

Times Have Changed

On the Relationship Between Swedish Public Service Television and the Viewing Public

ANNA EDIN

There was a time when a shortage of broadcasting frequencies gave public service media more or less natural monopolies in the countries where they operated, albeit not without political power struggles. Publicly owned European broadcasting monopolies were founded not solely on the basis of socio-political ideals, but also because of what has been called “a technical failure” (Collins & Murroni 1997:7). At the same time, the existence of a broadcasting monopoly is what made it logical and reasonable in institutional and communicative perspectives, to conceive of the viewing audience as the public and – by extension – of the viewer as a citizen. Broadcasting fare was a broadly shared experience, and what was offered on the air was widely discussed. Radio and television were in many ways the center of attention.

The technological changes that started in the 1980s mean not only that public service channels are forced to compete for viewers with privately owned media in emerging multichannel systems, but also that the spatial category that the previous system helped to construct, which is deeply rooted in the public service model, is increasingly challenged: that is, the notion of the audience as a national public. Furthermore, overall political and cultural trends have for some time problematized the notion of the public as a homogeneous and rational entity. Although the concept of public service that long has defined the publicly owned media institutions allows numerous interpretations and is thus highly adaptable, in essence it presumes the existence of a (national) public that can be – and wishes to be – served.

The Audience and the Institution

The relationship between the television institution and the viewing audience may be seen as a discursive system consisting of distinct, but interlinked levels. For one, there is the level at which institutional conceptions of the audience and the communicative relationship are produced and reproduced, which includes official rhetoric and what has been called the “invisible fictions” of the television institution (Hartley 1987:127). Sec-

only, there is a level comprised of concrete expressions and modes of address that characterize actual programming, which in turn range from a comprehensive and serial level down to the level of segments of the programme output. The audience plays its roles in the communication process in great part by means of discursive constructions that originate in other sectors of the media system. These constructions help to bring “the audience” and the media system and its prime players together, but they do not necessarily coincide with viewers’ actual desires or intentions – although it is, of course, entirely possible that they do (cf. Ang 1991, Blumler 1997, i.a.). On the other hand, it is ever the task of the media to find modes of address that reach out to viewers. Unless they succeed in this, their efforts are quite literally meaningless.

Some have argued that the gap between the audience and the institution is so wide and so deep that the history of European public service media is best described as an enduring struggle for power, the driving force of which is the audience’s resistance to being objectified in the name of noble notions of the nation and of culture (cf. Ang 1991, i.a.). Others see it rather as a process of successive adaptation, whereby conceptions of the audience and modes of address have gradually approached the communicative context – a process that also has been credited with exerting a decisive, positive influence on the development of cultural and political public spheres (cf. Scannell 1989, i.a.).

Whichever interpretation one prefers, there is no guarantee that institutional demands and communicative practices are in alignment, and it is clear that this is not only a problem in theoretical terms, but that it time and again has given rise to a dilemma, particularly for the public service media.

The Public Service Mandate

What, then, is the official rationale behind Swedish public service broadcasting (SVT) today? A precise and unequivocal answer is not readily at hand, since any number of motives is/are put forward, all said to be equally important. Not even the government, the source of the mandate, have/has formulated a statement of purpose. Instead, the mandate is so broad and varied that public service television has been assigned a virtually universal responsibility for democracy on all levels, from the health and vitality of democracy per se to the personal fulfilment and satisfaction of the individual citizen/viewer. If we then turn to the requirements programming should fulfill, the complexity is hardly less. The demands are many, vaguely formulated and often contradictory. Programming should be so multifaceted and varied that it ranges from the broadly popular to the eccentric; it should give viewers what they want, but at the same time give them new, unfamiliar and unexpected sensations. Diversity, breadth, independence, orientation (in public affairs), quality, multiculturalism, participation, integrity, deference, public interest, knowledge, innovation, experimentation are some of the most frequently mentioned values. These encompass a wide array of elements including “Swedish” and “foreign”, “newcomers” and “indigenous people,” “the majority” and “minorities”, “entertainment” and “education”, “viewing audience” and “citizens”.

In other words, we have here an extremely inclusive programme policy – a jumble of references to the public interest and special interests, to the broad and the narrow, to what distinguishes viewers and what they have in common. At first sight, the terms give the impression of being based on empirical reality, but on closer examination we find that

they define one another in what might fairly be described as an intertextual system, where one value or quality is defined by another, which is defined by another, etc., in a long chain of definitions (Edin & Widestedt 2002:32).

The best?

This exceedingly complex and complicated mission is accomplished year after year, however, down to the last dot on the “i” – judging, that is, from the “public service audits” that SVT undertakes each year. There are apparently no shortcomings, at least none worthy of mention, in the company’s program policy documents.

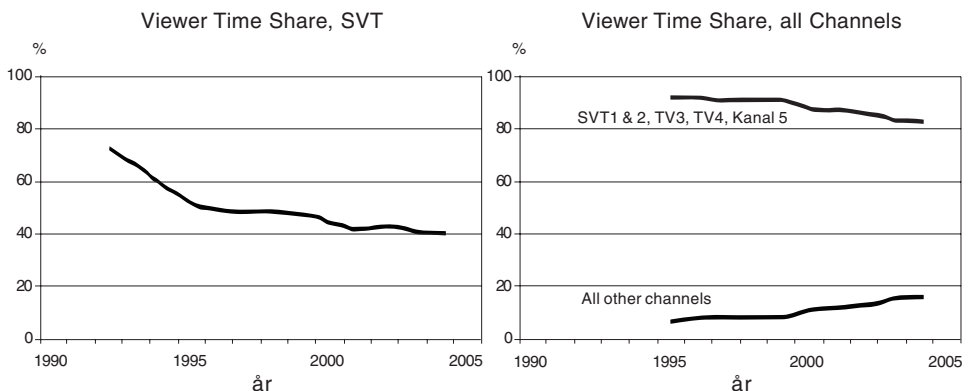
Clearly, Sveriges Television (SVT) is a good public service broadcaster; the company produces and airs many programs of good quality. Each year SVT rakes in numerous international awards, commendations and nominations. Audience statistics support the company’s self-esteem: 84 of the 100 most widely viewed single programs in 2004 were aired on SVT channels. Regularly conducted opinion surveys show that the Swedish people express great confidence in public service television, and commonly applied measures indicate that SVT offers a greater breadth and diversity of programming than its competitors do (see further SVT’s public service audits for 2001-2004). “Irrespective of the measure applied, SVT ranks among the top internationally comparable public service companies.” (SVT. Public Service Audit, 2001:8).

This, together with the fact that public service broadcasting so seldom is brought up in public fora, might be taken as a sign that public service television – finally, after a half-century – has found its proper role and place in society.

A more critical eye and ear might interpret the situation differently, as something approaching ideological hegemony, that is to say, that the dominant political and cultural actors in Sweden (SVT included) are agreed that the Swedish public service media are the best in Sweden – and perhaps the world?

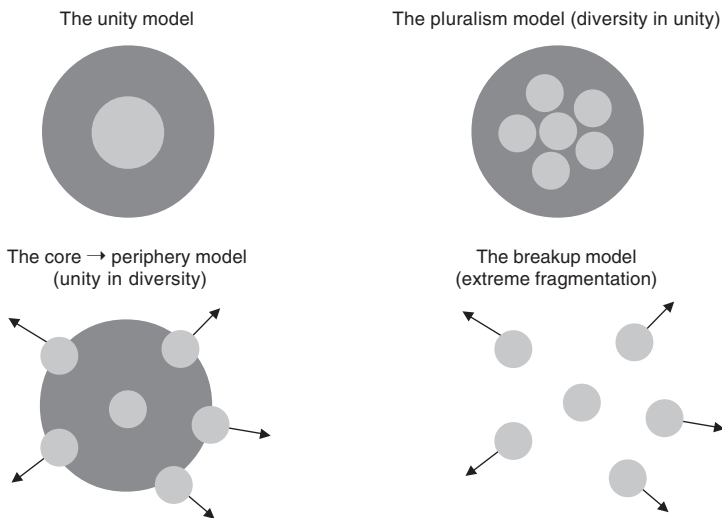
Viewing

Since the era of monopoly total viewing time has slowly but surely increased; in the same time span SVT channels’ share of viewing time has slowly but surely shrunk. In recent years viewing time has stabilized, and the changes nowadays are mainly shifts in the distribution between individual channels.



Television today offers viewers interactivity and unprecedented freedom of choice. The television environment is becoming increasingly differentiated, the viewing experience less social and more individual. A segmentation of the audience, whereby audiences become smaller and more homogeneous, is taking place in response to greater specialization of program output and greater freedom of choice, increasingly attuned to lifestyle and taste. This segmentation is largely propelled by the media themselves in order to create new markets and to be able to deliver well defined and attractive target groups to advertisers. Secondly, we note a fragmentation of viewing, whereby a relatively constant amount of viewing/attention has come to be distributed over a growing number of media. This latter trend is more technology-driven, the prime motor being digitization. These processes of segmentation and fragmentation may be described in terms of four stages, which together make up a longitudinal trend.¹

Four stages of fragmentation



(From a model in McQuail 1997: 138)

1. *The unitary model.* Applied to Swedish television, this model is typical of the 1950s and 1960s and is characterized by limited freedom of choice in the framework of monopoly. The broadcast media serve the public in a dual sense: they serve their listeners and viewers, and they serve the society. However, if ever a conflict between the two arose, the priorities were clear: the media's first loyalty was to the society. The prime tasks of television were to explain and "in the best sense of the word, to popularize" the political issues of the day, and to ensure that artistic *oeuvres*, traditionally the pleasures of an elite, reached out to every home (Edin 2000:62f). In its fundamentals, the unitary model presumes the existence of a single, homogeneous audience that more or less coincides with the citizenry.
2. *The pluralism model* – a model that might also be termed diversity in unity. In Sweden it is typified by the two-channel system that was introduced at the end of the 1960s within the framework of monopoly. The two channels were to engage in

“stimulating competition” according to the principle of contrast, whereby viewers at any given juncture could choose between different program categories. At the same time a highly normative program policy prevailed, according to which viewers’ freedom of choice was subordinated to explicit pedagogical and cultural political objectives. The overall aim of the two-channel system, official rhetoric notwithstanding, was not to provide freedom of choice, but rather to cultivate a selective and serious viewership that preferred to watch the best and most important fare, according to a priori definitions. A “protective philosophy” was developed within the public service companies to ensure that certain priority programs, such as news and current affairs, were not threatened by broad entertainment on the opposite channel (Edin 2000:102). A typical choice between the two channels in this era might be a Norwegian documentary on Polish folk dance on the one channel, and an Italian TV-drama on the other (cf. the program schedule for 17th January 1973). Developments in Swedish society and cultural life as well as in the media sector made it increasingly difficult to maintain a strict, normative program policy, even under monopoly conditions.

3. *The core-periphery model.* This post-monopoly model might be characterized as unity in diversity. External multichannel competition has been established. In the early 1990s we see the launching of hybrid channels offering all-round programming and being committed to fulfilling certain public service requirements, e.g., Swedish TV4. It becomes increasingly difficult to maintain a normative program policy, and viewers, for their part, are now able to compose their own menus, which may well deviate from the majority’s. At the same time, there is still a recognizable majority audience with mainstream preferences. This is also the golden age of demographic targeting: channels commit considerable effort to identifying relatively large, homogeneous subgroups among the viewing audience. Starting in the 1990s and emerging successively, the core-periphery model is still the dominant model, even if there is a noticeable overall trend away from the center – in Sweden “the Big Five”: SVT1, SVT2, and the commercial channels TV3, TV4 and Kanal 5.
4. *The breakup model.* The ultimate stage of development is one of extreme fragmentization. The center has disintegrated, and viewing is spread thinly over myriad channels. There are no discernible collective viewing patterns in either time or space. Only sporadically do viewers share their viewing experiences socially. This is the model that will apply when digitization is fully implemented and the digital multichannel system is operative *and used*. The majority audience is a thing of the past. The breakup model still lies in the future, but the trend toward increasing fragmentization is already well under way.

Public Service Broadcasters’ Response

These developments may, in the case of public service channels, be seen to coincide with a more pronounced audience orientation, a development that several Nordic researchers have discussed (cf. Syvertsen 1992, Søndergaard 1994, i.a.). This audience orientation may in turn be discussed in terms of an increasing focus on personality and individuality. When SVT rearranged its two channels in 2000, an explicit objective was to give each of the channels a personality, identity and attitude that would be recognizable in all aspects of the channels’ programming – both in individual programs and, overall, in

how the channels address their audiences. The one channel was to be “for everyone, always” and have a broad appeal; the other was to be “for you, now and then” and address individuals with specific tastes and interests (Edin 2002:53).

Younger Adults, Individuals – and Traditional Ideals

When it comes to target audiences, typical of the third stage of audience fragmentation, there is – alongside socio-politically identified minorities, children and adolescents – primarily one group that SVT mentions in their policy documents, viz., “younger adults”. One of SVT’s most explicitly expressed ambitions in recent years has been to “reach more viewers and produce more programs that are attractive to younger adults (25-39 years).” (SVT Public Service Audit 2001:96).

Digitization and web services, which in time will multiply the options available to the viewing public, are embraced as improvements of public service broadcasters’ services to the public. From the point of view of the audience, greater freedom of choice is digitization’s main selling point. Digital TV will “give viewers more public service” in the form of greater freedom of choice and more service to the individual viewer. On New Year’s Eve 2004/2005, for the fourth year in a row, SVT’s General Director announced the company’s “New Year’s resolutions”. Here, too, it is clear that the company increasingly conceives of its audience as individuals with personal interests and tastes. Here is a selection of recent promises:

SVT will be coming closer: We promise to be better at reflecting your part of the country.

SVT will offer helpful advice: We promise you personal service on our website and will help you get into shape.

SVT will tell your story: At SVT the viewer is king.

SVT will recharge your batteries: We promise new programs that will get you – especially you young people – on your feet.

Of this we may conclude that SVT, even as the multichannel system comes into being, continues to maintain its traditional ideals of providing opportunities for enlightenment and personal betterment, while at the same time investing in new ways to better reach broad segments of the viewing audience, who are now addressed as individuals. On the one hand, this is a logical step in view of what is happening in the television landscape. The most attractive demographic group for commercial channels is precisely younger adults; consequently, commercial channels tailor their program output for these viewers. SVT, having lost market shares in this age group, has decided to try to win them back. As SVT puts it: “Everyone, young and old alike, should find something of interest at SVT.” But the objective is somewhat problematic. For one thing, the rationale represents the essence of commercial thinking, and is perhaps not precisely the way SVT should be thinking. Secondly, rival commercial channels are already serving this group quite satisfactorily, so that there is no real reason for SVT to do the same thing. “Copy-cattin’” commercial competitors, but doing what they do not quite as well is a sure path to self-destruction. Granted, public service television needs the support of broad sectors of the audience in order to be able to say they are in the service of the public, and the mass audience is a guarantor of narrower audience segments, but there is still a non sequitur in relation to public service ideals.

The Logic of Digitization

Even the focus on the individual viewer may be said to be a double-edged sword for public service broadcasters – in terms of program policy as well as in theory. It may be claimed that digital television and web services of various kinds mean greater accessibility, while the smaller scale of operations enable SVT, in the company’s words, to “come closer”. A non-commercial emphasis on news and the ambition to make digital ‘round-the-clock news channel, SVT24, the biggest news channel for Swedish-speaking viewers may be seen to strengthen viewers’ identity as citizens. On the whole, the notion of “public service-service” that imbues SVTs digital visions may well mean that public service broadcasters’ output and the accessibility of that output increases. The underlying logic is that “more of everything is more public service” (cf. Severson 2004:129).

But a focus on the individual viewer and his or her personal freedom of choice also implies a paradox. In theory at least, individual media use in a digital media system can result in such a high degree of differentiation and individualization that the audience as a collective entity ceases to exist – if all choices become personal and discrete, i.e., independent of one another in time and space, there is no longer any basis for common experiences and the kind of social participation that is held forth as a fundament of the public service ideology. Members of “the audience” have as little in common as consumers of any other product. The unreflected manner in which both politicians and public service broadcasters argue that SVTs move toward digitization gives the public more public service is dangerously close to a circular argument: Inasmuch as SVT is a public service broadcaster, what SVT does defines public service television. There is also a risk that public service television is eroding its very *raison d’être*.

Viewed from a different perspective, the potential of the digital multichannel system to splinter the majority audience and the centrally defined conception of the public may open the door to a more authentic television public: like Phoenix, various subgroups and partial public spheres – which may exist on micro as well as macro levels – may arise from the “rubble” of fragmentization. In contemporary, late-Modern multimedia societies public service broadcasters may be seen as having outlived its role as a cornerstone of the public sphere, and its claim to representativeness is in fact “a defense of virtual representation of a fictive whole” (Keane 1995:6). Perhaps it is only when the hallowed idea of the television audience as a national, collective entity has lost all credibility that new claims of public service can arise?

Or, may digitization instead lead to even wider information gaps in society, so that social groups that today are well-endowed become even more sophisticated, whereas the rest fall away even further from media content that offers critical perspectives and in-depth analysis? Is it now that mass communication truly metamorphoses into class communication?

Discursive Construction of the Public

Thus, exactly what implications digitization will have for public service broadcasting remain to be seen. There are still more questions than answers, even if official program policy documents describe the situation as *sans souci*. But what is the nature of the discursively constituted conception of the public today? Does in fact public service television make any effort to reconcile its viewer orientation with a conception of the audience as a public?

“Everyone”

Government policy documents describe television audiences, the public/citizenry and their elected representatives in an unreflected manner as logically related, despite the fact that the logical links between the respective entities are hardly self-evident. The public, hypothetically, includes “everyone”. On the other hand, an implicit rank-order both sets limits for who is to be counted among everyone and constitutes an implicit norm upon which definitions of the Swedish public interest are based.

One approach to this problem complex is to examine the responsibility for minorities that is, and has always been, central in public service contexts. Politicians define and assign this responsibility on the basis of Sweden’s officially recognized linguistic, ethnic and other minorities – Samí, Tornedalings,² speakers of Yiddish, Romani, Chib and Finnish, and functionally challenged groups (sight and hearing impaired) – are defined in, whereas others are excluded from the responsibilities of the public service broadcasters. Laws and regulations also indicate which groups are to be accorded priority or “preferred” status (cf. Government Bill 2000/01:94:43ff). But, if we instead consider the list from the point of view of excluded groups, we find at the very bottom the unmentioned and undifferentiated multicultural Sweden, i.e., linguistic and immigrant ethnic groups who are ranked after/below those explicitly mentioned – miscellaneous pieces in the cultural mosaic that otherwise are assumed to make a positive contribution to contemporary Swedish society. All other minorities, those outside the pale of the rank-order, remain anonymous.

Social and Moral Responsibility

SVT, for its part, makes no explicit mention of the public and thus avoids these complications. The company’s responsibility for linguistic and ethnic minorities is discussed, but not at length – might it be because SVT is more interested in the core audience than in officially recognized, preferred minorities? The only minority, in SVT’s view, that might interest Swedish audiences is the Samí, referred to as “our indigenous people” (SVT Public Service Audit 2001:36).

In the new competitive situation we see a revival of the traditional emphasis on responsibility, parallel to the new focus on differentiated tastes and viewers’ individual orientations. Today, however, the social responsibility ideology is less political; it is not about reforming society or “parenting” the public. As the competition from commercial media grows keener, the social responsibility ideology has more and more assumed the character of implicit media critique, with a special emphasis on moral qualities. That is, the public service channels’ claim to superiority is based on their claim to moral and ethical superiority. In a media landscape characterized by strong commercial interests, public service television is said to be the company that viewers always can rely on. The more important and well-integrated place the media occupy in people’s lives, the more important reliable media – media that assume a social (but not political) responsibility and literally serve the public.

A central issue for researchers with an interest in public service broadcasting is the ability of public service media to combine a strong viewer orientation with the notion of the audience as the public. Many have stressed that program policy pronouncements on a rhetorical level are not enough. In what way can public service media formulate a new claim to authority in the context of current program policy and programs (cf. Ytreberg 1999, i.a.)?

From a perspective that conceives of the relation between broadcaster and audience as a discursive system consisting of different levels of expression and modes of address,

one may argue that it is precisely through an updated social responsibility ideology that the audience and public paradigms can be reconciled. The social responsibility ideology gives public service media a competitive edge in television, rendering them a sort of certified organic window on the world. Only on public service channels will viewers find an abundance of transparent, reliable/accurate communication with serious intent. This applies not only to news and public affairs programming, but also to newer type of material such as the broad genre reality-tv. Whereas the ultimate purpose of reality shows on commercial channels is to turn a profit, public service television invests its authority and reliability in similar programs of its own. The value added in the SVT adaptation of *Survival (Expedition: Robinson)* consisted of lessons in loyalty, honesty and perseverance. In one of the company's most recent reality shows, *Rivet* ("The Realm"), it was knowledge of history and class-consciousness, and in *Wild Kids*, a reality program for children, the lessons were anti-mobbing and the meaning of friendship.

Is this theme, this communicative value added not typical of present-day public service television? As several scholars have already shown, definitions of the public service mandate or mission have shifted with changes in the conditions that prevail in the media landscape (cf. Syvertsen 1990, Søndergaard 1995). These different definitions have not, however, succeeded and displaced each other. Instead, they have been added as layers, one on top of the other, which explains why the public service concept contains not only confusingly many different principles, but also a number of chameleon-like concepts, the meaning of which changes. The new emphasis on social responsibility and its communicative value added in relation to other media may be only the most recent layer.

On all levels of address, from the least details in program output to overall official rhetoric, public service media would appear to be imbued with all the qualities of a good friend: the mortar that holds a complex and barely coherent program policy together is the perception of responsibility, security, reliability and stability on the part of the broadcaster. This is the television company you can rely on (between the lines: unlike commercial media). A company that keeps its promises. An unflagging witness for truth and probity, totally independent of party politics and economic interests – or, in short: Public service simply cannot tell a lie. Everything we see on the screen is true, unless someone has made a mistake. And if public service television should err, viewers can always file complaints with the Broadcasting Council³, whereupon the public service company can confess its sins before the viewing public and receive absolution from the powers that be, and the audience.

By introducing this special concept of social and moral responsibility, the company is seeking to win not only viewers' confidence, but their hearts, as well. The channels gain viewers, but not only that. At best they will win viewers' *loyalty* – the hardest-won prize in the game. But, to a critical observer a question presents itself: Is there not a risk that a company's efforts to win the hearts and minds of an entire viewing audience may lead to self-censorship, to decisions to avoid provocations and distressing content? In short, to an opportunistic representation of what the great majority are believed to approve of and enjoy – a sort of ideological populism.

"Free Television"

There has been very little public discussion of public service media – i.e., the mandate, principles and broadcasting practices, programming – in Sweden, but in early 2005 some controversy was aroused by a series of self-advertising spots that SVT produced and

aired. The controversy was sparked when Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi complained of how he was portrayed in one of the spots. In the film, a written banner text was accompanied by pictures of Berlusconi in various public contexts. The text read:

Silvio Berlusconi controls 90 per cent of domestic television in Italy. In 2001 he was elected prime minister after an intensive television campaign. After the election, a court ruled that he divest himself of one of his channels. The law was amended.

Then, a concluding text without picture: “Sveriges Television – free television”.

The combination of sound and picture gave an impression of Berlusconi as a self-interested and manipulative political leader. The Swedish ambassador to Italy was called to the Italian foreign ministry. Berlusconi demanded that the spot be taken off the air. Even the Italian Opposition complained that SVT had intervened in Italy’s internal affairs. The controversy sparked a brief, but intense debate in Sweden, as well.

With what must be described as catastrophic timing, the “Free television” campaign coincided with a change of Chairman of the Board of Governors of SVT. Just as the debate on SVT’s independence was reaching a crescendo, the Government appointed a life-long Social-Democratic politician, Cabinet member (up to only a half year earlier), and personal friend of the Prime Minister, Lars Engqvist, Chairman. The appointment immediately provoked still more debate in the media. Critical voices within SVT, too, termed the appointment “a travesty” of the company’s ambition to exercise its independence.

The storm subsided, but the epithet “state television” was again on people’s lips. The debate continued on the SVT website. Clearly, the debate interested members of the public as well as journalists and commentators. One can in a sense see the debate as counter-evidence vis-à-vis the statistical data, presented in official program policy documents, convincing but abstract: Figures, for example, to the effect that 87 per cent of the population have confidence in the public service media. The “free television” debate was lively, critical, and many expressed the view that Swedish public service broadcasting should be questioned more freely, more often and called for the broadcasters to engage more humbly in a dialogue about their performance. As one debater on the website put it: “It’s lucky that free television is financed via a compulsory fee. It would never survive in free competition, because its self-image is far cry from how others perceive it” (www.svt.se/fri_television, 16th May 2005).

A Critical Reflection

The term “state television” is generally dismissed as a vulgar epithet sometimes used in bourgeois propaganda, but the notion may deserve to be taken a bit more seriously. In a macro perspective, focusing on public service broadcasting as a democratic institution, there are obviously strong government and institutional interests invested in SVT. These pose no hindrance to a good measure of independence in matters of program policy and budget allocations. A number of central aspects of broadcasting have been deregulated over the past few decades, and today, there is no serious political force in Sweden that would try to steer SVT or to disband it. Any self-respecting democratic country with democratic traditions looks upon a strong public service broadcasting as a valuable asset. Especially in Europe, public service media have come to symbolize the vitality of democracy and national stability.

It is not on the macro level, but on the micro level – when we focus on the communicative relation between the media and their audiences – that the discussion of state television assumes a cutting edge. It is here that the very strength, independence and authority of public service media become problematic. In order for the value added that the social responsibility ideology confers on SVT – the qualities of reliability, stability, credibility, etc. – to be understood “correctly”, is it not necessary for SVT itself to assume a position tantamount to state television, or at least national television? Something that would probably not be possible without widespread consensus around (1) the values associated with public service broadcasting, and (2) the company’s ability to translate these values into practice. This consensus – or belief, if you prefer – is intrinsically bound up with a suspicion of commercial television, the eternal “Brand X” – the dark side of the medium, the source of poor and even harmful programs, guided by sheer avarice. Commercial television has always been depicted as a negative contrast to public service, but the question is if the stereotype has not become the prime mainstay of the public service ideology: without it, the virtues claimed by public service television would probably not be considered quite as indisputable as they are today.

Translation: *Charly Hultén*

Notes

1. After a typology proposed by McQuail, 1997.
2. Tornedalen, a river valley north of the Gulf of Bothnia, marks the land frontier between Sweden and Finland. The natives of the Swedish side of the valley, who speak a distinct dialect of Finnish, are an officially recognized minority.
3. A government-appointed board that reviews broadcast programs on Swedish public service channels and checks their compliance with pertinent legislation (the Radio and TV Act, the Law on Freedom of Expression, etc.) and the terms of the channels’ charters. The Council responds to complaints from members of the public, but may also initiate investigations of its own. The Council may not censor or otherwise inhibit content prior to transmission. See more at www.grn.se.

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