

The Many Uses of the “Public Service” Concept

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Sharpening media competition over the past decade has led to a sort of inflation in the use of the concept of *public service* with respect to radio and television services.¹ From once having been of primarily historical significance, *public service* has become a key concept in the regulation of publicly and privately owned radio and television channels. By attaching concrete and significant privileges to the status of “public service broadcaster” without specifying what they mean by the term, authorities have elicited a battle of rhetoric, the winners of which are awarded gilt-edged concessions, a share of licence fee revenues, and politicians’ blessing. In such a situation it may be interesting to go back and examine the origins of the concept and ask: Is there any meaning left, or has the concept been so perverted that it nowadays can be used as an apology for just about anything?

No Standard Definition

That there is no standard definition of the meaning of *public service* is an old truth in the field of media research. My own interest in the subject developed back in the late 1980s when I was working on a doctoral dissertation on the BBC and Norsk Rikskringkasting, NRK, the Norwegian public service broadcasting institution. I was searching for an established definition that might serve as sort of a “base line” in the introduction to my thesis. After having considered more than thirty different definitions, I realized that not only did the definitive criteria differ, some were in fact directly contradictory. I discussed this problem in an article (Syvertsen 1991), some of the main points of which are relevant to the current discussion. Let me begin by reviewing them briefly here. We shall then go on to discuss the extent to which the developments of the past decade have made it more difficult or easier to use the concept in media policy contexts.

“Broadcasting in the 1990s:

Who is the Most Public Service- Minded?”

The article, which appeared under the above title in 1991, made three main points. First, during sixty years of broadcasting history, no single understanding

of “public service” had crystallized. Not only were the attempts to define the phenomenon contradictory, there was also considerable variation in the definitions between countries and over time. Developments in Great Britain were particularly interesting in this regard. Here, regulatory usage of “public service broadcasting” had shifted from being a synonym for the BBC and its starchy, paternalistic policies of the 1920s to become a catch-all that ultimately included the greater part of a relatively commercialized media system. “Everyone” wanted to be a public service broadcaster – from local radio stations to Sky Channel.

The change did not occur without protest, however. The BBC, for example, continued to use the concept in a manner that accommodated all the changes that the organization itself had undergone, but excluded all other broadcasters. Given such a state of affairs, one can only conclude that the concept of “public service” was highly elastic, not to say amorphous. It was also apparent that the term was not entirely well-suited to use as a guiding principle in media policy discourses.

This conclusion led to the second point in the article, namely, that the question of what constitutes “public service” has significance far beyond the research community and people interested in broadcasting history. As early as the late 1980s it was quite apparent in Norway, as elsewhere, that institutions who could make a justifiable claim to the “public service” label would enjoy an advantage in the competition for economic and infrastructural privileges in the broadcasting sector. Characteristic of publicly regulated broadcasting sectors is that not only money and ratings, but political and cultural legitimacy count when privileges are to be granted or defended. “Public service” was in this context an honorific, carrying connotations to values like “national culture”, “professionalism” and “quality”. Use of such a label signalled a sense of responsibility and democratic commitment. At the same time, the term was diffuse and did not impose any major strictures on the broadcaster’s freedom of manoeuvre. From the above one should not draw the conclusion that media research supports calling anything at all “public service”. On the contrary, the article went on to identify several positions in relation to the concept, and the third main point was the observation that the battle between these positions was largely a struggle between different conceptions of the importance of broadcasting in society. Following a semantic analysis of the concept, three principle meanings were identified.²

The *first* definition was “public service” in the sense of a *public utility*, i.e., a technical-economic interpretation of the term that refers to the kind of services governments commonly provide – postal service, roads, railroads, etc. – where the prime criteria of success are signal quality, efficiency of operations and a distribution network that provides universal access. This understanding of the term predominated in the early years of European broadcasting. In Norway, for example, the principle that broadcasting services should be available nationwide was a prime argument for making broadcasting a responsibility of the public sector. John Reith, the BBC’s first Director-General and author of what might be termed a paternalistic ideology of broadcasting, used the term in this sense. This is quite apparent in his book, *Broadcast over Britain*, of 1924, where he develops his ideas

about radio as an agent of public enlightenment and vehicle for the distribution of (high) culture. A chapter entitled, "A Public Service" reflects little of such concerns, however. Instead, "public service" is discussed in terms of features like universal access, uniform rates, regulated profits and high standards of engineering quality.

The *second* main meaning of "public service" arises out of the circumstance that "public" may refer to the "public sphere" or "the commons". In this sense, "public service" may be expressed as *broadcasting in the service of the public sphere*, i.e., a meaning in which content and values figure somewhat more explicitly. The public sphere represents institutions in which members of the public take part as citizens and collectively make decisions for the common good. A medium "in the service of the public sphere" mainly guarantees that all members of society have access to the information and knowledge they need in order to perform their civic duties. This understanding of the concept corresponds well with broadcasters' self-conceptions in the era of broadcasting monopolies. The relative withdrawal from the state and the market brings non-commercial broadcasting closest to the ideal of a critical "public eye" in modern society. Licence-financed broadcasters have exploited this sense of the concept to the hilt in their struggle to retain monopoly privileges and to stave off competition.

The *third* definition of "public service" takes its starting point in the equation of "public" with "audience", which implies a conception of the public as individual consumers of the media. In this usage, "public service" may be translated as *broadcasting in the service of the listener/viewer*, that is to say, broadcasting whose prime purpose is to satisfy the interests and preferences of individual consumers rather than the needs of the collective, the citizenry. This sense of the term was not widely accepted in the late 1980s. Today, powerful forces are at play, both within the licence-financed, but competitively challenged broadcasting institutions and among new players on the market, to legitimize such an interpretation of the concept.

"Public Service" Today

What, then, has happened over the past decade that may have a bearing on the interpretation and usefulness of the public service concept? From the Norwegian horizon four main lines of development appear to dominate.

First of all, the concept of "public service" has clearly assumed an even more central position in media policy than could have been foreseen a decade ago. In fact, one may well say that it has become the key concept in the regulation of Norwegian broadcasting. The trend started in 1988, when the phrase "in the service of the public" was written into the Statutes for NRK, when the institution was reorganized into a foundation. In 1991, the new, privately owned TV2 was required to offer a programme profile that was "based on the principles of public service broadcasting". Two years later, the same requirement was inserted into the concessionary contract for P4, a privately owned radio station. In addition, in 1995

the government put twenty concessions for “local public service television” up for bid. Finally, in 1996, when NRK was converted into a (publicly owned) corporation, a new formulation regarding the company’s purpose was introduced into the “Regulations” document: “NRK is a public service radio and TV company carrying on radio and TV broadcasting and activities in connection with broadcasting.”

The ubiquity of the concept indicated here has not exactly helped specify its meaning, and it is not surprising that the government found it necessary in 1995 to appoint a “Public Service Broadcasting Council” (Allmennkringkastingråd) to help interpret the concept and to formulate the requirements to be made of the various channels. The work of the Council to date, and the debates its annual reports have kindled further underline the lack of consensus regarding the meaning of “public service”. The government, however, does not seem to take notice of the problem, but continues to use rhetoric like “with a view to improving the conditions of public service broadcasting in Norway” to legitimize any and all media policy initiatives. “Public service broadcasting” has become an increasingly popular mantra among media policy-makers and market actors. The more it is repeated, they seem to believe, the more it will acquire a meaning acceptable to all and, in time, magically, commercial channels will develop programme policies that render all further confrontations and disciplinary efforts unnecessary.

So far, at any rate, this seems a distant prospect. One of the most striking results of regulators’ use of the incantation has instead been that broadcasters’ have intensified their efforts in the battle concerning how to define it. It is only natural that when government attaches extensive concessionary privileges to a vaguely defined concept, those desirous of the privileges will do their utmost to interpret the concept to their advantage. NRK, the licence-financed broadcaster, has the most at stake, and to date the company has invested the most impressive efforts toward this end. Not only has the concept of “public service” begun to infuse all the external information emanating from the company, but NRK has also dubbed its annual presentation of audience and programme statistics “public service accounts”. These accounts contain a lot of interesting information, but they have nonetheless contributed to giving NRK’s external information a propagandistic bent. Whereas it once was rather easy to find factual data in the annual reports, you now have to wade through columns of public service-honorifics to find the simple little figure you are looking for. NRK’s self-legitimizing campaign also imbues the information the company offers on Internet. A simple search using the key word “public service broadcasting” (*allmennkringkasting*) yields over forty references to the NRK sites, and the number multiplies when one also uses the various permutations of “public”/public service” (*allmenn*), “radio” and “television”³. Interestingly, in several instances NRK makes use of a definition of public service broadcasting which excludes all other channels without making it clear to the Internet reader that such usage directly contradicts the usage current in official Norwegian media policy.⁴

TV2 and P4 have followed a mixed strategy in their efforts to legitimize themselves. When they have been criticized for not living up to public service requirements, management has, with studied nonchalance, replied that there is no firm definition of "public service" and that there is therefore no basis for demanding changes in the companies' programme policy. To be on the safe side, the companies have used the term to describe their output. TV2 has, for example, followed NRK's lead and more or less sneaked the concept into its public relations material; the last few years the company has also copied NRK in entitling the audience and programme statistics presented in the company's annual reports, "Allmennkringkasteren" [The public service broadcaster]. In a similar vein, P4 when announcing programming staff cuts and reorganization in late 1998, stressed that the company is "making every effort to fulfill the criteria of public service broadcasting" without elaborating on what that might entail.⁵ The strategy is clear: by implicit use of the concept and avoiding all confrontation with its historical dimensions, the new channels are scrambling to make room for themselves within the scope of the "public service" concept. On a less lofty level their aim, of course, is to continue to enjoy their state-guaranteed privileges at least a few years more.

"In the Service of the Audience"

It is quite apparent from the above that there is no common understanding of what "public service" and public service broadcasting mean. One has to admit that the commercial broadcasters and their political champions are right on that point. But that hardly means the concept can be taken to mean whatever you want it to. What we are witnessing today is a systematic struggle to shift the content of the concept from two traditional interpretations toward a new, third meaning: from broadcasting as a *public utility* and *broadcasting in the service of the public sphere* toward *broadcasting in the service of the audience*. The channels themselves are not solely to blame for the shift; they have had good help of media policy-makers, as well. By accepting that new channels fail to offer services to the parts of the country that are costly to reach, by including privately owned and advertising-financed channels under the heading, "public service"; by accepting NRK's letting ratings decide the fate of individual programmes; and by allowing NRK to finance some of its services through advertising sales, authorities have accepted, and even encouraged, greater responsiveness to the individual media consumer than to the audience as a culturally interested, democratically oriented body, or public.

My personal view is that these shifts of position have in many ways been unavoidable and even necessary: the alternative might have been a broadcasting system open to serious erosion. Still, I find phrases like "improving the conditions of public service broadcasting in Norway" both inappropriate and misleading as a description of a policy which in effect has paved the way for comprehensive commercialization of the entire broadcasting sector. When the concepts, *public service broadcasting* and *commercial broadcasting* gradually begin to be taken for more or

less the same thing, then, surely, the distinction as such has lost its meaning once and for all.

As “public service broadcasting” has more and more come to be understood as broadcasting in the service of the audience, however, an interesting question has arisen: Which audience are we talking about? In recent years we in Norway, as in other countries, have seen tendencies for the term “public service broadcasting” to be used in contrast to *market-segmented* or *targeted broadcasting*. As audiences become increasingly fragmented and the tendency toward special programming for those willing (and able) to pay for it progresses, “public service broadcasting” emerges as the last remaining truly mass media: the old-fashioned kind of radio and television that aims to appeal to a mass audience and is relatively accessible/comprehensible to viewers and listeners.

This is the understanding of the concept TV2 had in mind when the company in its Annual Report for 1997 described itself as “a public service broadcaster with a broad profile [having] the entire population as its target audience” (p. 33). The passage contrasts TV2 with the same company’s second, more targeted channel, TVNorge, as well as new pay-TV competitors. In 1997, the same understanding of “public service” figured in the debate that followed a demand of the Public Service Council that the traditional criterion, breadth of appeal, should be applied to each of NRK’s three radio channels rather than to the company’s overall radio output. Both the Ministry of Culture and NRK took exception with the Council’s interpretation. I mention the dispute here mainly as an illustrative example of how, in a relatively important policy area, the public service concept gives no indication of how it is to be properly understood.

New Usages

This last point suggests that we – once again – may be on the threshold of a new broadcasting situation in which not only traditional broadcast media, but also other media that combine sound, text, data and images, which formerly occupied separate spheres, will be operated by one and the same institutions. The development toward digitization and the convergence of telephonic, information and media services promise new areas of expansion, and in this context the concept of “public service” may well be stretched in new directions. NRK management, for example, argues that the company’s involvement in Internet is “a natural extension of what we normally do”.⁶ That must mean it is “public service”, too. Perhaps we shall soon see a situation where “public service” is finally liberated from its exclusive coupling to broadcast media so that it can be freely applied to many different kinds of cultural and media activities. Norwegian film historians Dag Asbjørnsen and Ove Solum have advanced some interesting ideas in this connection. In an article published in 1998 they argue that the Norwegian cinema monopoly, a child of the same era as monopoly broadcasting, should also be considered a “public service” system. One might by the same token argue that the Norwegian system of press subsidies, aiming as it does to maintain a universally ac-

cessible and diverse newspaper flora, is a “public service” institution, and that policy areas like telecommunications, transport, cultural life and education have been steered according to “public service principles” the greater part of this past century.

Discussions like this point toward two alternative fates for the concept of “public service” in years to come. On the one hand, expansion ad absurdum; public service as a catch-all for everything good and right in a world where a lot of things are bad and wrong. On the other hand -and much more fruitfully – we can conceive of public service as signifying a set of ideals and norms that imbued all media and cultural institutions in an historic era in the years around mid-century, but which ebbed out slowly starting in the 1970s and 1980s. As the millennium comes to an end, numerous artefacts and norms dating from the period remain intact (not least portions of NRK programme output), but as a guiding principle for broadcasting and cultural policy, the concept is definitely passé.

Notes

1. The Norwegian term, *allmennkringkasting*, translates more exactly as “public broadcasting”, but no distinction vis-à-vis “public service broadcasting” is intended, and none is made here.
2. The trichotomy was later used in several media policy contexts, including the Parliamentary reports, *Media i tida* (St.meld. 32 1992/93:126) and *Om virksomhet i kringkasting og dagspresse* (St.meld. 42 1993/94:10-11) in Norway and Søndergaard’s (1995:25ff) Rapport til Statsministeriets mediaudvalg om public service i dansk fjernsyn in Denmark.
3. A search 17th February 1999, using the search motor KVASIR, yielded 259 hits for the term, *allmennkringkasting*, 42 of which referred to the NRK pages. (See note 1.)
4. See NRK information at <http://www.nrk.no/info/fakta/allmennkringkasting> and <http://www.nrk.no/info/fakta/allmennkringkasting/kriterier>.
5. <http://stadt.notes.online.no/digi98.nsf/web/md60449187hb8662241550>, 8th March 1999.
6. <http://w3.digi98.nsf/pub/md42890292hn3489433127>, 8th March 1999.

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