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Media Policy, Economics and Citizenship.
An analysis of a peculiar model for participatory public service television *

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Abstract

Facing strong competition and financial hardship, Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) operators worldwide are redefining their role and re-inventing new futures. The Portuguese PSB, *Rádiatelevisão Portuguesa* (RTP) is no exception and important changes have recently been introduced in the traditional 'public service' model. The centre-right coalition government (elected on 17 March 2002 with absolute majority) perceived the restructuring of RTP as a major political goal and, in an unprecedented move, decided to relinquish control of one of RTP's national generalist channels to the so-called 'civil society'. This article looks at the political decision of transferring the responsibility of programme-making to 'civil society' and explores some dimensions of the social, political and economic implications of such a peculiar move. This paper argues that as far as rhetoric went, citizens had the centre-stage in this new 'participatory model' but – despite collateral positive results – we will put forward the idea that short-term political and economic interests, rather than the promotion of a truly participatory model – were at the heart of this strategy.

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Media Policy, Economics and Citizenship. An analysis of a peculiar model for participatory public service television.

The development of new PSB alternatives and the increasing participation of citizens in the definition and implementation of the Public Service Broadcasting channels (PSB) has been put forward by several authors (see, inter alia, Raboy, 1994 and 1996; Achille and Miège, 1994; Blumer, 1993; Michell and Blumer; Sondergaard, 1999, Collins, 2002; Pinto, 2003; Sousa and 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 televisions is perceived as inevitable and the participatory argument has been integrated both in academic and political discourses.

The Portuguese PSB, *Rádiatelevisão 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 March 2002 up until March 2005 Socialist's electoral victory. Indeed, the Social Democrats perceived the restructuring of RTP as a major political goal. In the strategic document 'New Options for the Audiovisual Sector' (2002), the government clarified its intention to reduce the existing two national generalist public service channels to only one. RTP1 was to remain as a generalist channel whilst RTP2 (renamed *Canal 2* and later *A Dois* or *2:*)

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

was to be handed out 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 conceptualization and implementation.

The 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 has 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 have presented this proposal as the only possible way of saving TVI from certain bankruptcy and to help SIC breakeven'² (Carvalho, 2002: 35).

Indeed, the two Portuguese main parties (Social Democratic Party and Socialist Party) have dramatically reduced the PSB revenues without any consideration for alternative financial sources. The social-democrats, in power from 1985 up 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 audiovisual sector. The socialist's failure to work out a viable alternative for RTP led the Social Democrats - whilst in opposition - to call for the privatisation of the public service company.

On 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' was 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 Democratic Party sectors intended to keep on fighting for RTP's total privatization whilst more moderate sectors would call for partial privatisation and/or for the attribution of so-called 'Public Service' tasks to private operators. Either way, the Social Democrats were henceforth perceived as having a clear

² Our translation. For practical reasons, all information in Portuguese used in this paper was translated by the authors. We do apologise if, in any case, we do not express the full meaning of the original text or speech.

intention of handing out (totally or partially) the expensive and financially adrift public service operator.

Looking for an alternative

Neglected by the Socialists and unable to solve its enormous debt, RTP was just there to be 'redesigned' by the centre-right government who 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 privatized. 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) and the recently elected centre-right government's popularity started to take in some of its identifiable first knocks 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, hesitations 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.

Hesitations 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 Report³ sustained that RTP1 should continue operating as a generalist channel and that the terrestrial frequency used by RTP2 should be neither privatized nor used as [for?] any another 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 difference, universal principles, cohesion and proximity'** (2002, September: 6; our emphasis).

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 Audiovisual Sector, 2002). Accordingly to the document, Morais Sarmento, responsible for the media tutelage [não tenho a certeza se isto se pode dizer], clarified the government's intention to reduce the existing two national generalist public service channels to only one. RTP1 was to remain as a generalist channel whilst RTP2 was to be handed out to 'civil society'. In 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 (see Sousa and 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's 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 out the then called RTP2 channel to commercial interests, the government ended up saying that it would

³ Relatório do grupo de Trabalho sobre o Serviço Público de Televisão, September 2002. In addition to Helena Vaz da Silva (who has died whilst the work was in progress), this group integrated university teachers, journalists and MPs.

attribute RTP's second channel to 'civil society' but details were scarce on the 'civil society' concept and on the implementation of this model.

The 'Civil Society' peculiar model

Although the government's appointed task force on 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 Audiovisual Sector* (Presidência do Conselho de Ministros, 2002: 15-17), presented the channel in the following terms:

- i) The second channel aims to do public service television **outside the realm of the public service operator**.
- ii) The second channel shall be open to civil society in what constitutes a challenge to all institutions willing to produce public service audiovisual content.
- iii) The second channel shall be a **direct communications medium** between different entities and the public **without the state's intermediation**.
- iv) For that purpose, institutional partners are to be chosen from different sectors. Not being a generalist channel, it will address demanding and segmented audiences.
- v) The second channel has a particular vocation for culture, education, social action, amateur sports, religious confessions, independent production, Portuguese cinema, environment and consumer issues, audiovisual experimentalism and support for new creative formats.
- vi) The different partners' participation should have the following possibilities: content production about their sphere of activities, cession of rights concerning cultural events, shows, etc., financing or co-financing of particular programmes or the entire channel.
- vii) The PSB, *Radiotelevisão Portuguesa*, may also provide content for this channel, namely news programmes and documentaries.
- viii) **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.
- ix) **All entities associated to the second channel will be part of an Accompanying Council (*Conselho de Acompanhamento*).**
- x) The proposed model for the second channel shall have an autonomous financial management. **It should aim for its own economic self-sustenance, and will have a global budget of 50% of the present RTP2 (then called Canal 2).**

- xi) 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.** (our emphasis)

Despite numerous uncertainties about the implementation of such model, the government went ahead with it. Facing fierce criticism concerning the idea of a Public Service Broadcasting outside the realm of the Public Service broadcaster, Morais Sarmiento went on developing his 'civil society' concept implied in the New Options for the Audiovisual Sector Report (2002). In December 2003, speaking⁴ at the ceremony to inaugurate the association of 'civil society' partners to the new channel renamed '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 the 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 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 audiovisual content. This would constitute what Morais Sarmiento called a 'non-mediated', a 'direct communication' between the sender and the receiver. 'It is our belief that the 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 an enormous potential to the entire 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 amongst citizens and, last but not least, it would contribute to the general improvement of democracy. Summing up, citizens would be both providers and audience of their own programmes. In the government's 'revolutionary' perspective the public service television would be in the hands of the public itself.

'Public service' outside the public service television operator

Considering the government's words, uncertainty rose amongst 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:

- a) Does a public service television imply the existence of a public service operator?
- b) Can a public service be (or should) be contracted out to private television operators?
- c) Is public service television mainly related with programming content or does it also involve matters of property, management and control?

⁴http://www.portugal.gov.pt/Portal/PT/Primeiro_Ministro/Intervencoes/2004331_PM_Int_RTP.htm

- d) In relation to private television, should public service be a structured global alternative or should it be a complement to commercial output?
- e) Should political responsibilities vis-à-vis television be centred in the setting up of formal conditions for the provision of public service programming content or should it be the state's responsibility to get widely 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: 61-80) 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 consolidated 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 RTP's generalist nation channel 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 notoriously insufficient to identify the sort of interests and forces which might have access to their 'public service' share and in what terms. Furthermore, it [what?] does not clarify the role institutions such as public universities and other publicly funded non-profit organizations might play in the new audiovisual 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 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*, 19.12.2002). A few days later, in the same newspaper, Paulo Cunha e Silva argued that the civil society did not know how to produce audiovisual content. To produce such content, he argued, 'technique and a highly professionalized culture are indispensable and this is not compatible with amateurism' (23.12.2002). 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' (19.12.2002).

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 force⁵, 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 it (23.12.2002). On the same line, Eduardo Cintra Torres, a well-known media critic and another former member of the government's appointed task force⁶, also believed that elitist arguments were being used to depreciate the government's

⁵ Relatório do Grupo de Trabalho sobre o Serviço Público de Televisão, September, 2002.

⁶ Relatório do Grupo de Trabalho sobre o Serviço Público de Televisão, September, 2002.

initiative: the elites want the public service for themselves but probably other spectators need it the most (*Público*, 30.12.2003).

In fact, and despite other relevant changes in the audiovisual sector (e.g. merger of public radio and television in a single broadcasting company) only the destiny of the second RTP channel managed to capture the public and the media attention. Columnists such as Vasco Pulido Valente (in *Diário de Notícias*, 21.12.2002) stated that the government's choice had a hidden agenda. Pulido Valente believed that, as defined by Morais Sarmiento, the second channel was a 'still-born' and in these circumstances the government managed to find a dissimulated way of handing it out to private interests (in *Diário de Notícias*, 21.12.2002).

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 has presented itself as a reformist one and the media structural change was enshrined in the government programme and in other ulterior 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 it. 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 out (see, inter alia, Eduardo Prado Coelho, *Público*: 20.12.2002).

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

Although it is not our aim to discuss neither the concept of Civil Society nor the prolific literature which articulates Public Service television with the role social agents can play (inter alia, Raboy, 1994; Raboy, 1996; Mitchell and 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 uncoerced 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 unions, self-help groups, social movements, business associations, coalitions and advocacy groups'⁷.

As we perceive it, the 'civil society' concept incorporates the notion of 'public sphere' (Habermas, 1991; original version: 1962) where social actors, groups and organizations 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 freedom (non-coercive action) of belonging, freedom of participation, freedom of expression in a wide variety of organisations, and freedom of organisations to develop their own activities. 'Civil society' also refers to a common share of interests, objectives

⁷ http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/CCS/what_is_civil_society.htm (access: 07.07.2004)

and values sustaining differentiated institutions and to the organization 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 frontiers 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 comprehend a relevant role for non-profit cultural, social and scientific organizations 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, 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 as we have just referred to.

Several academics have also put the finger on the public's involvement when public service television models are in debate. 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 (our emphasis, 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, of people as citizens rather than consumers. According to Rumphorst, the public is not only the beneficiary of public service broadcasting, and its paymaster, but also its controller. 'What, then, does control by the public mean? It means that representatives of the people ensure that the public service broadcasting organization 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; b) at a methodological level, via co-responsabilization, interaction, advice and continuous evaluation mechanisms (2003: 47-48). 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, 48-51) and – in addition to the strong emphasis on media education – they range from individual action and associative intervention, to internal and external regulatory mechanisms (Pinto, 2003, 48-51).

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 knowledge⁸ of academics or other social actors arguing that a public service television should be handed out to civil society (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 should be in the hands of the public, a direct medium between the sender and the receiver without the state's interference.

⁸ 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.

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 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, has 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*) for 16 years to be operated within the framework of a Public Service contract⁹. The second one, named 'special concession' of public service television (article 51^o) 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 out to an entity whose composition reflects the diversity of civil society, according to what will be enshrined in the special public service contract¹⁰ 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 production, national cinema, environment, consumer rights and audiovisual experimentalism. It would be up to the channel's direction, led since the very beginning by Manuel Falcão, and to 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 expressed by the channel's official partners who are expected to express 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 indispensable conditions to become a channel '2:' partner.

⁹ The General Public Service Concession Contract was signed in 22 September 2003 (in http://www.ics.pt/Ficheiros/Legisl/CCG_SP RTP.pdf)

¹⁰ The Special Public Special Concession Contract was signed in 17 November 2003 (in http://www.ics.pt/Ficheiros/Legisl/CCE_SP RTP.pdf)

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 in January 2004. Currently, according to the channel's own data¹¹, 66 entities have already signed up 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 issues, 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*: 06.07.2004). 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 contracting out) in audiovisual production for channel 2: . These entities include governmental ministries, universities, foundations, charities, and other environmental, consumer, professional, business, sports and media organizations. Amongst these partners, state agencies (including one public polytechnic) account for more than a quarter of all entities (26%). The three most important professional organizations (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 amid partners. Although a detailed categorization has not yet been made, it might be provisionally said that the vast majority (around 50%) of channel 2: ' partners are somehow involved in some form of social intervention (charities, social associations and observatories, etc.) 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 per cent monthly share and its monthly share rose to 4,3 per cent in the following six months. In the first three months of 2005, its share rose yet again up to 4,7%¹². Still, the lack of professionalism of some entities involved is recognised by the channel's Director himself (quoted in Eduardo Cintra Torres, *Público*, 06.07.2004).

Although Channel 2: partners considered the experience as a positive one, there is an almost unanimous chorus regarding the absence of production conditions (see, inter alia, dossier of *Diário de Notícias*, 06.07.2004). There are obviously well-off partners who contract out and put quality (broadcasting) programmes on air but there are also those who cannot afford independent productions and make their own audiovisual 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*, 06.07.2004). 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 partners to make 'a bigger investment' and that 'partners must organize themselves' (*Diário de Notícias*, 06.07.2004).

The citizens's role in a troubled economic context

¹¹ http://www.dois.tv/area_parceiros.shtm (access: 14 June 2005)

¹² <http://www.marktest.com/wap/a/n/id~792.aspx>

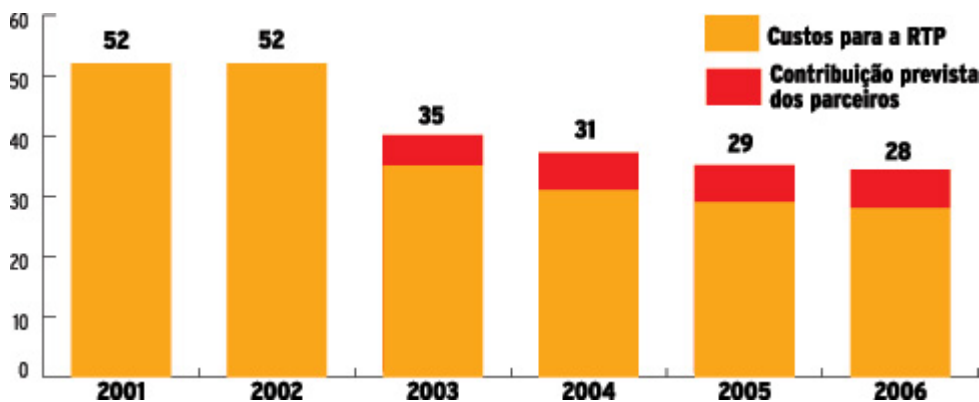
If we look back at the recent history of RTP, it becomes quite clear that the development of this new 'revolutionary' civil society channel is intrinsically related to the PSB company's dramatic economic situation. The licence fee was abolished by the Social Democrats and advertising time was reduced 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 the previous socialist governance (from 1996 to 2002), Morais Sarmiento explained RTP's deterioration over the past six years in the following terms:

- RTP's audience share decreased from 44% in 1995 to 28% in 2002;
- RTP was technically bankrupt with an accumulated debt of € 1200 million;

(in *Novas Opções para o Audiovisual*, 2002)

Independently from political responsibilities for RTP's current situation (see Sousa and Santos, 2003), the social democrat government was not prepared to maintain the company's level of expenditure. In 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 notorious in the governmental slogan 'better public service for less money'. Indeed, in 2002, according to RTP's data, the operational costs of the second channel reached €52 million. The government expected a progressive decrease of the channels costs to €28 million in 2006 (figure 1) and an equally progressive financial commitment of both present and future partners.

Figure 1
Evolution of total second channel expenditure



Figures: € Millions
Source: RTP

This experience results mainly from immediate economic difficulties and from governmental hesitations 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 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 the audiovisual output, even if the channel is still grossly maintained by RTP's structure.

Moreover, even if we put aside individual partners' production, 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. 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 audiovisual entertainment and education, not only through the broadcasting of quality children's programmes but also through its adequate location in the programming schedule. Additionally, Manuel Falcão emphasised the simultaneous subtitling and Portuguese voice-over 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 amongst children and young people' (in *Media XX*, September/October 2003: 33).

In the information arena, changes were also introduced. The channel 2: Director wanted news bulletins to be characterised by journalistic criteria and not by editorial choices based on audiences (in *Media XXI*, September/October 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 attributed 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 channel 2: 's Director to provide a cheaper but more diversified and qualified output. Despite difficulties, the role of partners cannot be underestimated and they generally perceived the experience as being positive. What is not so clear – at least so far – is the public's appreciation (though audience rates have not gone down) for this new channel. Indeed, apart from the direct participation of social actors, no regulatory body was set up to listen to and interpret citizens' suggestions and opinions. Channel 2: ' Accompanying Council only gives voice to partners themselves.

The government's citizenship rhetoric was not accompanied by any regulatory mechanism in order to contribute to the development and up-dating 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.

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, privatization 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 one 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 the inside and from the outside of the state. The concept is therefore bi-cephalous, that is, the government defended a two-headed public service: 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 air. What deserves particular attention are partners' selection mechanisms, the channel's power structure, the processes related to the construction of the programming schedule, the financial sources for audiovisual 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 audiovisual 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 in the channels programming. On the one hand, the government argued that the state should minimise its role in the media in general and in the public service in particular. On the other hand, more than a quarter of all partners are state agencies. Furthermore, the most active channel 2: partners are resourceful foundations and professional highly influential associations. There is a notorious under-representation of labour organizations, unions, parents associations, environmental and consumer structures.

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 on the contrary, it might be argued that the governance style has been more compatible with a centralised decision-making process and 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 spectators 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's participation tradition in the Portuguese public service television, the government has decided for the most radical form of public participation in public service.

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 has 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 as social and political opposition was intense. 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 discourse 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 (or even before), other politicians will re-evaluate the process and possibly take alternative decisions on it.

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