

# 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 Radiotjänst, 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 Lectures 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 Solidarnosc 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 Radiotjänst (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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