

“The Role of Public Broadcasters in a changing Media Environment” – Speech by William Horsley, Media Freedom Representative of the Association of European Journalists (AEJ)

“SPEAK UP!: FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND MEDIA IN THE WESTERN BALKANS AND TURKEY”, Brussels, May 6 2011

Good afternoon. I know from my work as a journalist working for the BBC for many years, and also as Media Freedom Representative of the AEJ – a network of professional journalists in more than 20 countries -- that questions about the role of national governments in suppressing press freedom in various ways are among the most sensitive questions of all for them.

So it is good to hear today’s promises from European Commissioners that they mean to turn their words into action, by taking a much tougher line in defence of press freedom in dealings with governments. But watch this space – it’s the results that count.

Why we need Public Service Broadcasting

I recently learned the phrase “Always On” to describe the world we live in now – a world of video and audio and text in near-infinite variety, delivered on satellite, cable, by terrestrial broadcasting and online – on large screens, laptops, portable phones and in the backs of aircraft seats.

The “always-on” generation now lives in every part of Europe, and it’s playing a big part in the so-called Arab Spring revolts in the Middle East, too.

Some argue that in the always-on age of cheap and plentiful information the idea of public service broadcasting (PSB) , funded by a compulsory tax, is out of date – unnecessary and wasteful. That argument sounds seductive. But to me it’s clearly wrong.

Just look at the United States, where the strict rule that required broadcasters to observe fairness or impartiality in coverage were withdrawn many years ago. Now, partisan and polemical programmes are the norm, and the once-proud national TV networks live in the shadow of multiple new media of doubtful quality.

Now consider this extract from a recent Council of Europe paper, approved by ministers from across Europe: “Public Service Media”, it says, because “it has genuine editorial independence and institutional autonomy, helps to counter-balance the risk of misuse of power in a situation of strong concentration of media, and is a fundamental component of the media landscape in democratic societies.”

A noble cause indeed! But what is the reality of the PSB that we see today? I will give you my reasons for believing that public broadcasting is vital to a healthy democracy, now and in the future. But only if it is the real thing – that is, independent, inquiring, diverse and tolerant of differences.

So first let's face up to the reality of what public broadcasting has become in most of South-Eastern Europe and elsewhere.

In Turkey, broadcasters, like other journalists, face oppressive laws, and political pressures make self-censorship commonplace. Broadcasting workers complain that they are not allowed to form independent trade unions to protect their employment rights and guarantee their professional independence.

With scores of journalists in jail for their work, and hundreds silenced by criminal prosecutions, who will independently seek out and report on corruption or abuses on behalf of the public's right to know? The European Union has had countless warnings over the past few years that the situation has been growing worse, but little has been done, or to little effect.

In other parts of the region, the preface of the Open Society Institute's publication "Television Across Europe: More Channels, Less Independence" speaks of a "re-politicisation" of broadcasting in the countries which threw off communism a generation ago, so that "political control of the crudest kind has re-possessed television from the Urals to Umbria." That picture is confirmed by many journalists from the region who are here, and by reports written by my colleagues in the Association of European Journalists.

One commentator described this phenomenon as the "fusion of political and media power", creating in effect an open field for cronyism and political interference. As we have heard today, the symptoms include the deliberate political manipulation of TV and Radio governing structures and suppression of critical or opposing voices.

The European Parliament President, Mr Buzek, who spoke to us earlier, must know that public TV in his country, Poland, is deeply tainted by improper demands by the political parties for journalists there to be loyal or favourable to them. And that problem still persists, long after the loss of power by the Law and Justice Party, which was described as one of the worst offenders. It should be addressed for the sake of the health of Polish democracy.

In the face of all this, journalist and editors of integrity in those countries demand and must now receive determined political help -- not evasions or bland promises as often in the past -- from the European Union and other European institutions, because against such ruthless political forces they probably lack the means to do it by themselves.

It is true that the EU, the Council of Europe and the OSCE, as well as individual western governments, have done a lot to assist, with better legal frameworks, and media support and training, as well as warnings to governments that aspire to EU membership.

That is all valuable. But as we heard, for example from the speaker from Kosovo, the EU risks being seen as on the side of governments and their sometimes dubious friends, when it is seen to fail to stand up for journalists' right to investigate, and instead become itself part of a pattern of obstruction and cover-up. The EU must work

harder to show that for journalists in such places the Union really part of the solution, and not part of the problem.

The EU needs to put its own house in order – and be consistent

Too often, Europe's actions do not match its words. I know, because at the invitation of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, I investigated the many blatant violations of legitimate media freedom, and the multiple attacks on journalists in the 47 member states between 2007 and 2009 – including at least 20 cases of killings of journalists. Prompted by that alarming evidence, the Assembly and experts in the Council of Europe proposed concrete measures to monitor and expose these abuses, and to use that evidence to pressure the countries concerned to remove unjust laws, end arbitrary arrests and harassment, and ensure that the police and judiciary themselves behave independently, under the law.

Yet in effect those proposals have been blocked, time after time, by national governments, The shameful fact is that, when presented with the evidence that press freedom is in retreat and that journalists are being silenced by malign forces which use any means to stifle them, European governments have still refused to allow their ministries and courts to be held to account in that way. The way to show they are sincere now is to allow that monitoring as well as effective mechanisms to ensure compliance with the standards they themselves have set.

It has been a similar story after Council of Europe ministers agreed, two years ago, following a fierce debate, to conduct regular reviews to ensure that national anti-terrorism laws do not violate Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights. Despite powerful expressions of concern by media and human rights groups, governments of Council of Europe states have simply ignored this pledge which they made in black and white. Such things can be a matter of huge importance, even of life and death, for journalists who are persecuted by pernicious laws.

And yet another failure -- the failure of states to change their bad laws and practices even when the European Court of Human Rights rules that they must -- means that the same abuses, at the hands of police and courts, persist for year after year. Journalists are usually among the groups that suffer most. That must be changed.

At the same time, a number of EU member states can be accused of failing, all too obviously, to uphold the independence of the public broadcasting media themselves. That record is indeed part of a wider problem.

Take the failure of the European Parliament, despite much public outrage, to speak up and condemn monopolistic patterns of media control in Italy when the issue was debated.

And, in recent months, the case of the EU's response to the passage of the new media laws in Hungary. There was, and still is much confusion – some have seen it as evasion – about the EU's authority to act, even after the European Commissioner of Human Rights listed several serious concerns about infringements of the most basic

rules of media independence. The argument for the EU to adopt a legally binding “Charter of Fundamental Rights” was to protect freedom of expression, as other rights, against state interference. Now it is an important test of the EU’s credibility.

The Slovenian government, too, was accused by over 400 of its journalists at the time when it held the EU Presidency, in 2008, of improper interference in the media landscape, allegedly for political advantage.

And the European Commission itself has been harshly accused, by the International Press Association, representing Brussels-based journalists, of excessive media “spin” and manipulation in the way information is sometimes given out, or not.

Each of these governments, and EU institutions, can of course speak and defend themselves against charges like these. The point is that where strong evidence exists, the warnings and fears of journalists matter more than the pride or embarrassment of any government.

So it is encouraging to hear that the Commission is determined to monitor these things more closely, and require higher standards and more transparency from governments. To be credible, that must apply to those of EU member states as well as those that aspire to become members.

Public Service Broadcasting: still a model for the future

Now let me say why I believe, despite everything, that public service broadcasting has a bright future.

First, at its best, public broadcasting is widely recognised as a gold standard for good journalism and for a lively democracy – though only when it is the real thing.

Secondly, it still commands high levels of trust, and audiences, in some parts of Europe – in Scandinavia, in the UK, and in Germany too, although there the political basis of appointments to senior posts in ARD and ZDF, the two publicly-funded TV networks, is offensive to purists.

As for Britain, the recent coverage of a Royal Wedding may have broken records for the worldwide audience it reached – and it showed again that the British are better at broadcasting than they are at football. But more seriously, the UK has recently been through a turbulent period of elections and a referendum on the voting system, and the BBC, as well as ITV and Channel Four, which also count as Public Broadcasters, showed once again that they “hold the ring”, remaining impartial while the politicians argue with one another furiously on air. That is an example of how it’s supposed to work, even in the modern media age, the age of “always-on”.

Finally I believe that public service broadcasters can also thrive even in the more troubled parts of Europe, including Turkey. The task of making that happen must fall not only to the journalists there, who must uphold professional standards and independence in harsh conditions. It falls also to the European institutions, because when governments themselves break the rules, the joint pressure of other democratic states may be the only means of obliging them to honour their obligations.

Only political leaders can do that. They must avoid a repetition of the situation early this year, when governments in Europe appeared at first to be on the wrong side of the line, when genuinely popular and democratic uprisings took place in the Arab world against autocratic regimes which Europe had got used to calling its allies and friends.

It's time for the EU to conduct itself in a way that demonstrates that those words about upholding press freedom for the sake of democracy are for real. The time to act is now.