

The Public Service Nun
A Subjective Tale of Fiction and Facts
Epilogue

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The Public Service Nun came alive at a Public Broadcasting International (PBI) conference in Belfast in 1999. Since then she has travelled around the world. Thanks to the many comments and suggestions I've received as her custodian along the way, her story has gradually evolved in line with changes in public service broadcasting in its political and economic environment. She was presented at the RIPE conference in Helsinki in 2002 and had not herself thought to show up again in that connection. But recent developments in Brussels and in many European domestic settings convinced her custodian to add another chapter for the RIPE@2004 conference.

The story of the Public Service Nun has never been published before. Like all fairy tales with a moral, it is meant to live orally in direct communication. But as also in the case of public broadcasting, a nun can be convinced to compromise a little if given the opportunity to reach a broader audience.

Once upon a time
in the “good old days” of broadcasting monopoly

In all European cities you find a central square that has been frequented since middle ages. From surrounding country side and nearby villages, people came to the market square to trade goods and buy for the household. But of course the square was always for much more than conducting the business of commerce. Visitors exchanged news and rumours, had something to eat and drink, enjoyed the fights, the music, the dances and all assorted entertainments.

At any time when people felt the need for something of deeper substance, one could easily find the big, beautiful Public Service Dome – or Cathedral, if you like. It dominated one side of the square. The gate opened wide for everyone. Within the confines of the cathedral – far from the bustling turbulence of the square – the nun would preach her public service gospel. Her stories weren't the most sensational and the organ music playing softly in

Figure 1. Public Service in the time of monopoly

the background wasn't popular songs or music to dance by. But what happened in the dome was an important part of everyday life for nearly every citizen. It was easily discernible from the life of the square. There were no other places of its kind. The Public Service Dome had a monopoly on valued services and was, as such, a cultural cornerstone of European society.

And it came to pass, the monopoly ended

Close to the end of last century, this situation came gradually to an end as the activities on the market square expanded. Shops opened in the long row of houses round the square as more people came and set up businesses offering goods and services of all kinds. There was money to be made; a lot of money. Some services bore a resemblance to those offered by the public service nun, although no other gave precisely the same quality of substance, depth or variety.

Even so and without much thought, more and more people on the square gradually turned their back to the public service dome and nun. They were busy browsing all the shops and taking part in the many amusements offered by beautiful young dancers and new foreign musicians visiting from abroad; fewer and fewer thought to pay their respects to the nun.

After a while it even became difficult to find the dome, much less the public service nun. Tall buildings were raised in front of the cathedral, blocking it from sight. The formerly dominating dome increasingly seemed a small wayside chapel. Adding insult to injury, merchants on the square built a

Figure 2. Public Service in time of competition: A dilemma for the Public Service nun



narrow gate, effectively blocking the way to the cathedral. Strong gatekeepers equipped with high tech tools jealously guarded the entrance, making it even more difficult to even find the venue for the dwindling few who still wanted to lend their ears to the messages of the nun.

The public service nun was caught in a difficult dilemma. She could concentrate her activities on the few who, despite all the temptations on the square and the new hindrances, were faithful in attendance. Why worry about the many that apparently didn't recognize any need for her services? Why not be happy and satisfied with the faithful, even if a much smaller flock? Had she asked her small flock for their opinion, they would have undoubtedly advised that course, continuing her services just for them. Forget the herd on the square. It was their choice not to visit.

But of course the public service nuns have always been inclined to missionary work. They are obliged to at least try to reach beyond the sanctified boundaries. They have a commission to include where others are tempted to exclude. After many years of monopoly this in-dwelling urge had developed into an obligation of societal scale.

Thus, it was necessary to leave the cathedral and go out into the market square to meet the audience. The public service nun was painfully aware of the risks. Within the cathedral she had a traditional role that distinguished her by habit, so to say, from the crowded market square. By mingling in the marketplace, she would run the risk of becoming just another among the many. And think of all the dubious activities happening there! She might get some of the mud from the square on her immaculate gown. Or, if lifting her skirt to prevent that, she might disclose so much leg she could be taken for one of the indelicate dancers.

It has never been easy for public service nuns, but this was an especially difficult and troublesome period – except for those who had fallen asleep in a silent corner of the cathedral. For a pretty long time the public service nun just didn't know what to do. Through the open door to the market square she could hear people talking about her, wondering if she had any future role. More than one singer and dancer in the market place questioned the need for any cathedral, heaping scorn upon the public service nun. “Any thing she can do, we can do *much* better” they boasted – while counting the content of their purses.

So the public service nun went out to meet her audience...

After a long period in serious doubt, the nun finally ventured out from the safety of the cathedral to take her first daring steps in the open air of the market square. She was well aware of the risks and of the harsh critique she would receive from the tiny congregation of believers back in the cathedral. This was a new beginning and much was needed to be done. So, what did she do?

Figure 3. The public service nun in the market square



First she knew – or rather discovered – that after the long years of monopoly she had to clarify her mission anew, and thereby the remit of her activities. Being in close contact with her audience was a necessary condition if she was to fulfil her obligations. But that wasn't sufficient because she must at the same time uphold her calling as a clear alternative to all her materialist competitors. Otherwise, there was no reason for her to be in the market at all.

Secondly and soon, she learned that being in the market and maintaining a distinct appearance was not enough either. One way or another, she must tell her story in the language understood by the audience. So she introduced new tunes to update her songs and worked hard to develop new qualities in her offer. She opened new channels of communication and even introduced new technologies enabling her to reach out to every corner of the market square. She didn't have resources in abundance like her rivals, but she learned to economise within the limitations she had to live and work with.

...Verily, she found her place in the market place

After some years of trial and quite a few errors, the nun found her place in the market. She doesn't have the dominating role enjoyed in the days of monopoly, of course. People on the square dance to many tunes and listen to sermons about missions other than public service. But that doesn't bother the nun as long as she has the fair possibility to reach out to all in order to secure regular contact with everybody on the square.

She – and what was much more important, also many of the people on the square and those in the city council – discovered new sides and aspects of her mission. Although the plethora of services on the market brought many advantages, in combination with other developments in the city they also had a disintegrating influence on the community. People now think more within their narrow personal interests and some times even forget they are citizens living together in the same town. Many of the cherished stories of the town, having lived from generation to generation, are fading from memory. New songs introduced from abroad pushed native songs of the city into the background. It has become a challenge and special obligation for the public service nun to help save cultural heritages while also taking an active part in creating new stories in the dialect of the city and new melodies in tune with local costumes. Suddenly the songs and tales of the public service nun have become one of the few cohesive forces, binding its citizens together in a community.

In this way a “dual market model” developed on the market squares of Europe, a in many ways a model that has brought new qualities and secured old values. The healthy competition between the nun and her revenue-oriented rivals has forced both to keep on their toes. Travellers from other continents are visiting the dual market squares of Europe to learn their virtues. Some are coming from countries where the market square is dominated totally by merchants who, lacking competition from public service, are lowering the quality of their offer and raising prices. Others come from places where the market square is totally controlled by a city council that kidnapped the nun for their mouthpiece.

Figure 4. The dual market model of Europe

To the surprise of many and to the dismay of some her rivals, the nun has achieved remarkable success at home. But wait, maybe it is too much of a success?

Strong forces are trying to push the nun back into the chapel

The success of the nun in establishing herself firmly in the market square and securing a balanced coexistence with her rivals is now menaced by dark clouds on the horizon. The winds of opposition are gathering to push her back into the sequestered oblivion of the little chapel.

Suddenly commercial rivals who once favoured competition and praised the vitalising forces of the market place are distressed by the popularity of the nun. They want the nun to get out of the square and go back to the confines of the chapel. They seek to restrict her activities to traditional prayers and hymns, played only in solemn tones on the old church organ. For them, the activities of the nun are acceptable as long as they only attract the diminishing group of believers on the few benches left in the chapel. They are self-righteously against the nun using any new-fangled means of communication that enable her to reach out and contact her audience. That is called trespassing, even transgressing, the narrow and well guarded gate they construct.

Meanwhile back at the chapel, the cultural elite that used to have the nun all to themselves are dissatisfied that she's been hanging around the market square. They certainly support the special funding of the nun's activities though the compulsory collection of donations to their church, but they can't

Figure 5. Strong forces are threatening the public service nun



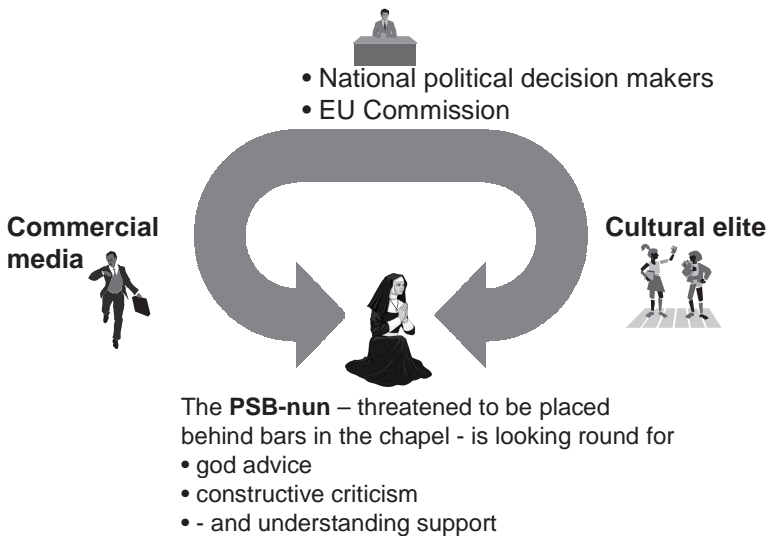
understand that such scarce resources should be used to support popular activities. Such sordid services should be left to the money changers in the market square, they argue. Although everybody participates in the collection, contributing their money too, these believers think the funds should only be used to support the very special interests of this faithful few: Prayers, sermons, the old traditional hymns and other organ music. The once mighty cathedral and now little chapel is best suited to holy restricted activities.

Thus and in a strange way, the merchants on the market square and the tiny cultural elite in the chapel, which are not normally observed to be in harmonious accord, comprise a special alliance. If from opposite angles and for contrary reasons, this alliance puts the nun under harsh double pressure as they co-operate to force her back under the shadow of the dome. The nun is worried, of course. She has listened to her rivals on the square and her little faithful congregation. Although she well understands the arguments, she has become ever more convinced that it is in fact her duty to stay with her flock in the square.

Then came a long period of quarrels in which strong words not typically any part of the nun's vocabulary were used rather boldly. Her commercial rivals trumped off to the city council to demand their assistance, albeit without much success. The counsellors summoned the nun and asked her to kindly refrain from one or two of the more spectacular songs and successful tales, and perhaps to add an extra prayer a couple of times each Sunday. But they mainly concluded, "We are not in a position to decide what a nun can do or not do as long she is following her remit as established by the law of the land". They were of course referring to well known principles about the independent relations between the council and the church.

Did that stop the frustrated merchants on the square? No, indeed. They charged off in a huff to the newly established international Union of Competition Attendants. Those are the people in charge of keeping a close eye on the market square to restore peace and calm when merchants surpass reasonable limits in their rough and tumble fight for larger market share. These Attendants are familiar with every assorted and unscrupulous trick associated with cunning merchants. They had therefore developed very complicated accounting methods and clever control mechanisms which, to the satisfaction of the city councils and the citizens, had brought more than one of the more dubious merchants to the pillory in stocks at the corner of the market square.

Figure 6. The public service nun under double pressure



Unfortunately the Attendants had never dealt with the activities of nuns. They knew the terms and details of trade in most other kinds of goods and services brought to the market, but how can one evaluate the reasonable price of a prayer or the cost of a well-tuned sermon? On the other hand, they reasoned, a service is a service is a service. So, they rummaged around for similar cases and stumbled across a previous conflict that had been successfully resolved, one that involved drivers of horse carriages. “Hey presto”, they declared in their document addressed to the merchants and nuns in the market squares of Europe. “Just do as the horse carriage drivers! Follow the rules we laid down for them, and we will not interfere”.

Not surprisingly, of course, the merchants were unsatisfied. They got however energetically busy foreseeing a wide range of new ways of putting the nun under pressure by measuring her activities of nuns according to yardsticks reinterpreted from the aforementioned horse driver case. On her

side, the nun wasn't happy either because, in any event, the entire affair was so complicated that few nuns and fewer city councils would ever be able to properly understand or thoroughly follow guidelines that were actually about horses, carts and drivers rather than missions, gospels and congregations.

What's a poor nun to do?

For her part, the nun is becoming more and more worried by these 'developments' – if that's what they actually are. She has experience dealing with all sorts of pressures and regulations at the behest of people not familiar with her faith. But never had she imagined that her tales, prayers and songs would be put in the driver's seat of a horse carriage. For the first time in many years she realises that a future behind the gate in the confines of the chapel far removed from the daily life of her congregation could in fact be the result. She is painfully aware of the need for a lot of rethinking, evaluation and also reform on her own part. She is prepared to go to confession, and she would admit an impure thought or two committed under stressful circumstances. But will that be enough? It seems doubtful.

In search of wise counsel and informed advice, the nun turns to the scholars of academia. In case one might wish to entertain her petition, here's a short list from her evening prayers:

- Compass and maps for the difficult navigation between the Scylla of populism and the Charybdis of elitism
- Better tools for evaluation and measurement of quality in her services
- Help in the development of ways to be more innovation and to enhance creativity
- Advice on how she can be better in telling her story and explain her obligations and importance to society
- Help to understand the secrets of horse carriage driving and the minds and thoughts of the clever attendants
- Active participation from the academy in the public discourse about her role and mission

And what can the PSB-nun offer in return? Not very much. She has no authority to pardon or to absolve any sins. Speaking on her behalf as a custodian, I can only thank you for having so patiently listened to this tale.

