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Public service media are struggling to reach younger, less educated audiences and risk “decline and ultimately irrelevance”

- Public service media (PSM) are struggling to reach new online audiences and those with little formal education
- Those aged 18 to 25 favour Facebook and YouTube, rather than PSMs, for online news
- Most PSMs reach audiences with both left- and right-leaning perspectives
- Most PSMs cater to populists and non-populists alike, though the former have less trust in them
- Researchers find PSMs “risk continued decline and ultimately irrelevance to much of the public”

The audience for public service news is old, educated, and politically diverse. As a result, public service media (PSM) in many countries fall far short of the ambition to provide a near-universal news service, especially online and risk becoming irrelevant to much of the public. PSMs often struggle to reach younger audiences and people with limited formal education. Most of these news brands are widely used and highly trusted, but they are often less trusted by people on the political right and by people with populist attitudes.

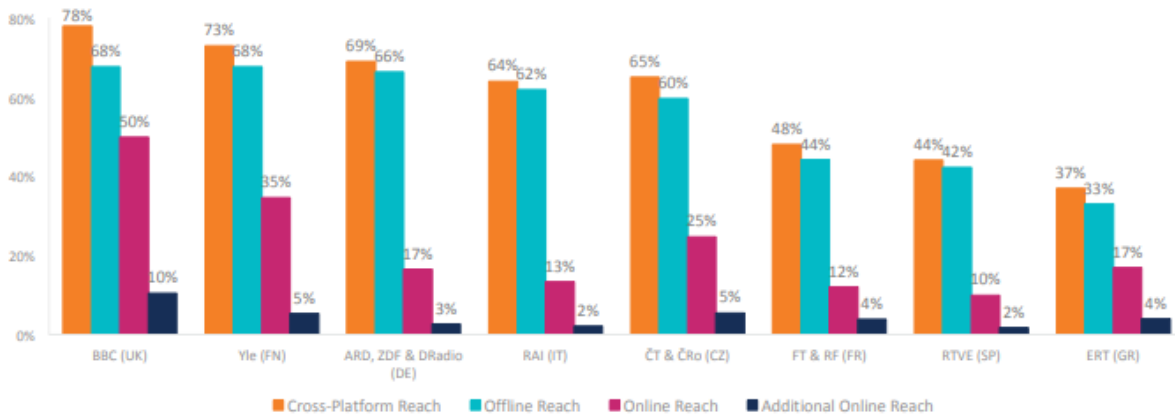
These are the main conclusions of [a new report](#) published by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism with the support of Finnish public broadcasting company Yle. The report draws on survey data from the 2019 Digital News Report and covers eight European countries: Finland, Germany, United Kingdom, Czech Republic, Spain, Italy, France and Greece.

Here are a few findings of the report on five different topics.

On the audience that PSMs reach online and offline

PSMs struggle to engage with new audiences online. The vast majority of the people they reach online are already reached offline. Across the eight countries covered by the report, the BBC is the only PSM whose combined cross-platform news reach is 10 points higher than its offline reach. In most cases, the additional online reach is 5% or less.

Figure 2. Cross-platform, offline, and online weekly reach of PSMs



Q5A/B. Which of the following brands have you used to access news offline/online in the last week? Base: Total sample: UK = 2023, Finland = 2009, Germany = 2022, France = 2005, Italy = 2006, Spain = 2005, Greece = 2018, Czech Republic = 2023.

On PSMs reaching young people

The report compares how audiences between 18 and 25 use offline and online public service news with the use of their strongest private competitor online and with the use of YouTube and Facebook for news. The figures show two things:

- US-based platforms like Facebook and YouTube are more widely used as sources of online news by young people than public service media in many European countries. Facebook is more widely named by young audiences as a source of online news than public service media in seven of the eight countries covered, and YouTube in six of eight countries covered.
- Despite broadcast public service news being much less widely used among younger audiences, offline still delivers wider reach than online in every case but the BBC.
- Despite younger audiences' consistent preference for online news over offline sources, the BBC is alone in our sample in having significantly higher online reach among young audiences than in the wider public. In every other country covered, reach is lower or at best roughly the same.

As Table 2 shows, weekly online news reach for people under 25 has declined in the last three years in most of the organisations covered by the report.

Table 2: PSM online reach for U25 in 2016 and 2019 (%)

	BBC	Yle	ARD & ZDF	RAI	ČT & ČRo	RTVE	FT & RF	ERT
2016	59	29	21	18	30	16	9	12
2019	56	27	19	14	22	8	7	13
Change	-3	-2	-2	-4	-8	-8	-2	+1

The report documents how heavily public service news audiences skew towards older people, with those over 55 accounting for about half of total weekly reach, ranging from 42% (Czech Republic) to 52% (Germany). PSMs rely heavily on offline news content to reach younger people, with half or more of the 18- to 24-year-old audience reached offline only in most countries.

On reaching people with less formal education

In every country covered by the report, public service news is less widely used by those with limited formal education. Given how news consumption is characterised by significant social inequality, this means there is a risk of public service news exacerbating rather than closing this gap. In Germany, only 13% of the least-educated group use the ARD and ZDF online services at least once a week compared with 17% overall. This number goes down to 11% for RAI in Italy, 9% for RTVE in Spain, and 8% for the joint PSMs' online services in France.

On reaching people with different ideologies

The report charts each PSM news provider and select private broadcasters in terms of the size of their cross-platform weekly news audience and how far its overall audience leans towards the left or right of the political spectrum, as compared with the population as a whole.

Figure 7 reflects this analysis. The further from the centre, the more politically polarised is a news provider's audience. News providers in the centre tend to have audiences that appeal equally to those on the left and those on the right.

Figure 7. Cross-platform audience maps for political left/right orientation



Q1F. Some people talk about 'left', 'right', and 'centre' to describe parties and politicians. With this in mind, where would you place yourself on the following scale? **Q5A/B.** Which of the following brands have you used to access news offline/online in the last week? *Base: Total sample: UK = 2023, Finland = 2009, Germany = 2022, France = 2005, Italy = 2006, Spain = 2005, Greece = 2018, Czech Republic = 2023.*

In most countries the audiences of the private competitors lean more strongly to the political right.

In five of the eight countries covered by the report, PSM news services are trusted more on average than their private competitors. Most of them reach people with diverse political views, although in some cases less so on the political right.

On reaching people with populist views

Most PSMs covered by the report reach people with and without populist attitudes to equal degrees. The only exception to this pattern is Greece, where public broadcaster ERT does not reach people with populist attitudes. Private broadcast competitors seem to be better at catering to populists. The only exception to this pattern is in Spain.

Figure 9. Cross-platform audience maps along populist attitudes



Q2_2019_1/2. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements: The people should be asked whenever important decisions are taken/Most elected officials don't care what people like me think.
Q5A/B. Which of the following brands have you used to access news offline/online in the last week? Base: Total sample: UK = 2023, Finland = 2009, Germany = 2022, France = 2005, Italy = 2006, Spain = 2005, Greece = 2018, Czech Republic = 2023.

All but one PSM examined in this report are trusted significantly less by individuals who support populist ideas. The only exception is RAI, which is trusted equally by populist and non-populist citizens.

Anne Schulz, lead author of the report, said: “Our research shows that PSMs studied in the report are well trusted and often more trusted than their main private broadcast competitors. However, they seem to be facing problems with trust by populist audiences. Populist citizens have not stopped using these outlets but they trust them less. It will be important to keep an eye on this in the future.”

Dr. Schulz added: “If the online performance of these news brands does not improve, public service media risk continued decline and ultimately irrelevance to much of the public.”

Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, co-author of the report, said: “The challenges that face public service media are bigger – much bigger – than is commonly acknowledged. If they do not find more compelling and engaging ways of delivering online news, especially to younger people and people with limited formal education, they ultimately will not be able to deliver on their public service mission, or justify the public funding they receive.”

Methodology

The report draws on survey data from the 2019 Reuters Institute Digital News Report. This dataset, collected in January/February 2019, allows for consistent comparison between countries and across platforms, both for the overall public and broken down by particular audiences by age, level of education, and political views and attitudes. The authors focus on a sample of eight different countries that represent a wide range of different PSMs traditions, levels of funding, forms of public service governance, and lengths of public service history.

Further country-specific charts are available in the report.

This [link to the report](#) will become live when the embargo is lifted. For further information please contact: Eduardo Suárez or Matthew Leake, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford, 01865 611098 eduardo.suarez@politics.ox.ac.uk / matthew.leake@politics.ox.ac.uk

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[Dr Anne Schulz](#) is a Research Fellow at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Her doctoral work focused on populism, media perceptions, and news consumption. She is researching questions surrounding news audiences and digital news.

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Board of Ofcom, the UK Communications Regulator, from 2011 to 2017, and was Controller, Public Policy, at the BBC, prior to joining RISJ.

[Professor Rasmus Kleis Nielsen](#) is Director of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism and Professor of Political Communication at the University of Oxford. His work focuses on changes in the news media, political communication, and the role of digital technologies in both.

About the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism:

The Thomson Reuters Foundation is the core funder of the RISJ, based in the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Oxford. The RISJ was launched in November 2006 and developed from the Reuters Fellowship Programme, established at Oxford 36 years ago. An international research centre in the comparative study of journalism, the RISJ aims to be global in its perspective and provides a leading forum for scholars from a wide range of disciplines to engage with journalists from around the world. See <http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/>