

# **Building a European Digital Public Space**

**Strategies for taking back control  
from Big Tech platforms**

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**Published by** iRights.Media, Philipp Otto  
iRights.Lab GmbH  
Schützenstraße 8  
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**Layout and design by** Josef Bacher

**Copy editing by** iRights.Lab

**Proofreading by** iRights.Lab

**Printed by:** CPI books GmbH

**eBook-Conversion:** CPI Clausen & Bosse GmbH, Leck

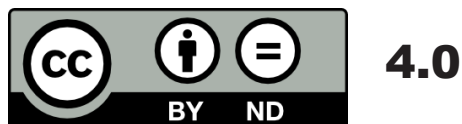
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# Creative Commons as a Public Service Task<sup>1</sup>

Experiences, opportunities, and challenges of collaboration between public service Media and commons-based third-party platforms

Leonhard Dobusch

## Abstract

While increasingly in the field of science the results of publicly funded research and data inventories are made available free to use for everyone (“open access”), publicly funded media providers remain reluctant to make their content accessible under free licenses. Meanwhile, early experiences of collaboration between public service media and commons-based platforms furnish insights into the reasons for such reluctance and may provide clues about how hurdles may be overcome on the way to free, Wikipedia-like licensing of public service media content.

1 This text is based, in part, on blog entries by the author, originally published in the series “Neues aus dem Fernsehrat” (News from the Broadcasting Council) at [netzpolitik.org](http://netzpolitik.org) between 2016 and 2019. It also contains passages adapted from the author’s “Demokratisch-mediale Öffentlichkeiten im Zeitalter digitaler Plattformen” (Democratic Public Media in the Age of Digital Platforms), published in “Zur Zukunft öffentlich-rechtlicher Medien: 55 Beiträge aus österreichischer und internationaler Wissenschaft zur Medienzukunft” (Vienna: Facultas, 2018), Mitschka, K., Unterberger (ed.). See [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benutzer:Kurt\\_Jansson/%C3%96R](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benutzer:Kurt_Jansson/%C3%96R)

## Introduction

“It should be a given that self-produced content broadcast over public radio ought to be aired under a free license.” (Kurt Jansson, quoted in Dobusch, 2017a) This view was espoused by Wikipedia author Kurt Jansson and co-founder of the German Wikimedia chapter organization, who wished to incorporate more public service media content in the German version of Wikipedia. To this end, in 2017, he and others also initiated a kind of “wish list”<sup>2</sup> of content that, from the perspective of volunteer Wikipedia authorship, would be particularly well-suited for the free online encyclopedia.

It’s obvious that Wikipedia and its readers benefit when historical photographs of, say, Hannah Arendt or the Berlin Wall are shown. But while there are often Wikipedia entries about the participants of diverse talk shows, there may be no suitable photo available. This could be easily corrected by public broadcasters. And there are buried treasures available in public archives: “We’d like to illustrate articles on legendary programs, such as ‘Das Literarische Quartett’ (The Literary Quartet) or ‘Was bin ich?’ (What am I?), with short excerpts,” says Jansson (Dobusch 2017a).

Wikipedia is not just any online platform, but the only non-profit among the 50 most visited websites worldwide. Moreover, according to an online study by two prominent German broadcasting companies, ARD and ZDF, more than 93 percent of 14 to 29-year-olds use Wikipedia at least occasionally and, on average, Internet users in OECD countries call up more than nine Wikipedia articles per month (see Steinmaurer/Menzel 2015, p. 14). So if more open-licensed content were so freely distributed as to appear on Wikipedia, this would imply not only a totally new distribution channel, but one that would be useful to younger target groups in particular. But besides Wikipedia, there are other areas of application for open-licensed content. In German-speaking countries, for example, interest in open educational resources (OER) has gained considerable traction in recent years (see Dobusch et al. 2015). A growing community of digitally oriented educators contributes to a public pool – a knowledge commons – of freely accessible and adaptable learning materials. Here, too, public service media with open-licensed content may be better aligned with its own educational remit and become more visible, particularly among younger target groups.

2 See [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benutzer:Kurt\\_Jansson/%C3%96R](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benutzer:Kurt_Jansson/%C3%96R)

Both these examples illustrate the large and rapidly growing potential for distribution and for reaching new audiences connected with the release of open-licensed content that is, thus far, little appreciated, let alone exhausted. But beyond questions of distribution, there are fundamental reasons for increased commitment to the cause of open licensing. For example, precisely because public service media are supported by direct contributions, they must merely maintain financial viability, but typically do not strive to maximize profits; so that the use of free, open licensing, such as the Creative Commons, corresponds closely to their economic mission.

Moreover, by standing in clear contrast to profit-oriented “all-rights-reserved” offerings, open licenses and formats can strengthen the participatory character of public service media in general. Given their empowering advantage, open licenses go beyond traditional forms of interaction and engagement of users and contributors. Nevertheless, it’s clear that the topic of open licensing – as in copyright and licensing issues in general – is, of course, of no interest or inspiration to the public at large. Yet the enhanced accessibility and availability of materials on such platforms as Wikipedia, or in the context of online educational resources, is of benefit to contributors to public service media, regardless of how unmindful they may be about licensing backgrounds.

Considering the numerous advantages and potential of open licensing from the perspective of public service media, the question naturally arises as to why barely any significant efforts have been made in recent years by public service broadcasters to make content accessible in this way. This question is all the more relevant in view of the substantial degree to which public service media have become invested, during the same period, in the presence of such third-party commercial platforms as YouTube or Facebook. In Germany, for example, the ARD-ZDF public youth offering called “Funk” has an annual budget of some 45 million euros.<sup>3</sup> In the absence of broadcasting infrastructure, Funk develops and optimizes its content for playing out on third-party platforms such as YouTube or Instagram, while Wikipedia is not yet among target platforms for self-produced content. The aim of this article is to shed light on the causes of reluctance on the part of public service providers to cooperate with commons-based communities and their platforms, and to indicate some possible solutions. Before discussing in detail several

3 See <https://www.funk.net/funk> (02/25/2019)

hurdles for open licensing of public service content, the following section discusses illustrative case studies of collaborations between an established, publicly funded institutions and the Wikipedia community to give empirical-practical examples of the potential and the pitfalls of such collaboration.

## **Case Examples: Commons-Oriented Collaborations with Publicly Funded Institutions**

Since the early 2000s, a growing number of collaborations have emerged between publicly funded institutions – particularly in the so-called GLAM sector (galleries, libraries, archives, and museums)<sup>4</sup> – and commons-based communities like Wikipedia. In most cases, the aim is to digitize cultural heritage and make it accessible to as many people as possible. A well-documented, early example of such a collaboration in the German-speaking world is that from 2008 between the German Federal Archives and the German Wikimedia Chapter (an association founded in 2004 as Wikimedia Deutschland - Gesellschaft zur Förderung Freien Wissens e.V.). Over a period of two years, a selection of 140,000 photos from the holdings of the Federal Archives was made available under a Wikipedia-compatible Creative Commons license and transferred to Wikipedia’s media archive, Wikimedia Commons. The response to the increased access to the national archives was so great that it led to capacity issues at the Federal Archives: “(...) the doubling of the number of users has also resulted in definite problems in the form of a nearly unmanageable workload.” (Sander 2010, p. 162)

The growth in users and direct access to the pages of the Federal Archives is a result of detailed source information and external links published on Wikipedia. In contrast to commercial platforms, which tend to hinder external linking capability, this is good and established practice in Wikipedia. In the ten years since the collaboration project of the Federal Archives, many other institutions from the GLAM sector have mounted similar initiatives involving open licensing and the provision of digitized works (see Table 1 for a selection of commendable examples).

4 See <https://de.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Wikipedia:GLAM&olddid=185906669> (03/19/2019)

<b>Case Example</b>	<b>Published Works</b>	<b>License</b>
Deutsches Bundesarchiv, Berlin	140,000 (med.-res)	CC BY SA
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York <sup>5</sup>	406,000 images (hi-res)	CC0
Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision, Hilversum <sup>6</sup>	7,300 videos	CC0 and others
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam <sup>7</sup>	150,000 images (hi-res)	CC0
Walters Art Museum, Baltimore (MD)	18,000 images (med.-res)	CC BY SA
ZDF Terra X <sup>8</sup>	150 videos	CC BY

Table 1: Examples of free licenses in publicly funded institutions  
(Source: author's own presentation)

What many case examples cited in Table 1 have in common is that the works that were digitalized and published under open licenses were already extant and were even, in some cases, no longer under copyright protection anyway. In the interim, however, there have been increasing numbers of cases in which publicly funded institutions have considered open licensing immediately upon the creation of new content. A well-documented example of such a project is the Dutch TV series “Mind of the Universe” by the public broadcaster VPRO (see Brinkerink et al. 2018).

This series – based on interviews with leading scientists in disciplines ranging from biology and chemistry to computer science and astronomy – explores possible paths of social and technological development. The series is designed in such a way as to enable independent moderation and rearrangement of the original material. The intention, then, is to facilitate the creation of different language versions and simplify

5 See <https://www.metmuseum.org/about-the-met/policies-and-documents/image-resources>

6 See <https://www.openimages.eu/media.en>

7 See Pekel (2014)

8 See Dobusch (2020)

the use of the videos for educational purposes. To this end, both raw (approx. 30 hours) and edited versions of the video material, as well as stills, were made available under a Wikipedia-compatible license.<sup>9</sup>

Already in the conceptualization and pre-production phase, prerequisites for using an open license were considered. These included corresponding legal requirements, but also clear usage scenarios for the specific materials to be openly licensed and, of course, the consent of both the participating camera teams and interview partners. Regarding music, new compositions - for which the necessary rights associated with open licensing could be obtained - were targeted (see Brinkerink et al. 2018).

Following broadcasting of the series on Dutch TV, and then distribution via YouTube, numerous interview segments were integrated into Wikipedia articles about the scientists interviewed. Again, for this purpose, it had been advantageous to incorporate multilingual subtitling so as to support the use of the different language versions available in the online encyclopedia. In February 2019, 34 Wikipedia articles that appeared in 6 language versions each included video material from the series and were viewed thereafter some 75,000 times per month (Smeets/De Vos 2018).

### ZDF Terra X-Videos in Wikipedia (Views/Monat)

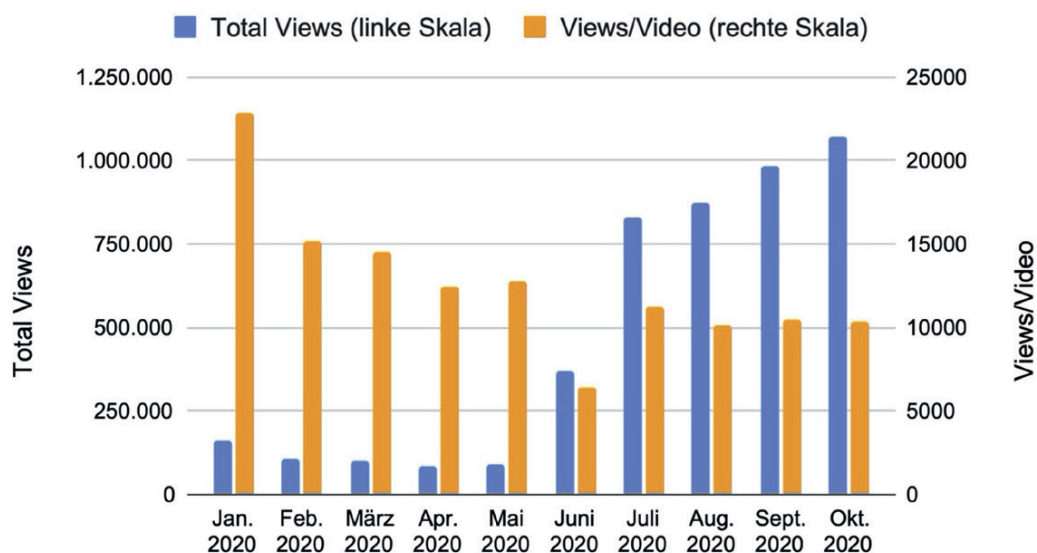


Chart 1: Users views of ZDF Terra-X video clips in Wikipedia, January to October 2020 (Source: author's own presentation; data from [mvc.toolforge.org](http://mvc.toolforge.org))

<sup>9</sup> Spec.: Creative Commons Attribution Share-Alike 4.0 International



Since 2020, a further example of the regular release of videos in German-speaking countries under free licensing is the ZDF documentary series, Terra X which, through the release of selected, short videos, reaches a broad audience through Wikipedia (see Figure 1). In contrast to the Dutch example, these are mainly brief explanatory videos and complex computer simulations of historic architecture and cities. Here, too, the decision to adopt free licensing was agreed from the start.

## **Hurdles for Open Licensing of Public Service Content**

The case studies outlined in the above section illustrate the demand for and scope of – as well as some basic legal considerations surrounding – open licensing of public service content. They are also clearly exceptional cases and, especially for this reason, involve extra effort on the part of those responsible. This section focuses on the reasons for such additional effort, which until now demonstrate some of the most decisive hurdles for the increased use of open licensing of public service content.

The hurdles in question correspond specifically to content that is principally suited to open licensing and therefore comparatively uncomplicated. By contrast, for example, content involving agents or organizations mandated to represent ownership rights of authors, musicians, and artists – such as GEMA in Germany or AKM in Austria – as well as most fiction formats are excluded from the present discussion. The concern here is not with content produced specifically for commercial exploitation by public broadcasters or other third-party enterprises – at least not when it involves complete episodes or entire works of marketable entertainment. Such works are relevant for use under open licenses only in exceptional cases and then only for referencing in the form of stills or short clips.

In what follows, particular attention will be given to hurdles that directly impede the use of Wikipedia-compatible licensing. In some respects, such hurdles are even more formidable than those associated with more restrictive forms of licensing, for example, those that exclude any form of commercial use.

## Fear of Manipulation

Not all hurdles are economic or legal in nature. In fact, some of the most common arguments against the use of open, Wikipedia-compatible licensing concern perceptions, real or imagined, of the loss of control over the original material. As reported by an internal working group at ARD in 2014 (see Dobusch 2014), even in such cases where public service providers use – or recommend the use of – an open license, they're apt to apply exceedingly restrictive limitations. As the ARD working group report explains:

“The License, ‘Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs’ (BY-NC-ND) is the most readily employed and minimizes legal risks. At the same time, however, this form of licensing excludes many of the most desired types of use: Wikipedia, for example, cannot use content protected under such a license.” (AG Creative Commons to the ARD Online Editor’s Conference, 4)

In line with this recommendation, for example, graphics produced by ZDF in connection with its coverage of 2017 Bundestag election results were published under the most restrictive of all available Creative Commons licenses, CC-BY-NC-ND, which prohibits any form of modification or any use whatsoever in a commercial context (Dobusch 2017b). Such a license prevents use, not only in Wikipedia, but in many other subsequently desirable contexts as well.

In return, however, an ND license does not provide any protections against the possible falsification of content: neither accuracy nor the attribution of content is regulated under an open license. Such licenses protect solely against modification of the original presentation and apply the obligation to identify the material under the respective Creative Commons license. If the Creative Commons license used does allow some modification of content, fulfillment of the terms of use still requires that any change must always be identified. This means that, even with an open license, a public service provider is not in a weaker position should legal action need to be taken in the event of inaccurate content or improper attribution.

## The Involvement of Multiple Rights Holders

That the consent of all rights holders is required for open licensing of public service content is of great practical relevance. This can be particularly daunting in the case of archive content where, as a rule, the rights for certain kinds of use may have been granted, but not for open licensing. Subsequent relicensing is therefore always associated with additional expense that typically requires special justification.

By contrast, an example like the ZDF mockumentary, “Operation Naked,”<sup>10</sup> for which Mario Sixtus was largely responsible, proves that, even in the field of fiction, and where numerous coauthors are involved, the use of a Creative Commons license is viable. Again in this case – as with the Dutch TV series, “Mind of the Universe,” discussed above – a precondition of success was that issues specific to open licensing were carefully considered already in the pre-production phase.

## Rules of Compensation

It should be self-evident that open licensing must not result in any lost compensation to authors and other creatives. In practice, however, established rules of compensation aren’t designed to support open licenses. The classic example, of course, is that of percentage-based royalty payments which, in the case of open licensing, are likely to be at least partly precluded. This is of particular relevance to freelancers, who are typically dependent on such forms of remuneration.

Given the development of non-linear, online offers – media libraries in particular – the traditional practice of ongoing, sales-based royalties faces new limitations anyway (Bundesverband Regie e.V. 2014). Depending on how it’s designed, a practicable and, for many rights holders, attractive – solution involves the inclusion of an opening or alternate clause that provides either a higher, lump sum remuneration for open licensed content – i.e. excluding subsequent royalties – or a lower initial payment with the possibility of future royalties.

10 See <http://operationnaked.org/>

## Competition Protections

Another argument for the use of restrictive, Wikipedia-incompatible license variants concerns competition regulations. Here, a key question is: Does the release of public service content under a license that enables commercial re-use constitute unlawful aid under EU law?

This raises the importance of ensuring that open licensing doesn't result in special benefits to individual organizations, but equally serves interests of all. Thus the use of a license such as Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) does not favor any particular company or industry and doesn't imply the selectivity required for the concept of aid. The same applies for a license that stipulates "ShareAlike" (CC BY-SA), which doesn't exclude commercial use, but safeguards the free reuse of published derivative works. Similar to the open access provision of publicly funded research results, the consequent general improvement of the basis for third-party activity does not constitute competition influencing, selective aid.

Conversely, open licensed content may be relevant as unlawful aid under EU Competition policy if it's been distinctively tailored to the needs of a specific cooperation partner – in technical jargon: *de facto* selective. Such *de facto* selectivity is, however, hardly conceivable in connection with the general release of archive content or new productions that are unassociated with any concrete cooperation agreement.

## Additional Costs

What all the hurdles described above have in common is that – compared to classic production processes – the use of open licensing in the context of public service content initially implies additional effort on the part of the institutions and editorial offices involved. For pioneer projects, such additional efforts and related costs are clearly steeper than in the case of follow-up projects that can build on relevant previous experience. As described earlier, such additional costs are offset, however, by added gains, especially in the form of audience expansion and the opening up of new target groups; gains that will be of growing importance, especially for future, non-linear distribution channels. For this reason, the following, final section of this article is dedicated to strategies for strengthening the viability of open licensing of public media content.

## **Strategies for Strengthening the Viability of Open Licensing of Public Service Media Content**

Outlined below are three strategies for more open licensing of content from public service media providers. These strategies, which complement or even mutually reinforce each other, represent various starting points for gaining initial experience in the use of open licenses and gradually building upon them.

### **Bottom-up: Editors**

Since the use of open licensing requires the agreement of the authors involved, the obvious starting point is the individual editor who serves as the author's contact person. Without the appropriate commitment of editors, a general initiative for more open licensing would indeed be hard to imagine.

New online formats – for example, the virtual reality reconstructions of historic buildings that are part of ZDF's "History360"<sup>11</sup> – are proof that open licensing can be of particular interest in specific fields and for certain editors. The potential of such new and innovative online offerings can hardly be realized through classic linear distribution channels, which is why the editors responsible must explore how such fully self-produced content may be disseminated (Dobusch 2018). Wikipedia-compatible licensing of such content is an obvious choice, since it's manifestly suited to the encyclopedic format.

At least in Germany, the elimination of the previously mandatory "broadcast reference" for online content in 2019 has led to a sharp increase in the number of non-linear offers in search of new distribution channels. This should in turn increase pressure on authorities in other countries to grant their national public broadcasting networks greater freedom, as well.

11 See <https://history360.zdf.de/>

## **Top-down: Commitment and Support**

Even if initiatives to promote open licensing without support of individual editors are hopeless, there remain a number of options for action to enhance the possibility of top-down support.

- Official commitment at management level: The value, at the level of management, of the mere positioning of support for the use of open licensing can hardly be overestimated and leads – at the very least – to awareness of relevant questions.
- Support on questions of law: Since the possibility of applying an open license will give rise, at least at the start, to legal questions, the availability of an appropriate point of contact will help to alleviate any related uncertainties or fears.
- Provisions for open licensing when (re-)negotiating rules of compensation: Editors, authors, and other creatives who work with open licensed content must not suffer any financial disadvantages.
- Promotion of model projects: To enhance visibility and awareness of the meaning and value of open licensing, it makes sense to centrally orchestrate pilot model projects.

None of the above suggestions should imply any significant financial investment. Rather, the goal is to initiate cultural changes that can help to establish a more open mindset.

## **Archival Content: 1,000 Hours for the Internet**

As discussed above, the use of open licensing for archive content is generally more complex than in the case of newly created material, since only the latter enjoys the advantage that relevant concerns can already be taken into account at the onset of the production process. Nevertheless, open licensing can be applied in the field of archives, but it requires understanding of the need to appropriately invest in the cost of clarifying respective rights. In cooperation with the responsible department, a

project may be defined and budgeted to provide for the availability of an annually restricted number of broadcasting hours under an open, Wikipedia-compatible license.

The selection of content suitable for this purpose would be left to the archivists. Communication with the public, however, should emphasize the empowering character of open licensing, particularly with regard to its advantages for fee-contributing users (e.g., “1,000 hours for the Internet”).

## Conclusion

In view of the growing importance of non-linear distribution channels, it becomes increasingly clear that the use of open licensing is in the very interest of public service media providers themselves. Considering growing pressure to cooperate with private providers, the fact that open licensed content may also be used for commercial purposes even suggests a strategic advantage: While private providers may use the content, non-commercial platforms and independent media have access to it as well. When compared to the limited access to public service content by a handful of commercial providers within the framework of a cooperation like the video platform of the Austria Press Agency (APA), this advantage is significant.

The question still remains for public service providers to decide whether self-produced content – i.e. created without the integration of third-party materials – should in principle be published under Wikipedia-compatible open licenses (ideally CC0, CC BY, or CC BY-SA). In this way, besides the positive effects on audience reach, particularly in comparison to private commercial offers, the added value and other benefits of a public service offer would become clear.

## Author

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