

# The Many Uses of the "Public Service" Concept

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Sharpening media competition over the past decade has led to a sort of inflation in the use of the concept of *public service* with respect to radio and television services.<sup>1</sup> From once having been of primarily historical significance, *public service* has become a key concept in the regulation of publicly and privately owned radio and television channels. By attaching concrete and significant privileges to the status of "public service broadcaster" without specifying what they mean by the term, authorities have elicited a battle of rhetoric, the winners of which are awarded gilt-edged concessions, a share of licence fee revenues, and politicians' blessing. In such a situation it may be interesting to go back and examine the origins of the concept and ask: Is there any meaning left, or has the concept been so perverted that it nowadays can be used as an apology for just about anything?

## No Standard Definition

That there is no standard definition of the meaning of *public service* is an old truth in the field of media research. My own interest in the subject developed back in the late 1980s when I was working on a doctoral dissertation on the BBC and Norsk Rikskringkasting, NRK, the Norwegian public service broadcasting institution. I was searching for an established definition that might serve as sort of a "base line" in the introduction to my thesis. After having considered more than thirty different definitions, I realized that not only did the definitive criteria differ, some were in fact directly contradictory. I discussed this problem in an article (Syvertsen 1991), some of the main points of which are relevant to the current discussion. Let me begin by reviewing them briefly here. We shall then go on to discuss the extent to which the developments of the past decade have made it more difficult or easier to use the concept in media policy contexts.

## "Broadcasting in the 1990s:

### Who is the Most Public Service- Minded?"

The article, which appeared under the above title in 1991, made three main points. First, during sixty years of broadcasting history, no single understanding

of "public service" had crystallized. Not only were the attempts to define the phenomenon contradictory, there was also considerable variation in the definitions between countries and over time. Developments in Great Britain were particularly interesting in this regard. Here, regulatory usage of "public service broadcasting" had shifted from being a synonym for the BBC and its starchy, paternalistic policies of the 1920s to become a catch-all that ultimately included the greater part of a relatively commercialized media system. "Everyone" wanted to be a public service broadcaster – from local radio stations to Sky Channel.

The change did not occur without protest, however. The BBC, for example, continued to use the concept in a manner that accommodated all the changes that the organization itself had undergone, but excluded all other broadcasters. Given such a state of affairs, one can only conclude that the concept of "public service" was highly elastic, not to say amorphous. It was also apparent that the term was not entirely well-suited to use as a guiding principle in media policy discourses.

This conclusion led to the second point in the article, namely, that the question of what constitutes "public service" has significance far beyond the research community and people interested in broadcasting history. As early as the late 1980s it was quite apparent in Norway, as elsewhere, that institutions who could make a justifiable claim to the "public service" label would enjoy an advantage in the competition for economic and infrastructural privileges in the broadcasting sector. Characteristic of publicly regulated broadcasting sectors is that not only money and ratings, but political and cultural legitimacy count when privileges are to be granted or defended. "Public service" was in this context an honorific, carrying connotations to values like "national culture", "professionalism" and "quality". Use of such a label signalled a sense of responsibility and democratic commitment. At the same time, the term was diffuse and did not impose any major strictures on the broadcaster's freedom of manoeuvre. From the above one should not draw the conclusion that media research supports calling anything at all "public service". On the contrary, the article went on to identify several positions in relation to the concept, and the third main point was the observation that the battle between these positions was largely a struggle between different conceptions of the importance of broadcasting in society. Following a semantic analysis of the concept, three principle meanings were identified.<sup>7</sup>

The first definition was "public service" in the sense of a *public utility*, i.e., a technical-economic interpretation of the term that refers to the kind of services governments commonly provide – postal service, roads, railroads, etc. – where the prime criteria of success are signal quality, efficiency of operations and a distribution network that provides universal access. This understanding of the term predominated in the early years of European broadcasting. In Norway, for example, the principle that broadcasting services should be available nationwide was a prime argument for making broadcasting a responsibility of the public sector. John Reith, the BBC's first Director-General and author of what might be termed a paternalistic ideology of broadcasting, used the term in this sense. This is quite apparent in his book, *Broadcast over Britain*, of 1924, where he develops his ideas

about radio as an agent of public enlightenment and vehicle for the distribution of (high) culture. A chapter entitled, "A Public Service" reflects little of such concerns, however. Instead, "public service" is discussed in terms of features like universal access, uniform rates, regulated profits and high standards of engineering quality.

The second main meaning of "public service" arises out of the circumstance that "public" may refer to the "public sphere" or "the commons". In this sense, "public service" may be expressed as *broadcasting in the service of the public sphere*, i.e., a meaning in which content and values figure somewhat more explicitly. The public sphere represents institutions in which members of the public take part as citizens and collectively make decisions for the common good. A medium "in the service of the public sphere" mainly guarantees that all members of society have access to the information and knowledge they need in order to perform their civic duties. This understanding of the concept corresponds well with broadcasters' self-conceptions in the era of broadcasting monopolies. The relative withdrawal from the state and the market brings non-commercial broadcasting closest to the ideal of a critical "public eye" in modern society. Licence-financed broadcasters have exploited this sense of the concept to the hilt in their struggle to retain monopoly privileges and to stave off competition.

The third definition of "public service" takes its starting point in the equation of "public" with "audience", which implies a conception of the public as individual consumers of the media. In this usage, "public service" may be translated as *broadcasting in the service of the listener/viewer*, that is to say, broadcasting whose prime purpose is to satisfy the interests and preferences of individual consumers rather than the needs of the collective, the citizenry. This sense of the term was not widely accepted in the late 1980s. Today, powerful forces are at play, both within the licence-financed, but competitively challenged broadcasting institutions and among new players on the market, to legitimize such an interpretation of the concept.

### "Public Service" Today

What, then, has happened over the past decade that may have a bearing on the interpretation and usefulness of the public service concept? From the Norwegian horizon four main lines of development appear to dominate.

First of all, the concept of "public service" has clearly assumed an even more central position in media policy than could have been foreseen a decade ago. In fact, one may well say that it has become the key concept in the regulation of Norwegian broadcasting. The trend started in 1988, when the phrase "in the service of the public" was written into the Statutes for NRK, when the institution was re-organized into a foundation. In 1991, the new, privately owned TV2 was required to offer a programme profile that was "based on the principles of public service broadcasting". Two years later, the same requirement was inserted into the concession contract for a privately owned radio station. In addition, in 1995

the government put twenty concessions for "local public service television" up for bid. Finally, in 1996, when NRK was converted into a (publicly owned) corporation, a new formulation regarding the company's purpose was introduced into the "Regulations" document: "NRK is a public service radio and TV company carrying on radio and TV broadcasting and activities in connection with broadcasting."

The ubiquity of the concept indicated here has not exactly helped specify its meaning, and it is not surprising that the government found it necessary in 1995 to appoint a "Public Service Broadcasting Council" (Allmennkringkastingrådet) to help interpret the concept and to formulate the requirements to be made of the various channels. The work of the Council to date, and the debates its annual reports have kindled further underline the lack of consensus regarding the meaning of "public service". The government, however, does not seem to take notice of the problem, but continues to use rhetoric like "with a view to improving the conditions of public service broadcasting in Norway" to legitimize any and all media policy initiatives. "Public service broadcasting" has become an increasingly popular mantra among media policy-makers and market actors. The more it is repeated, they seem to believe, the more it will acquire a meaning acceptable to all and, in time, magically, commercial channels will develop programme policies that render all further confrontations and disciplinary efforts unnecessary.

So far, at any rate, this seems a distant prospect. One of the most striking results of regulators' use of the incantation has instead been that broadcasters' have intensified their efforts in the battle concerning how to define it. It is only natural that when government attaches extensive concessionary privileges to a vaguely defined concept, those desirous of the privileges will do their utmost to interpret the concept to their advantage. NRK, the licence-financed broadcaster, has the most at stake, and to date the company has invested the most impressive efforts toward this end. Not only has the concept of "public service" begun to infuse all the external information emanating from the company, but NRK has also dubbed its annual presentation of audience and programme statistics "public service accounts". These accounts contain a lot of interesting information, but they have nonetheless contributed to giving NRK's external information a propagandistic bent. Whereas it once was rather easy to find factual data in the annual reports, you now have to wade through columns of public service-honourifics to find the simple little figure you are looking for. NRK's self-legitimizing campaign also imbues the information the company offers on Internet. A simple search using the key word "public service broadcasting" (*allmennkringkasting*) yields over forty references to the NRK sites, and the number multiplies when one also uses the various permutations of "public"/"public service" (*allmenn*), "radio" and "television"<sup>3</sup>. Interestingly, in several instances NRK makes use of a definition of public service broadcasting which excludes all other channels without making it clear to the Internet reader that such usage directly contradicts the usage current in official Norwegian media policy.<sup>4</sup>

TV2 and P4 have followed a mixed strategy in their efforts to legitimize themselves. When they have been criticized for not living up to public service requirements, management has, with studied nonchalance, replied that there is no firm definition of "public service" and that there is therefore no basis for demanding changes in the companies' programme policy. To be on the safe side, the companies have used the term to describe their output. TV2 has, for example, followed NRK's lead and more or less sneaked the concept into its public relations material; the last few years the company has also copied NRK in entitling the audience and programme statistics presented in the company's annual reports, "Allmennkringkasteren" [The public service broadcaster]. In a similar vein, P4 when announcing programming staff cuts and reorganization in late 1998, stressed that the company is "making every effort to fulfill the criteria of public service broadcasting" without elaborating on what that might entail.<sup>5</sup> The strategy is clear: by implicit use of the concept and avoiding all confrontation with its historical dimensions, the new channels are scrambling to make room for themselves within the scope of the "public service" concept. On a less lofty level their aim, of course, is to continue to enjoy their state-guaranteed privileges at least a few years more.

### "In the Service of the Audience"

It is quite apparent from the above that there is no common understanding of what "public service" and public service broadcasting mean. One has to admit that the commercial broadcasters and their political champions are right on that point. But that hardly means the concept can be taken to mean whatever you want it to. What we are witnessing today is a systematic struggle to shift the content of the concept from two traditional interpretations toward a new, third meaning: from broadcasting as a *public utility* and *broadcasting in the service of the public sphere* toward *broadcasting in the service of the audience*. The channels themselves are not solely to blame for the shift; they have had good help of media policy-makers, as well. By accepting that new channels fail to offer services to the parts of the country that are costly to reach, by including privately owned and advertising-financed channels under the heading, "public service"; by accepting NRK's letting ratings decide the fate of individual programmes; and by allowing NRK to finance some of its services through advertising sales, authorities have accepted, and even encouraged, greater responsiveness to the individual media consumer than to the audience as a culturally interested, democratically oriented body, or public.

My personal view is that these shifts of position have in many ways been unavoidable and even necessary: the alternative might have been a broadcasting system open to serious erosion. Still, I find phrases like "improving the conditions of public service broadcasting in Norway" both inappropriate and misleading as a description of a policy which in effect has paved the way for comprehensive commercialization of the entire broadcasting sector. When the concepts, *public service broadcast* and *commer.* *broadcasting* gradually begin to be taken for more or

less the same thing, then, surely, the distinction as such has lost its meaning once and for all.

As "public service broadcasting" has more and more come to be understood as broadcasting in the service of the audience, however, an interesting question has arisen: Which audience are we talking about? In recent years we in Norway, as in other countries, have seen tendencies for the term "public service broadcasting" to be used in contrast to *market-segmented* or *targeted broadcasting*. As audiences become increasingly fragmented and the tendency toward special programming for those willing (and able) to pay for it progresses, "public service broadcasting" emerges as the last remaining truly mass media: the old-fashioned kind of radio and television that aims to appeal to a mass audience and is relatively accessible/comprehensible to viewers and listeners.

This is the understanding of the concept TV2 had in mind when the company in its Annual Report for 1997 described itself as "a public service broadcaster with a broad profile [having] the entire population as its target audience" (p. 33). The passage contrasts TV2 with the same company's second, more targeted channel, TVNorge, as well as new pay-TV competitors. In 1997, the same understanding of "public service" figured in the debate that followed a demand of the Public Service Council that the traditional criterion, breadth of appeal, should be applied to each of NRK's three radio channels rather than to the company's overall radio output. Both the Ministry of Culture and NRK took exception with the Council's interpretation. I mention the dispute here mainly as an illustrative example of how, in a relatively important policy area, the public service concept gives no indication of how it is to be properly understood.

## New Usages

This last point suggests that we – once again – may be on the threshold of a new broadcasting situation in which not only traditional broadcast media, but also other media that combine sound, text, data and images, which formerly occupied separate spheres, will be operated by one and the same institutions. The development toward digitization and the convergence of telephonic, information and media services promise new areas of expansion, and in this context the concept of "public service" may well be stretched in new directions. NRK management, for example, argues that the company's involvement in Internet is "a natural extension of what we normally do".<sup>6</sup> That must mean it is "public service", too. Perhaps we shall soon see a situation where "public service" is finally liberated from its exclusive coupling to broadcast media so that it can be freely applied to many different kinds of cultural and media activities. Norwegian film historians Dag Asbjørnsen and Ove Solum have advanced some interesting ideas in this connection. In an article published in 1998 they argue that the Norwegian cinema monopoly, a child of the same era as monopoly broadcasting, should also be considered a "public service" system. One might by the same token argue that the Norwegian system of press subsidies, aiming as it does to maintain a *versally* ac-

cessible and diverse newspaper flora, is a "public service" institution, and that policy areas like telecommunications, transport, cultural life and education have been steered according to "public service principles" the greater part of this past century.

Discussions like this point toward two alternative fates for the concept of "public service" in years to come. On the one hand, expansion ad absurdum; public service as a catch-all for everything good and right in a world where a lot of things are bad and wrong. On the other hand – and much more fruitfully – we can conceive of public service as signifying a set of ideals and norms that imbued all media and cultural institutions in an historic era in the years around mid-century, but which ebbed out slowly starting in the 1970s and 1980s. As the millennium comes to an end, numerous artefacts and norms dating from the period remain intact (not least portions of NRK programme output), but as a guiding principle for broadcasting and cultural policy, the concept is definitely passé.

## Notes

1. The Norwegian term, *allmennkringkasting*, translates more exactly as "public broadcasting", but no distinction vis-à-vis "public service broadcasting" is intended, and none is made here.
2. The trichotomy was later used in several media policy contexts, including the Parliamentary reports, *Media i fida* (St.meld. 32 1992/93:126) and *Om virksomhet i kringkasting og dagspresse* (St.meld. 42 1993/94:10-11) in Norway and Søndergaard's (1995:25ff) Rapport til Statsministeriets mediaudvalg om public service i dansk fjernsyn in Denmark.
3. A search 17<sup>th</sup> February 1999, using the search motor KVASIR, yielded 259 hits for the term, *allmennkringkasting*, 42 of which referred to the NRK pages. (See note 1.)
4. See NRK information at <http://www.nrk.no/info/fakta/allmennkringkasting> and <http://www.nrk.no/info/fakta/allmennkringkasting/kriterier>.
5. <http://stadl.notes.online.no/dig198.nsf/web/md6049187hb8662241550>, 8<sup>th</sup> March 1999.
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TV2s konsesjonsavtale [The TV2 concessionary agreement] (1991).

## Public Service Broadcasting – A Fragile, Yet Durable Construction

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"Sveriges Radio is a vulnerable and fragile construction", wrote Olof Rydbeck, Director-General of Sveriges Radio or the Swedish Broadcasting Corporation 1955–1970, in his memoirs (Rydbeck 1990). That was his conclusion after fifteen years' experience of defending the integrity of the organization as an independent public service broadcasting institution. Crucial to the success and viability of such an organization is the establishment of a recognized position and an ability to stand free of the powers that be. But how is this possible when the organization is ever dependent on concessions that come up for renewal within a year or so, and when one's strength is dependent on the support of influential organizations, public and private? It is, above all, this shortness of term, this lack of a longer perspective, which has effectively wing-clipped public service broadcasting organizations in Sweden and made them the "vulnerable and fragile" constructions that they are.

Subject to the whims of leading politicians and made to walk a slack rope between conflicting demands, the organizations are ever in the position of having to prove their value:

- Although dependent on the Government and Parliament, the radio and television strive to be free, independent and critical.
- Although the companies wish to be free and independent and to be able to offer a rich array of programmes, they face chronic shortages of resources and are enticed by the prospect of advertising revenue, which means dependence on commercial interests.
- Although the companies have an ambition to provide popular programmes that attract mass audiences, they also have a responsibility to serve minorities and a cultural and societal responsibility which weighs heavier than high audience ratings. It is a dilemma under any circumstances, but it is no easier to handle when the number of commercial rivals increases, which necessarily leads to shrinking audience shares.

Despite these conflicting demands and ambitions and despite politicians' and others' intermittent lust to renovate the broadcasting sector, Western European public service broadcasters have survived some seventy-five years. This testifies to a vitality in the idea of independent radio and television services which in-

clude public debate, cultural expressions and educational programming, besides light entertainment and diversions. It is an idea which ties in with our kind of democratic societies, where radio and television meet their audiences not only as consumers but as citizens. It is also an idea which bears kinship to the growth of the welfare state, which is characterized by a desire to balance market forces, which tend toward conformity and uniformity of cultural expression, by applying various cultural and media policy measures. That is why we have various public endowments designed to support and encourage diversity, quality and domestic production, be it in the field of literature, periodicals, cinema or newspapers. The forms vary according to the conditions prevailing in the branch.

But, one may ask, do we really need something as old-fashioned and stodgy as public service radio and television, considering the wealth of information channels satellites, Internet and other forms of digital communication have made available? Might this old European idea of broadcasting in the "service of the public" be passé?

### BBC and the Classical Concept

John Reith, BBC's first Managing Director, set out the first principles of public service broadcasting in his book, *Broadcast over Britain*, in 1924 (Reith 1924). In the USA, where the technology was roughly a year ahead of England, the number of commercial stations on the air had produced a chaotic cacophony. There, there was neither coordination nor a comprehensive media policy. Coordination is crucial, Reith reasoned, particularly when the expansion is rapid and the number of frequencies is finite. A single regulatory authority is required in order to be able to create nation wide service over the airwaves (Briggs 1995:144).

The monopoly service that Reith envisaged would be acceptable only if it were publicly owned and stood equally free from political forces — the Government in particular — on the one hand, and various private economic interests, on the other. Consequently, it should be financed via receiver licence fees rather than advertising. There is no such thing as unregulated broadcasting. If the public sector refrains from imposing rules, commercial interests will regulate the branch according to the unmitigated dictates of the market. Reith castigated the prospect of using radio solely to entertain as "prostitution" and as an "insult" to the character and intelligence of listeners (Stuart 1975).

In Sweden, too, radio was assigned an educational objective. The terms of reference issued to Radiojånst, the Swedish public service monopoly, by the Government in 1925 stated: "Broadcasting shall be undertaken in such a manner as promotes the enlightenment and education of the public." One might, of course, say that the idea of public education was the outcome of a compromise between the government, newspaper publishers, and the Board of Telecommunications (Elgemyr 1996), but when programming came on the air, educationalists occupied leading positions, and the ambitions to enlighten imbued the entire organization in many different respects. Yngve Hugo, Director of the Låres Depart-

ment, was a dedicated educationalist (Nordberg 1998). Lectures, what is more, were highly popular. In the first study of the listening audience, in 1928, lectures proved to be among the very most popular categories of programmes. Despite numerous changes in the Charters over the years, Swedish public service radio and television are still bound to fulfill educational ambitions.

Thus, a programme company in the service of the public is steered by delicate compromises: Programming shall appeal both to mass audiences and to special interest groups, programming shall strike a balance between programme-makers' freedom of expression and demands imposed by public sector bodies; and programmes shall both serve the national interest and reflect the producing organization's integrity and independence.

### An Independent, Self-Reliant Broadcaster?

"Television should be public, but not governmental. It should be like BBC". So declared a spokesman for Solidarnoc in Poland before the country's first free elections in 1989 (Ash 1990). He knew all too well what state radio and state television were. Instead, he wanted a separate, independent, and reliable radio and television; he wanted a public service broadcasting institution.

It has proven difficult to reform the old state radio and television organizations in Eastern Europe. The intimacy between broadcasting and power lingers on, even if the Communist Party has been replaced by an assortment of new parties. Consequently, the media have not played any major role in the democratization process. Commercial channels have come on the air, but they are profit-oriented, and many have allied themselves with the new power elite.

How independent have public service broadcasters been in Western Europe? The companies' freedom has been fairly tightly circumscribed from the start. In the early days of radio in Sweden, the Board of Telecommunications (part of the civil service), and newspaper owners and publishers were represented on the public service company's Board of Governors, along with radio manufacturers. All had interests to protect. Radio manufacturers wanted popular programmes so that people would start buying receivers. The state wanted revenue; for many years the broadcasting company had access to only a third of the revenues that licence fees brought it. The Telecommunications Board, too, was eager to get a share of the licence revenue and to keep control of the engineering aspects of broadcasting and the distribution network. Newspaper owners perceived the new medium to be a threat and sought total control over it. The radio company was not allowed to broadcast news; the newspapers themselves, acting through their joint wire service, the Swedish Central News Agency, had a monopoly on newscasts. The Managing Director of the Agency was also the Managing Director of Radiojånst (Elgemyr 1996).

Thirty years later, the introduction of television in Sweden was delayed due to the urging of a constellation of industry and non-socialist parties (Conservatives and Liberals) that the programming be offered on a commercially financed chan-

nel. The Social-Democrats, who had a firm grip on the government, allied themselves with newspaper publishers who saw television advertising as a mortal threat to their own advertising revenues. Consequently, television was introduced within the framework of the public service radio company, Sveriges Radio (formerly Radiotjänst).

When a non-socialist coalition gained a majority and took power in the mid-1970s, they chose not to privatize Sveriges Radio or even to sell one of the two public service channels. Instead, they split up the company into four subsidiaries under a rather weak parent company, a measure which weakened the institution as a whole.

When the Social-Democrats returned to power in the early 1980s, they set about strengthening the parent company, but by this time the public discourse was concerned with issues of "freedom of the airwaves" and when commercial television would be allowed to be introduced. And in what form: Would one of the public service channels be converted to commercial financing, or would a third, privately owned commercial channel be introduced?

Elsewhere in Europe, the idea of letting market forces guide or replace media policy was gaining currency. Deregulation was a buzzword. New commercial channels were introduced, and some public service channels were privatized or turned to the advertising market for financing. In Great Britain, Prime Minister Thatcher was considering disbanding the BBC, but at the proverbial last minute she changed her mind. It seems that not even Margaret Thatcher dared fully rely on market forces.

In Sweden, Sveriges Television was not unwilling to carry advertising on one of its two channels, and the company was supported in this by some Social Democrats and the Center Party (an erstwhile coalition partner). The responsible Social-Democratic minister was of another mind, however. He wanted to keep public service television free from commercial influences and opted, with the support of the non-socialist bloc (Center Party excepted), to introduce a regulated, but commercially financed third domestic television channel, scheduled to come on the air in 1991.

The non-socialist parties were returned to power in September that year, and the new Minister of Cultural Affairs started her term of office by proposing to nationalize the public service broadcasting companies. This met considerable political opposition, however, and when the dust had settled, Parliament found a publicly owned foundation a more appropriate solution. A foundation was deemed to afford the best guaranty of independence and integrity. Charters for periods of six years and annual cost-of-living increments were introduced to limit the influence of the Government and Parliament.

The same minister also continued deregulation of the sector, introducing private local radio as a means to enhance freedom of expression. Concessions for the stations were auctioned off to the highest bidder. Today, most stations are in the hands of relatively few owners and are linked together in more or less nationwide networks, offering music punctuated with advertising spots a far cry from

the lofty pronouncements that accompanied the change in the law. One may wonder what the next new Minister of Cultural Affairs will do!

Budget cutbacks, coupled with requirements of periodic (self-)reviews of the quality of output, were imposed on traditional features of the welfare state such as the schools and public health care; the same requirements were imposed on the public service broadcasting companies, as well (cf. Walsh (1995)). In the absence of profit maximization, other criteria of performance are needed. Procedures for quality assessment - or "public service accounting" as it is called in Scandinavia - have been drawn up and are implemented on an annual basis; potentially, this will provide a basis for a broader discussion of quality in broadcasting, but so far the exercise has mainly concerned programme statistics and ratings (Sveriges Television 1998). In Sweden's multichannel media landscape today public service radio and television are the sources of "the essentials" of national and regional service as well as diversity of output.

In pace with deregulation international trade in media products has become highly profitable. In trade agreements between Europe and the USA, Europe, and particularly France, has wanted to exempt film and television programmes from the free trade agreements under WTO. The USA has refused to agree to this, demanding free access to the European market, which represents thousands of millions of dollars in programme sales.

Former EU President Jacques Delors addressed the conflict in a speech in 1989, noting that the trade in cultural products cannot be regulated as though it were a question of refrigerators or automobiles. Market forces should not be left a free rein.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the Atlantic, a poster in media mogul Rupert Murdoch's Hollywood office jeered, *Up yours, Delors*. Delors personified all the hindrances that stood in the way of Murdoch's expansionistic strivings. But Europe, the "Old World" of small countries and small languages and that old-fashioned ideal of broadcasting in the service of the public, has remained steadfast - and the struggle goes on.

The most recent challenge to public service broadcasters has come from the Commission of the European Union, the champions of free competition and freedom of enterprise within the Union. The Commission has developed a dictate for public service broadcasting and has proposed confining the organizations' output to the kinds of programming which commercial interests are unable or unwilling to provide. Member States' ministers of culture, assembled in the EU Council of Ministers, protested strongly. It now appears that the Commission will accept a broad definition of the public service mandate and leave further definition to the Member States (Celsing 1999).

And so the tug-of-war between advocates of a free market and defenders of public service continues. Whatever the ultimate outcome, although "fragile" in some senses, the idea of public service broadcasting has proven to be remarkably durable as it now enters into the digital age.

## Summary

Public service broadcasting, i.e., programme companies in the service of the public, is, as we have seen, the result of striking a number of delicate balances: between programming for a majority of viewers and programming for people with special interests; between broadcasters' freedom and the requirements society imposes on them; and between programming serving the national public interest and the independence of the broadcasting institution.

Public service broadcasters must continue to perform their traditional three-fold task of informing, enlightening and entertaining. Viewers expect programme schedules to offer programmes of both broad and minority appeal (Boman 1998). Equally important, there need to be programmes that examine public issues with an incisively critical eye, and services should provide fora for debate. It is programmes like these that distinguish public service broadcasting from public sector broadcasting, i.e., state-owned and controlled radio and television.

Today, in the final years of the century, even the most avid Free Market Liberals are apparently beginning to have second thoughts about the notion of privatizing public service radio and television. We see this in Sweden and throughout the European Union. Several years of "policy field experiments" have shown that one cannot treat public service radio and television like a shoe factory. Radio and television in the service of the public are at once societal and cultural institutions. We must not lose sight of the fact that television today is the largest theatre, the most influential source of news, the prime entertainer, and the largest educational institution in the country. It has become the national stage and the national forum for information and debate. To what extent television will continue to hold this position, and not be reduced to solely an entertainment medium, is intimately bound up with the fate of the public service companies.

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## Some Reflections on Public Service Broadcasting

HENRIK SØNDERGAARD

Concepts, however abstract, do not arise out of thin air, but are produced in an interplay with the reality to which they refer and which they attempt to conceive. When reality changes, it becomes necessary either to invent new concepts or to adjust the old ones so that they can continue to be useful, rather than becoming empty shells that have lost their meaning. Some may say that the concept of "public service broadcasting" already has been an empty shell for some time and is a thing of the past. However, there is considerable evidence that, on the contrary, the original meaning of the concept has been overlaid by new layers of meaning, so that the nature of the concept has changed even though it retains important elements of its original meaning (Syvertsen 1992). In any case, it is evident that the term is still in widespread use; indeed, it appears to be a key concept in current media politics and in the planning of media systems of the future.

Undeniably, the public service concept is chiefly used as a tactical weapon, as a claim to legitimacy, in the ongoing trench wars surrounding media policy. This is nothing new; the concept has always served political aims. In fact, it is its political significance which makes the concept interesting today, for what is at stake in the current conflicts over public service broadcasting is not only the media themselves, but the existence of an open and diverse social communication system. Thus, the idea of public service broadcasting carries a political charge of far broader consequence than the tenor of the current debate might lead us to believe, and for this reason, it should also interest even those who are more or less indifferent about how the media are organized.

Recent media research, not least in the Nordic countries, has concerned itself with the public service concept primarily as a starting point for analyses of publicly owned media's development and programme output (for a review of the literature see Søndergaard 1996), but also as part of government committee work in the area of media. In both cases studies have mainly the character of apologia. If media research today is of any political consequence over and above the purely administrative goal of providing a basis for legislation, it may be to draw attention to the fact that the notion of "public service" is much more than a regulatory principle for electronic media, but is in fact a complex of principles, the parts of which cannot be removed without losing the point and purpose of the whole. The political significance of all this should be viewed in the light of some current tendencies: the media sector, where powerful forces are trying to reduce the

scope of the public service concept so that it might be smoothly fitted into the logic of the market.

### A Complex Concept

The concept of "public service" primarily refers to a set of *relationships* between electronic media and the society they operate in and are mandated to serve. This in itself involves a complex of issues, which makes the concept unwieldy, but in addition there are, formally speaking, many different approaches to the complex, the most important of which are the legal basis on which public service media operate, their organization and programme output, and certain ideals concerning their functions in society. Thus, the concept actualizes complex and far-reaching issues, the importance of which has not faded, but rather grown in pace with developments in the media sector.

Historically, the concept of public service broadcasting was less complex and unwieldy than it is today, partly because it previously exclusively had to do with radio and television monopolies, but also because most of the electronic media concerned had the formal status of institutions in the public domain. When the monopolies were dissolved in the course of the 1980s, it suddenly became much more complicated to speak of "public service" because the basis of former uses of the concept had been eroded while no new basis had been established.

This development has not meant the demise of the concept of public service, as one might have expected, but has instead meant a gradual metamorphosis of its traditional meaning, which was based on the notion that radio and television should "serve the public" within the context of the unifying "national culture" which the monopoly media themselves had created and maintained. One should not, however, conclude that the change in the traditional concept is a consequence of either the presence of competition or the requirements of efficiency and 'audience appeal' which have come with it. Instead, the cause is the proliferation of media. In a multichannel system the media can no longer procure the conditions on which the traditional concept of 'public service' is predicated (first of all, the notion of a national community and a common public sphere) and thus the concept loses its meaning. This also explains why attempts to revive the old ideals are doomed to fail.

However, in the political controversy that arose in conjunction with "deregulation", when the position of publicly owned media was called into question, the concept of public service broadcasting suddenly assumed such *strategic* importance that the question of what it actually stood for was left aside. In the context of media policy, 'public service' was regarded almost exclusively as an institutional concern, and the problem raised was how best to *legitimize* publicly owned media, which, for political reasons, one wished to preserve. Consequently, it is virtually impossible to deal with the public service concept without also considering the fairly complicated political context surrounding it.

### The Realm of Ideals

The concept of public service broadcasting has to do with both concrete media institutions and some overall, essentially instrumental ideals concerning the media and culture and the needs of society. How the concept relates to the media in question is, however, neither clear nor unequivocal; on the contrary, the relationship seems to be increasingly nebulous in a way that forces us to reconsider what exactly we mean by "public service".

Here we are presented with two separate options which approach the issue from different perspectives. The one, the more pragmatic of the two, consists of redefining or at least modifying the concept of public service so that it better corresponds to the actual course and functions of the media, i.e., it takes the media as its starting point. The second, more speculative option involves rethinking the concept "from scratch", so to speak. Here it is a question of asking what kind of "public service broadcasting" society actually needs, i.e., it takes society as its starting point.

The latter exercise is clearly the more interesting of the two, but — as we shall see — it tends to lead toward a kind of idealization, dwelling as it does among ideals relating to the function of society, far removed from the real-life institutional constraints under which the media operate. Nonetheless, this approach produces more critical perspectives than the pragmatic alternative which dominates the discourse at present.

In either case one must bear in mind that concepts are mental constructs, the function of which is precisely to abstract aspects of reality in order to help us grasp relationships of such complexity as defy our comprehension. The concept of public service, however, also has a *normative* aspect in that it is used with the aim of moulding reality in a certain way. This is doubtless one of the reasons the concept has a somewhat ambiguous status, while it also inspires the formulation of rather abstract requirements.

It would be an overstatement to say that the concept of public service arouses passions, but it is nonetheless one of those ideas it is easy to become enamoured of, mainly because the demands it makes of media "in the service of the public" have a special appeal and enticement in a media sphere which otherwise mostly is a matter of customers, markets and "the bottom line". The appeal resides not so much in the requirements of diversity of programme output as in the captivating image of audiences which it summons up. Much of the research on the concept of "public service" addresses the concept in the context of theories of the public sphere and a conception of listeners and viewers as rational citizens (Garnham 1983; Murdoch 1992; Tracey 1998). In this usage, "public service" is not so much a question of media as of higher callings, and it is these, be it a question of democracy, culture, or societal development, that are so engaging. Thus, ironically, one often finds the most ardent advocates of public service broadcasting among those who have the greatest reservations about the electronic media. There is no reason to discount or dismiss the cultural criticism in these positions, but their proponents' overall lack of understanding of the actual conditions and constraints un-

der which media operate limits their usefulness in analytical and media political contexts.

### Media Realities

Use of the concept of public service on the ideal plane is less common today than in the early 1980s, when the discussion of public service broadcasting started up. Instead, considerable interest is attached to public service media and their programme output, i.e., precisely the areas which previously were little explored, whereas societal perspectives, once predominant, have now receded into the background. The reasons for this are several, but principal among them is a recognition that current media trends, rather than doing away with public service radio and television, as many a decade or so ago feared might happen, have instead led to a kind of "reconstruction" of them. In this process the concept of public service has changed character in such a way that it is hardly comprehensible unless one takes account of the conditions under which the media operate.

Competition has above all forced public service media to be more responsive to their audiences than previously in the sense that viewers' and listeners' wishes and desires now carry more weight than society's desires regarding certain cultural or social functions. The dissolution of the monopolies meant the death of the kind of paternalism previously associated with public service media, and as many of the programme policy requirements which the channels' monopoly status entailed had lost their relevance, public service media now achieved more freedom with regard to programme policy. The nature of the changes in programme policy that have occurred in recent years will not be discussed further here, as they are relatively well documented elsewhere (cf. Hultén 1996; Syvertsen 1997; Søndergaard 1994). Suffice it to say that the analyses of programme output undertaken to date find no evidence that the changes made have in any way set aside the requirement of all-round diversity or standards of programme quality.

The "modernization" which the concept of 'public service' has undergone does not involve totally new and different principles with respect to programme policy, but mainly represents an adaptation of existing criteria to the new media situation. The institutional framework has, on the other hand, changed radically, primarily because in a number of countries public service institutions based on entirely new principles have been introduced. In Denmark, TV2 is a public institution, but is financed primarily via advertising sales, whereas TV2 in Norway and TV4 in Sweden are both privately owned commercial companies which operate under concessions to which programme criteria similar to the requirements made of the older public service institutions (DR, NRK and SVT) are attached.

As a result of this broadening of the public service concept, some features which were previously perceived to be integral parts of the concept, such as public ownership and licence fee financing, no longer necessarily apply. Instead, public service broadcasting is now defined nearly exclusively in terms of pro-

gramme policy commitments, which concern the composition (diversity) and character (quality) of programme output. These demands, what is more, seem rather imprecise inasmuch as they can be fulfilled not only by public institutions, which are independent of the market, but also by purely commercial companies, to which the requirements are no more than the price they have to pay in order to gain access to the market.

At present, this broadening of the concept to include companies operating on concession and companies financed by advertising has some salient advantages for media policy-makers. On the one hand, it limits the room for maneuver of purely commercial media, thereby mitigating some of the negative consequences of competition; on the other hand, it contributes to markedly greater diversity of domestic programme output, which in effect strengthens national channels' competitive strength vis-à-vis foreign channels. It should be noted, however, that this system presumes that the number of radio and television frequencies is limited because the precondition for the system of commercial concessions in Norway and Sweden, and for the profitability of Danish TV2, is the respective institutions' monopoly on nationwide television advertising. This monopoly cannot live forever, both because the steady expansion of satellite viewing will continue to undermine its value, and, secondly, because digital distribution technology will eliminate the scarcity of frequencies. The most likely outcome of these developments is that these "hybrid channels" will not be able to continue as public service media, but will gradually metamorphose into strictly commercial enterprises.

### Public Service Broadcasters on the Market

In any event, even the expansion of the public service concept we have seen to date has some rather far-reaching consequences. The inclusion of commercial enterprises means not only that the duties of public service broadcasting are spread over, or shared by, different kinds of institutions, but also that they become embedded in the market economy and thus have to be regulated differently than has been the practice to date. This latter point means that public service broadcasting, once conceived as an alternative to the market, tends increasingly to be regarded and judged in market-economic terms. As a consequence, it becomes increasingly difficult to draw the line between public and private media, and between public service and commercial broadcasting. Not only because commercial media have taken upon themselves public service duties, but also because public media have begun to form alliances with private companies and/or engage in various commercial ventures, such as *merchandising* and sales of services.

The emergence of the new "hybrid channels" that combine public service requirements and commercial operations has also more directly influenced perceptions of the public service concept. "Public service" becomes a question of the terms of the contracts between specific media institutions and the state so that the duties: circumscribed in the contract become synonymous with the meaning, at any

given time, of "public service". Under such circumstances it is fairly clear that what shall be understood to constitute public service broadcasting becomes a negotiable, something that will vary according to the relative strength of the parties to the contract.

Aside from the fact that it is hard to imagine that future contracts will be more demanding than those we see today (and that a contrary development seems quite likely), this implies that "public service broadcasting" is reduced to a question of the composition and character of programme output. The operationalization of specific requirements can hardly avoid paring down the notion of "public service" to quantifiable characteristics (*x* many hours of this, *y* of that). This will not only be so for the commercially financed public service broadcasters who operate on concession; such thinking has entered through the back door, so to speak, in the government's relations with the publicly owned broadcasters in the form of earmarked funding for one or another category of programming, as has occurred in Denmark.

Such financial steering of programme policy may not in itself constitute any grave threat to the integrity of the public service broadcaster, but it is only one of several such measures, all of which militate in the same direction. Together and in the longer term, they set the stage for further erosion of the concept. As noted earlier, the inclusion of public service media in a market-based media system implies certain regulatory options of a purely economic nature, which media policy-makers have been inclined to make use of. The problem with this kind of apolitical regulation is not so much that it is hard to steer as that it sets quite definite bounds as to what is possible, inasmuch as it enforces the dictates of the market.

In the context of market economics, public service media cause more problems than they solve. They limit the potential earnings of purely commercial media, but worse, they distort competition (through licence financing and/or exclusive rights to nationwide broadcast advertising). These impacts are relatively easy to justify so long as public service media are regarded as cultural institutions; they become much more difficult to defend once these media begin to act like commercial enterprises.

In reaction to this problem public service media are to an increasing extent regarded as a *supplement* to market-based media. Their task is to provide the kind of programming that the market neither can nor is willing to provide: in short, to compensate for the shortcomings of the market. If they consent to such a role assignment, however, they risk finding themselves trapped in a cultural ghetto, having lost contact with mass audiences they once served.

Up to now it has been possible to counter this trend, but we may expect increasing pressures to specify the public service mandate in purely economic terms, with licence fee revenues being distributed so as to cover the loss of commercial revenue due to fulfilment of public service requirements. As a result, programmes which attract financing on purely commercial grounds will disappear entirely from public service programming, and, in effect, this will produce a clear distinction between "public service" and "commercial" programming.

Such a dichotomy may be reasonable enough from the point of view of the market, but it is quite meaningless from the point of view of cultural policy in that it in fact prevents public service media from carrying out their cultural political mandate. Not only will it do away with the diversity of output that characterizes these media today, but it will also marginalize them to such an extent that their contribution to the quality of the total media system will be negligible. Maintaining a sizeable market share is the key to public service broadcasters' being able to compensate for the shortcomings and biases of the market; this is why public service programming must be popular. As Richard Collins puts it: "[I]f their programmes remain unwatched they can neither exercise a beneficial effect on the market as a whole nor effectively contribute to society by bringing merit goods to the viewers and listeners who pay for them" (Collins 1998:24).

### A Final Remark on Digging One's Own Grave

When in but a few years' time radio and television have been fully digitized, the need to elaborate the public service concept will be even more pressing than it is today, not only because of proliferation and increasing competition, but also because continued vertical and horizontal integration will have changed the power structures within the media sector. Ironically, the outcome may be that the process that started with the decline of publicly owned monopolies may well end with the creation of new, private media monopolies (Søndergaard 1998). Policy-makers' chances of avoiding such a development are seemingly quite slim, but public service media are indubitably the most important — in fact the only — defence against such a turn of events. The more closely public service media become integrated into the market, however, the more difficult it will be to maintain their status when market forces, aided and abetted by advances in distribution technology, tend to force them out onto the sidelines.

Judging from the stream of reports and fact-finding commissions in recent years (cf. Woldt 1998 and Graham 1998, i.a.), political support for public service media has never been stronger, and there are no signs that politicians are inclined to lay them to rest. The greatest threat public service media face is rather that they, themselves, in their eagerness to survive on a market that really has no use for them, will dig their own graves. For that reason it is vital that we make up our minds as to whether public service broadcasting shall continue to be counted among the objects of cultural policy, to be sustained *despite* market pressures, or whether it should continue to adapt to those pressures.

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# The Rise of the Modern Press in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden

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