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PSB and the Media Welfare State Promoting Positive Free Speech

The presentation is based on the book *The Media Welfare State: Nordic Media in the Digital Age*, and subsequent work by the authors: Trine Syvertsen (prof. Univ. of Oslo), Gunn Enli (prof. Univ. of Oslo), Ole J. Mjøs (associate prof. Univ. of Bergen) and Hallvard Moe (prof. Univ. of Bergen).

The book can be read online at:

http://www.press.umich.edu/6943059/media_welfare_state

Introduction

This presentation explores the role of public service broadcasting in the Nordic region, and also in turn, what we have tentatively termed 'The Media Welfare State'. The focus is on the historical development of Nordic public service broadcasting, as well as recent changes and how these relate to the idea of a Media Welfare State.

Related to the topic positive free speech, the presentation explores to what degree a strong public service broadcasting institution can serve as a guarantor for various voices to be expressed in the public sphere. One of the key aspects of the PBS remit in the Nordic region

is diversity in programming, that the entire population, both smaller and larger audience groups should be represented through varied perspectives, opinions, and content.

A key argument is that a strong public service institution impacts on the entire media ecology, and that regulation of a national media market might be more effective when the public service broadcasting sector is well funded, has high legitimacy, and plays a central role in society.

The presentation will start out with a discussion of public service broadcasting in the Nordic countries, and how its role as a cornerstone in the Media Welfare State has evolved throughout history. Second, the idea that a well-funded PSB arrangement might impact on what might be defined as an the entire 'ecosystem', or a dual media market, rather than just the PSB institutions themselves will be explored. Third, and last, this draft, will link to the workshop's theme by addressing how public service broadcasting might be regarded as a regulatory strategy to ensure that a variety of voices are heard in the public sphere.

Public Service Broadcasting in the Nordic Region

The public service broadcasting corporations in the Nordic countries might best be regarded as cornerstones of the Media Welfare State (MWS). More than any other media structures, the public service broadcasters embody what we in the book have identified as four pillars of the MWS: they are publicly owned and *universally available*, they *have institutionalized freedom from editorial interference*, they are *obliged to provide diversity and quality* in media output, and their existence is based on broad political *compromises* and a high degree of legitimacy.

Historical development

Originally set up as radio monopolies during the interwar period, Nordic public service broadcasters have adopted and evolved, appearing in the current media landscape as self-

confident, modern, and popular multimedia corporations. Part of the reason for the current status of the Nordic PSB institutions are their ability to adjust to technological, economic, and regulatory changes, and that they in return have been given a relatively wide regulatory leeway to explore new markets, innovations, and expansions.

The public service tradition in broadcasting has its origins in the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) established in the mid 1920s, and the concept of public service broadcasting has since referred to a variety of institutions, regulatory arrangements, social obligations, and types of programming. Common to all definitions is that the concept refers to a form of broadcasting that is accountable to society, rather than to the state and the market (Murdock and Golding 1977; Garnham 1986; Scannell 1990; Raboy 1996).

In line with their British, and the other northern European broadcasters, the Nordic institutions represent the heartland of the public service tradition. In the Northern European countries the PSB institutions are generally well funded, have a comprehensive remit, and occupy an essential position in society.

In contrast, both southern Europe, and other Anglo-American countries such as Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, the PSB remit is less comprehensive, the funding more limited, and the position less central. Moreover, public service broadcasting in northern Europe stands in sharp contrast with the US public broadcasting, which occupies a distinctively marginal position (Hallin and Mancini 2004; Hoffmann-Riem 1996; Humphreys 1996; Mendel 2000).

The five Nordic countries have in common a strong public service broadcasting system, with broadly similar characteristics even though some of the specific organization and funding of PSB varies due to historic and political differences. The similarities are largely results of mutual learning and coordination, and the travel of content, regulatory models, and examples across the borders (Smith 1998, 38).

The national broadcaster

A key characteristic of public service broadcasting in the Nordic region is that the PSB institutions have maintained authority as *the* national broadcaster. In this presentation, I will argue that this central position of the PSB institution is not only important in itself, but also

plays an important role in the regulation of *the entire 'media ecology'* in each country and in the region.

The unique role of the PSB institutions in the Nordic region is evident in their political legitimacy, which again is based on a general popularity among audiences. Practically everyone uses the PSB institutions' services in the Nordic region, most on a daily basis. Recent audience research shows that more than 90 per cent of the population tune into the respective public service broadcasting services (NRK (Norway), DR (Denmark) and SVT (Sweden) over the course of a week (see Syvertsen et al 2015).

This central position is not least explained by historical factors, such as the fact that in Denmark, Iceland, and Norway, there was only one national television channel available until the 1990s, and in Sweden and Finland only two (Flisen 2010). The situation thus contrast sharply with television history in larger countries and countries with a tradition of commercial broadcasting, such as the United Kingdom and Unites States, where several TV networks competed from the 1950s.

In fact, topographical peculiarities in the Nordic region is part of the explanation for the long-lasting television monopolies, as the extension of broadcasting networks to the sparsely populated landmasses and highly inconvenient terrain of Norway, Sweden and Finland was costly and difficult.

During the golden age of 'the welfare states', the public service broadcasters set the national agenda, and anything they aired of importance would be discusses across the nation. Since 1980s, however, the technological, political, and economic changes have massively transformed the broadcasting context. Two waves of change can be identifies; the deregulations of 1980s, and the subsequent challenges associated with digitalization in the 1990s and 2000s.

PSB in the Digital Era

The loss of monopoly implied a dramatic wake-up call for the incumbent broadcasting institutions, and while they had been slow to embrace competition in the 1980s, they took a more proactive approach in the face of the challenges associated with digitalization. From

the mid 1990s, public service broadcasters all over Europe lobbied policy makers to establish digital terrestrial television networks, fearful that they would otherwise be left without possibilities to expand (Levy 1999; McQuail and Siune 1989).

In the Nordic countries, as well as elsewhere, such as the United Kingdom, the role assigned to the former monopolies in the post-digitalization era is perhaps best described as 'digital locomotives'; as they were entrusted with the obligation to spearhead the transition to information societies and act as a bulwark against the threat of global media giants (Aslama and Syvertsen 2007; Enli 2008). This in turn implied looser regulatory frameworks compared to other European broadcasters, and the PSB institutions quickly expanded into new platforms; the Internet and the mobile telephony (Moe 2009). These moves have been crucial for rebuilding a central position in the digital age, and as a result, the public service broadcasters have to a large extent remained their historical role in securing universal access to information and media content in the digital age.

PSB in an 'ecosystem' perspective

The historical development of public service broadcasting in the Nordic region shows that the current legitimacy of the institutions is not solely related to their internal activities such as programming, but also to their positive impact on the larger society through technological innovation ('digital locomotive') and its ability to engage and activate the population (see Enli 2008). The role as a monopolist player is replaced by the role as the spearhead for innovation, diversity and quality in a dual market where both private and public institutions operate.

This dual broadcasting system is also recognized in other smaller media markets, such as the Flanders (the northern part of Belgium), as well as some larger countries like the United Kingdom. According Raats and Pauwels (2013:199), public service broadcasters legitimacy today partly rests on setting the "standard" in terms of quality and innovativeness. In other words: It should lead private players by example. This practise is a result of a development where regulators have increasingly focused on what has been termed an 'ecosystem approach', encouraging different types of collaboration between public and private media broadcasters. The ecosystem approach is typically a shift towards a focus on PSB's

surrounding stakeholders, such as cultural actors and private media companies (Raats and Pauwels 2013:205).

PSB as positive free speech

Following from the above discussion, I will now explore to what degree the regulatory arrangement with a strong PSB institution, such as in the Nordic region, can be regarded as an instrument to promote positive free speech.

First, the legitimacy of a well-funded and expansive public service broadcaster is largely related to their obligation to provide *diversity and quality in media output*. In turn, the PSB institutions' obligation to provide diversity in media is an incentive to promote positive free speech. With a requirement to provide diversity, it follows that the PSB content should voice various opinions in society, and provide an inclusive arena for public debate. For example by including every (relatively major) political party in television election debates.

A second aspect of positive freedom of speech associated with public service broadcasting is that the institutions' will - through their role as 'a leading example' –*impact on the entire media ecology*. One possible effect of this 'ecosystem' approach is for example that private television companies will seek pluralism in their content, and for example include varied political opinions and represent minority voices in their programs, in order to match the PSB channels in which they are competing against.

Third, the mixed-genre schedule in public service broadcasting works against the tendency of niche channels, which more or less exclusively served the most commercially attractive audience segments, and disdains less attractive segments, such as the elderly, minorities, and children (Enli 2013). Through *specialized programmes* targeted at these segments, the PSB institutions brings their voices into the public debate on their own premises, and in ways that would otherwise be hard to secure through a regulatory practise.

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