

# 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 in 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 specified 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” programmes.

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 1999, 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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