

# Public Service After the Crisis

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A review of recent years' research relating to public service broadcasting turns up a miscellany of assessments and conclusions, characterized by uncertainty even with regard to basic concepts. Perceptions of what 'public service' means are as varied as ideas about the roles public (non-commercial) media should play in deregulated media systems (Syvertsen 1992). The uncertainty, of course, has to do with the fact that public service broadcasting has changed in the last decade, so that many of the concepts that once were used to describe it are no longer adequate. Still, it is no easy task to develop a new vocabulary which can describe the complex situation in which public broadcasting finds itself today.

The difficulty encountered by broadcasting researchers has more than academic interest since it has also affected how public service broadcasters have been characterized. The difficulties in finding adequate terminology for the new situation have, so to say, tinted the lenses through which the institutions are viewed. This effect is particularly apparent in the widespread notion that public service broadcasting is in a state of crisis – if not crisis, then at least dire straits.

No one has seriously questioned this diagnosis, despite the fact that public service media have obviously managed to survive the competition and, what is more, been able to renew themselves so as to give public service new meaning (Søndergaard

1992). The vocabulary formerly used to describe public service, however, does not show the same facility, and one may go so far as to say that the term, 'public service' itself stands in the way of an understanding of the transformation at hand.

The particular conception of 'public service' which derives from a theoretical contradistinction between public and commercial media (Garnham 1983) is blind to the situation because the trend challenges the dichotomy itself: the auto-metamorphoses public service media have undertaken over the past decade clearly have the character of market adjustment, which, of course, blurs the distinction even more. This is consequently perceived as a problem, because the change is perceived as a kind of "commercialization", i.e., a threat to, or perversion of public service, by definition.

It is high time that we ask ourselves whether public media – and particularly television, which will be the focus of my discussion here – indeed are in a state of crisis, and whether it is reasonable to perceive the media's attempts to modernize their programme policies as a 'symptom' of how desperate the situation really is. If we consider the situation in Denmark, for example, it seems far-fetched to speak of a crisis.<sup>1</sup> Nor does the situation elsewhere where the future of public service has been debated – e.g., in Great Britain<sup>2</sup>, the rest of Scandinavia and Finland<sup>3</sup> – fit the picture.

If anything, we see a revival at hand. Does this mean that the crisis is past, that public service is on its way toward new and brighter horizons?

## Two crises

First of all, it is important to recognize that the so-called 'crisis' is a composite of several different constellations, which one does well to keep separate. Speaking of a single crisis means mixing quite disparate factors, which tends to confuse more than elucidate actual conditions. Several of the problems underlying the crisis- diagnosis interact and reinforce one another. Some are as old as the public service media themselves and, considered in isolation, cannot be said to have contributed to the crisis. That we at all speak of a crisis is rather due to an agglomeration of old, unresolved problems and new challenges, which have become acute now that public media face competition. Some of these old problems have been solved,<sup>4</sup> whereas others persist. On the whole, however, public service media have – with a few exceptions – managed to maintain their position in the centre of the media landscape.

If talk of crisis nonetheless persists (as it is likely to do some years into the future), it is because the contours of new challenges are emerging on the horizon. Thus, "the crisis" is actually two different, temporally distinct problem complexes: (1) a crisis which struck public service broadcasters in the mid-1980s, which they seem more or less to have managed through, and (2) a new set of problems, which have not yet manifested themselves, but which are to be anticipated in the near future.

The "old" crisis, which coincided with the end of the broadcasting monopolies, is best described as a problem of adjustment. It meant not only a break with the tradi-

tional concept of public service, but also a belated, but therefore all the more urgent, modernization of the publicly owned media.<sup>5</sup> The new problems, which we only see in the offing, have to do with the roles public service media should and can play in the full-fledged multichannel environment which is currently taking form.

On the face of it, it might seem as though the problems are the same, that we are facing only a continuation of yesterday's crisis. And, indeed, there are many similarities between the new problems and those just overcome. The main reason that it is difficult to tell them apart, however, is most probably that the interval between the two is so very short. Just as the one crisis is over and the public service media have proven themselves to be competitive, the next situation turns up on the horizon. Nonetheless, it is important to recognize the differences between the two situations since the new crisis will most probably call for quite different solutions – to problems in a different context.

With regard to the latter point, one should note that in Denmark and many other countries public service media are far more responsive and have considerably stronger political backing today than they had in the early 1980s. Public service broadcasters today have little more in common with their former selves in the monopoly era than their names. In Denmark, the advent of TV2 has been a boon to DR TV, and in the past year or two both public service media have acquired a considerable degree of independence, the importance of which to their flexibility can hardly be exaggerated. Independence has created a climate that is conducive to greater professionalism than prevailed in the monopoly era. The public service media today sail on untroubled waters, and although these happy circumstances may not last long, it

means that the companies are well-situated to respond to the coming challenges.

## **Adapting to the market**

In the early 1980s, many commentators were convinced that it was only a matter of time before public television, which faced many problems, some old, some new, would go under once and for all (Garnham 1983). Therefore, one may well ask why these dire prognoses proved unfounded, why public service media have mounted a much stronger resistance than many debaters believed possible. One reason is that the diagnosis was wrong. The analyses made in the early 1980s were clearly far too pessimistic and drew too sweeping conclusions on the basis of trends which were more manifest then than today. This was due not least to the political climate, perhaps especially in Great Britain, the source of most of the analyses, but also in Nordic Europe, where neo-Liberal politicians also were in vogue. In many of these analyses, predictions of the demise of public service broadcasting were part and parcel of a more general attack on the institutions of the welfare state (Falkenberg 1983) and the privatization of culture, the product of a blind faith in the blessings of the market among neo-Liberals.

Today we can see that the 'crisis' of public service was political in nature, and that it was essentially like that which many other public institutions experienced in that period. It was due less to the introduction of competition into broadcasting than to a misfit between public service programming and viewers' wishes and, overall, the companies' inability to adapt to the social and cultural changes taking place in society as a whole.

Another reason why the most pessimistic forecasts have proven wrong is that, as

mentioned, public media have managed to adapt. Forced to adapt to all that competition implies, the companies have modernized their programme output to an extent that could hardly have been foreseen. Consequently, the public service institutions have proven able to hold their own on the market.<sup>6</sup> In most cases they have managed to do this without abandoning their principles, whilst giving 'public service' a content more in keeping with the times and more attuned to viewers' needs and preferences.

This is the main reason public service finds itself in clear sailing today. A second factor, however, is that faith in the market has paled in the light of twenty years' experience of proliferation in (primarily) commercial television (Blumler 1992). Public service television is clearly more highly valued today, but this recognition comes just as the media face new challenges, which will require a new review of some of the ideals that have guided public service to date.

## **Last chance**

In the light of the trend outlined above, we have little reason to believe that the days of public service television are numbered, but neither do we have reason to believe that the future will be any less problematic. The problems ahead will not be the public media's alone: Commercial television, taken as a whole, has noted major advances, but the many individual channels operate under considerably more vulnerable and uncertain circumstances than public broadcasters.

Nonetheless, there is considerable evidence that we approach a decisive phase in the reorganization of our media systems, which started with deregulation in the 1980s, and that it is essential for public

service media to find and establish a suitable role in the new system before the new wave of competition sets in. As Anthony Smith observes:

Institutions in the public sector which survive the present round of reorganization and privatization are likely to survive a very long time and build themselves indispensable roles inside the multichannel system. One can envisage only with great difficulty the construction of a new public service institution in a society which chooses now to abandon an existing one. The present era offers, therefore, something of a last chance" (Smith 1992:64).

The transformation undertaken in the 1980s was clearly necessary, insofar as it was crucial to the public service media's competitive strength. However necessary this market orientation may have been, it offers no guarantee that public service television will be able to maintain their position in the far harsher conditions which the multichannel systems of the future imply. Nor is it sure that the 'cure' used to meet the past crisis will be the right medicine in the crisis to come.

Regardless of how public service media choose to meet the challenge, it is entirely unrealistic to believe that they will be able to retain the same dominance, measured in market shares, as they have today. Even if they were to adopt a purely 'commercial' strategy in programming, they could hardly hope to keep a mass audience when so many other channels are wooing viewers with programmes of a similar kind.

Competitors to public service media will be not the handful of commercial channels we have today, but ten to twenty channels, perhaps even more, depending on market trends and the extent of further deregulation. The result will be a much more dis-

tinct segmentation of the market, in which the market share which any one channel can hope to attain will be inversely proportional to the number of channels operating in that particular segment. As long as the number of actors remains rather few, there will be enough viewers available to ensure that public service channels attract a good share of the audience. Given a proliferation of channels, which many anticipate, no channel, whether publicly or privately owned, will reach a very large audience. This only poses a serious problem to commercial channels if and when their market shares shrink beyond a certain point, they will no longer be able to attract enough revenue to cover their costs. The result will most probably be increased concentration, with only a few, resource-strong actors remaining on the air. The problem public service companies face is somewhat different. Here, the problem is that if their shares of the market shrink all too much, the concept of 'public service' in the sense of 'serving the people' loses its meaning. In such a situation it may become difficult to justify receiver licence fees as a source of revenue.<sup>7</sup>

This is not to say the role of public service television will necessarily be reduced commensurate with its market share. The above-mentioned segmentation of the market forms the basis of a *functional division of labour* between channels operating on the same market, a factor which is of far greater importance to public service television than the market shares they manage to control. It is especially important as regards what kind of public service will survive. In terms of media policy this implies that it is not enough simply to see how well the various institutions fare in the competition, but one might begin to consider the role or contribution of public service institutions in the television system as a whole. Conse-

quently, public television companies will have to explain and specify the tasks they perform, something which can hardly be done without first considering 'public service' as a function to be performed by television per se, rather than as a principle of relevance only to certain kinds of institutions (Blumler 1992).

## A second change of course

Perhaps the most interesting feature of the current situation is that the changes which public service media have undergone during the 1980s during the first phase of competition now seem to have come to completion, and a new course is being charted. Public service channels' attempt to compete with commercial channels for viewers' attention head-on seems to have given way to certain doubts concerning the viability of basing public service on the market. Publicly owned media seem to have recognized that they need to create and maintain a profile by other means, in part because it has become apparent that in a situation of increasingly sharp competition it will be impossible to hold one's own in unmitigated market competition without sacrificing basic principles. Some companies' recent attempts to formulate a *raison d'être* reflect this kind of thinking at any rate, and characteristically enough, the purely licence-financed institutions have been most explicit in this regard. The arguments Danmarks Radio puts forth in its policy document, *Danmarks Radio 1995-2005* (1994) and the BBC's statement of policy in *Extending Choice: The BBC's role in the New Broadcasting Age* (1992) are two of the more ambitious attempts to revitalize public service on a new foundation. Admittedly, these documents may be taken for expressions of 'neo-Puritanism', with the aim of bolstering the arguments for licence financing, but

they are more than merely a revival of old virtues, as one might fear. The main point is that public service is founded in certain societal functions, which are set in relation to the potentialities and limitations of the emerging multi-channel system.

Whereas DR in the mid-1980s set out to be the preferred Danish channel, "the most important source of satisfaction of the Danes' expectations with regard to stimulus, information and entertainment" (Jensen 1985), today the company refers to various social objectives, e.g. "to strengthen the public's ability to act, to take part in a democratic society". Instead of wanting to "serve the viewing public", which is what any number of commercial channels strive to do, the goal is now to be "at the service of the people", a goal to be achieved by "providing a wider range of choice in relation to the output of market-steered radio and television channels", as proclaimed in the above-mentioned policy document from DR. In *Extending Choice*, which has been a major inspiration to Danmarks Radio, the BBC outlines a strategy in response to the expansion of commercial broadcasting:

In the past, as dominant provider, the BBC had an obligation to cover all audiences and broadcasting needs; in the future it will have an obligation to focus on performing a set of clearly defined roles that best complement the enlarged commercial sector (*Extending Choice*:19).

An observation with quite radical implications is that the aim of fulfilling a complementary role may in the longer term mean that some kinds of programming that the BBC presently offers will be totally abandoned: "Over time, it [the BBC] should withdraw from programme areas or types in which it is no longer able or needed to make an original contribution" (Ibid.).<sup>8</sup>

## **The erstwhile public**

The segmentation of the market which a multi-channel system gives rise to strikes against the concept of a 'public', on which the idea of 'public service' has been and is currently predicated. There are, of course, other factors at play besides the nature of the television system; more general social and cultural trends suggest that the (national) entity known as 'the general public', the collective whom public service should serve, is slowly, but surely disintegrating. In multi-channel systems 'the public' is primarily conceived in terms of individual consumers, with immediate consumer demand constituting the prime parameter which steers the system's development. In such systems, notions of a 'general public' and 'the public sphere' obviously do not carry much weight. By the same token, it is difficult to define and justify public service broadcasting in market terms, which are still the dominant vocabulary.

This is not to say that public service is dependent on the existence of a 'general public', which actually may be only an artefact of the structure of a particular social system of communication. This 'general public', which seems to be waning today, is no less 'mediagenic' than the segmented one that appears to be in the ascendant. As long as the audience was held together, gathered 'round a single channel, it was easy to confuse the ideas of 'audience' and 'public', and to predicate media policy on this misperception. But the programming ideals such as diversity, pluralism and quality, to which public service broadcasters are committed, are no less important should the 'general public' disappear. On the other hand, it is more difficult to justify public television if programme policy is predicated solely on market terms and made dependent on how the commercial sector of

the system is performing. In this latter situation, it lies close to hand to wonder if perhaps burgeoning commercial programming in time might render public television in the form we know it superfluous: Why continue to maintain public television with an all-round, pluralistic menu of programmes when the public has 10-20 different commercial channels to choose from?

In a more differentiated and diverse system than we know today it will be necessary for public television to create an even more distinct profile, giving higher priority to the tasks which compensate the imbalances of the market. As we shall see in the following, this does not necessarily mean that the channels' tasks will be fewer, but that they will be assessed and selected on a different basis than is the practice today.

## **An economic straitjacket**

The functions public television serves will, then, to an increasing extent be defined by how commercial television develops, which in turn depends on the market and whatever regulatory restrictions may be imposed on commercial channels. It is generally assumed that digitalization will bring about enormous expansion of commercial television in the not too distant future, with a much greater diversity of programme output than exists today. No one can be sure whether such predictions will hold, but such a development seems likely. The splintering of Danish TV3 into three channels – one for young viewers (ZTV), one for women (TV 6), and a mainstream channel – is one example of the tendency; DK4, a new educational cable channel, is another.

On the other hand, it is not realistic to expect that the number of commercial channels will be anything near what the technology might allow. The limiting factor will not be technical capacity, but econom-

ics, i.e., what the market will support. Digital transmission technology will radically expand the capacity of the system, but, as Frands Mortensen (1994) points out, increased capacity means rather little to the individual channel, inasmuch as transmission costs are but a minor fraction of what it costs to run a channel. Garnham & Locksley, who have studied the relationship between media economics and diversity of output, reach a similar conclusion: "All the current evidence points to financial constraints as a more powerful limitation on the real availability of broadcasting channels than spectrum availability" (Garnham & Locksley 1991:20).

The question is whether the actual capacity in the multi-channel system will be so great as to give viewers greater freedom of choice than they have today. In the above-mentioned study Garnham & Locksley found that a considerable number of channels must be available before real choice exists:

The point at which, under competitive conditions, alternative minority programming will be offered varies according to one's assumptions as to the range and structure of audience preferences. However, all such studies point to a significant threshold at around five or six channels, below which regulated monopoly maximizes choice" (1991: 20f).

Due to the costliness of television production, the market, depending on its size, will only be able to bear a limited volume of original production and thus a limited number of channels which produce their own programmes. Consequently, the number of channels operating on any given market can expand only if programmes can be imported at a lower cost than domestic production. In Denmark and the other Nordic

countries, it does not seem likely that the market can support a significantly greater volume of production than we have today, which means that a greater supply of programming will necessarily consist primarily of cheap imports. In our corner of the world, however, this is nothing new.<sup>9</sup>

Whereas the multi-channel system may not offer as great a diversity as some people assume, digitalization will indeed afford a capacity for entirely new modes of distribution of programmes and services, far different from conventional broadcasting. Traditional television which addresses a general public will be only one of many different forms of distribution. 'Narrowcasting' or 'multicasting' will doubtless contribute to the further segmentation of the viewing public, while they also change the communicative landscape in which television currently operates. But although it may be necessary to rethink the concept of television from the ground up, it hardly seems likely that television will cease to be a mass medium.<sup>10</sup> The new modes of distribution actually represent an extension of the medium's potentialities and pose no threat to 'broadcasting' per se. For that reason, this particular aspect of the 'digital revolution' is not the most important one, from the point of view of public service media.

## **The role of public service television**

Some of the scenarios sketched above may suggest that there is little room for public service television in media systems of the future, if, that is, one applies conventional market criteria in one's assessment. One may, however, choose another perspective, considering instead what societal needs the media system should satisfy, and on that basis judge whether public service media have a positive role to play.

Here, the future of public service seems brighter, but much will depend, of course, on how the public media respond to the new challenges before them. The principal argument for public service is that modern pluralistic societies have a need for open and pluralistic public communication systems, which allow all groups in society equal access to information, cultural expressions and entertainment. As equal access is of crucial importance to the full realization of participatory democracy,<sup>11</sup> it is recognized as something of a civil right in democratic societies. If one entrusts this task to mass media based on commercial principles, access to information, cultural expression and entertainment will either become dependent on the size of the individual's citizen's pocketbook, or access will be extended only as far as it is profitable. Both cases most likely result in the same situation, namely, an even more marked polarization between 'information-haves' and 'have-nots' than we see today. The groups who have the greatest need of television as a social and cultural resource will be those whom the commercial system leaves aside. The result will be a sharper differentiation of the population into 'A' and 'B' leagues, a development which is hard to reconcile with the ideals of democratic society. This said, fully aware that the least privileged members of society are the heaviest consumers of commercial television today.

By virtue of their independence of market forces, public service media are able to serve small and economically or politically weak groups in society, since they are able to 'cross-subsidize' in the sense that programmes with narrow appeal can be given the same resources as programmes having mass appeal. This is not possible in commercial television, where the only form of 'cross-subsidization' is a technique for spreading financial risk. In such a small

cultural and linguistic areas, for example, Denmark it is highly unlikely that there will ever be enough narrow thematic channels to cover the needs of minority tastes. Not even pay-TV would be able to be narrow enough, to which must be added the fact that pay-TV is hardly an attractive alternative for economically weak groups.

A second important, but often neglected argument for public service media is their role as a factor promoting social and cultural integration. The growing fragmentation of social and cultural life, plus the segmentation of the audience which channel proliferation gives rise to make this task more difficult, but all the more important. National public broadcasting institutions represent, as Tracey (1994) points out, the most potent centripetal force in contemporary societies characterized by dangerous centrifugal tendencies, in which communities seem to be splintering into segments which, to an increasing extent, are uncomprehending of, if not outright hostile toward one another.

## **Discount television**

When public service television is discussed, the discussion nearly always focuses on its importance with respect to political opinion formation and cultural life, but in reality these are hardly the most important functions at present inasmuch as neither democracy nor cultural expression is dependent on the existence of television. What is at stake, however, is *television* as a form of cultural expression, and the prime threat is the paucity of resources which increasing interchannel competition gives rise to.

At present the cultural function of television is not particularly in focus in discussions of media policy. Instead, it is generally thought of as having to do either with

presenting 'quality' culture or as a 'pre-serve' for programmes of narrow appeal. This kind of thinking ignores the fact that the societal role of public service media is essentially cultural, inasmuch as television represents the dominant form of cultural expression in societies like ours and thus exerts the greatest cultural political significance.

In this context the problem of ensuring quality of output assumes critical importance, since increasing competition cannot help but cause difficulties in this regard. Particularly at risk is the breadth of programme output, which is the most important criterion of quality in television. It is precisely in this area that public service forms an important part of the overall television system, since more commercial channels and sharpening competition do not necessarily lead to greater diversity, but rather mean that some kinds of programmes will disappear, or at least be cut back severely. The threat is naturally greatest with respect to programmes that are costly to produce and have little chance of showing a return, for lack of public interest: original television drama, documentaries, critical and controversial programmes, particularly cultural and current events programmes, educational programmes, and children's programming with pedagogical ambitions.

When it comes to quality of individual programmes, the form of financing is not as important as the amount of resources invested in programme development and production. Characteristic of many of the commercial channels which have come on the air in recent years is that they do not invest in development or production, but instead purchase most of their programmes from commercial production companies. In many cases the programmes are of poor quality, but can be had cheaply, so that they still turn a profit. It is not unlikely that

many of the new commercial channels which turn up in the next few years will operate on very tight budgets, and that programming may be of even poorer quality than we have seen to date. The problem is simply that the more channels in the system - especially in a system as small as the Danish, for example - the less resources any given channel will have at its disposal. Whether it be public or private television, barring some major change, programme quality may be expected to decline, and only 'discount channels' will have much hope of survival in the longer term. In a situation where television is even more gravely underfinanced than today it becomes of utmost importance that public service media remain true to their present standards of quality so that a general lowering of standards can be avoided.

Thus, the most serious risk attached to sharpening competition is that television may be reduced to a discount medium, which no longer can fulfill the tasks it performs today. This 'poverty of expression'<sup>12</sup> will most likely first affect current functions vis-à-vis the cultural and political spheres inasmuch as these kinds of programmes are the least profitable, but in the longer term the consequences may be even more far-reaching. The most likely outcome of such a trend is, namely, not only that some categories of programming will disappear, but that television as such will lose the social and cultural status it is accorded today. It will lose touch with the society it operates in, its vitality waning successively until it is no more than a medium of diversion which no one takes seriously. What makes this a serious problem is that no other existing communication system can fill the void such a development would leave. The question is whether our societies can afford to risk letting this happen.

## **Viewer service vs. market-orientation**

The 'modernized' concept of public service includes an element of receiver-orientation, which turns traditional understandings of public service upside down and thus has surprised and offended many friends of public television. At the face of it the viewer-orientation may look like market steering inasmuch as programme output mainly reflects not the intentions of the broadcasting institution, but what viewers demand. In reality, it is more a question of adapting programme output to changes in the more general notion of what serving the public is all about.

Whereas the traditional concept of public service, formulated in the context of the classic welfare state, is based on the principle that public institutions should serve the *objective* needs of consumers, without necessarily letting them have a say, the modern concept emphasizes providing *choice*, so that consumers themselves in the last analysis decide what kinds of products and services will be produced. This is the idea of "the responsive state",<sup>13</sup> and it represents, on the one hand, a break with the paternalism on which the traditional concept of public service was founded. On the other hand, it reflects the fact that consumers' needs and interests have become so differentiated, and mutually incompatible, that standardized products can no longer satisfy them. Individualized demand requires customized services.

A similar change has taken place in the media sector: media institutions have become more responsive. In the case of the media, 'responsiveness' translates as an orientation to the receiver, as opposed to the paternalism and sender-steering which has traditionally dominated. This means that the media now try 'to give the audience

what they want', which, of course, is a form of market steering, yet one that is fundamentally different from the constraints on programme output *which commercial market forces impose*. The commercial market serves only those needs which are shared by enough viewers to make it profitable to satisfy them, and since television is characterized by an extreme concentration, this concentration eliminates the free competition that otherwise might be expected to give rise to programming that caters to a variety of needs. The regulation of supply according to demand, theoretically the essence of the market system, has been put out of commission. For obvious reasons, cost-benefit assessments weigh much heavier than responsiveness to viewers' needs, particularly when expressed in highly differentiated preferences.

The aim of public service broadcasting is not (any longer) to suspend the market mechanism by offering programmes which someone considered important, but no one bothers to watch, but rather to see to it that existing, highly differentiated demands which the market fails to respond to, are satisfied. In this way public service media can 'improve' the market mechanism, creating a market which more directly, and without intervening economic considerations (cost/benefit), responds to demand and regulates programme output accordingly. Above all, the public service media are much better at serving the needs and interests of *all* groups of viewers, be they large or small, and still offer programmes which satisfy more specific needs. At the same time public service channels can serve segments of the audience which are defined differently than those defined by the commercial market, thus opening the possibility of discovering new kinds of needs which, so to say, lie beyond the market's horizon.

## New prospects

I have argued that the coming multi-channel system, with its sharpened competition, poses a challenge to public television, but also that it makes the need for one or more public channels all the more urgent. By way of conclusion, I should like to point out some of the opportunities which this development produces and which the public service media may benefit from in the current situation. Since the prime function of these media in media systems of the future will be, on the one hand, to guarantee the diversity and pluralism of programme output which the market system cannot provide and, on the other hand, to counteract the pressures toward lower quality which otherwise threaten to impoverish television as a form of cultural expression, I shall confine my comments to factors with a bearing on this issue.

In public service companies which have only one channel at their disposal, as is the case in Denmark, the demand for enhanced diversity and pluralism, and not least the task of serving a variety of subgroups, immediately poses a dilemma, since the channel still has to appeal to and attract large audiences. The problem comes to a head when programmes with narrow appeal are banished from 'prime time', when the most viewers gather around the medium, with the result that these programmes reach fewer viewers than their quality merits. By the same token, viewers with a preference for these programmes receive poorer service since they, too, are 'banished' to less convenient viewing times. If, at the same time, the channel aims for an even greater measure of diversity, striving to serve a greater variety of minorities, the situation becomes even more acute. The consequence is that however high the degree of vertical diversity, viewers still have no free-

dom of choice because vertical diversity is not transformed into horizontal diversity (McQuail 1992; Søndergaard 1995).

This is mainly a problem of capacity, which might be solved, were the public television company able to transmit over more than one channel, and here, digital transmission technology offers a solution: Relatively cheaply, and without occupying available frequencies, public television can establish complementary and 'relief' channels. Clearly, such a possibility also makes it possible to extend transmission time in order to make room for a variety of programmes. In my opinion, however, this is not the main point, since extended transmission time is not without its problems. The point is, as I see it, that viewers have more to choose from, and narrow-appeal programmes have a better chance of reaching their target audiences.

It is important to bear in mind that what viewers find appealing in the commercial multi-channel system is its *viewer-friendliness*, i.e., that it allows viewers to use television in a more flexible fashion than they can today. One can watch the news, films and game shows at one's convenience, and if that is not good enough, video-on-demand or other pay-TV services are there to fill the gap. If public television is to be able to hold its own in this area, it will be necessary to develop more flexible and user-friendly modes of distribution, e.g., the same programmes might be distributed over multiple channels in a coordinated fashion so as to provide the greatest possible measure of horizontal diversity. At the moment it would undoubtedly be a first priority to concentrate these efforts in prime time so as to multiply prime-time air time, thereby broadening one's interface with the audience. In terms of market strategy, it would also mean that public television programming would fill more of the total menu; this

alone would mean that public television achieved a larger market share. DR in Denmark and NRK in Norway are each already planning such an 'extra' channel with a view to increasing viewers' choice, and when the technical capacity becomes available, they may benefit further from the use of one or more additional channels.

Expanded distribution capacity is something of a mixed blessing, however, if it is used to expand total transmission time as, for example, DR plans to do.<sup>14</sup> The advantage, of course, is that the company can enrich its diversity of programming because new subject areas can be covered and new groups of viewers be served. The disadvantage arises if extended transmission time is not accompanied by greater resources. Unless the budget increases, the amount of money available for each programme must necessarily be less. In view of a shortage of resources, which seems highly likely, there

is a risk that programme quality may deteriorate. Thus, we confront a dilemma between the ambition to provide greater diversity, and the ambition to maintain high standards of quality. Under more straitened economic circumstances than prevail at present, it is presumably more important for public service television to allocate available resources in a manner that maintains quality rather than to increase the diversity of its programming in quantitative terms. A limited repertoire of quality programmes is, after all, to be preferred over a shoddy 'discount version' of the present breadth of output. On the other hand, the company must maintain a modicum of breadth – and have sufficient air time in which to offer it – if it is to be able to offer viewers greater choice. That is to say, there are limits to how far one can go in giving programme quality priority over quantity.

## Notes

1. For more detailed documentation of the situation in Denmark I refer the interested reader to my report to the Media Commission in the Office of the Prime Minister (Søndergaard 1995).
2. Cf. the BBC's *People and Programmes* (1995).
3. Cf. Bono & Bondebjerg (1994) for a survey of the current situation in Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland.
4. This is especially true with respect to the problems of political steering, a consequence of the companies' monopoly status, which in many respects impinged on their independence in matters of programme policy (cf. Søndergaard 1994:99ff).
5. The developments in Denmark may be characterized as a question of redressing a time-lag (Søndergaard 1994). In the course of the 1970s monopoly broadcaster Danmarks Radio found it increasingly difficult to keep up

- with the pace of change in society at large. Thus, there was a pent-up need for modernization which, however, could only be effected after the dissolution of the monopoly.
6. In all fairness it should be noted that the respective institutions range widely in terms of their competitive strength, but most public service television companies note market shares of 40-50 per cent. In Denmark the figure is just over 70 per cent.
7. It is hard to say with any exactness how small a channel's market share can be before licence fee-financing loses its legitimacy, but many have indicated a market share of about 20 per cent as a magic threshold. It should be pointed out, however, that market shares are neither the only, nor the most important parameters with regard to the justification of receiver licence fees; reach is far more important in that context.
8. The situation of the BBC is not entirely comparable to that of public service broadcasters in the Nordic countries. The British

- market is much larger, which means that commercial channels in the British television system have enough resources to be able to contribute to the diversity and quality of programming. Thus, the BBC can in principle limit its programme output to a greater extent than is possible for the public service institutions in the Nordic countries, where market-based programming can make no more than a limited contribution to diversity and quality.
9. Danish TV3 is a good case in point, but even local channels in Denmark are largely dependent on programme imports.
  10. There is reason to be sceptical about predictions that television channels distributed via new technologies will displace conventional television (cf. Barwise & Ehrenburg 1988: 154ff) because, among other reasons, conventional television has qualities which news services like *video-on-demand* lack. Not least among these is the ability to transmit 'live' to a virtually unlimited audience, where the 'live' aspect is an essential feature of the viewing experience, giving it the character of a social event (cf. Ellis 1982).
  11. Cf. Murdock (1990) and Scannell (1989) for further discussion of the relationship between public service media and active citizenship.
  12. I have in mind not only the poverty which occurs as a result of the totalization of popularity, but also the limitations imposed by steadily tightening financial constraints in the system, so that ultimately, it is only able to produce programmes in the cheapest, 'no frills' formats, and the cultural poverty that arises when domestic production of original programmes is replaced with imports.
  13. Cf. Andersen (1989) for a more detailed discussion of the responsive state and the modernization of the public sector in this perspective.
  14. Cf. *Danmarks Radio 1995-2005*, where it is stated that extended tableaux are to be financed through rationalization measures.

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