HOW TO PRESERVE THE BROADCASTING LICENSE FEE: THE CASE OF NORWAY

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ABSTRACT As more and more countries abandon it in the age of digital media, the licence fee on television sets is becoming a rarity. This article looks at a case – Norway – where the traditional funding scheme for public service broadcasting has so far been preserved. It reviews the organization of the Norwegian public service broadcaster, NRK, and scrutinizes the political and public debate over its funding arrangements. Concentrating on three sets of stakeholders – the competitors, the public and the politicians – the article seeks to understand the lack of controversy surrounding these arrangements during the first decade after year 2000. In the conclusion, the article discusses possible outcomes of the current situation.

KEY WORDS: Public service broadcasting, Norway, license fee, media policy

Public service broadcasting exists in a state of constant turmoil. Yet, one of its more stable aspects, in Northern Europe at least, has been the funding scheme. Publicly owned broadcasting institutions have been funded by a license fee on radio or television sets, the goal of which is to provide a steady income stream and independence from the state and commercial actors. This setup has proved comparatively resilient across the Nordic region. But in the era of digital media, when radio and television are changing and public service broadcasters have expanded to platforms such as the Internet, in effect turning them into public service media institutions, the licence fee is being increasingly questioned.

Several Northern European countries have recently made fundamental changes to the funding scheme for public service media,
opting for different arrangements. While the Netherlands transferred the cost to the state budget, Germany abandoned the idea of a fee on receiver equipment and instead introduced a household fee. Neighbouring Denmark, meanwhile, expanded the licence fee to include computers and handheld devices capable of receiving audio-visual content. In Norway, by contrast, the funding scheme remains the same – a general fee on television sets. This provides an interesting case. Why has the traditional licence fee been preserved in Norway?

To address this question, this study focuses on what might be referred to as a non-decision. More specifically, it follows Des Freedman’s call for researchers to “look beyond immediate and visible instances of decision making in the media field”, and scrutinize what he labels “media policy silences” (Freedman, 2010: 1). What follows will first explain in some detail the history and specific design of the Norwegian funding scheme. Or that basis, the article scrutinizes discussions on the licence fee. The debate, until recently, has been surprisingly low-key; the fundamental status of the public service institution NRK remains largely uncontroversial. Concentrating on three sets of stakeholders, the competitors, the public, and the politicians, the study seeks to understand this lack of controversy during the first decade after year 2000. In closing, underlining that the lack of controversy does not mean public service broadcasting in Norway, or its funding, is safe and sound, the article discusses possible outcomes of the current situation.

The arguments presented here build on ongoing research into the development and regulation of public service media beyond broadcasting (see Moe, 2009, 2011, 2012; Elgesem et al., 2010), and rely on analysis of policy documents as well as mediated debates. Such texts are used as "sources intended to document a process" (Skogerboe, 1996: 50; also Østbye et al., 2007: 47). Considered in this way, it is assumed that documents can reflect the interests or actions of their authors, or in some other way represent facts of the policy process they refer to. So, by analysing documents it is possible to uncover political interests or forces behind policy developments (also Scott, 1990, Karppinen & Moe, 2012 for discussion).

PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTING IN NORWAY

Public service broadcasting arrangements come in different forms in different countries. One way to classify them is by distinguishing between (a) systems with broad regulatory interventions and strong public service broadcasters; (b) systems with some public service intervention, usually in order to stimulate domestic programming, and lower levels of public funds available; and (c) systems with minimalist intervention, low levels of public funding, and marginal public service broadcasters (Moe & Syvertsen, 2009). The latter category would include Southern European countries like Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain, as well as New Zealand and the United States. The middle category would
lands transferred the idea of a fee on receiver licences. Neighbouring countries include computers and there is a geneal fee on content. In Norway, the fee serves as a general fee on what might be called Des Freedman’s invisible instances of what he labels “media assets” will first explain in the Norwegian funding discussions on the licence fee. Raising key, the fee in the Netherlands remains largely low-key, the fee in Belgium, the Netherlands recently joined the ranks of Southern European countries such as Portugal, Spain and Greece in abandoning a free-standing funding scheme, potentially shifting the “heartland” of public service broadcasting further north. This compels us to scrutinize the contexts in which the legitimacy of solid funding arrangements remains high, or where the licence fee seemingly remains stable. Norway is such a case.

Norsk rikskringkasting (NRK) is the Norwegian licence fee-funded, publicly owned media institution (the following paragraphs build on Moe, 2009). Its Director-General, appointed by the Executive Board, is both administratively and editorially in charge. The Minister of Culture represents the state as owner. The NRK does have a broadcasting council with members picked by Parliament and the Government. However, the council has a mere advisory function, typically raising program-related issues on behalf of listeners and viewers. The Media Authority is the media and communication regulator. Formally an administrative body under the Minister of Culture, in 2011, it was granted a more independent role in the area of broadcasting regulations (Kampanje, 2011a).

For decades, the NRK was the sole broadcaster in Norway and did not face nationwide competition until the early 1990s, when the Government issued licences for commercially funded radio and television channels with public service obligations. As of 2011, the Norwegian public service broadcasting system is made up of an ad-funded private television provider (TV2) and two ad-funded private radio broadcasters (P4 Radio hele Norge and Radio Norge), in addition to services from the publicly owned NRK (for an overview of the Norwegian media landscape, see Østbye, 2007).

With the introduction of a national radio and television broadcast market in the early 1990s, the organization and regulation of NRK including its funding scheme – took a new turn. NRK launched a forceful argument for a more efficient organization in response to its first serious national competition. The public service broadcaster quickly found that the licence fee, even in combination with cutbacks, could not provide sufficient income to finance its ambitious aims; a problem that became more obvious in the emerging digital era (NRK, 1995: 7). NRK’s strategy entailed a proactive approach that “paid off” as Parliament changed the organization from a foundation to a state-owned limited company in 1996. This change of status facilitated subsidiaries to exploit commercial potentials while keeping a level of political control. NRK
Aktivum was established as a subsidiary the following year to take care of all business activities connected to public service broadcasting. While commercial activities had existed also prior to this time, they now took a more ambitious form. Aktivum initiated several controversial projects before settling on four main areas: programme sales, interactive services, consumer goods (mainly via a web store on nrk.no) and events (Støren, 1999: 82; NRK Aktivum, 2006; see Moe, 2012 for a discussion of the internal tensions surrounding Aktivum’s expansive plans during this period).

Since that time, the broadcaster has actively sought commercial partnerships and revenue in program production, as well as for teletext and online service development and engaged in a stranded initiative to commercialize the entire department for educational programs (Gram, 2001), acquired and launched magazines, and planned, and subsequently licenses, the rights to a theme park based on a children’s program series (Wekre, 2006). Although the percentage of total commercial income remains small, the pretensions and scope of activity did not lag behind larger sister-institutions. Since the mid-1990s, NRK has expanded beyond traditional radio and broadcasting to explore new media platforms. By 2011, the institution views its Internet-based services as basic and on a level with broadcast services. The online services include not only redistribution of audio and audio-visual material, but extensive text-based news content (Elgesem et al., 2009), along with more innovative offerings, such as online weather services and games (Moe, 2009). In effect, public service broadcasting has turned into public service media (for recent analysis of this development in other contexts, see e.g. Bennett, 2008; Van den Bulck, 2008; Brevini, 2010).

In general terms, that describes the situation for the NRK. The question is how the first decade of the 2000s has fared with the legitimacy of the licence fee arrangements.

**IMPEDED DEBATE OVER THE FUNDING SCHEME**

To preserve their privileges, public service broadcasters must maintain their position of legitimacy. Support for the licence fee is a good indicator of such legitimacy. One way to get a grip on this support is to look at opinions expressed by the different sets of stakeholders. In this context, we can identify three different sets of such stakeholders (see Moe, 2009).

First, and increasingly more important, the NRK needs to secure legitimacy among its commercial competitors and partners. Industry must perceive the public institution’s activities as stable, predictable, and reasonably regulated. Importantly, as institutions like the NRK have moved beyond traditional radio and television and taken up novel forms of content provision on new media platforms, this set of stakeholders no longer consists solely of broadcasters. Rather, the businesses formerly engaged in making printed newspapers, as well as the companies that used to provide telecom infrastructure, together with
newcomers, now all have a stake in the discussion of public service media. In this sense, commercial competitors make up a first set of stakeholders.

The public makes up a second set, as it uses and pays for the services. The public must see the institution and its output as distinctive, independent, and reliable – and as such worthy of funding. There are different ways to assess the level of perceived legitimacy among the public. One is by looking at public debate. Another is by looking at audience statistics, as they tell us how many and who actually uses public service media content, and how they use it. Seen in this way, the public is made up of a number of groups, such as those directly involved in the public debate, those who are heavy users of the services provided by the NRK, those who are light users, and those who are not users at all.

A third set of stakeholders is found in the political realm. This is the most formal aspect of public service broadcaster’s legitimacy. It is reflected by the ways in which the broadcaster’s plans call for political policy and the ways actual policy or regulations are directly impacted by such urgings. The question, then, is how legitimate the licence fee set up has appeared to be over the last decade among these stakeholders.

**Competitors: unobtrusive, not attacking the fundement**

The general impression of Norwegian commercial media and their interest groups is that they have lagged behind their European counterparts when it comes to disputing NRK privileges. While the Association for Commercial Television (ACT), to take one high-profile example, issued a much-discussed report in 2004 attacking public service broadcasting in the digital age, the Norwegian actors were slower in launching a concerted offensive. And when such issues have surfaced on their agenda, they tend to be neither about the very existence of the NRK nor about the licence fee. Rather, attacks have been directed at specific, less fundamental, privilege and have not caused widespread media debates.

This is not to say that commercial competitors have been inactive. If we look beyond public debates, and into the policy sphere, there are processes similar to those found in other European countries since the turn of the millennium: commercial stakeholders have directed their complaints about competition from publicly funded broadcasters to the European Commission’s Directorate for competition policy (Moe, 2009, also e.g. Donders & Pauwels, 2010). In 2003, the NRK’s strongest competitor on television, TV2, filed a complaint to the EFTA Surveillance Authority (BSA), whose powers mirror those of the European Commission in the field of state aid, on alleged cross-subsidy of the public service broadcaster’s teletext and Internet services. Norwegian regulations allowed advertising on these two parts of the licence fee-funded broadcaster’s output. According to TV2, this arrangement gave the NRK an unfair advantage when trying to attract advertisers. During
2004, ESA extended the investigation to include the complete model for funding the NRK and the definition of its remit (ESA, 2005). The case was not settled until 2010 (see Lilleborge, 2011 for an updated presentation of the procedure). Importantly, neither TV2 nor ESA questioned the fundamental set up of the licence fee. The whole process did not attract much attention in Norwegian policy debates, despite its novel character and the fact of a supranational policy actor imposing competition law-founded regulation on the NRK. Only towards the end of the decade did the case really breakthrough in public debates. And even then, minor issues got attention from the commercial competitors.

A case in point was the NRK’s right to sell ads on its websites. Introduced in 2000, Parliament confirmed and defended the arrangement as late as in 2007 (Regjeringen, 2007). In the years that followed, commercial competitors voiced their concern over the issue, arguing that the NRK took ad money away from the private market. In 2010, the NRK itself announced it would end its practice of ad selling online (NRK, 2010). Despite attracting some attention, not much was at stake in terms of revenues. NRK earned approximately €1.2 million per year on the ad sales while collecting around €572 million in licence fees in 2010.

While the set of stakeholders that make up NRK’s commercial competitors should not be seen as having strengthened the legitimacy of the licence fee over the past decade, they can at least be said to have remained relatively low-voiced. Their complaints did neither attack the NRK’s fundamental role, nor focus on the legitimacy of the licence fee as such during the first decade of the 2000s.

**The public: some opposition, but still widespread use**

If we look at public attitudes toward NRK funding reported in the media during the same period, questions have only emerged sporadically and seldom touched on anything essential to NRK’s existence. From time to time, polling data has been reported. One poll from 2009 claimed 44% opposed the licence fee, while 53% supported it – results which were interpreted by commentators as both positive and negative for the NRK (Kampanje, 2009). More recently, NRK claimed to have found 74% of the public reported feeling they get value for their licence fee money (Kampanje, 2011b). Methodological issues notwithstanding, such numbers are comparatively high internationally and have tended to spark isolated statements from policy makers or industry stakeholders on the issue, rather than a prolonged, substantial debate.

One interesting event, which potentially could have led to real public discussion, was a mediated debate in 2007 on a plan from the previous year to change the deadlines for collection of the licence fees to comply with accounting regulations. Depending on which side one chooses to believe, the quite complicated schema would either entail no burden for the licence fee paying public or result in several months of double payment (Alstad, 2007; Gabrielsen & Vågstad, 2007). But again, rather
than tackling basic issues related to the legitimacy of licence fee funding, the debate remained focused on technicalities (this time practices of accountancy) and personal misrepresentations.

More recently, and as potential arena for public debate, Facebook groups against the licence fee have created some buzz in the mainstream media — symptomatic of a more general trend, perhaps, where Facebook groups are used as a representation, or even a measure of, grassroots resistance or public protests. By mid-2011, this trend seems to have faded in Norwegian mainstream media. By any account, even the fact that one anti-licence fee Facebook group counts well over 200,000 members in June 2011 (Facebook, 2011) has not triggered any sizeable debate. If such examples give an impression of the low intensity in the opposition to the NRK’s funding scheme in public debates, actual user statistics can add to the picture of the public service broadcaster’s legitimacy among different groups.

Of those Norwegians between 9-79 years of age who listened to radio in 2010, 32% listened to an NRK channel (MedieNorge/SSB, 2011). Broken down in different age groups, the 9-15 years old stand out as the segment with the least use (10%). Such a lack of appeal among the youngest is a well-known challenge for public service broadcasters – and one that could potentially lead to more serious trouble regarding NRK’s legitimacy down the road. However, if we look at television viewing, the impression is more balanced. Following the launch of a children’s channel (NRK Super) in 2007, the NRK’s market share among the youngest audience groups has increased substantially. For 2-6 years old, that channel alone had a 43.2% share, and for 7-11 years old it held 16.5% in 2010 (MedieNorge/TNS Gallup, 2011a). While the numbers are lower among teenagers and young adults, such audiences still reflect the overall reach of NRK content across media platforms. In 2010, this was measured to 85% for all age groups – with no age group falling below 65% (MedieNorge/TNS Gallup, 2011b).

Such relatively high overall user numbers should not be taken as a proof of general support of the licence fee. Nevertheless, they do tell us something about the soil for serious challenges to the NRK’s fundamental organization: it is not at all that fertile. By extension, the numbers also help explain the lack of weight given to those members of the public who protest the licence fee arrangements. One group of stakeholders who certainly should be expected to pay attention to such statistics can be found in the political realm.

Political stakeholders: don’t rock the boat

In the Norwegian Parliament, three of the parties have set abolishment of the licence fee as an goal; the Progress Party (FrP, 22.9% in the 2009 general election) favours commercial funding, while the Conservative party (Høyre, 17.2%) along with the smaller Liberal party (Venstre, 3.9%) want to turn the NRK into a post on the annual state budget. Leading members of the Christian Democrats (KrF, 5.5%) have also more
recently voiced similar opinions (NTB 2008). This gives an impression of a lack of legitimacy for the licence fee among political stakeholders. However, Parliament did not undertake any substantial debate on alternatives to the licence fee during the ten years after the turn of the millennium.

One aspect that merits mentioning is that the basis for such discussion in the 2000s has been a strong consensus throughout the 1980s and 1990s to keep the NRK as a primarily publicly funded institution. Basically, the NRK has operated within a quite liberal regulatory framework. Since the liberalisation of the Norwegian broadcast sector in the 1990s, a long line of political decisions have favoured NRK in the sense that the institution has been allowed to modernize and transform into a “multimedia house”. The Norwegian authorities’ willingness to protect the comparatively generous leeway for NRK can also be seen in the investigation into state aid issues by the ESA, discussed above. Here, the Norwegian Ministry of Culture repeatedly argued for a dynamic interpretation of the public service remit and opposed too detailed definitions, fearing restrictions for NRK innovations and development (Moe, 2009). In effect, commercial stakeholders’ unassertive complaints did not resonate within the ruling parties. This indicates that the NRK has enjoyed a friendly and understanding political climate over the last decades.

Moreover, the lack of any thorough debate is to a large extent due to the ruling majority’s policy. The Coalition Government, in office since 2005 – Labour (Arbeiderpartiet, 35.4% in the 2009 general election), the Socialist Left (SV, 6.2%) and the Centre Party (Senterpartiet, 6.2%) – still favours the licence fee. Importantly, the majority has not shown any interest for solutions that aim to “modernize” the funding arrangements, in order to cover the move beyond traditional broadcast services. In principle, the NRK’s licence fee regulations do not rule out collecting fees from PC and mobile phone owners. In 2005, the NRK even suggested this approach should be employed, partly building its argument on a newly passed decision in Denmark where a “media licence fee” was debated and introduced (Mossin, 2006; see Ala-Fossi & Hujanen, 2010 for a discussion of a similar proposal in Finland). The Norwegian coalition government rejected the idea without much debate or any formal treatment.

Herein lies an important nuance in the attitude of the political stakeholders in the Norwegian case. The result of their policy has not been a carte blanche for the NRK, but a somewhat conservative approach, keen on retaining the specific scheme of the licence fee on television sets. As a consequence, the licence fee set up retained strong legitimacy among formal political stakeholders throughout the first decade after 2000.

While such a stakeholder analysis helps us understand why there has been so little substantial controversy around the licence fee in Norway since 2000, the discussion does not necessarily give an all-encompassing explanation. For instance, more general contextual
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factors, such as economic growth and the recent financial crisis, also matter. On the one hand, Norway was comparatively lightly affected by the crisis, and remains a very wealthy country. By 2010, Norway was ranking as number two (after Luxemburg) on OECD’s list of GNP per capita (OECD, 2011). This has contributed to a climate of less pressure on public expenses than seen in many other European countries. On the other hand, to the extent that the financial crisis did lead to cutbacks in the commercial media markets, the public and the politicians might very well see NRK as a stable actor – one that now more clearly stands out with a comprehensive news and documentary agenda.

**Strengthened Legitimacy**

Yet, beyond such contextual factors, the discussion of the three sets of stakeholders does yield insights. Importantly, the aspects identified are interrelated and could be said to reinforce each other. The commercial stakeholders’ protests are probably perceived as low key partly because they have found little support in the political realm. And the high level of legitimacy found among political stakeholders has a historical side (the liberal framework developed for the NRK during the 1990s) and a practical side (the fact that a Left-Centre coalition has had the majority in Parliament). In addition, the high levels of public support, most notable in the sense of the popularity of NRK services across platforms, would impact on the political realm as well.

Still, the case of Norway, as it emerges from such discussion, does show some peculiar traits. Not least is that the expansive strategy since the mid-1990s has transformed the NRK from a radio and television broadcaster into a full-blown cross-media provider. So while money has been spent on more diverse activities, quite far removed from broadcast programs, the legitimacy for the traditional funding scheme has remained high. And, importantly, the funding remains explicitly linked to the traditional form of broadcasting: it is still called a broadcasting license fee and it still depends on ownership of a television set. In sum, one might argue that the picture that emerges of the Norwegian case since 2000 is one of strengthened legitimacy of a traditional funding scheme despite the growth of non-traditional services. The question, then, is how this might play out in the years to come.

**LOOKING AHEAD**

So far, the demands from competitors as well as the public and politicians have been something NRK has managed to handle without seriously jeopardizing its licence fee arrangements. This may, of course, change. The agenda of the commercial media interest groups could lead to more substantial attacks, also on the licence fee. Judging from the latest rounds of revision of the NRK’s regulatory framework – including a 2010 Media Authority report on the NRK’s online services and the
introduction of the Norwegian version of the public value test the same year (Lilleborg, 2011; Thoresen & Bolstad, 2011) – the intensity and volume of commercial stakeholders’ protests are on the rise. Furthermore, depending on the outcome of the 2013 election, a majority could be formed in a resistance towards the licence fee. Still, there are signs that indicate that such a resistance might not mean immediate abandonment. For instance, in a 2011 debate with the Minister of Culture, a leading Conservative Party representative moderated his and his party’s earlier aim to abolish the licence fee, making it clear that it is no burning issue (Kampanje, 2011c).

On a more fundamental level, Norwegian media regulations’ use of the term “broadcasting” is a key aspect for the future of the licence fee. As noted, the licence fee is for broadcasting. When the institutions receiving the licence fee money increasingly do other things, apart from broadcasting, opponents can easily target them. All Nordic licence fee institutions have indeed been involved in a long line of activities beyond radio and television broadcasts, especially since the emergence of the Internet as a mainstream media platform, and they continue to develop such services. In this situation, it matters what we call the activities of these public institutions. In Norway, the authorities have opted for an approach that more or less explicitly seeks to fit new services – websites, mobile phone services, iPad apps etc – under the umbrella of “broadcasting”. As shown, so far into the 21st century, this approach has proven successful: the legitimacy of the licence fee remains high despite the apparent mismatch between the funding arrangement of broadcasting on television sets and the actual scope of services it pays for.

Until recently, the NRK had no comprehensive description of its remit (the following builds on Moe, 2011). An updated outline of the remit is wanted, especially in light of the NRK’s ventures into digital media. Somewhat paradoxically, the commercial public service broadcasters have had more detailed tasks to adhere to, spelled out in their licence agreements. As the Ministry of Culture and Church Affairs admitted when it embarked on a white paper on the issue in 2007, NRK services on new media platforms had never really been the subject of political handling by Parliament. Instead the developments, especially on the Internet, were the result of NRK’s own priorities, without much policy involvement (Regjeringen, 2007: 99).

The white paper included an outline of a so-called NRK manifesto, constructed to describe the overall aims of the institution’s public service broadcasting on the level between the Broadcasting Act and the institution’s own statutes. In the version passed by Parliament in March 2008, the manifesto is organized around five pillars. They command the NRK’s public service activities to support and strengthen democracy; be universally available; reinforce Norwegian languages, identity and culture; aspire to high quality, pluralism and innovation; and be non-commercial (Familie- og kulturkomiteen, 2008: 7–8). Importantly, new
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media platforms are at the outset put on equal terms with traditional radio and television broadcasting – the manifesto specifically mentions Internet activities and directs the institution to “be present on, and develop new services for all important media platforms in order to reach as widely as possible with its complete program provision” (Familie- og kulturrådet, 2008: 7–8, §2d).

On one level, then, the recent Norwegian regulatory initiative facilitates an expansion of public service beyond broadcasting. Services for new platforms are defined as broadcasting. The manifesto as a whole deals only with what it calls the NRK general public service broadcasting provision. It even explicitly defines this to be “both traditional program activities and in the shape of new media services” (Familie- og kulturrådet, 2008: 7–8, §5e) and to specifically include online “downloadable services” (Familie- og kulturrådet, 2008: 7–8, §5c). Insisting on “public service broadcasting” as the overarching concept has paradoxical consequences. A range of media services provided by the NRK – from text-based online news, to Internet discussion forums, to weather services for mobile phone users – are public service broadcasting according to the manifesto but not broadcasting pursuant to the Norwegian Broadcasting Act, which definitions as “transmission of speech, music, images and the like via radio waves or by wire, meant or suitable for direct and simultaneous reception by the public” (1982: §1(1)). Here, the two documents contradict each other. While the act operates with a strict, technological definition of broadcasting, the more recent manifesto seeks to extend the concept. In this sense, the recent Norwegian approach – trying to fit new services to the broadcasting concept – is more a rehash than a thorough rethinking.

This is anything but a principled stand and an approach, which, potentially, puts the privileges of public service arrangements at risk. It under-communicates the fundamental shift that has taken place within these organizations, as well as in the media industry more generally (Moe, 2011). However, for those concerned with the traditional arrangements of the licence fee on television sets, such an under-communication might be good news – at least in the short term. At some point, though, policy makers might be forced to face the more basic challenge of building an argument for public service arrangements without relying on the traditional term.

Scholars have taken up the challenge and made several attempts to move the public service concept away from broadcasting by introducing different alternatives. Some exchange broadcasting with communication (Harrison & Wessels, 2005) or communications (Born, 2005). Others opt for content (Jakubowicz, 2008). Yet others prefer, as suggested above, to introduce media as the concept’s third part (e.g. Bardoe & Lowe, 2008). Such suggestions are suited to describe the actual development of public service beyond broadcasting. They may also facilitate thorough thinking about the regulatory status of public service as a cultural policy tool. However, simply changing broadcasting with generic terms like
"communications", "content" or "media" does little to address the issue of the basic legitimacy of the policy.

Among the conceptualizations that might more fundamentally free public service from broadcasting are merit goods arguments (Musgrave, 1959; e.g. Stewart et al., 2004 for discussion related to new media) and the idea of the commons (e.g. Murdock 2005 for discussion related to public service broadcasting). Such concepts may help explicate what is at stake, but have questionable aspects as well (Moe, 2011). On the one hand, a merit good argument leads us to focus on individual services that correct a market failure, thereby leaving behind the idea of a comprehensive public service remit of interlinked services. On the other hand, the notion of the commons clearly encompasses a lot more than what a public service media institution can provide, for instance well within the territory of museums, or even educational institutions. As a consequence, none of the alternative terms or redefinitions solves the policy dilemma. As a regulatory term, broadcasting is inadequate, yet there is no obvious universal successor. It remains to be seen how this is tackled in the Norwegian case and whether or not the licence fee on television sets is preserved in the future.

CONCLUSION

This article has dealt with the state of the licence fee funding in Norway. Based on a contextualization and description of the Norwegian case, it has been argued that the level of debate over the NRK licence fee has been low in the first ten years since the turn of the millennium – and never really threatened the fundamentals of the funding arrangements for the NRK. Discussing three sets of stakeholders – commercial competitors, the public and the political realm – the article has identified factors that might help us understand why this is the case. It has also sought to identify some aspects that might be of importance for the continued existence of the licence fee. For while the very existence of a public media institution in Norway might not be seriously threatened right now, there is little doubt that eventually it will be the subject of controversy – as public service broadcasting always is, everywhere.

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