystem in regard to innovation, universality and recommendations?
>
> RQ3. How is universality preserved by PSM in the national context?
>
> RQ4. How are OTT platforms and recommendation systems being developed by local and regional PSM?
>
> RQ5. What stage is Catalan PSM at in regard to innovation?

We used a qualitative methodology consisting of an examination of documents and the grey literature (e.g., strategic plans), and in-depth interviews with people who have expertise in, and responsibilities for, the topics of analysis (Raats et al., 2022), following the exhaustive literature review presented in the theoretical framework. The interviewees in the fieldwork were:

- An executive of regional PSM in charge of innovation: Cristina Villà, Director of Innovation, Research and Digital Strategy at the Corporació Catalana de Mitjans Audiovisuals (CCMA).
- An executive of the network that supports and aggregates local PSM: Marc Melillas, Managing Director of the Xarxa Audiovisual Local (XAL).

- A representative of the broadcasting regulatory authority: Enric Casas, Member of the Catalan Audiovisual Council (CAC).

The interviews were conducted using the methodology by Bierman (2018), where we asked the interviewees to identify four elements: 1) Those promoting innovation or making it necessary, 2) the objectives pursued by their organisation through innovation, 3) the barriers they encounter when innovating, which could impede the process, and 4) those that facilitate the achievement of innovation.

The research is framed in the Political Economy of Communication and its current topics of analysis – business concentration, convergence, and the functioning of the communication industries (in this case, the public communication one), among others – in the mentioned platform capitalism landscape.

The case study approach (Vennesson, 2008; Flyvbjerg, 2006) enables an exhaustive analysis of a complex issue within broader dynamics (Donders and Ramsey, 2022), providing updated information and exploring challenges – and possible solutions – that can be applied by other (regional and local) PSM outlets. Therefore, this article contributes to international debates on PSM in the platformised context.

3. Theoretical framework: debates on PSM in the platformised context

Since PSM were created in Europe as a political institution in the welfare state to promote political, cultural and social participation in a democratic society (Brevini, 2013; Van Cuilenburg and McQuail, 2003), some debates have arisen on the challenges faced by such media at every historical stage. After the initial stage, characterised by the emergence and consolidation of PSM from the 1920s to the 1970s (Donders, 2012), the liberalisation of broadcasting services and competition with commercial media for audiences introduced new challenges as licences were awarded to private television and radio stations between the 1970s and the 1990s (in Spain, this process took place later, in the early 1990s, because of Franco's dictatorship).

For a while, the coexistence of private and public media outlets was considered a guarantee of pluralism against public monopolies. This view changed when highly commercialised media landscapes underscored the need for PSM as a guarantee for providing public interest content and promoting social cohesion, dealing with topics not shown by the industry (Moragas and Prado, 2000). Some researchers pointed out that more channels did not necessarily imply more diversity (Ferrell Lowe and Steemers, 2012; Flew, 2006; Trappel, 2010), and PSM were deemed to be actors that assured that goal in a highly commercialised audiovisual ecosystem.

This debate is considered relevant today, when PSM play their role whereas oligopolistic industry practices make media systems even more globally concentrated. PSM are making an effort to shape – according to their public service values – the online media landscape, in which platforms have immense influence (Martin, 2021). Consequently, these entities are recalibrating their

production and distribution strategies to navigate the dynamics of platformisation, a shift that has rendered media increasingly dependent on digital infrastructures to reach their audiences (Poell et al., 2022; Nieborg & Poell, 2018).

3.1 Innovation

PSM must maintain the traditional goals of pluralism, representation, accountability, independence and so on, and also deal with the new challenges of the digital era. Technological changes, audience fragmentation and the need for differentiation from other media (Zaragoza and García-Avilés, 2022) imply innovation in a variety of ways: Adapting content (in terms of formats, programming, etc.) and the platforms via which it is distributed, as well as the dynamics of producing content and the ways of disseminating it. PSM must be committed to innovation and digitalisation processes in order to maintain their position of relevance (Rodríguez-Martelo et al., 2022). In a highly competitive media environment, public service broadcasters may have difficulties in accomplishing their missions if they do not integrate innovation (Mehdi Sharifi, et al., 2019).

From a Schumpeterian perspective, innovation is conceptualized not merely as a technical improvement but, more significantly, as a fundamental driver of economic development. Schumpeter identifies various dimensions of this process, including "the introduction of new products, new methods of production and new forms of business organization as well as the penetration of new input—and output markets" (Hospers, 2005, p. 23).

Within the Public Service Media (PSM) literature, Donders (2019) identifies five stages of innovation in PSM distribution, despite the fact that it is an ongoing and nonlinear process: (1) experimental, in which PSM become aware of the possibilities of distributing content in a different way and start making pilots; (2) panic, when they realise that other companies are more successful at attracting online audiences and that their strategies are not very coherent; (3) expansionist, when the online presence is enhanced through a lot of effort; (4) consolidation, with prioritisation of what is important in terms of public interest and financial limitations; and (5) maturity, when a solid digital strategy is designed to connect with the audience in a competitive market. This article analyses the stage that Catalan PSM had reached at the time of writing, even though their innovation is an ongoing and nonlinear process.

Zaragoza and García-Avilés (2022) offer different understandings of innovation: It can be considered as the invention of something new, the adaptation of something that already exists, the differentiation between things, and something that puts creativity in order. For those authors, creativity is "the result of collaborative culture, autonomy and capacity for experimentation" (p. 13) and it is therefore not linked to standardised protocols. What is common to all types of innovation is that it involves the creation of organisational change management models (Nissen, 2013) to ensure relevance in the digital space.

From a critical perspective, innovation is considered a way of introducing market dynamics to PSM because it requires the development of new products and new productive models adapted to new markets (Cañedo and Segovia, 2022). D'Arma et al. (2021) identified that PSM strategies imitate the design and platforms adopted by Netflix and other companies, in what those authors call "mimicry". In that sense, Mehdi Sharifi et al. (2019) underline the need to use external sources to implement innovation, since internal sources are usually limited and not specialised.

Europe is heterogeneous in terms of PSM innovation lead: Zaragoza and García-Avilés (2022) point out cases in which PSM have catalysed technological innovation, whereas others are characterised by a lack of initiative. Those authors identified that an innovative corporate strategy was missing in the case of Spanish PSM (*Corporación de Radio y Televisión Española*, RTVE), whereas another study on the analysis of participation in some regional media within Spain (López Olano et al., 2022) concluded that the labour structure was not flexible enough, with traditional workflow strategies that made innovation difficult.

This research focuses the analysis of innovation on technological development, specifically concerning OTT platforms within a context of platformisation. Nevertheless, it acknowledges that such innovation occurs across multiple levels (including content adaptation and production dynamics) as the result of a culture of collective experimentation within the organization.

3.2 Universality

The key difference between PSM and private online streaming services is universality and free access (D'Arma et al., 2021). One of the PSM pillars in peril in Europe is universality (Arriaza and Morillas, 2022), which remains within the public service objectives, with content necessarily being targeted at all potential audiences. The gradual freeing up of digital terrestrial television (DTT) spectrum space for 4G and 5G has left broadcasters and empowered digital corporations that operate through network platforms in a disadvantaged position, with "telecom operators as lucrative intermediaries" (Arriaza & Morillas, 2022, p. 70).

Universality means that "all groups within society – however, they are to be identified or differentiated – are supposed to be reached by PSM offers" (Bengesser & Sørensen, 2024, p. 1366). The concept is understood as providing a service "equally available to everyone" (Unterberger and Fuchs, 2021, p. 11), and is linked to the idea of accessibility. In the digital landscape, PSM have the mission of working towards including everyone and, therefore, of minimising the digital divide, of offering content for functionally diverse people, and of facilitating accessibility (through audio-description and subtitles, among other actions).

According to Raats, et al. (2022), PSM have been criticised for insufficiently connecting to so-called "difficult" and sometimes "hidden" audiences. Donders (2021) defined these PSM audiences: lower socio-economic groups and people with low levels of education and literacy, as well as ethnic minority groups.

PSM are adapting to the audience fragmentation brought about by digitalisation in terms of access to topics of interest, offering thematic content and distributing it via different channels and platforms. Considering these trends, Hokka (2019) highlights the idea of "nuanced universality", according to which PSM do not necessarily aim to reach all citizens most of the time, since generalist content that is too broad may lead to the loss of target groups. According to Urbániková & Smejkal (2025), the legitimacy of PSM hinges on providing content and services that appeal to as wide a range of individual citizens as possible" (p. 870). In that sense, Bruun & Lassen (2023) link the publishing strategy with the public service identity, arguing that "it may be able to secure a diverse, distinct, and discoverable PSM offer" (p. 196). Moreover, authors list the obligations for PSM: to deliver content of a certain quality, cater to minorities, support the national language, culture, and identity, be politically and financially independent, as well as to provide a universal and diverse content (Bruun & Lassen, 2023).

Martin (2021) draws attention to the PSM desire of "upholding the principle of universality – being available across as many platforms and mediums as possible and maintaining relevance to the publics they serve" (p. 3). However, the author argues that, in this case, PSM lose direct access and relationships with the audience due to commercial platforms having increasingly become intermediaries between them and the public.

3.3 Recommendations

The use of algorithms and data collection by PSM is an issue under debate. Platforms gather data from users to learn about audiences and better connect with them, and also to recommend content. Sørensen (2020) points out the contradiction between serving individual interests by offering filtered content, and the public service mission of reaching everybody with diverse topics that editors consider appropriate for the citizenry, in keeping with the role of enhancing social cohesion and promoting democratic discussion.

Van den Bulck and Moe (2018) consider personalisation as a challenge for PSM universality, and Knudsen (2022) argues that artificial intelligence and news recommender systems have raised concerns over possible adverse effects on democracy. However, Skovsgaard and Andersen (2020) tell us that providing content aligned with audience interests could be a way for PSM to prevent other risks such as news avoidance, especially by young people.

Another issue under debate is the basis on which PSM recommendations should be made. Value-oriented platforms should be different from market-oriented ones, especially in the way the platform selects, filters and curates content (Bonini et al., 2021). The European Broadcasting Union (2016) points out that PSM should propose content not only based on people's personal preferences, but also on what the broadcaster itself finds relevant for users. It would therefore be a matter of using big data, combining individual preferences with public service editorial decisions.

Many authors defend the idea of developing public service algorithms (Van den Bulck and Moe, 2018; Unterberger and Fuchs, 2021; Sørensen, 2020) or even public service platforms (PSP) (Bonini et al., 2021; Bonini and Mazzoli, 2022) to get further away from personal preferences in order to ensure an element of chance and to allow exposure to alternative opinions and interests (Van den Bulck and Moe, 2018). The existence of PSP should allow user data to be managed and recommendation algorithms to be developed in favour of those values that benefit society (Bonini et al., 2021). Sørensen (2020) defends the possibility of integrating specific PSM indicators into a recommendation system designed with commercial goals in mind in order to take into account diversity, social cohesion and public service.

There are concerns on the usage of algorithms for content recommendation: PSM should be careful with data management, usage and purpose, and be transparent (Van Drunen et al., 2022). They should also avoid using these data for commercial purposes, such as personalised advertising or the sale of information to other companies (Cañedo and Segovia, 2022).

As a final remark on the theoretical debates, digital challenges coexist alongside the PSM commitment to quality local content, which is strongly associated with cultural identity and diversity, thus reinforcing the legitimacy of PSM and their funding (D'Arma et al., 2021).

4. Results

Innovation is being implemented individually at different PSM levels (regional and local) in Catalonia, with no mechanisms of collaboration between the regional corporation *Corporació Catalana de Mitjans Audiovisuals* (CCMA) and local media, the latter of which channel innovation through the *Xarxa Audiovisual Local* (XAL).

The XAL is a public network that supports local audiovisual media and aggregates local media with a public service commitment (55 local television stations and 148 radio stations are members). Due to the difficulties experienced by these media in a fragmented and heterogeneous landscape of local media with limited financial, human and technological resources, the XAL's goal is to help local media, providing them with new technologies and also promoting content exchange and new content production.

The innovation objective is recognised by law for PSM at the regional level but not at the local level (Law 22/2005 on Audiovisual Communication in Catalonia). However, local media are developing their strategies to reach citizens through digital dynamics and to maintain their relevance to audiences in accordance with platformised consumption habits.

At both the regional and local levels, the creation of over-the-top media services (OTT) is the main project in terms of digital adaptation, as specified in the strategic plans of both public entities (XAL, 2020; CCMA, 2022). It should be noted, however, that the two levels of Catalan PSM are developing their platforms separately from each other. Audiovisual consumption has been found to be concentrated in Subscription Video on Demand (SVoD) services, so regional

and local PSM are developing their own platforms in order to participate in audiovisual platformised dynamics.

In the Catalan case, major overlaps in terms of innovation have been identified. There is a lack of formal cooperation and coordination mechanisms between the two PSM entity levels, as the interviewed managers of the CCMA and the XAL, respectively, agreed. The main reason given was that each entity has its own calendar regarding innovation. However, their strategic plans were published only two years apart (in 2020 in the case of the XAL and 2022 in the case of the CCMA), and subsequent implementation was also set according to the calendar of each entity. The agenda for innovation was also affected by the election of the new board of the CCMA, which was not completed until March 2022. It was from that time that they started designing new projects. The two public entities awarded the development of their OTT platforms to two different companies, after public tenders with specific criteria for each case. The implications of different business models and scheduling render the chances for cooperation between the two projects difficult.

4.1 Innovation at the local level

The articulation of the OTT platform La Xarxa+ was financed and coordinated by the XAL, and it was externally developed by a private company[2] after a public tender. The platform contains the linear broadcast of all local channels, as well as on-demand content to address adaptation to the platformised context given the falling DTT audiences.

In fact, the creation of a new OTT, which was launched in February 2023, is a component of the actions labelled as "adaptation" in the strategic plan for 2021-2025, as differentiated from the "innovation" actions that are due to be developed in the next step for better big data usage. The creation of the platform was therefore the first phase, which will be further developed through experimentation with AI to improve user experience. The methodology for the data plan includes the establishment of clear indicators and the incorporation of tools and human resources into the team, as well as data-based decision-making (XAL, 2020). The XAL's manager argued that working with data was a challenge for the local sector, which was not used to using these sources or to introducing rapid changes to adapt to the media ecosystem (Melillas, 2023, personal interview). One of the strengths of an OTT, recognised by the plan, is the ability to learn about users' preferences in real time in order to adapt content to that information.

For the proper implementation of the platform's management, the XAL's management body identified new roles required in the fields of marketing (to make the platform known and its content attractive), content curation and technology, such as data analysts. However, the entity has limitations on recruiting new staff, and those roles have not been filled. Regarding the OTT's

[2] The OTT project was developed by Vidneo and Konodrac, joined in a UTE (a Spanish legal formula for the temporary aggregation of companies to carry out specific projects).

development, the XAL created the structure, but data usage and recommendation system operation were externally developed.

4.2 Innovation at the regional level

At the regional level, the CCMA has historically been innovative, adhering to its commitment to use systems and technologies appropriate to the provision of public broadcasting services in line with technological advances (Audiovisual Communication in Catalonia Law, 2005), with two public companies specifically dedicated to this goal: Activa Multimèdia Digital and CCRTV Interactiva. The first oversaw software development and the second designed the digital strategy. Due to the financial crisis of 2008, which impacted on the PSM budget, these companies were shut down as a cost-cutting exercise, and the Digital Media department is now in charge of the entire strategy.

In 2004 the website 3alacarta was created to provide on-demand video as well as linear broadcasts of public television channels. This is an example of the pioneering dynamics of CCMA in the 2000s (this platform was created a year before YouTube and three years before the BBC iPlayer, among others). The innovation dynamics gradually waned in the 2010s, and this platform became obsolete, as did the digital dynamics in the corporation.

After years of considering innovation a non-priority area, in 2022, the new president of the corporation created a directorate for Innovation, Research and Digital Strategy, with the goal of designing a strategy to foster a spirit of innovation and cultural change in the organisation, and also of establishing relationships with universities and the entrepreneurial ecosystem. Despite the board – from 2022 – having the goal of aligning innovation in the CCMA with its strategic objectives and of coordinating it (Villà, 2023, personal interview), innovative procedures in the corporation had been fragmented for years.

The strategic plan of the CCMA (CCMA, 2022) stipulates the "creation of a universal access OTT platform capable of competing in the digital landscape" (p. 45), regardless of the other PSM level in Catalonia, without specific details in relation to calendars. Before inaugurating the generalist platform, the corporation launched a thematic OTT focusing on children's content (SX3) in October 2022, many years after becoming disconnected from young audiences (Author et al., 2023). This was a first step towards partially catching up with the platformisation strategy, responding only to a target group of the whole audience.

In the years when the CCMA did not have its own OTT platform, linear broadcasts and on-demand content was accessible via the 3alacarta website and app (without OTT functionalities such as recommendations or programme catch-up options after the last viewing). The TV3 YouTube channel filled the gap of the missing OTT, with most entertainment content becoming available once broadcast. Moreover, the Catràdio website and app offered live radio and on-demand audio content, the SX3 OTT provided content for children, and EVA was a brand aimed

at teenagers and young people that distributed content via social media only, with a social first strategy (Villà, 2023, personal interview).

In October 2023, the directorate for Innovation presented a new OTT to aggregate all content and digital platforms, and also to improve the user experience of consuming digital content, with a new brand (3Cat), a new design and new functionalities, such as the possibility of catching up while continuing to watch a programme from the time it was paused. The launch of the OTT is in the second phase, with improved service and the goals of (1) including third-party content aggregation; (2) unifying video and audio distribution, incorporating television and radio catch-up and linear broadcasts; and (3) expanding the offering and experiences, with gamification, e-learning and collaborative content. The tender for the management, design, development and maintenance of the platform was awarded to the private companies Mediapro and Inetum, which are different from the companies in charge of the Xarxa+ OTT.

4.3 The bigger, the slower

In terms of calendar, regional PSM have taken longer than local PSM to design a new generalist OTT, despite their bigger financial capacity: Public funding of the CCMA is more than 11 times that of the XAL. This study has identified a lack of real mechanisms to articulate cooperation between the two levels, which the interviewees attributed to different development paces and calendars, and to administrative problems.

The fact that, in a highly competitive landscape, the smallest actor has developed an OTT faster is interpreted by the directors of PSM and the regulatory authority as the capacity to be more flexible, and to adopt an iterative experimental framework. Despite the speed in creating the platform, the regional platform is intended to incorporate more services, such as videogames and audiobooks, and to serve the entire country through alliances with third parties (other technological and audiovisual companies, entities, the cultural sector, etc.).

Traditionally, the regional broadcaster (CCMA) had led the Catalan audiovisual ecosystem in all aspects: content production, industry dynamism and innovation. The central role of the corporation from the 1980s was lost in the 2020s, when the dynamics of platformisation were not being adopted and other actors in the media landscape were moving forward in a quicker and more flexible way, such as local broadcasters and other actors that launched OTTs in Catalonia (Liceu+ by the Gran Teatre del Liceu and CaixaForum+ by La Caixa Foundation, among others).

The CCMA's assigned mission of promoting the introduction of technical innovation into the sector (Audiovisual Communication in Catalonia Law, 2005) is not assured if we look at its loss of leadership in this area within the Catalan media ecosystem. Consequently, its reduced competitiveness is affecting not only the service it offers but also its function in the audiovisual industry and therefore society: CCMA is not leading audiovisual sector innovation as it did in the past.

4.4 Features of innovation in Catalan PSM

Using the methodology by Bierman (2018), the managers of the regional and local PSM, respectively, and the regulatory authority member identified reasons for, objectives of, barriers to, and facilitators of innovation in PSM. Melillas (2023, personal interview) argued that innovation in PSM was needed to reach people, in a context where DTT had an expiry date. This made them enter into new models of exploiting content, to capture people's interests by putting citizens at the centre. Villà (2023, personal interview) considered that they needed to innovate to follow global changes and to adapt to new consumption habits.

The objectives pursued through innovation by practitioners were to improve efficiency and keep being useful (Melillas, 2023, personal interview), and to connect better with citizens and to be useful in the new audiovisual ecosystem (Villà, 2023, personal interview); whereas the barriers were mostly financial and human-resource related. Public sector limitations do not allow public companies to be as flexible as private ones when it comes to recruiting new roles. For example, the XAL identified a number of professional roles required to manage the platform, without any chance of filling them.

The XAL's managing director identified the capacity to introduce a trial and error approach and to take risks as facilitators of innovation (Melillas, 2023, personal interview), whereas the CCMA director underlined alliances with other actors and the fact that innovation was a clear goal throughout the organisation (Villà, 2023, personal interview).

Digital adaptation needs technological resources developed by private companies, using public tenders to outsource these services to them. PSM are using existing systems to build competitive platforms, inspired by OTTs already operating globally, which provide content in a visual and attractive way, with content recommendations according to preferences. However, the two public entities awarded the projects to different companies after two public tenders with different criteria and calendars, making the options for collaboration more difficult.

In the case of La Xarxa+, a recommendations pack was acquired, with few controls by the public company over what is taken into account in the personalisation process: geographical area and thematic preferences, previously entered by users. It is a basic algorithmic recommendation system because it takes into account the preferences established by the audience but not their daily use of the platform.

In the CCMA, the website 3alacarta did not include any recommendation systems. However, to access the 3Cat platform on a smart TV (from November 2023), registration is suggested in order to allow data collection from users and to provide recommendations. When asked about the criteria for content recommendation, and whether the platforms integrated editorial criteria to assure public service content, the managers assured us that all the provided content had a public service goal. However, there were no specific concerns about how to ensure diversity in the platform's catalogue for every single user. The interviewees of the two entities affirmed that

personalisation was (and would be) limited in the OTTs, whereas the editorial criteria were the main consideration for content presentation.

5. Discussion and conclusions

Catalan PSM's capacity to lead innovation in the communication space is limited. Despite the recognition by law that regional PSM should promote innovation, this area was not prioritised, especially in the period 2010-2022, due to budgetary constraints as a result of the economic crisis. In 2023, PSM at local and regional level were driving their strategies forward to adapt to the platformised scenario.

Addressing RQ1, public entities face significant challenges in recruiting the specialized talent necessary to drive OTT innovation. This includes a deficit in technological roles and specialists in content curation and marketing to better attract and engage the audience. The limitations on public entities in terms of recruiting new roles are a constraint when it comes to (1) avoiding the outsourcing of all services related to innovation, (2) having more control on data usage, and (3) being more efficient in managing the platform once developed. Therefore, this study reinforces the idea that the labour structure is not sufficiently flexible or adapted to innovation (López Olano, et al., 2022), and that there is a lack of specialisation (Mehdi Sharifi, 2019).

Another challenge to overcome is that the absence of formal cooperation mechanisms between the two levels of PSM management described by Guimerà and Bonet (2020) is transposed specifically to the area of innovation and platform creation. Instead of developing common projects or establishing mechanisms to collaborate, each level (regional and local) leads and develops its own strategy, with no coordination between them. Due to the lack of such coordination between the public entities, major overlaps in terms of innovation have been identified, as they have their own calendars, processes and outsourced companies, which are totally independent from each other. Despite this reality, the PSM managers are insistent upon the need to establish more collaboration, not only between them, but also with other actors in the media ecosystem. Examples of the latter are the private companies that have developed Catalan thematic OTTs, such as the cultural channel Liceu+ linked to the Barcelona opera house, the channel of a bank's foundation Caixaforum+, or Filmin, owned by a private company.

Subcontracting digital development through public tenders offers immediate access to existing resources but entails the disadvantage of reduced technical autonomy and less control over tool design. Indeed, PSM are imitating the big platforms' strategies, especially their OTT recommendation systems, following the tendency towards mimicry that has already been pointed out (D'Arma et al., 2021).

In terms of strategic implementation (RQ2), both CCMA and XAL are developing OTT platforms to compete with established SVoD services within the European market (Rodríguez-Martelo et al., 2022). This strategic shift toward platformisation represents an effort by Public Service Media

(PSM) to reconcile traditional public values with the need for discoverability in a volatile digital landscape.

However, the pace of this transformation varies significantly across entities. While regional PSM have introduced niche services such as the children's platform SX3, the launch of a general-interest OTT has been slower than the local media efforts led by XAL. Nevertheless, XAL's platform is more basic compared to the comprehensive ecosystem later developed by the CCMA. The latter is more foresighted, integrating a wider array of services and fostering greater participation from audiences and social actors. Furthermore, the CCMA's recommendation system is more advanced, taking into account user consumption habits. Directors and regulators attribute this discrepancy to the smaller entity's superior organizational agility, its willingness to embrace uncertainty, and a culture rooted in iterative innovation.

Linked with strategies, the branding of the OTTs is a controversial issue. These platforms are content aggregators; therefore, their naming should respond to the goal of referring to broad content, including all formats (breaking with the traditional naming split between "radio" and "television" and bringing all content together in a single platform, with new functionalities). New brands have been created for the PSM OTT platforms, whereas linear channels have kept their original names.

Regarding the RQ3, the creation of PSM digital platforms is crucial to guaranteeing universality in PSM, with generalist content to reach not only all audiences, but also specific target audiences in accordance with the idea of nuanced universality (Hokka, 2019). Attention to specific audiences is greater in the case of the CCMA, especially with digital products for kids and young people, after years of neglecting the young audience (Author et al., 2023). However, the regional provider has not been a pioneer in the development of a generalist OTT, a necessary step to guarantee the universality of the corporation in the platformised ecosystem.

The fact that, for many years, YouTube acted as a catch-up platform for the CCMA (combined with the 3alacarta website), implied a less direct relationship with users and the introduction of global commercial players as intermediaries between PSM and the audience. However, as Martin (2021) points out, it allowed content to be relevant and accessible to the public, contributing to universality.

In relation to RQ4, this study concludes that the concern about the adoption of public service criteria has not been taken into sufficient consideration by Catalan PSM, which has opted for solutions developed in the commercial field. The recommendation systems are currently elementary, and content is mostly offered on the platform after editorial selection. A more intense debate on recommendation in PSM is crucial in order to develop more advanced content personalisation and filtering functionalities. Although content recommendation is key for OTTs to function in accordance with the context, especially for commercial competitors, such algorithmic personalisation must be transparent and integrate public-value criteria so that the missions of PSM continue to be assured.

Innovation in Catalan PSM is in an expansionist phase (RQ5), considering the five stages identified by Donders (2019). After an experimental period, in which digitalisation actions were less intense, and a panic one, in which the management bodies realised that they needed to be coherent in order to attract online audiences, being aware that users – especially younger ones – were using commercial platforms and were not engaged with PSM, the strategic plans of both the CCMA and the XAL are now aiming at the expansionist goal, with efforts being put into online strategies to attain it.

After the expansionist stage, with a lot of resources being concentrated on the design of a solid digital strategy, the next step should bring consolidation and maturity to PSM, resulting from a thorough debate on public interest and how to guarantee universality within the digital platforms.

This study provides insights to the debates around the challenges of PSM in the digital and platformed scenario, filling a gap in looking at the regional and local level. While this research has delved into core challenges, such as the development of OTT platforms, certain aspects – including the implementation of artificial intelligence – remained outside its scope and should be explored in subsequent studies. Furthermore, future research is needed to analyse the evolution of innovation in PSM and to expand the sample of this case study in order to analyse PSM in other regions and countries, thus enabling international trends to be identified in relation to their adaptation – as public entities adjusting their projects and playing a role on a stage of global private players – to the platformised context.

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