



“The Dilemma of Democracy in Public Service Broadcasting”

Comparison of the BBC and RÚV
Pre-Election Coverage Frameworks

Vera Dagsdóttir

Lokaverkefni til BA-gráðu í stjórnmálafræði

Félagsvísindasvið

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HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

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Útdráttur

Í þessari ritgerð verður tekinn fyrir samanburður á umfjöllunarramma tveggja opinberra ljósvakamiðla í aðdraganda kosninga, BBC í Bretlandi og RÚV á Íslandi. Markmiðið er að meta hvort gagnrýni á núverandi umfjöllunarramma RÚV í aðdraganda kosninga og umbótartillögur miði að því að færa RÚV nær umfjöllunarramma BBC. Færð verða rök fyrir því að þessir opinberu ljósvakamiðlar deili sama grunneðli en að ólíkt umhverfi hafi áhrif á umfjöllunarramma þeirra. Í kenningakafla ritgerðarinnar verða viðeigandi kenningar settar fram, kenningin um samfélagssáttmála, umræðulýðræði og opinberan vettvang (e. public sphere). Tekinn verður fyrir umfjöllunarramma BBC í aðdraganda kosninga, sem einkennist af úthlutun á ókeypis útsendingartíma fyrir framboð og óhlutdrægnis reglunni, ásamt rökum og viðbrögðum gagnvart rammanum. Einnig er metið hvort umfjöllunarramma BBC geti verið álitinn fyrirmynd. Fjallað er um skýrslu frá Öryggis- og samvinnustofnun Evrópu (ÖSE) um skort á regluverki fyrir umfjöllun í aðdraganda kosninga og nýtt lagafrumvarp fyrir RÚV, sem felur í sér ákvæði er varða umfjöllun í aðdraganda kosninga. Einnig er leitast eftir að skilja hvaða þættir hafi áhrif á umfjöllunina, í ljósi skorts á regluverki. Helstu niðurstöður sýna að gagnrýni og umbótartillögur miða að því að færa umfjöllunarramma RÚV nær umfjöllunarramma BBC. Hins vegar stuðlar fjölmiðlalegt og pólitískt umhverfi þessara tveggja ríkisfjölmiðla að ólíkindum þeirra og því sé ekki til nein algild fyrirmynd að umfjöllunarramma í aðdraganda kosninga.

Abstract

In this dissertation the pre-election coverage frameworks of two public service broadcasters, the BBC in the United Kingdom and RÚV in Iceland, will be compared. The aim is to evaluate whether criticism against RÚV's pre-election coverage and subsequent reform proposals aim to bring RÚV closer to the BBC's current pre-election coverage framework. Although both are public service broadcasters, the different environments in which they operate influence their frameworks. In the theoretical framework, relevant democratic theories in relation the public service broadcasters will be discussed: the social contract theory, deliberative democracy and the public sphere. Subsequently, the BBC's pre-election coverage framework is addressed, which comprises Party Election Broadcasts (PEBs) and the impartiality rule, with arguments for and against it. In this context, the relative merits of the BBC's coverage will be examined. A report from the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) focusing on the lack of rules governing RÚV's current pre-election coverage framework and a newly proposed law for the public broadcaster, which proposes pre-election coverage rules, are discussed. Given this context, the factors controlling RÚV's pre-election coverage in the absence of a regulatory framework are examined. The main conclusions are that criticism and proposed reforms of RÚV are leading it to conform with the BBC's current framework. The media and their political environments do, however, contribute to their differences and demonstrate that there is not one single model that can be adapted for every pre-election coverage framework.

Formáli

Ritgerð þessi er lokaverkefni til BA prófs í stjórnmálafræði við Háskóla Íslands. Hún var unnin á vormisseri 2013 og er metin til 12 ECTS eininga. Leiðbeinandi minn var Jón Gunnar Ólafsson og vil ég þakka honum fyrir afbragðs leiðsögn, stuðning og félagsskap í gegnum námið mitt við Stjórnmálafræðideildina. Einnig vil ég þakka Páli Fannari Pálssyni fyrir ómælda þolinmæði og fjölskyldu minni fyrir að styðja mig í gegnum námið. Að lokum vil ég þakka vinum mínum þeim Þorsteini Kristinssyni og Heimi Hannessyni fyrir yfirlestur og aðstoð.

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Introduction

Elections cannot be considered free and fair solely by virtue of the voting process. Voters must also have adequate information about parties, policies, candidates and the election process itself, so that they can make an informed choice. People mainly access political discussions through the mainstream media, which is the main information source in modern democracies. Since the media is essential to the conduct of democratic elections, its powers must come with responsibilities. It is therefore essential to understand the media's role and responsibilities in the context of general elections and how they are implemented.

Although the diffusion of information is a fundamental role of the media and has distinct objectives, different types of media can have different emphases. Privately owned media provides coverage aimed at serving its consumers while state owned media can seek to protect the interests of the ruling government. Publicly owned media, however, aims to serve the entire public.¹ The purpose of public service media is therefore distinct from other media types. The role of public service media is to foster civic engagement for the individual citizen as well as for society as a whole. It seeks to enhance diversity, political participation and democratic procedures and processes. Since its primary function is to serve the public, public service media is perceived to have greater democratic responsibilities.² This claim has attracted academic researchers to observe institutions of public service media in this context.³

Outside of the academic spotlight is the small public service broadcaster Ríkisútvarpið (RÚV) - the Icelandic National Broadcasting Service. Few academic studies have been done on the institution in this context, although its pre-election coverage framework has recently incited upheaval.⁴ The framework has been criticised for its lack of rules, and a reform bill aiming to strengthen RÚV's role as a public service broadcaster was recently drafted in the Icelandic Parliament, *Alþingi*. The current framework and the reform bill will be the subject of observation in this dissertation. Aspects of certain provisions in the reform resemble the pre-election coverage framework of another public service broadcaster, the British

¹ James W. Carey, "In Defense of Public Journalism", in *The Idea of Public Journalism*, Ed. Theodore L. Glasser (Ed.), (New York: Guilford Press, 1999), p. 51.

² Stanley J. Baran, Dennis K. Davis, *Mass Communication Theory: Foundations, Ferment and Future*, 6th edition (Boston: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2012) p. 110.

³ See e.g. Enli (2008), Dahl & Bastiansen (1999).

⁴ A report from the OSCE and a new bill of law, which will be discussed later.

Broadcasting Corporation (BBC).⁵ It is widely regarded as an ideal public service broadcasting model in practice and is therefore convenient for comparison in this case. Although RÚV and the BBC are both public service broadcasters, they are located in different countries and have developed in distinct political environments.

The aim will be to evaluate whether the criticism against RÚV's pre-election coverage and the subsequent reform proposals aim to bring RÚV closer to the BBC's current pre-election coverage framework. Furthermore, the relative merits of the BBC's coverage will be examined to determine the desirability of altering the current Icelandic framework. This dissertation will also seek to understand which factors currently control RÚV's pre-election coverage in the absence of a regulatory framework. Finally, the importance of the topic will be addressed in relation to the future of RÚV, the BBC and public service broadcasting in general in light of the changing media environment of the 21st century.

The dissertation will be structured using a theoretical framework based on democratic theories relevant to public service broadcasters, i.e. the social contract theory, the theory of deliberative democracy and the public sphere. The distinction between public and private media will also be discussed. In the next chapter, an introduction to the BBC's purpose will be given in a historical and political context. Subsequently, the focus will shift to the BBC's election coverage, mainly the Party Election Broadcasts (PEBs) and its impartiality rule. Arguments for the PEBs and the impartiality rule will be discussed, as well as general criticism and reactions to how they are carried out. In the following chapter, RÚV's current pre-election coverage framework will be analysed. The chapter will examine recent deliberations and their resulting evaluations of RÚV's election coverage as well as the newly proposed bill of law. Finally, in the discussion chapter, a comparison between RÚV and the BBC will be made in terms of their pre-election coverage. It will be argued that RÚV's criticism and reform proposal aim to bring it closer to the BBC's current election coverage framework.

⁵Anthony Smith, quoted by Graham Murdock and Peter Golding, "Common Markets: Corporate Ambitions and Communication Trends in the UK and Europe", In *The Journal of Media Economics*, Vol. 12, No. 2, (1999): p. 122.

1 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework addresses the theories relevant for the topic of this dissertation. First, the social contract theory between media and democracy will be discussed. It is a theory stating broad, widely accepted claims about the relationship of the media and democracy in general and most importantly the media's obligation to democracy. Subsequently, the focus will be on the theory of deliberative democracy as a set of standards and obligations. It claims that discussions should be a part of daily life and decision making at all levels of society. These discussions should take place in parliamentary chambers, in daily life and in the media. This conception of democratic discourse will be approached using Jürgen Habermas's idea of the public sphere, which entails free critical discussion between citizens to act as a counterweight to the state and to influence public actions. This leads to a discussion about the private media and the public media. Their different characteristics will be defined and arguments for and against both media types will be examined. This theoretical framework addresses the general role and responsibilities of public service broadcasters as democratic instruments of society. Therefore, their normative messages should be considered when focusing on real life performance of public service broadcasting institutions.

1.1 The Social Contract Between Media and Democracy

Originating in political philosophy, the social contract theory typically investigates the origin of society and the legitimacy of the state's authority over the individual. It is based on the view that a person's moral and political obligations depend upon an unwritten contract or agreement between them to form the society in which they live. The theory has been articulated differently by prominent theorists such as John Locke, Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. They believed that people must find ways of living together for survival purposes, therefore creating a social system.⁶

The relationship between democracy and media has sometimes been described in terms of such a social contract. The social contract theory claims that media can only exist and thrive in a democracy. The media fulfils its part of the social contract by providing the government with necessary information needed for decision making. It provides citizens with accurate and comprehensive information that they need in order to be self-governing and free, It is a forum for

⁶ David Boucher and Paul Kelly, "The Social Contracts and its Critics. An Overview." In *The Social Contract from Hobbes to Rawls*, Ed. David Boucher and Paul Kelly (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 2-9.

public discussion and the deliberation of public policy from a variety of views. It acts as a watchdog against power abuse in society and in politics and as a voice for the less powerful. Consequently, democracy requires that this watchdog function be free from the state. It also depends on public discussion and a system for the flow of information. Democracy fulfils its part of the social contract by respecting and protecting these necessary freedoms.⁷

The media, therefore, provides public benefits in return for freedom. The media and journalists have professional duties because, concluding from the theory, they have a cumulative and systematic impact on society. According to the media and communications professor Nick Couldry, “journalists have a duty to improve the informational and deliberative health of citizens in the same way as public health officers are responsible for the physical health of citizens.” By carrying out the democratic functions of the social contract theory, they are supporting the “informational” health of the public.⁸ Power and influence entail responsibilities and therefore legitimate public expectations.⁹ Establishing a structural yet binding relationship between media and democracy, in which the media must function as a separate actor. As the communication theorist James W. Carey states: “Without journalism there is no democracy, but without democracy there is no journalism either.”¹⁰

The social contract theory is rather uncontroversial and widely accepted but is also very broad and unspecific. For example, providing citizens with information necessary for their own freedom and acting as a watchdog against power abuse a seldom cause disagreement among academics.¹¹ Its core value is the importance of obligations the media has towards citizens and democracy, in order for a healthy society to work.

There is, however, wide disagreement about what information the media should be giving in order to fulfill its part of the 'contract' and how the watchdog should behave.¹² To clarify

⁷ Jesper Strömbäck, “In Search of a Standard: four models of democracy and their normative implications for journalism, in *Journalism Studies*, vol 6(3) (2005), p. 332.

⁸ Nick Couldry, Media Ethics: “Towards a Framework for Media Producers and Media Consumers”, In *Media ethics beyond borders: a global perspective*, Stephen J. A. Ward and Herman Wasserman (Ed.), (New York and London: Routledge, 2010), p.50.

⁹ Ibid, p. 50.

¹⁰ James W Carey, “In Defense of Public Journalism”, in *The Idea of Public Journalism*, Theodore L. Glasser (Ed.), (New York: Guilford Press, 1999), p. 51.

¹¹ Jesper Strömbäck, “In Search of a Standard: four models of democracy and their normative implications for journalism”, pp. 331-345.

¹² Benjamin I. Page, *Who Deliberates? Mass media in modern democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

expectations of the media's roles in democracy, a definition of an appropriate model of democracy is necessary.

1.2 Deliberative Democracy and the Public Sphere

As discussed previously in the context of the social contract theory, it is the media's duty to be a forum for public discussion. Deliberative democracy, or discursive democracy, is the form of democracy in which deliberation is central to decision making. Notably, theories of democracy have always treated the communicative interaction among citizens as a central element.¹³ According to the social and political theorist Jon Elster, the core idea of deliberative democracy is:

...that the notion includes collective decision making with the participation of all who will be affected by the decision or their representatives: this is the democratic part. Also, all agree that it includes decision making by means of arguments offered by and to participants who are committed to the values of rationality and impartiality: this is the deliberative part.¹⁴

So public deliberation of equal and free citizens, among all sections of the public and their elected representatives is the core of legitimate political decision making and self-governance, not voting *per se*. It is about the procedures of political decision making, because ultimately democracy is an ideology of decision making.¹⁵ In this sense, democracy is the development of civic virtue and democratic polity is the way to achieve self-fulfillment. The deliberations derive from the values of rationality, intellectual honesty and equality among the participants. Ideally, the discussions should be a part of daily life and decision making on all levels in society; they should take place in the media, in parliamentary chambers, and in ordinary life.¹⁶

Following this conception of deliberative democracy, citizens are faced with many normative expectations. Taking these expectations into account, we would assume that a great amount of time, comprehension, interest and skills on the part of citizens are required in order for this decision making form to work in reality. Since these requirements are perceived to be unrealistic the most common form of democracy is representative democracy, where

¹³ Peter Dahlgreen, "In Search of the Talkative Public: Media, Deliberative Democracy and Civic Culture" in *The Public*, Vol. 9 (2002), 3, 5-26, <http://javnost-thepublic.org/article/pdf/2002/3/1/>

¹⁴ Jon Elster, Introduction in *Deliberative Democracy*, Jon Elster (Ed.), (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 8.

¹⁵ Jesper Strömbäck, "In Search of a Standard: four models of democracy and their normative implications for journalism", p. 333.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 333.

representatives are elected by citizens. Direct democracy is, however, used in some places to a certain extent, in which the public votes directly on subjects.¹⁷ Even though decision making by the public in modern democracies is bound by voting in elections, citizens mainly access political discussions through the media.¹⁸ Therefore, most democratic theories impose some normative obligations upon the media. One way of protecting freedom of speech, a fundamental element of democracy, is to ensure that it is possible for people to engage in the discussion and deliberation necessary for the successful use of democratic institutions.¹⁹ Deliberative democracy therefore charges the media with enhancing political discussions and demonstrating the importance of them being deliberative, mobilize citizens interest, engagement and participation in public discussions. Participation in the media should therefore be characterised by rationality, impartiality, intellectual honesty and equality. In the words of Jesper Strömbäck, a media and communications professor: “Democracy can never become more deliberative without the active participation of journalism and media.”²⁰

Directly related to deliberative democracy is a phenomenon called 'the public sphere.' The idea can be traced back to ancient Greece and began to resemble its modern form during the Renaissance in Western Europe. Brought on by merchants' need for accurate information about distant markets as well as by the growth of democracy, individual liberty and popular sovereignty, the public sphere was a place between private individuals and government authorities in which people could meet and, through that discussion, debate about public matters. In this arena, individuals could come together to freely discuss and identify societal problems, and through that discussion influence political action. These discussions are regarded as a counterweight to political authority and took place during meetings at coffee houses, public squares as well as in the various forms of media.²¹

¹⁷ Gunnar Helgi Kristinsson, *Íslenska stjórnkerfið*, (Reykjavik: Háskóli Íslands, 2008), p. 29.

¹⁸ Jesper Strömbäck, “In Search of a Standard: four models of democracy and their normative implications for journalism”, pp. 340.

¹⁹ James W. Nickel, “Free Speech, Democratic Deliberation and Valuing Types of Speech”, In *Deliberation, Democracy and the Media*, Ed. Simone Chambers and Anne Costain, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 3.

²⁰ Jesper Strömbäck, “In Search of a Standard: four models of democracy and their normative implications for journalism”, p. 340.

²¹ Gerard Hauser, “Vernacular Dialogue and the Rhetoricity of Public Opinion”, in *Communication Monographs*, vol. 65, 2 (1998): 83–107, p. 86.

One of the most widespread concepts of a public sphere is Jürgen Habermas's bourgeois public sphere. Habermas, a German sociologist and philosopher, introduced this idea in his book: *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere – An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Habermas describes a new social order taking shape in 17th- and 18th-century western and northern Europe. He presents a spatial concept, a virtual or imaginary community, where meanings are articulated, distributed and negotiated. This community is referred to as a political public sphere where private people gathered as a public body, as a balance against public authorities, approaching to form some sort of a public opinion.²²

The preconditions that Habermas presents for the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere are the three so-called 'institutional criteria.' The first one is the idea of preservation of social intercourse that disregards status. It is a parity of 'common humanity,' whose basis is the authority of the better argument and could assert itself against social hierarchy.²³ The second is the domain of common concern in which higher authorities, such as the state and the church, had a monopoly on interpretation. When cultural products became generally accessible, with the growing demand for information that followed capitalism, private citizens had to determine its meaning on their own by way of rational communication with one another. The third criterion is inclusivity. The public can never close itself off, consolidating as a clique. Discussed issues became 'general' in accessibility and significance, and everyone had to be able to participate. Where the public established itself institutionally, it was a form of bourgeois representation claiming to act as its mouthpiece or educator.²⁴ However, a major criticism on Habermas's criteria is how exclusive this inclusivity is. Since preconditions of entry were proper education and property ownership, it excluded women, minorities and men who did not belong to upper classes.²⁵

The core in Habermas's public sphere is the distinction between the *private realm* and *public realm*. Not separated before, the private symbolic of the individual, the family and property ownership. The public was the state, usually represented by the king and the church. The separation of the public and the private coincided with the creation with the public

²² Jürgen Habermas, *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*, trans. Thomas Burger, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), p. 36.

²³ *Ibid*, pp. 27-43.

²⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*, p. 37.

²⁵ Douglas Kellner, Habermas, *The Public Sphere and Democracy: A Critical Intervention*, <http://pages.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/papers/habermas.htm> (February 16th 2013).

sphere. The public body was large and dependant on the media for transmitting information and influence those who receive it. Habermas referred to the media as it “was for the first time established as a genuinely critical organ of a public engaged in critical political debate: as the fourth estate.”²⁶ Accordingly, Habermas’s idea of the media’s role in society is resembles the previously discussed normative implications that deliberative democracy imposes upon the media. Focusing on the importance of deliberative discussions, the engagement and participation of citizens in them.

Some of Habermas’s critics doubt that democratic politics or the public opinion were ever fuelled by norms of rational debate and consensus, i.e. if something exists that can be called public opinion. They regard the idea of a public sphere as merely an abstract idealisation.²⁷ However, the media can be seen as a public sphere itself, when it is free from the economy and the state. Public media fulfils this criteria, while the common private media form is not free from the economy. This feature distinguishes the main distinction between the two main types of media.

1.3 Public and Private Media

Private media is characterised by the fact that it is funded by consumers, and sometimes shareholders, owners and other companies. Private media is closely linked to a libertarian model or commercial model of media. That can be explained by the fact that its mere existence depends on profit making, which is collected mostly from advertisement revenue and by selling their goods. There are in most cases some law and regulation for private media, although ideally it mainly follows the law of the market. Therefore it is relatively free to publish, write or broadcast what it wants.²⁸ Consequently, obligations of the private media have been considered few but they are not necessarily simple. The chief obligation is to provide people with entertainment and information about significant events. Anything deemed important or interesting for the audience can be considered newsworthy. In the interest of truth, reliability and success, private media adapts professional journalistic standards. The news is reported in a

²⁶ Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, p. 60.

²⁷ Peter Hohendahl "Critical Theory, Public Sphere and Culture: Habermas and His Critics," in *New German Critique*, vol 16 (1979): 89-118.

²⁸ Sarah Oates, *Introduction to Media and Politics* (London: Sage, 2009) , pp. 8-12.

quick and accurate manner, ideally minimizing subjectivity by not attempting to convey one particular viewpoint²⁹

Supporters of the private media and the libertarian model have enhanced the argument for private media with the laws of the market and freedom of choice. The institutions constantly compete with each other, which drives them to improve as information sources.³⁰ This libertarian thought is in opposition to censorship of any kind. For libertarians the “unhindered and unlimited flow of information is regarded as a characteristic of a healthy democracy.”³¹ The audience is left to decide what to believe and what to question. In order for people to make informed choices, diversity becomes a key element. The marketplace of private media favours such diversity, since it is regarded as a self-regulating marketplace of ideas. “Diversity and richness in the media are not ornaments of a democracy but essential elements for its survival.”³²

One of the main criticisms against the private media is its failure to provide diversity, often due to market failures. In some cases, institutions of private media can lean to the side of being a guard dog, rather than a watchdog in society. “The guard dog metaphor suggests that media perform as a sentry not for the community as a whole but those particular groups who have the power and influence to create and control their own security systems.”³³ These groups could be leading parties or governments or economically strong and privileged groups, which may be involved in the ownership of the media. The main point is that the private media can become intentionally biased. According to James W. Carey, the link between the market and civic functions of the private media are merely circumstantial. The private media decides what part of politics needs demystification, which institutions require reform and which truths need to be told.³⁴ He is sceptical of the private media’s role in democratic debate and discussion.

²⁹ James Watson, *Media Communication* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1998), p. 86.

³⁰ Stanley J. Baran, Dennis K. Davis, *Mass Communication Theory: Foundations, Ferment and Future*, 6th edition (Boston: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2012) pp. 104-105.

³¹ K. Jaspers, *Philosophy is for everyman: A short course in philosophical thinking*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1969), p. 82.

³² Ben H. Bagdikian, “The U.S. Media: Supermarket or Assembly Line?” In *Journalism, Media and Democracy*, Ed. Margaret Scammell and Holli Semetko (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2000) p. 97

³³ George A. Donahue, Phillip J. Tichenor and Clarice N. Olien, “A Guard Dog Perspective on the Role of Media”, in *Journalism, Media and Democracy*, Ed. Margaret Scammell and Holli Semetko (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2000), p. 22.

³⁴ James W. Carey, “In Defense of Public Journalism”, in *The Idea of Public Journalism*, Ed. Theodore L. Glasser (Ed.), (New York: Guilford Press, 1999), p. 51-53

Carey agrees with Habermas that private media shapes rather than (simply) transmits the critical debate, therefore becoming a leader and carrier of public opinion. They believe that commercialism and leisure have overtaken public engagement in the rational-critical debate, and that this change has damaged the public sphere. Habermas claims/proposes that the media is a mediator in today's public sphere. However, when bounded by market forces, it lacks the interactivity necessary for the public sphere to work properly. He argues that the solution is a strong public sphere to check domination by the state and non-governmental organisations, to awaken critical public opinion. In a media form that is not bound to market capitalism.³⁵

Public media, or public service media, can be largely explained by its main characteristics are that it is working for the public and it is funded by the public. Funding for its operations is usually gathered by license fees and taxes levied by the state, with a statutory guarantee of their independence from the government. Consequently public media does not work in favour of a ruling government or political parties. It serves society in ways that are defined in law and regulation and is obligated to serve all sections of the public.³⁶ Specific national rules cover matters such as the amount and type of advertising and political access. In its general behavior, public media usually emphasises social responsibility and focuses on social concerns and the common good. It should not broadcast questionable accusations or undesirable viewpoints. Public media has therefore been closely linked to a social responsibility model of media. It should spread information responsibly and should, therefore, not be free to publish whatever it likes, since it is obligated to provide balance, and access to all groups.³⁷

One of the main criticisms leveled against public service media is that its goals are unrealistic.

PSM are indeed a balancing act striking equilibrium between being so distinctive in the service of the public obligations that they lose their audience while at the same time trying so hard to reach all citizens that they are devoid of any kind of distinctiveness as a result.³⁸

Thus, the public media faces the imminent problem of not connecting to the people whom it is bound to serve. Libertarian criticism is closely related to this point and focuses on the fact that

³⁵ Ibid, p. 161.

³⁶ James Curran, *Media and democracy*, (London: Routledge, 2011) p. 58.

³⁷ R. Negrine, *Politics and Mass Media in Britain*, 3rd edn. (London: Routledge, 1994), chapter 2.

³⁸ Christian S. Nissen, *Public Service Media in the Information Society*
http://www.menntamalaraduneyti.is/media/MRN-PDF-Althjodlegt/Public_service_media.pdf (March 7th 2013).

people do not have choices concerning public service media, including obligatory payment through taxes.³⁹ The “gate-keeping” role the public media also has its complications. It is based on a policy of information use in society; of providing ethical 'quality' and the public media can infringe on citizens' right to full information. Information manipulation can therefore be justified.⁴⁰

In support for public service media, Carey claims that, despite all its limitations, public media represents an attempt to be honest about the role of media in contemporary life. What he means is that the public media brings media to what he refers to as the “conversation of the culture,” the ideology of the role it actually plays among us in society. Stating that democracy is a *sine qua non* of the media; “Against both the marketers and trustees public media claims its first task the necessity of making public life possible and cultivating an ethic of citizenship rather than cults of unhindered information and markets.”⁴¹ Carey defends the public media’s existence for the same purposes as Habermas deemed the public sphere necessary; the public media disregards status, establishes inclusivity and enhances common concern.⁴²

Ideally, both media types share the previously discussed role of protecting democracy as information providers. “In their capacity as a watchdog the media are the eyes and ears of the public, its defender against possible abuses by the state.”⁴³ Despite that aim, opinions and ideology seem to influence largely the arguments for and against both public and private media as democratic instruments. That is why media systems in most democratic countries include both private and public media institutions. However, the unique position of the public service media is that it is bound neither by the imperatives of maximisation of political power nor the maximisation of profits. It can therefore be considered superior to the market as a means of providing equal media access to *all* citizens, regardless of their status, location or wealth.⁴⁴ In its attempts to fulfill its obligations, public media can choose different forms of

³⁹ Stanley J. Baran, Dennis K. Davis, *Mass Communication Theory: Foundations, Ferment and Future*, p . 106, 108.

⁴⁰ Sarah Oates, *Introduction to Media and Politics*, p. 8.

⁴¹ James W. Carey, “In Defense of Public Journalism”, in *The Idea of Public Journalism*, Theodore L. Glasser (Ed.), (New York: Guilford Press, 1999), p. 51.

⁴² James W. Carey, “In Defense of Public Journalism”, in *The Idea of Public Journalism*, Ed. Theodore L. Glasser (Ed.), pp. 51-53.

⁴³ Same reference, pp. 6-7.

⁴⁴ Christian S. Nissen, *Public Service Media in the Information Society*,
http://www.menntamalaraduneyti.is/media/MRN-PDF-Althjodlegt/Public_service_media.pdf (4. March 2013).

communication. The most prominent form and claimed as an elective affinity with public life is the public service broadcasting model.⁴⁵

The social contract theory establishes in very general terms that the media is dependent on democratic freedom and how democracy needs the media in order to thrive. Deliberative democracy is based on rational and impartial discussions between citizens. Habermas's public sphere can be seen as a metaphor for variant of this public arena. The public sphere has arguably been linked to the public media's role in society, since it is free from the economy and the state. A prominent example of this type of public media in practice is the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), which we will now discuss.

⁴⁵ N. Garnham, *Capitalism and Communication: Global culture and the Economics of Information*, London: Sage (1990), p. 120.

2 The BBC's Political Balance

In this chapter the BBC's pre-election coverage framework will be discussed. First the BBC's history and circumstances will be introduced to give a better understanding of the pre-election coverage framework. Next, we will turn to/focus on the pre-election coverage framework, which is characterised by allocating free air-time to candidacies through Party Election Broadcasts (PEBs) and proportional coverage. The debate surrounding this framework, which derives partly from the deep-rooted media culture and limited access in order to balance the coverage, will then be presented. Finally, reactions to/criticisms of the PEB's and the impartiality rule of proportionality will be discussed. Although there are clear signs that the PEBs are still regarded as an important part of the election culture in Britain, they are losing their connection to voters.

2.1 An Introduction to the BBC and its History

The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) is a public service broadcasting corporation in the United Kingdom. It is the largest public service broadcaster in the world in terms of its number of employees. Its main goal is to provide impartial public service broadcasting for the country, although it also has a worldwide service. It is semi-autonomous, which means that it does not have to fulfill certain duties as a public institution. It operates under a Royal Charter, a certificate of incorporation as an institution and specification of its rights. It is funded by an annual license fee that is charged to all British households, organisations and companies, and is decided annually by the British government and agreed by parliament. The BBC is directly responsible to those who pay the license fee.⁴⁶ It offers a variety of channels, both on television and radio.

Its statutory framework was created in its first operating years in the 1920's and lasted until the 1980's. In the beginning, it had been called the British Broadcasting Company and the broadcasts were mainly made through the form of radio. Broadcasting was a breakthrough since it allowed a content to be delivered to an almost unlimited number of people at the same time/simultaneously. In the years since its inception, BBC's broadcasting has shifted from being regarded as a fad to a common form of communication media.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Sarah Oates, Introduction to Media and Politics, pp. 35-39, 99.

⁴⁷ Andrew Crisell, "Broadcasting: Television and Radio" in *The Media in Britain. Current Debates and Development*, Ed. Jane Stokes and Anna Reading, pp. 61-63.

There was not room for many other broadcasters on the waveband, partially due to the technological limitations of the time, therefore the BBC was granted a unique position. This position influenced the philosophy of the British Broadcasting Corporation, transforming it into a *public service* first and foremost. This philosophy also opposed funding the BBC through advertisement revenues. Indeed, there are no commercials on the BBC to this day. The first Director General of the BBC, John Reith, believed that it should be a service of information, education and entertainment for everyone who wanted it. His ideas of the BBC's purpose have become key to the description of public service broadcasters around the world.⁴⁸

The BBC, being free from both government and commerce, seeks to expose the individual listener to the widest possible range of content.⁴⁹ As the appointed Sykes Committee declared, which in 1923, was given the task of making recommendations for the future of broadcasting in Britain:

...We consider that the control of such a potential power over public opinion and the life of the nation ought to remain with the state and that the operation of so important of national service ought not to be allowed to become an unrestricted commercial monopoly.⁵⁰

This principle has influenced broadcasting policies of many other countries in the world. Despite this later influence, there were initially no rules, standards or an established purpose to help, since a broadcaster like the BBC was unprecedented. Therefore, the BBC was not only an institution aiming to be a public service model, it also helped shape the idea of public service media in general and contributed to its standards.⁵¹

The BBC enjoyed a domestic monopoly in television until 1955 and in radio until 1973. Even after this monopoly, the BBC's competitors were tied together in one composite structure. Consequently, the BBC faced in general only one source of competition. The contractors of the commercial media formed a unified system under the control of the government by an appointed authority; they were to subscribe to a broadcasting philosophy similar to that of the

⁴⁸ Francois Heinderyckx, *A Composite Approach to Evaluating the "Quality" of Public Service Broadcasters* (A contribution to the RIPE@2006 conference) <http://ripeat.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/Heinderyckx.pdf> (accessed on 2. april 2013) p. 6.

⁴⁹ Andrew Crisell, "Broadcasting: Television and Radio" in *The Media in Britain. Current Debates and Development*, Ed. Jane Stokes and Anna Reading (Hampshire: MacMillan Press Ltd, 1999), pp. 61-62

⁵⁰ The Sykes Committee, *The Broadcasting Committee Report*, Cd. 1951 (1923)

⁵¹ Andrew Crisell, "Broadcasting: Television and Radio" in *The Media in Britain. Current Debates and Development*, Ed. Jane Stokes and Anna Reading, p. 61.

BBC. The history of broadcasting in the United Kingdom has, since the emergence of the BBC, been characterised by a duopoly between the BBC and the commercial branch, influenced largely by state regulation. Since the mid 1980s, this duopoly has been disturbed by technological developments such as the introduction of satellite broadcasting, cable television and, later on, the emergence of digital television and the birth of the internet.⁵²

As globalisation increases and communication technology occupy a more prominent economic role, media has become harder to control. Therefore, the British government intervened by introducing a less strict regulatory framework, with deregulating acts in the 1990s. Aiming to get businesses to pay for what the public would otherwise have to finance. In the light of growing market factors, questions have been raised about the BBC's purpose. "Whether its public role does reflect the masses and to what extent it maintains the social and political status quo for the elites."⁵³

In spite of this dilemma, it has a unique quality and range of current affairs provision and news. In particular, the BBC has considerable resources to compensate for unprofitable areas, which are important to many segments in society, such as cultural shows, in-depth analysis of social problems and coverage of political parties before elections.⁵⁴ One of the BBC's privileges is the Party Election Broadcasts, which is valuable airtime for parties, since paid political advertisement is prohibited in broadcasting. Under such regulation, this duty adheres to a careful model of balanced reporting on political parties, which will now be discussed.

2.2 The BBC's Political and Electoral Coverage: Rules and Circumstances

Pre-election coverage laws for every national election in the United Kingdom are conducted by an institution called the Electoral Commission. The BBC is required to adopt a code of practice prior to each election. In doing so, the BBC is required to "have regard to any views expressed by the Electoral Commission."⁵⁵ During national campaign periods in the United Kingdom, which are usually about a month long and take place once every five years, the BBC provides

⁵² Andrew Crisell, "Broadcasting: Television and Radio" in *The Media in Britain. Current Debates and Development*, Ed. Jane Stokes and Anna Reading, pp. 61-64.

⁵³ G. Philo, *Glasgow Media Group Reader*, Vol. II: Industry, Economy, War and Politics (London: Routledge, 1995).

⁵⁴ Sarah Oates, *Introduction to Media and Politics*, pp. 35-37.

⁵⁵ The BBC, "Reporting UK Election and Referendum Campaign 10.4.19", Elections <http://www.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/page/guidelines-politics-practices-elections/#broadcasting-during-elections> (Accessed 7. March 2013).

programmes called party election broadcasts (PEBs). Outside the election campaign, the BBC also has Party Political Broadcasts (PPBs), which are broadcasts made by political parties throughout the period of the elected Parliament.⁵⁶ A specific channel is dedicated to this, which is called BBC Parliament, as well as various debates on the main BBC channels.⁵⁷

The word “party” in those BBC programmes derives from the multi-party system, which is a characteristic of the electoral system in the United Kingdom. The largest parties are the centre-left Labour Party and the centre-right Conservative Party, who dominate politics in the United Kingdom. The country's political system is nevertheless a multi-party system, so there are also many small parties, the Liberal Democrats, the Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru in Wales for instance. The party with the most seats in Parliament usually forms the government; the second largest party forms the opposition. People vote for members of parliament (MPs) who aim to win particular constituencies. One MP is therefore chosen from every constituency. The MPs run for different parties and therefore the locus of power remains with the parties.⁵⁸

The major parties, the Conservative Party and the Labour Party, are allocated minutes of free airtime on the PEBs. These minutes are divided into slots which can be up to five minutes long. The number of minutes and slots given is dependent on the previous election results, where the most successful parties get the most time. Labour and Conservatives have usually been the most successful, so they tend to get more air-time. In the 2005 election, for example, the Conservatives and the Labour Party each received five slots while the Liberal Democrats received four. The parties are allowed to bring up issues and set the political agenda, and are relatively free to determine how they utilise their time. Therefore, their use of broadcast time is mostly their own responsibility.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ The BBC, “At a Glance”, Inside the BBC,

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/insidethebbc/howeare/ata glance/> (Accessed 1. March 2013).

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Chris Robinson, *Electoral System and Voting in the United Kingdom* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp. 9-13

⁵⁹ The BBC, “Broadcasting during elections 10.4.18”, Elections
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/page/guidelines-politics-practices-elections/#broadcasting-during-elections> (Accessed 1. March 2013)

The agreed ratio of time in the PEBs allocated to each party is usually proportionally similar in the overall election coverage.⁶⁰ In agreement with the BBC's rules: "We should make, and be able to defend, our editorial decisions on the basis that they are reasonable and carefully reached, with due impartiality."⁶¹ The BBC's public service requirements to deliver balanced and impartial news and coverage have been interpreted in relatively strict ways for elections. Impartiality has been linked tightly to *proportionality* in the electoral coverage. The BBC also has guidelines about coverage for smaller parties. Provisions ensure that no parliamentary candidate features in television news without a similar opportunity being accorded to his or her competitors.

News judgements at election time are made within a framework of democratic debate which ensures that due weight is given to hearing the views and examining and challenging the policies of all parties. Significant smaller parties should also receive some network coverage during the campaign.⁶²

For example, when reporting in a particular constituency during elections, the BBC should offer participation "to all candidates within the constituency or electoral area representing parties with previous significant electoral support or where there is evidence of significant current support."⁶³

This proportional party coverage has usually been seen as a general rule applying to all broadcasters in the United Kingdom, although since the deregulating acts of the 1990s, the BBC's commercial rivals have been abandoning such 'stop-watch' representation and changing the landscape of political coverage. Notably, since deregulation there has been a rise in the number of interviewing programmes on the BBC, which have fuelled a style of

⁶⁰ Pippa Norris and David Sanders, *Does balance matter? Experiments in TV News* (Paper prepared for Panel 38-12 The ABC of Media Effects in British Elections: Agenda, Balance and Change' at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association in Boston 3 -6 September 1998)
<http://www.hks.harvard.edu/fs/pnorris/Acrobat/BALANCE.PDF> (Accessed 6. March 2013).

⁶¹ The BBC, "Broadcasting during elections 10.4.17", Elections
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/page/guidelines-politics-practices-elections/#broadcasting-during-elections> (Accessed 1. March 2013)

⁶² The BBC, "Broadcasting during elections 10.4.18", Elections
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/page/guidelines-politics-practices-elections/#broadcasting-during-elections> (Accessed 3. March 2013)

⁶³ Ofcom, "Section six: Elections and referendums", The Ofcom Broadcasting Code
<http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/broadcasting/broadcast-codes/broadcast-code/elections/> (Accessed 3. March 2013).

distinctly non-deferential questioning of political leaders as well as robust interrogating. These programmes have led to a decline in political news compared to non-political stories.⁶⁴

Although law and regulation apply to how the BBC is supposed to handle political coverage, there are no written rules on how much political coverage there should be. The BBC is nevertheless under far more scrutiny than its commercial rivals. Partly because the PPB-PEB system has been protected by law since 1990, the overarching framework is now overseen by the BBC, BBC Trust and Ofcom, the new regulator of the commercial broadcasting and telecommunications sectors in the UK. Ofcom, as well as the BBC bodies, is an institution that citizens can contact if they feel that the BBC has broken its rules. The BBC's rules state that they are obliged to take every complaint made seriously.⁶⁵

The PEBs, even though strictly limited in number, remain the most important direct, journalistically unmediated means of party communication in the United Kingdom and is of great importance to the parties' campaigns, especially since parties have limited air-time.⁶⁶

2.3 Arguments for the PEBs and the impartiality rule

One of the reasons why the PEBs are free of charge, and air-time is limited to the parties, is for the democratic function of direct access. Within this regulatory framework, the power derived from the financial strength of parties diminishes. They cannot buy the biggest advertisement spaces or longer time on the PEBs. Advertisements and increased media coverage are claimed to enhance people's sense of what is important. It can be argued that a political party with more funding to spend on advertising is in a better position to introduce itself to voters than a party with less funding. Therefore, regulated direct access without charge is considered an argument to level the playing field between the parties, claiming that people are exposed to the parties in a less biased way. According to the Electoral Commission, this is also done in trying to prevent the 'dumbing down' of how the parties are represented. By allowing parties to advertise, the election campaign could turn into sound bites and slogans to get people's attention. "Party election broadcasts (PEBs) are designed to offset the differential ability of parties to attract

⁶⁴ Margaret Scammell and Ana Inés Langer, "Political Advertising in the United Kingdom" in *The SAGE Handbook of Political Advertising*, ed. Lynda Lee Kaid and Christina Holtz-Bacha (London: Sage publication, 2006), p. 67.

⁶⁵ Margaret Scammell and Holly A Semetko, "Election Coverage in the UK" In *The Handbook of Election News Coverage Around the World*, Ed. Jesper Strömbäck, Lynda Lee Kaid (New York: Routledge, 2008), 83.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 85.

campaign funds.”⁶⁷ By using PEBs in this way, it encourages the parties to focus on quality rather than quantity. By using PEBs in this way, parties are encouraged to focus on quality rather than quantity. It urges them to be innovative and informative, since the length of a slot is considerably longer than an advertisement.⁶⁸ The PEBs have therefore been considered a part of upholding the BBC’s objectivity by relinquishing its own power of exposition, and dividing it equitably between the political parties themselves.

Regulating media content, with the impartiality rule, is a way to limit the use of media as a privilege to a certain political viewpoint. The media is therefore not in the role of being an advocate or campaigner, which is precisely the aim of the BBC as a public service broadcaster. The rules aim for not favouring any particular side in the political debate, in order for the BBC to remain independent and prevent it from being steered by any political actors. Therefore it cannot endorse any political view or political party, despite the fact that it broadcasts partisan views and programmes. ‘Due weight’ between larger political parties in proportion is considered balance in coverage, since the parties earn slots depending on previous support from the voters.⁶⁹ Impartiality executed as proportionality is more of a general guideline than an absolute rule. The arguments for it are mainly that it reflects the proportion of public support. By that, the BBC tries to balance its service to the individuals as well as the public as a whole.

When elections get closer, the rule of providing opportunities to all candidates with evidence of significant support is considered important since coverage becomes more even-handed and focused on the specific choices before the electorate. Reflecting the change in priorities as the voting day draws near. In this pre-election time, the BBC is ideally a democratic instrument with good intentions. However, perceptions of the BBC’s performance still vary.

2.4 Reactions to the PEBs and the impartiality rule

One of the main criticisms of the PEBs is that they do not connect well enough with voters. Recent media and social developments show evidence that the PEBs have become less popular and are failing to engage the public. Before the emergence of commercial TV, the PEBs were the campaign on television. Then the BBC was so concerned to appear neutral that it avoided

⁶⁷ The Electoral Commission, *Party Election Broadcasts and Referendum Campaign Broadcasts*, 2010
http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/__data/assets/electoral_commission_pdf_file/0020/13268/Party-Election-Broadcasts-UPDATED.pdf (7. March 2013).

⁶⁸ Sarah Oates, *Introduction to Media and Politics*, p. 99.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, p. 99.

almost any campaign coverage at all. Now, however, the PEBs have been regarded as too dominant and perhaps boring or alienating of viewers. Surveys have shown that in the 2001 elections, only about one third of people said they paid any attention and only about 13% thought the PEBs to be informative. These results have proven consistent over time and the PEBs have not improved their standing in public esteem. Some critics of the system claim that a broadcast lasting less than five minutes still fails to hold the audience's attention. It has been suggested that it could be useful to "scrap the simultaneous transmission of PEBs and urge journalists to make more bold and challenging programmes."⁷⁰

Being impartial in a proportional sense has created some dilemmas, since that balance can itself constitute a bias. The BBC has been accused of being too focused on the main parties in its attempts to be impartial. The BBC is said to reinforce the domination of the largest two parties by limiting substantially the opportunities of the smaller parties to reach the national audience. Research has shown that there is no impact on voting intentions regardless of the number of slots that the Conservatives or the Labour Parties get. However, there was a significant third-party effect, so viewing a Liberal Democrat broadcast increased the party's support. This effect is explained simply with regard to exposure: "Elections provide the only occasions when the party receives high levels of media attention, and the near equal ration of PEBs could assist significantly in raising a third party's profile."⁷¹ Present arrangements can be seen to favour the status quo. Smaller parties, pressure groups and other entities who are not part of an organised political party receive substantially less coverage in the mediated news than the big parties. It has been claimed that it is perhaps inevitable that a PEB system leads to unintentional bias towards established news, excluding those who have not organised themselves in the formal political process.⁷² A side effect to such strategic framing is a difference in the party agenda and the media agenda. It has been claimed that the gap between the party and media agenda has overall widened. This can be seen in a decrease in overall

⁷⁰ Margaret Scammell & Holly Semetko, "Political advertising on television: The British experience."

In *Political advertising in Western democracies*, Ed. L. L. Kaid & C. Holtz-Bacha, pp. 19–43, (London: Sage Publishing, 1995), p. 23.

⁷¹ C. J. Pattie, & R.J. Johnston, "Assessing the TV campaign: The impact of party election broadcasting on voters' opinions in the 1997 British general election" In *Political Communication*, 19, (2002): pp. 333–358.

⁷² Jacob Rowbottom, *Democracy Distorted. Wealth, Influence and Democratic Politics*), p. 210.

political news and reduced attention given to the parties' substantive issues.⁷³ This is of course food for thought in a media environment where the BBC faces changes around it, due to all the options people have in the modern media environment. Electoral coverage should be constantly reconsidered for it to benefit society.

On the other hand, even though the PEBs do not seem to be very popular, they have been considered to impact the election outcome in Britain.⁷⁴ Surveys have suggested that the PEBs are potentially valuable for the established parties. According to the Electoral Commission, over the years at least one PEB was seen by between 55% and 62% of the electorate. Although this figure seems to be decreasing, all survey evidence indicates that the PEBs still have considerable reach. The PEBs have, according to research, been regarded as more important by voters for voting decision than most other campaign tools, such as campaign leaflets and opinion polls.⁷⁵

All the parties that have been in candidacy favour the PEBs over having the option of unregulated paid advertisements in broadcasting. They want to have control over campaign costs and to keep the game leveled between the bigger parties. It is a strong characteristic of the parties' election campaigns and an important part of campaign rituals.⁷⁶ It reinforces voting and political engagement more than other types of campaign tools.⁷⁷ The Electoral Commission and the parties themselves have recommended to the government that the obligation to transmit party broadcasts should be extended beyond the current narrow group of broadcasters. It is therefore highly likely that the system will be protected, although it

⁷³Margaret Scammell and Holly A Semetko, "Election Coverage in the UK" In *The Handbook of Election News Coverage Around the World*, Ed. Jesper Strömbäck, Lynda Lee Kaid (New York: Routledge, 2008) p. 83.

⁷⁴C. J. Pattie, & R.J. Johnston, "Assessing the TV campaign: The impact of party election broadcasting on voters' opinions in the 1997 British general election" p. 355.

⁷⁵ The Electoral Commission, Party political broadcasting: Report and recommendations, http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0005/71159/Political-Party-Broadcasting-Discussion-Paper.pdf (9. March 2013).

⁷⁶ Margaret Scammell and Ana Inés Langer, "Political Advertising in the United Kingdom" in *The SAGE Handbook of Political Advertising*, ed. Lynda Lee Kaid and Christina Holtz-Bacha (London: Sage publication, 2006), p. 68.

⁷⁷ Sarah Oates, Introduction to Media and Politics, p. 99.

seems to be becoming more commercial and its broadcasts are becoming shorter and more frequent, making it more suitable to viewers in the contemporary media environment.⁷⁸

The PEBs face the accusation that they fail to attract the attention and interest of viewers. Nevertheless, they are a symbol of the United Kingdom's election coverage culture. The PEBs provide the bigger parties with longer air-time, and the BBC generally interprets that function as *impartiality* in its overall election coverage. Despite being a pioneer in public service, the BBC's standpoint is debatable in today's expanding media environment. Questions have been raised regarding the legitimate purpose of public service broadcasters, not only in the case of the BBC. The public service broadcaster RÚV in Iceland has been facing reforms regarding its pre-election coverage, as part of actions aiming to strengthen its legitimate grounds as a public service broadcaster.⁷⁹

⁷⁸The Electoral Commission, *Party Election Broadcasts and Referendum Campaign Broadcasts*, 2010
http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/__data/assets/electoral_commission_pdf_file/0020/13268/Party-Election-Broadcasts-UPDATED.pdf (7. March 2013).

⁷⁹Nefnd um aðgang stjórnmalahreyfinga og frambjóðenda að fjölmiðlum í aðdraganda kosninga, *Erindi nr. Þ 141/1508* (Reykjavík: Allsherjar- og menntamálanefnd, 2013) pp. 1-2.

3 RÚV and the reform

In this chapter, the recent developments regarding RÚV's pre-election coverage framework will be addressed. First, there is a need to introduce briefly the history of RÚV in order to grasp its circumstances and understand the environment in which it operates. Subsequently, the current pre-election coverage framework will be examined, particularly in terms of the current situation and how the institution has practiced it. In the following subchapter, the focus will be on reactions to the current framework, most notably a recent report by the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR). The report addresses the lack of a regulatory framework for the pre-election period in Iceland and offers advice for reforms. Reform suggestions in the report have been both welcomed and criticised, and have led to the preparation of provisions in a new bill for RÚV, which will be discussed.

3.1 An Introduction to RÚV's History and Democratic Duties

After a failed attempt by a private radio station to start broadcasting in the 1920s in Iceland, the Icelandic state was granted by law a warrant to operate a broadcaster. In 1930, the Icelandic National Broadcasting Service - Ríkisútvarpið (RÚV), started broadcasting from Reykjavík. The main reason for the birth of public service broadcasting in Iceland was that there were no grounds for extensive private media since Iceland was then a relatively underdeveloped country, trying to catch up with industrialisation, where the inhabitants lived to a large extent in rural areas and were relatively few.⁸⁰

RÚV was controlled by the Radio Council (Útvarpsráð), proportionally elected by the political parties at *Alþingi*, the Icelandic parliament. The major editorial line of the Icelandic public radio was to avoid most political coverage, since the press was biased towards different parties. This avoidance was secured by arranging the editors of the party press to serve as the parties' representatives on the Radio Council.⁸¹

Political scientist Ólafur Þ. Harðarson claims that Icelandic society before the 1970s was characterised by 'partiocracy.' What he means is that political parties before that time had considerable influence on most spheres of society, including the media. However, increased liberalisation of the economy in the 1960s enhanced independence from the political parties

⁸⁰ Ólafur Th. Harðarson, "Media and Politics in Iceland", in *Communicating Politics. Political Communications in the Nordic Countries*, Jesper Strömback, Mark Orsten and Toril Aalberg (Ed.), pp. 70-73

⁸¹ Ibid, pp. 70-73.

and the professionalisation of RÚV increased accordingly. RÚV started its television broadcasting in 1966 and soon became an important arena for political communication. At this time, it was argued that Iceland was too small to even afford one television station. However, today there are 11 domestic television channels and about 25 radio stations in Iceland, most exclusively in the business of entertainment. In television, a duopoly in the television market developed between RÚV and the private television station *Stöð 2*, since 1986. Up until that time RÚV enjoyed a domestic monopoly by the state.⁸²

Today RÚV operates one national television station and three radio stations. It is funded with a poll tax and charged to taxpaying citizens. Interestingly, unlike the BBC it is also funded by advertisements. It operates under the Broadcasting Act of 2000 and Regulation on Broadcasting Activities of 2002. The Broadcasting Act prescribes a general duty to apply democratic principles for all broadcasters. The Regulation on Broadcasting Activities defines the role of the Broadcasting Licensing Committee (Útvarpsréttarnefnd). The Broadcasting Licensing Committee, abbreviated BLC, consists of three members and is responsible for granting and revoking broadcasting licenses, as well as levying administrative fines and issuing warnings.⁸³

The purpose of those acts' creation at the beginning of the 21st century was to strengthen RÚV as a public service broadcaster. Laws in 2007 made RÚV a public limited company, changing it from being a state-owned institution to a company of which the Icelandic state was only a shareholder. This change was made to limit direct state influence. In that context, rules were made about evaluation on public service broadcasting.⁸⁴ The Radio Council was replaced by a Board, which is appointed by the Minister of Education, Culture and Science and proportionally elected by *Alþingi*. The Board is in charge of general and financial duties, as well as hiring and firing the Director of RÚV. The director is the head of daily operations and is in charge of RÚV's personnel.⁸⁵

In 2007's evaluation rules, RÚV's democratic roles and duties are defined. According to these rules, the institution should enhance cultural, sociological and democratic needs of the society. Its coverage must provide impartial information about Icelandic society, as well as

⁸² Ibid, p.72

⁸³ OSCE, Iceland – Early Parliamentary Elections 25 April 2009 (Warsaw: OSCE, 2009), p. 14.

⁸⁴ Ibid. p. 14.

⁸⁵ Ólafur Th. Hardarson, “Media and Politics in Iceland”, in *Communicating Politics. Political Communications in the Nordic Countries*, Jesper Strömback, Mark Orsten and Toril Aalberg (Ed.), p. 75.

other societies, and must promote democratic procedures, human rights and freedom of speech and expression. The democratic needs are considered fulfilled if RÚV displays different views on current issues when it matters to the public, in order for people to understand what meaning these different views have for the society. It is stated that this applies to general news material and political circumstances, both domestically and in foreign cases.⁸⁶

3.2 Current pre-election coverage rules and execution

Up until March 2013, when a new bill of law regarding RÚV as a public service broadcaster was passed, there were no legal duties regarding the pre-election period.⁸⁷ In the previous law bill, the reference to RÚV's democratic role was that it should honour democratic ground rules and human rights as well as the freedom of speech and expression. It should give an extensive, dependable and impartial news service for current issues that have an impact on the public and be a forum for different opinions in that context. RÚV has used its general rules as well as self regulated internal rules and guidelines for its pre-election coverage. General rules such as the evaluation rules, state that displaying different views in society should be applied to domestic political circumstances.⁸⁸ The role of being an arena for relevant and different views is prominent in the accessible internal rules and guidelines.⁸⁹ They seem to be clearly influenced by legal provisions and the general rules. The same applies to RÚV's interpretation of impartiality; it is tightly linked with the rule of diversity of perspectives.⁹⁰

A lack of established rules and laws, and the fact that those decisions are made internally at RÚV before every election, indicate that *informality* is a factor in the decision making process. Informality is here defined as *traditions* and *norms* inside the institution. For example, in the 2012 presidential elections, the head of news, Óðinn Jónsson, sent an email to RÚV's staff, reminding them that they should not let friendship, connections or admirations

⁸⁶ RÚV, "Reglur um mat á útvarpsþjónustu í almannapágu"

<http://www.ruv.is/files/skjol/Reglur%20um%20mat%20C3%A1%20C3%9Atvarps%20C3%BEj%20C3%B3nustu%20230307.pdf> (Accessed 15. March 2013).

⁸⁷ The bill will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ See various documents such as "Fréttamaðurinn", http://www.ruv.is/files/frettamadurinn_-_handbok_desember_2012.pdf (Accessed 11. April, 2013) and "Áætlunarverk og meginmarkmið RÚV" <http://ruv.is/um-ruv/ymis-skjol> (Accessed 11. April, 2013).

⁹⁰ RÚV, "Reglur um mat á útvarpsþjónustu í almannapágu"

<http://www.ruv.is/files/skjol/Reglur%20um%20mat%20C3%A1%20C3%9Atvarps%20C3%BEj%20C3%B3nustu%20230307.pdf> (Accessed 15. March 2013).

influence what they covered and which issues they emphasised. A RÚV employee was one of two leading candidates in the elections and her husband was also a RÚV employee. Jónsson's message was a reminder that the institution should follow a general rule of how it handles and delivers news.⁹¹

The only special obligation relating to the pre-election period in the online accessible self-regulated internal rules and guidelines focuses on the participatory limitations of candidates in national elections in RÚV's programme and agenda. The rules state that "candidates shall not appear in other programmes than those specifically meant to cover the elections, such as news or debates among candidates."⁹²

This reference to candidates in regular national elections is that sixty three of them are elected for a four year term in *Alþingi*, the Icelandic parliament. *Alþingi* is a unicameral parliament; the candidates are representatives of political parties, and people vote for the parties in elections. In the parliamentary elections, Iceland is divided into six multi-member constituencies. The government is formed after elections and is usually characterised by majority coalitions. The party system is dominated by four main parties, representing viewpoints from the political left to the right, and other smaller parties which come and go more frequently.⁹³ However, in the 2013 parliamentary elections there were 15 parties in candidacy.

One of the issues concerning access is advertisement policy. As noted before, advertisements are allowed and are a part of RÚV's funding, and that *includes political advertisements*. However, there are certain rules regarding advertisements from political parties, interest groups, individuals and particular issues:

The amount of political advertisements from political parties and others in candidacy can not hinder the advertisements of other candidates or parties. It is prohibited to grant one candidate/party access to a whole commercial break. RÚV reserves the right to arrange commercials prior to elections [...] All political parties and candidates running for

⁹¹ RÚV, "Reglur um fréttir og dagskrárefni tengt þeim í Ríkisútvarpinu"
http://www.ruv.is/files/frettareglur_og_vinnuleidbeiningar_desember_2012.pdf (Accessed 16. March 2013)

⁹² RÚV, "Frambjóðendur í kosningum til m.a. Alþingis eða sveitarstjórna skulu ekki, nema að því marki sem kveðið er á um í reglum þessum, koma fram í dagskrá Ríkisútvarpsins..." Í *Takmarkanir á þátttöku frambjóðenda til almennra kosninga í dagskrá RÚV*, <http://www.ruv.is/node/370472> (Accessed 17. March 2013).

⁹³ Gunnar Helgi Kristinsson, *Íslenska stjórnkerfið*, p. 74-75.

elections enjoy the same fixed discounts which RÚV's commercial department declares before every election.⁹⁴

Commercials do not have to follow RÚV's rule of displaying every relevant view in society. Candidates and political parties that have more funding and are ready to spend more on advertisements, according to these rules, have more access to RÚV's air-time. The restrictions are that a commercial should be inside the given overall commercial time, and that one candidate or political party cannot monopolise RÚV's commercial air-time or take away time from other parties or candidates. There is clearly a gap between commercial allocation and the pre-election coverage guidelines, as in this case, *funding matters in relations to access*.

As for access in the pre-election coverage itself, RÚV is active in broadcasting and organising live debates and interviews with and between the candidates in the time leading up to elections. For example, prior to the parliamentary elections in 2009, RÚV broadcast six debates with candidates from all seven competing parties, and two debates with all party leaders. RÚV broadcast some 12 hours of debates, totaling 36 hours over the three weeks prior to those elections. Apart from this considerable time allotted to debates, RÚV has also devoted extensive coverage to campaign activities in their newscasts.⁹⁵ However, according to a recent report on the pre-election coverage by OSCE, "[i]n the absence of official media monitoring of the campaign, there are no statistics on time allocated to parties."⁹⁶

3.3 OSCE's report and reactions to it

A surveillance committee from The Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR), invited by the Icelandic government, observed the Icelandic parliamentary elections in 2009. The reason for the committee's report relates to many calls for investigations and publication on material regarding Icelandic society, governance and administration after the 2008 financial crisis, which hit Iceland hard. These parliamentary elections were not regular; they were held two years before the end of the term, after an economic meltdown and the

⁹⁴ RÚV Auglýsingar, "Magn auglýsinga frá stjórnmalaflokkum og öðrum þeim sem að framboði standa má ekki verða til þess að hindra birtingu auglýsinga annarra framboðsaðila. Óheimilt er að veita einum framboðsaðila afnot af heilum auglýsingatíma. RÚV áskilur sér rétt til niðurröðunar auglýsinga í aðdraganda kosninga... Allir stjórnmalaflokkar og aðrir sem að framboði standa njóta sömu föstu afsláttarkjara sem auglýsingadeild RÚV gefur út fyrir hverjar kosningar" *Reglur um auglýsingar*, <http://www.auglysendur.is/Forsida/Reglurumauglysingar/> (Accessed 20. March 2013) .

⁹⁵ OSCE, Iceland – Early Parliamentary Elections 25 April 2009 (Warsaw: OSCE, 2009), p. 14-15

⁹⁶ Ibid, p.14.

subsequent fall of the ruling coalition government after unprecedented public protests.⁹⁷ The OSCE/ODIHR deployed an Election Assessment Mission Report where it addressed key factors regarding the election, which covered everything from the general framework and the administration of the elections to single factors such as election coverage, the funding of political advocacies and the participation of women. The report addressed the media in three ways, the media environment, the legal framework for the media and the media's election coverage.⁹⁸

The report's comments regarding the pre-election coverage were first in relation to the Broadcasting Licence Committee (BLC). The BLC has an essential role in the administration of the broadcasting sector, but no obligation to actively supervise or monitor media coverage of elections. It therefore has no way to deal with complaints regarding election coverage effectively. For instance, a small party, the Democratic Movement (Lýðræðishreyfingin), filed a complaint against RÚV because the party's coverage on RÚV was very limited. The report referred to communication with media representatives, which stated that larger parties received more coverage in television news programmes because they were already sitting in parliament. The complaint was dismissed as groundless under current legislation, in part due to the considerable number of debates held with all parties.⁹⁹ Suggestions for solutions in the report are that the BLC could be granted a supervisory role in relation to media coverage of elections.¹⁰⁰

The report emphasised the fact that there was only one internal rule regarding the pre-election coverage: the previously discussed limitations of candidates in RÚV's programmes and agenda. The report recommends that RÚV adopt a set of rules, which could entail issuing instructions on political advertising to ensure consistent media practice. "Paid airtime should clearly be marked as such in order to highlight the commercial nature of the messages", was a comment in relations to an incident when RÚV cancelled free air-time programmes. RÚV had decided to give every party a total of ten minutes of free air-time prior to the 2009 parliamentary elections. Since the majority of parties declined this offer, RÚV decided to cancel the programmes. Great dissatisfaction arose among smaller parties who claimed that

⁹⁷ OSCE, Iceland – Early Parliamentary Elections 25 April 2009 (Warsaw: OSCE, 2009),

⁹⁸ Ibid, pp. 1-2.

⁹⁹ Ibid, p. 14.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

bigger parties were able to limit the opportunities of smaller and newer parties.¹⁰¹ In this way, the established parties were able to eliminate the possibilities of new parties to present their candidacy.¹⁰² The established parties also have more financial support and can spend more on advertisements. The committee points out that implementation of laws or amendment on how to devote air-time could be considered. That would be done for consistency in pre-election coverage between elections, and could be free of charge for the candidacies.

Although the allocation of free airtime is not compulsory, it is a practice in many OSCE participating states that public broadcasters offer free airtime to parties competing in elections. Free airtime especially allows smaller competitors, with limited resources, an opportunity to address the electorate.¹⁰³

Although the report was only for observational and advisory purposes, it nevertheless influenced a new law bill for RÚV, drafted in consensus by the majority of the parties in *Alþingi*. The bill included a provision that granted free air-time to political parties. There was an interesting reaction to the reform idea from the head of news at RÚV, Óðinn Jónsson. He stated on his personal Facebook page that he was not against establishing rules regarding the pre-election period, but also claimed that it was ridiculous that the news department at RÚV had allowed parties to get a “free play” in the game. He said: “The misconception of Icelandic politicians about the role the media plays in modern democracies is disappointing. What a relapse it would be if political parties would seize with law the agenda setting of RÚV.”¹⁰⁴ He claimed that with free air-time, parties would be hindered by criticism and professional coverage before elections. Since there have been great cut backs in RÚV’s funding, this would make RÚV's work more difficult and demand changes to its current system.¹⁰⁵ Regarding his position on the matter, the focus will now be shifted towards the bill of law.

¹⁰¹ Allsherjar- og menntamálaráðuneytið, Skýrsla nefndar á vegum mennta- og menningarmálaráðherra um aðgang stjórnmálahreyfinga og frambjóðenda að fjölmiðlum í aðdraganda kosninga (Reykjavík: Allsherjar- og Menntamálaráðuneytið, 2013), p. 7.

¹⁰² OSCE, Iceland – Early Parliamentary Elections 25 April 2009 (Warsaw: OSCE, 2009), p. 14-15.

¹⁰³ Ibid, p. 15.

¹⁰⁴ Frettabladid, “Fréttastjóri RÚV segir tillögu á þingi óhæfu” *visir.is*, 19. Febrúar 2013, <http://www.visir.is/fretastjori-ruv-segir-tillogu-a-thingi-ohaefu/article/2013702199947> (Accessed March 20th., 2013)

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

3.4 Election coverage reform

The aforementioned bill addresses the purpose and duties of RÚV as a publicly owned media outlet. The bill aimed at strengthening RÚV in its public service role and effected considerable changes to the current law, separating the public service from its other operations, which were to be handled by its subsidiaries. In relation to pre-election coverage, free air-time for candidacies was a primary provision in the proposal. It is defined in the sense that candidates and political parties should be allowed to promote their policies in regular air-time, without paying. If it were not entirely free, it should at least not be a burden to candidates, and RÚV should publish rules to this effect. There should, however, be a very clear difference between RÚV's general election coverage, which should be produced in a professional manner by those executing it, and the allocation of the free air-time. In some European countries, private broadcasters are obliged to broadcast free air-time for candidates. In the light of a strong position and circulation, free air-time should be limited to RÚV.¹⁰⁶

There was another provision regarding advertisement policy, including limitations and shortening air-time devoted to commercials. The purpose was to limit RÚV as a competitor in the commercial market. In the pre-election period, it limits the time parties and candidates can buy. In the appendix part of the bill of law it is claimed that it would become a greater challenge for RÚV to distribute commercial air-time more evenly, demanding that more effort be put into ensuring equality. Nevertheless, these proposals would limit the access of the financially strong candidates and parties to advertise themselves through a public service broadcaster.¹⁰⁷

Arguments for these provisions are of a democratic nature. A criterion for democracy to function is that voters are exposed to and become familiar with *all* parties' and candidates' policies, not just those that stakeholders can present by paying more. It enhances the reasoning that presentation of political parties and candidates can have considerable influence on voters' opinions. To introduce parties, candidates or issues before national referendums is considered an important democratic role of RÚV. Due to its general impartiality rule of enhancing every view in society, it is vital to establish rules on the access political movements and candidates have to it¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ Nefnd um aðgang stjórnmalahreyfinga og frambjóðenda að fjölmiðlum í aðdraganda kosninga, *Erindi nr. Þ 141/1508* (Reykjavík: Allsherjar- og menntamálanefnd, 2013), p. 1-2.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Frumvarp til laga um ríkisútvarpið, fjölmiðil í almannabágu. Þskj. 197, 194. mál, 2012-2013. *Vefútgáfa Alþingistiðinda*, <http://www.althingi.is/altext/141/s/0197.html> (Accessed 22. March 2013)

Arguments against the bill of law, and these particular provisions, have come from members of the Independence Party who want to abolish RÚV and others who claim that certain parts of it will quickly become obsolete and that the reforms are too expensive. Despite this opposition, there seems to be a consensus concerning limiting commercials since that portion of the bill was approved. Notably, the free air-time paragraph was rejected and there as no coverage or statements given regarding reasons for the rejection.¹⁰⁹ However, the accepted provision still entailed new legal duties for RÚV. They require that, prior to elections, the candidacies of all parties or candidates and their policies be presented and that the election outcome be analysed. In the case of parliamentary, presidential or other national referendums, all candidates, parties or alliances are to be given equal time to promote their policies on regular airtime.¹¹⁰

The new laws did not instantly affect RÚV's pre-election coverage, since it had already been planned for the upcoming 2013 parliamentary elections. The only exception was that in the bill, an authorization was granted to limit the coverage of candidacies in accordance to the number of constituencies; candidacies can participate in a number of election programmes equal to the number of constituencies in which they are offered.¹¹¹

RÚV's pre-election coverage framework has been characterised by a lack of rules. Therefore RÚV uses the rules for general coverage and internal rules for this period. Impartiality is translated with the rule of enhancing every view in society, and allows advertisements. The OSCE report suggested that the Broadcasting License Committee (BLC) would be granted a supervisory role and free air-time for candidacies for consistency and equity purposes. The following reform proposals aimed at limiting commercials and to establish the free air-time for candidacies. The free air-time provision was rejected and consequently did not become a duty as it did for the BBC's Party Election Broadcast. For a better comparison of the BBC and RÚV as well as further discussion of related topics, the focus will now be on directly contrasting the two election coverage frameworks

¹⁰⁹ RÚV, "Ný lög um ríkisútvarpið samþykkt" *ruv.is* (13. March 2013) <http://www.ruv.is/frett/ny-log-um-rikisutvarpid-samthykkt> (Accessed 22. March 2013).

¹¹⁰ Lög um ríkisútvarpið, fjölmiðil í almannapágu nr.23/20. mars 2013.

¹¹¹ (Sigríður Hagalín – RÚV's vice head of news, email to author 14. April 2013)

4 Discussion

The election coverage framework and criticisms of both the BBC and RÚV have now been discussed. Both these public service broadcasters were founded at a similar time in history, for similar reasons and in similar circumstances. It was argued that there was a need in both the United Kingdom and Iceland for public service broadcasting in the early 20th century, as resource scarcity restrained other options. The normative purpose of the BBC and RÚV agrees with the theory of deliberative democracy, particularly its aims of impartiality, equality and mediation in the 'public sphere.' The public service media role manifests in their tendency to pursue higher ethical and democratic duties more often than the private media. However, their “upbringing” in different political landscapes and regulatory cultures, has arguably created their differences when it comes to election coverage. Notably, the previously presented reform ideas for RÚV show clear similarities with the BBC’s current pre-election coverage rules. It is therefore worth discussing a topic related to the aim of this dissertation, whether the BBC’s framework, comprising the PEBs and commercial restraints, can be considered ideal as pre-election coverage in public service media.

The BBC generally interprets impartiality as proportionality, and is free from advertisers of all kinds. Granted this kind of privilege it is also under great pressure, working in a restricting regulatory environment supervised by other institutions. Funded by both public taxation and advertisement revenue, RÚV has fewer restrictions and has been characterised by traditions and informality in election coverage. The location of power and responsibilities can be difficult to determine when checks and balances are absent.

Both the BBC’s and RÚV’s media environments have been marked by a duopoly between them and the commercialised private media. However, they face challenges due to the development of the seemingly endless information resources produced by increasing globalisation and the expansion of the internet. The reform bill and OSCE report can be considered indicators of this development, since they are about qualifications and strengthening acts regarding RÚV as a public service broadcaster. Considerations have in this light risen with regard to the future of public service broadcasting as a democratic instrument.

4.1 Is the BBC’s election coverage an ideal standard?

As previously noted, the BBC adopts its rules from an independent institution. Before every national election, new rules are made by the Electoral Commission and complaints are dealt with by other independent institutions, Ofcom and the BBC Trust. The system in which the

BBC operates is therefore a system of checks and balances. When comparing this system to RÚV's regulatory environment, where no independent institutions handle issues such as election coverage rules and complaints, the BBC's election coverage is clearly under closer scrutiny than RÚV's. However, according to UNESCO, public broadcasters should not be made accountable to too many bodies since instructions and duties could end up contradicting each other. They could cause the public service broadcaster, in trying to satisfy everyone, to no longer account for anything.¹¹² If RÚV goes down the road of increased institutionalisation, using the BBC as a role model, this possible result would have to be kept in mind.

RÚV uses existing and internal rules regarding its usual operations when it comes to election coverage, having relatively more freedom than the BBC to organise it. Freedom in the sense of independence can be viewed as essential, but too much editorial freedom could weaken that particular institution as a public service broadcaster.¹¹³ The essence of trust towards such an institution can arguably be based on an existing and well defined regulatory body. The lack of rules concerning election coverage on RÚV was, in part, why reforms to strengthen it were considered important in the OSCE's report.¹¹⁴

In the OSCE report and the subsequent reform bill, the previously discussed ideas of giving political parties and candidates free air-time and limiting commercials were introduced as an effort to strengthen RÚV. These ideas bring RÚV closer to the BBC's framework prior to elections. The report does not mention the BBC election coverage or whether it is considered a role model, although the relative merits of PEBs and commercials could be debated. As already noted, commercials are prohibited on the BBC, mostly because of the deep rooted thought of it as a "public" service broadcaster. A defining feature of the BBC is that it is a fundamental type of commercial free public media. However, PEBs have, over time, become more like commercials to increase viewership.¹¹⁵ It can be speculated, in light

¹¹² UNESCO, *Public Broadcasting: Why? How?* (Montreal: World Radio and Television Council, 2000) http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/files/18796/11144252115pb_why_how.pdf/pb_why_how.pdf (Accessed 22. March 2013), part B.

¹¹³ Francois Heinderyckx, *A Composite Approach to Evaluating the "Quality" of Public Service Broadcasters* (A contribution to the RIPE@2006 conference) <http://ripeat.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/Heinderyckx.pdf> (Accessed 2. april 2013) page 2.

¹¹⁴ Allsherjar- og menntamálaráðuneytið, *Skýrsla nefndar á vegum mennta- og menningarmálaráðherra um aðgang stjórnmálahreyfinga og frambjóðenda að fjölmiðlum í aðdraganda kosninga*, p. 21.

¹¹⁵ The Electoral Commission, *Party Election Broadcasts and Referendum Campaign Broadcasts*, 2010 http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/__data/assets/electoral_commission_pdf_file/0020/13268/Party-Election-Broadcasts-UPDATED.pdf (Accessed 7. March 2013).

of this development, whether in the future the only difference between a regular commercial and a PEB will be the fact that it is free for candidates and political parties.

One of the biggest criticisms of the PEBs and the BBC's election coverage is that it devotes the air-time unevenly, interpreting it as *impartiality*. Yet it provides consistency between elections. It would most likely be interpreted under the current rules in a different way by RÚV, due to the golden rule of "enhancing every relevant view in society". This rule entails the same morals as deliberative democracy and the public sphere, that everyone should have equal access.¹¹⁶ Effective complaints regarding RÚV's election coverage have purported that this requirement was not been fulfilled if less time is given to smaller political parties.¹¹⁷

Although the free air-time provision in the newly accepted law bill for RÚV was rejected by *Alþingi*, the accepted portion stipulates that RÚV should by law promote all candidates before national elections. Free air-time for candidates and political parties could have been interpreted similarly as a PEB, where political parties get air-time which they can allocate as they wish inside established rules. Then the difference between the duty to promote candidates and the allocation of free air-time could manifest itself in a shift of power from RÚV's news agency and administration to the candidates running for office. RÚV's commercial time was limited as well, which is generally regarded as positive strengthening in its public service broadcasting role. Nevertheless, it has the power to be the main allocator of candidates' access to its air-time remains with the institution.

Perhaps what can be considered ideal in the case of the BBC is its institutional functioning, where the power over candidates' access is limited and more consistent than in the case of RÚV. Although it is debatable whether or not proportionality can be considered an ideal impartiality guideline, RÚV's interpretation of impartiality is usually related to enhancing all views in an equal manner. This philosophy is in keeping with the tenets of deliberative democracy and concept of the public sphere as an arena for all views and discussions. RÚV's new legal duties of promoting candidates is an effort to increase consistency between elections. However, it is still less restricted than the BBC when it comes to candidates' access both in commercial and promotional terms. Arguably it therefore lacks some of the checks and balances, characteristic of the BBC.

¹¹⁶ Peter Dahlgreen, "In Search of the Talkative Public: Media, Deliberative Democracy and Civic Culture" in *The Public*, Vol. 9 (2002), 3, 5-26, <http://javnost-thepublic.org/article/pdf/2002/3/1/>

¹¹⁷ Smugan, "Ríkisútvarpið bregst við gagnrýni", *smugan.is* (20. November 2010), <http://smugan.is/2010/11/rikisutvarpid-bregst-vid-gagnryni/> (Accessed 28. March 2013)

4.2 Where does the power lie when rules are lacking?

In RÚV's case, where no election coverage rules exist *per se*, the general and internal rules on coverage are the guidelines concerning pre-election coverage. Arguably, this leaves more room for interpretation when it comes to election coverage. If others do not believe that RÚV has fulfilled its duty or followed its rules, there is no effective way of dealing with the complaints. The supervisory role of the BLC is not very effective, even though it is the official handler of complaints. It does not have an active supervisory role like Ofcom or the BBC Trust in the case of the BBC. RÚV is however very active in dealing with complaints itself, using methods which are decided and handled internally. Complaints have led to changes in election coverage. For example, in a 2010 constitutional assembly election, when an exceptional situation arose with over 500 candidates, a complaint from a citizen over RÚV's decision not to promote the candidates led to the change that all candidates got air-time on one of the radio stations.¹¹⁸

Complaints, like the one just discussed, can change RÚV's coverage. This is an indicator of institutional flexibility. Flexibility in this case aligns closely with the fact that it is under less scrutiny from other institutions. The power it holds thanks to this flexibility can be convenient, leading to quicker responses and efficient changes. On the other hand, it has more room to pick and choose when it comes to complaints and requests for changes. Notably, this flexibility can be bound by the power of unwritten rules and 'corporate culture,' which are most visible in the institution's informality and its decisions based on tradition. This is descriptive of Icelandic institutional features.

The small scale of Icelandic society, the openness and informality of social relations and generally good conditions (in media and personal relationships) for individuals' and interest groups' voices to be heard provide for that.¹¹⁹

Where internal power is greater than external power, supervisors or superiors can hold considerably more power in decision making, due to fewer institutional limitations. This feature makes resignations and dismissals due to breach of power rare. As head of news at RÚV, Óðinn Jónsson gave a statement criticising the free air-time reform, due to the fact that it would cost money, effort and take editorial powers away from the institution, granting them instead to the candidates and political parties. Despite the fact that the reform stated that there would be a

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Stefán Ólafsson, *Iceland's Social Inclusion Environment* (Reykjavík: University of Iceland, 2011), p. 23.

clear difference between RÚV's professional coverage and the free air-time.¹²⁰ Jónsson's expression can be viewed as protectionism of current institutional procedures, indicating the informality of the institution's power structure.

It can be argued that the environment RÚV operates in is susceptible to power seekers and is, in a sense, vulnerable to complaints. Informality plays a part in its procedures and decisions, while being at the same time flexible and convenient in the case of reconsidering actions. It still needs to find a balance between the opposing public service mantras, "everything for someone" and "something for everyone"

4.3 Public service broadcasting as democratic instrument in the 21st Century

Due in part to its unidirectional nature, broadcasting as a mass communication form is diminishing. Today, it faces the imminent threat of the internet, social networks and new ways of interacting with information. At the same time, there have never been more private broadcasters from which to choose.¹²¹ These factors are a threat to the existence of public service broadcasters, although many are active online with their websites as well. Both RÚV and the BBC were once key institutions in information giving in their home countries, passed through an era of de-regulation and are now having the legitimacy of their existence questioned. Nevertheless, the voting process is still the same, with voters needing adequate information to make informed choices.

Questions have been raised regarding the legitimacy of the public media given that the media environment has changed drastically since the days when public service broadcasters were viewed as essential sources of information. Supporters of public service broadcasting point out the fundamental difference between public and private media. They point out that the nature of private media's information spreading is inherently competitive, and the freedom of private media entails the freedom of choice in distributed content. Therefore they have the tendency to reduce diversity in coverage prior to elections when it is considered particularly

¹²⁰ Frumvarp til laga um ríkisútvarpið, fjölmiðil í almannapágu. Þskj. 197, 194. mál, 2012-2013. Vefútgáfa Alþingistíðinda, <http://www.althingi.is/altext/141/s/0197.html> (accessed March 22. March 2013)

¹²¹ Christian S. Nissen, *Public Service Media in the Information Society* (Council of Europe, 2006) http://www.menntamalaraduneyti.is/media/MRN-PDF-Althjodlegt/Public_service_media.pdf (Accessed 7. March 2013)

important. Successful public media broadcasters like the BBC and RÚV can lead the way when it comes to public respect and trust.¹²²

In the case of the PEBs, they face poor rating and have problems connecting with people. They once used to be a deciding moment in the campaign for parties, now they are just another part of the campaign. However, the BBC tends to be on the front line of pre-election coverage in Britain and the same goes for RÚV in Iceland. Due to the smallness of the Icelandic media market, RÚV provides the most extensive coverage of pre-elections and, without it, people's options would diminish greatly. Despite the media being highly modernised in Iceland, there are considerably fewer media options than in Britain, where millions are eligible for voting compared to the fewer than 300 thousand in Iceland. Being more newsworthy on a global scale, national elections and the pre-election period in Britain are also covered by global news agencies, including the BBC's own worldwide service.¹²³

With so many choices it is hard to keep people's attention. There is no doubt about that. Due to its nature, the private media does not cover issues in the same manner as the public broadcasters. It can be argued that RÚV and the BBC must remain important media players and enhance what makes them different, providing the people with what they need as well as what they want. Broadcasting used to be, and arguably still is, a powerful media form despite its lack of interactivity, having considerable power over public opinion. Nevertheless, it is just a media form, and in the case of these public institutions, one needs to keep an open mind to adapt them to the format that new technological advances will allow. Today, the existence of public service broadcasting depends just as much on the will of the people for it to exist as it does on their need for it. To be deemed necessary, it must keep supplying material which cannot be granted by others in the most beneficial way for society. As John Reith claimed, the functions is to entertain and, perhaps even more relevant in this case, to inform and educate.¹²⁴

¹²²UNESCO, *Public Broadcasting: Why? How?*

http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/files/18796/11144252115pb_why_how.pdf/pb_why_how.pdf (Accessed 22. March 2013), part I.

¹²³Jeanette Steemers, "Balancing culture and commerce on the global stage. BBC Worldwide." In *Cultural Dilemmas in Public Service Broadcasting*, Ed. Gregory Ferrell Lowe and Per Jauert, (Göteborg: Nordcom, 2005).

¹²⁴The BBC, "John Reith -1. Beginnings", The BBC's Story http://www.bbc.co.uk/historyofthebbc/resources/in-depth/reith_1.shtml (Accessed 15. April 2013).

5 Conclusion

The aim of this dissertation was to evaluate whether the criticism against RÚV's pre-election coverage and the subsequent reform proposals would bring RÚV's pre-election coverage framework closer to that which is currently used at the BBC. Furthermore, arguments related to the BBC's coverage as an ideal standard were examined. The dissertation also sought to understand which factors currently control RÚV's pre-election coverage in the absence of a regulatory framework. Finally, as a common concern for both the BBC and RÚV, the dissertation addressed the future of public service broadcasting in light of the changing media environment in the 21st century.

First, the theoretical framework of the dissertation was established. The social contract theory was presented in an introductory manner prior to discussing the theories of deliberative democracy and Habermas' public sphere, which addressed the morals concerning collective decision making. Habermas argues that public discussions and decision making should take place in a discursive arena free from the economy and the state. Both these theories have normative implications and entail duties which can be applied to the role of the media when it is working for the public. It was argued that the distinction between private and public media gives an account of how public media, due to its nature, purposes and functioning, can be ascribed to those duties, whereas private media is controlled by the laws of the market.

In the next chapter, the BBC was addressed in terms of its history and current structure for a better understanding of its pre-election coverage framework. Rules, regulations and institutional bureaucracy characterise its history and media environment, and it is argued that the pre-election coverage framework is coloured by that environment. Proportionality as impartiality and the Party Elections Broadcasts (PEBs) are characteristics of the pre-election coverage, and arguments for their implementation hailed the allocation air-time in proportion to previous electoral support and the disconnection of promoting candidates from the BBC's editorial work. Commercials are banned, creating limitations for access of candidates and hindering bias in air-time. Critics have nevertheless pointed out that the PEBs and the current interpretation of impartiality are biased towards the bigger political parties. A decline in ratings seems to indicate that the PEBs bore viewers despite their importance as a promotion tool for the candidates, and the election coverage is viewed as not very exciting even though it is characterised by consistency between elections.

In the RÚV chapter, the institution's history and current structure were introduced to describe its background, as well as influences. It can be argued that professionalism has increased in its media environment although it is characterised by limited bureaucracy and its pre-election coverage framework has been criticised for its lack of rules. Its institutional function, however, gives it considerable editorial independence over the pre-election coverage and grants relatively good access for candidates, although it allows commercials, which can arguably create bias in access. In light of the lack of rules, the recent wave of criticism, which partly derived from the OSCE's report and comments, led to provisions in a new bill for RÚV. Some were rejected, but the overall regulatory body was strengthened. Due to the limited scope of this dissertation, further research is needed to better understand the recent events affecting RÚV. This further research might include in-depth interviews with administrators and candidates to get a deeper understanding of the situation at hand.

Furthermore, it can be argued that criticism of RÚV and reform ideas aims to bring the institution closer to the BBC's current pre-election coverage framework. The idea of free air-time and limiting commercials can be viewed as a step towards the BBC's Party Election Broadcasts and commercial absence, although the connection to the BBC was not the express aim of those reforms. Notably, in contrast to the current structure of the BBC's election coverage, the free air-time provision was rejected.

It can be considered ideal that the BBC has checks and balances in its institutional function and consistency between elections. RÚV's proposed reform on these matters would make the Icelandic broadcaster's practices resemble those of the BBC, including similar current pre-election coverage procedures. However, a different perception of impartiality causes the BBC's pre-election coverage framework to be less idealistic, at least compared to RÚV, partially due to the Icelandic tradition of limited regulated bureaucracy. The factors that control when pre-election coverage rules are lacking, in the case of RÚV, are the general rules regarding the coverage as well as informality. The informality that can be seen in RÚV's internal culture and tradition, i.e. in the sense of unwritten rules and procedures. Flexibility thrives in these conditions although it can easily be manipulated.

The discussion here was lastly situated within the important and relevant broader debate concerning the future of public service broadcasting. It can be seen to be facing legitimacy challenges due to diversifying markets and the expansion of new media forms. Public broadcasters can only exist as long as people want them to exist. To this end, it can be argued

that they need to embrace duties that the private media do not and to adapt to new communication forms as well.

The dissertation was limited in the scope of its selected factors and therefore it may lead to more questions than answers. For example, would stricter limitations on editorial freedom and the display of candidates diminish interest in politics? Should public service broadcasters have more editorial freedom when it comes to pre-election coverage in order to thrive? As it has been argued in the previous comparison of the BBC and RÚV, the answers are not simple and may depend on ideology. It depends on the relevant media culture, historical circumstances or other factors. Since there is not one predetermined ideal for all public service broadcasters as democratic and impartial information givers, as long as there are grounds for a common nature and their existence, it can be argued that they should and must function with the aim of enlightening voters so they can make informed choices when they vote.

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