PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTING AND SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES: THE NORWEGIAN BROADCASTING CORPORATION ON FACEBOOK

Abstract

Social networking sites have become staples in everyday life in many parts of the world. Public service broadcasters have ventured on to such services, aiming to reach new users. This move triggers a line of question about the borders between the public and the commercial, the control of content and the shifting power in media policy. Focusing on the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation’s use of Facebook, this article offers insights into what exactly is new about the challenges posed by social networking sites, and explores how this instance of hybrid arrangements impacts on our understanding of public service media.

Through rapid growth, social networking sites have become staples in everyday life in many parts of the world. From: their original purpose of connecting people virtually, and offering an arena for mediated one-to-one and many-to-many communication, such services now penetrate a range of more or less obvious uses and actors — whether obscure extremist groups, large political campaigns, multinational charities, local fashion stores or the police.

The meeting between traditional offline organisations and social networking sites raises some interesting issues. Politicians and other public figures exposing improper comments on Facebook, at best meant for a private setting, by now seem commonplace. Public bodies have made good use of these services, not least in times of natural disasters (e.g. see Bruns et al., 2012 for an Australian example). While being “followed” by the security police on Twitter might just feel a bit awkward, the practice of using the same service to announce arrests of named suspects opens new venues for instant information spreading, but also raises some questions about privacy and the requirements of public documentation (see Solstad, 2009 for a Norwegian example).

For media organisations, social networking sites offer opportunities on different levels. The first is for doing journalistic work more efficiently, and potentially better, by involving users in different ways — a topic to which researchers and journalists alike have given a lot of attention (e.g. Bruns, 2005). Second, and on a more prosaic level, services such as Facebook, Twitter, Google+, Tumblr, Digg, Delicious and LinkedIn, to name some popular ones in recent years, are thoroughly integrated in the journalistic output on most mainstream news websites, urging readers to spread the word via their own networks. In addition, media organisations have ventured on to such services with their own content, aiming to reach new users.

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Publicly funded media have not been left by the wayside. By 2012, public service broadcasters across the globe – from the BBC in the United Kingdom, via ARD and ZDF in Germany to ABC in Australia – were using social networking sites in their provision. For these organisations, an additional challenge has to do with the commercial: these public service broadcasters can be seen as national non-commercial entities that enter the domain of global commercial enterprises. How do such organisations tackle social networking sites, and to what extent do the new practices force us to rethink public service media?

Rather than responding with a knee-jerk dismissal of public service broadcasters’ use of social networking sites, this article takes as a starting point that these broadcasters have always been about combining commercial and public activities and funding sources in hybrid arrangements. In different contexts, these arrangements have taken different forms, but they tend to be triggered by the introduction of new technologies or novel media forms. Such is also the case today, with services like Twitter and Facebook. Here, I focus on a Scandinavian publicly funded broadcaster’s use of Facebook.

The various Scandinavian public service broadcasting entities have a lot in common. In the interwar period, Sweden, Denmark and Norway set up national publicly owned radio institutions as publicly funded monopolies, followed by the launch of television in the 1950s and 1960s, within the same model. Since then, both radio and television programming have shared characteristics based on a common public service ethos, but they have also actually been similar in form and content following substantial exchanges and cooperation across borders. As of 2012, public service broadcasting continues to enjoy success in all the Scandinavian countries. I will use the Norwegian NRK as a main case. The NRK is a strong, comparatively well-funded institution, perceived to retain a high level of legitimacy and journalistic integrity, with channels that still dominate television and radio in Norway. The question is how to balance its status as publicly funded, largely advertisement free and bound to openness with the use of a global, amorphous, commercial service like Facebook. The aim of the article is to offer insights into what exactly is new about the challenges posed by services like Facebook, and to explore how this instance of hybrid arrangements impacts on our understanding of public service media.

In what follows, I first contextualise recent developments by way of historical examples of earlier hybrid arrangements – from program listing magazines to advertising practices. On that basis, I look closer at the actual implementation and internal guidelines, as well as external regulatory devices relevant to public service broadcasters’ use of social networking sites. I argue that the short history so far can be divided into two phases – one characterised by budding experiments, trial and error but high ambitions, and one described by emerging uniformity combined with more modest aims. In conclusion, I point to the fundamental questions raised in the current situation.

Public service broadcasting and commercial income streams

‘Public service broadcasting’ was coined a long time ago in a specific political, technological and social context. As it has travelled in time and space, public service broadcasting has changed. It exists as a concept of actual media policy. Retaining its centrality in national and supranational regulations, it is given specific – and by default different – definitions depending on the status and function of the text in question, and the political, technological and societal context. If we focus on economy, public service broadcasting has somewhere, during some periods, been dominantly non-commercial. Prime examples include the United Kingdom prior to the launch of ITV in 1955, and

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Scandinavia during the monopoly era – which in these countries ended only in the 1980s. Elsewhere, as in New Zealand or Jamaica, commercial income streams have always partly or wholly funded public service broadcasting (e.g. Comrie and Fountaine, 2005; Padovani, 2007). But even if we look closely at the more ‘pure’ cases, such as the United Kingdom and the Scandinavian countries, history reveals combinations of commercial and public activities.

The BBC entered the business of print magazine publishing in 1923, with the launch of program listing publication Radio Times (Currie, 2001). In the years since, a long line of new titles has followed. The BBC remained in that business for over 85 years, before selling off what had become a commercial subsidiary called BBC Magazines to private interests in 2011. While representing an ancillary service, this illustrates how even the world’s pioneering licence fee-funded public service broadcaster always has combined the public with the commercial.

This also applies to Scandinavia. From 1925 until the German occupation in 1940, Norwegian radio listeners, to take one early example, were exposed to ads. Originally introduced by the private company that pre-dated the public service broadcaster NRK, the practice of scheduling blocks of ads was maintained after the establishment of the publicly funded radio monopolist in 1933. Although the NRK expressed concerns about commercial pressure, the main argument against ads was competition with the printed press (Dahl, 1999: 61, 123, 326ff). The German occupiers banned commercials, and after World War II, NRK radio ads were never again put on the political agenda. Advertisers also failed to get an entry into television in the early 1950s (Dahl and Bastiansen, 1999: 154), and the supporters were outnumbered when the issue was debated in the late 1960s, with transnational satellite television looming (1999: 408). The NRK again introduced ads on parts of its service in the 2000s, starting with teletext, with the website following suit. By 2010, however, the NRK was again advertising free (see Moe, 2012 for discussion). Like the BBC’s magazine publishing, the NRK’s process of sparingly introducing and removing ads illustrates how even public service broadcasters counted as ‘pure’ on a global scale (e.g. Hallin and Mancini, 2004), at different times and with different rationales, have benefited from additional commercial income.

However, these more or less modest income streams come from additions to, or are secondary utilisation of, public services. Whether selling programs for rebroadcast on other channels, selling channel subscriptions to international audiences or selling merchandise including videos or DVDs, it was all primarily about exploiting content that had already been produced. The integration of social networking sites into the online, however, illustrates how the internet brings new forms of combinations of the public and the commercial. In these instances, public service content becomes part of an external commercial entity’s provision. The problem with imagining analogue examples from established media – presenting a BBC documentary on Sky, or using a commercial radio channel to advertise a public service one – simply underlines how the case we face with social networking sites constitutes something different. Understanding exactly how it is different, and what the consequences are, requires a closer look.

The NRK is formally required to take its remit online, and has incorporated Facebook in its provisions, resulting to date in a quite expansive and complex range of offers. On an average day in the second quarter of 2012, 87 per cent of Norwegians used some of the NRK’s services (TNS Gallup/MediaNorge, 2012). Moreover, Norway ranks high on lists of countries for Facebook penetration. By the first quarter of 2012, 59 per cent of Norwegians used Facebook on an average day. Taken together, these features should
make the NRK’s use of Facebook an interesting case of public service institutions’ use of social networking sites.

The history of Scandinavian public service broadcasters’ approach to social networking sites can fruitfully be told by separating between two phases. The first phase, from 2006, was characterised by randomly scattered experimentation, but also high ambitions. The second phase, emerging from late 2010, signalled a more uniform, coherent but also moderate approach. The transition between these two phases corresponds with a shift from a bottom-up to a top-down approach to social networking sites as a new media platform for public service media. In the following, this development is detailed with relevant examples, focusing on the Norwegian case.

The NRK and Facebook: Phase I

Scandinavian public service broadcasters’ first attempts at web services date from the mid-1990s; they were characterised by creative exploration, with groups of enthusiasts among the staff trying out the novel world of networked computing (e.g. Brügger, 2012; Moe, 2012; Thorsen, 2010 on different cases). As the web grew into a mainstream media platform in the years leading up to 2000, the public service broadcasters found themselves in a regulatory vacuum, trying to expand web offers – often with tiny budgets. During the first decade of the 2000s, however, when no one could deny the lasting character of the web as a media platform, public service broadcasters – in Northern Europe at least – got the formal political green light to include the internet in their remits. At this point, the institutions aimed not only to be on the web, but to be part of it. This meant expansion outside their own main websites (like bbc.co.uk and nrk.no). Such expansion could, as in the Norwegian case, include high-profile collaborations with other public organisations. On other fronts, public service broadcasters started to publish material on YouTube, and even built studios and sites in virtual worlds such as Second Life (e.g. Moe, 2008). In brief, this was the situation when social networking sites like Facebook showed up on the radar of mainstream media.

Facebook has had an enormous growth in the number of users globally, and has also in record time taken up a dominant position as a platform for mediated communication. It is easy to forget just how young the service is. Launched in 2004, but only going public in the autumn of 2006, the attention to and use of Facebook in a country like Norway gained momentum shortly afterwards: a search in the main database of Norwegian media finds only seven mentions of Facebook in 2006, but 1154 in 2007, a number that rises rapidly in the following years. By 2007, just 9 per cent of Norwegians used any social networking site (including MySpace) on an average day (SSB/MedieNorge, 2010). In April that year, the NRK experienced its first success on Facebook.

As part of what was initially a trial of audio-visual services for mobile devices, popular comedian Harald Ela came up with the Rubenmann character. Aimed at a young audience, Rubenmann was a young, male video blogger posting deliberately amateurish videos where he posed dilemmas to his viewers (e.g. ‘Would you rather never again brush your teeth or eat your grandma’s faeces once?’) (Sundet, 2008). Partly because Rubenmann attracted young viewers, NRK decided to take the experiment to the web. A separate blog was constructed, the video blog posts were uploaded to YouTube and a Facebook account was created for Rubenmann. On all these platforms, it was the character who spoke, not the actor behind Rubenmann or NRK as an institution (Hofseth, in Sundet, 2008). In particular, the Facebook account attracted attention from users as well as mainstream media, and led to an expansion of the project, both in terms of scope and timeframe. On Facebook, users could enter into a dialogue with the character, and
also express their fandom, contribute pictures, and so on. As Sundet (2008) argues, on the one hand this project represented a continuation of the NRK practice of using new entertainment programs or personalities to try out new media services. On the other hand, Rubenmann was different since there was no actual radio or television program to promote or extend. Also, the whole Rubenmann universe appeared without the well-known NRK logo, and blurred the lines between fiction and facts. Even though the decision to take Rubenmann on to Facebook was in line with the overall idea of using external websites to reach new – especially young – users (Garfors, in Sundet, 2008), the project clearly comes across as dynamic – as an experiment with low expectations, rather than grounded in a fixed and predefined strategy.

In the years that followed, Facebook – along with Twitter – grew to become more commonplace as part of NRK services. More and more individual radio and television programs established some form of presence within these companies’ domains. Yet, overall, the NRK’s approach to Facebook continued to be somewhat random, and even messy. A 2010 survey of accounts related to NRK news services found over 30 on Twitter and more than 20 on Facebook, and that did not include the individual accounts of journalists (Elgesem et al., 2010). These accounts varied greatly in their connection to the NRK (some were linked to radio channels, some to programs, one to the NRK’s main website’s front page, and some to other external NRK sites) and their scope (in number of followers as well as in content). In addition, no uniformity existed in terms of the naming, the layout or the specific use of any of the services (Elgesem et al., 2010). It is easier to see the value of Facebook or Twitter for extending the original broadcast and contributing to the remit for a radio program about new media technology or a television youth show than for a NRK regional office. In sum, by 2010 the use of social networking services was still diverse at best, and somewhat chaotic at worst.

Yet, in the few years since Facebook and similar sites started to get popular, the NRK’s ambitions for their use had clearly risen. By late 2010, invitations to join NRK programs on Facebook and Twitter were routinely put on the top of specific program pages on nrk.no, the institution’s main website. Indeed, radio news programs, for instance, even included an embedded feed of the editorial staff’s tweets on the nrk.no page (Moe, 2010). In some cases, Facebook in fact replaced the institution’s own domain as the platform for communication between the broadcaster, a specific show or editorial staff, and the audience. At this point, social networking sites where starting to get more seamlessly integrated with the remaining public service content. And this integration was not limited to the web: also in television and radio programs, hosts would refer users to Facebook. This combination of closer integration and more ambitious and widespread use, based on a ground-up approach, signalled a new phase in the NRK’s use of social networking services.

The NRK and Facebook: Phase II

As different editorial staff at the NRK continued to experiment with Facebook and similar sites in their provision, the world of policy and regulation was about to catch up. A regulatory process in neighbouring Sweden illustrates the change to a second phase.

On the morning of 21 May 2010, a report on one of the regional television newscasts from Swedish public service broadcaster SVT covered the wedding of Crown Princess Victoria of Sweden and Daniel Westling. The wedding was four weeks away, and some priests in Southern Sweden, the report said, had suggested the Crown Princess should not be led by her father, the King, down the aisle, as tradition would have it. After the report, the news anchor said, addressing the viewers: ‘Should Victoria enter the church
with Daniel or not? What do you think? Go to our Facebook page and have your say.

The program was reported to the Swedish Media Authority. In its discussion of the case, the Authority found that by mentioning Facebook and encouraging viewers to use the service, the broadcaster was guilty of undue promotion of commercial interests, in violation of the *Television and Radio Act* (Granskingsnämnden för radio och TV, 2010).

The ruling triggers some interesting questions. If the broadcaster was not allowed to announce its service, should it then offer it at all? If you cannot inform about your own Facebook activities, should you spend time and money building such activities? In this case, the Swedish public service broadcaster argued that Facebook was like a public square. As on any square, there could be some commercial actors present, but also important talk about socially relevant issues. And therefore, the public service institution had to be present. The Swedish Media Authority did not buy the public square metaphor: participation in the discussion on Facebook, the Authority claimed, required a user agreement with a commercial company (Granskingsnämnden för radio och TV, 2010). According to this view, the public service broadcaster was developing and publishing publicly funded media content within the domain of a multinational company — one run from the United States, which neither the Swedish broadcaster nor Swedish politicians could do much to regulate.

The intervention of an external regulatory body, then, brought to the surface some fundamental problems with public service broadcasters’ use of social networking sites. As noted, at this point in time — mid-2010 — NRK seemed to be on a path to similar close integration with content outside and inside Facebook. In the wake of the ruling, the Swedish broadcaster took a new approach, and so did its sister institutions in the neighbouring countries.

The case led the NRK to develop internal guidelines for the use of social networking sites, in force from late 2010. By and large, the document was relatively open in its formulations, laying down some basic routines for the reporting and documentation of new initiatives, and offering some guides towards ‘best practice’ use of the services. Yet the guidelines also included rules about how to refer from the broadcaster’s own programs or websites to Facebook, stressing that ‘Facebook is a commercial website. Our activity on Facebook should support the NRK services — not the other way around.’ (NRK, 2010: 7) Danish organisation DR followed suit in early 2011, acknowledging that it had to stop publishing exclusive content on social networking sites, and also provide a ‘strong editorial rationale’ for any references to named services (DR, 2011). The NRK document included a similar rule. In March 2011, a viewer complaint brought the issue to the NRK’s Broadcasting Council — an external advisory board. The NRK still held that it was crucial to be present on the platforms people used, but also admitted to less-than-perfect practices. Stressing the need to still allow for experiments, but at the same time underlining the importance of ‘branding’ the NRK, the organisation claimed to be in the process of implementing the new guidelines (Ostgård in Kringkastingsrådet, 2011: 7ff; see Dahle, 2012 for further analysis).

By 2012, the Facebook reference, the Twitter logo and the embedded Twitter feed were all gone from the nrk.no page of the radio news program referred to above. The use of social networking services by the NRK was well into its second phase, one characterised by a more modest approach, with less obvious connections, a more settled situation and a more uniform and concerted practice. By late 2012, the revised set of internal guidelines was put in place.

On one level, the effect of phase II is one less channel for individual, creative experiments among the broadcasters’ staff, potentially triggering tensions within the
organisations. On another level, it seems clear that the balance between exclusivity, or the problem of maintaining quality and control over your content, versus the need for disseminating widely in a rapidly changing media landscape, is yet to be found in this instance.

Conclusion

So far, the short history of public service broadcasters’ use of social networking sites seems to follow a well-known development: from a casual collection of individual experiments in an early phase to a more settled situation as the platforms in question mature, and the use gets aligned with a shared strategic approach within an organisation. This is a development also found in the history of new media such as the website – or radio and television, for that matter. In this sense, there are reasons to expect the issue at hand to come across as less controversial and difficult, given time.

However, we should not oversimplify the historical dependencies, nor cover up differences between countries and broadcasters. With comparatively stable and strong positions, and with ambitious aims for coverage and reach across media platforms, Scandinavian public service broadcasters were in a good position to try out the novel world of social networking sites as this was mainstreamed around 2007 with the rise of Facebook. A closer look at public service institutions in contexts with less favourable frameworks would surely bring to light quite different approaches and histories.

Yet, even within the Scandinavian countries, there are variations. One interesting such variation is the role of top-down regulations. While in Sweden the regulator intervened and directly brought on a change in the public service broadcaster’s use of Facebook, the transition to a more modest and uniform approach for the NRK came about without the formal interference of any external regulatory body. In a sense, the NRK acted proactively, and got to the problem before the Broadcasting Council, the Norwegian Media Authority or any political actors had paid much attention to the issue. It remains to be seen whether this signals a change in the process of media policy-making from one driven by external top-down regulation towards one with stronger elements of internal, ‘soft’ measures, reminiscent of what some label ‘media governance’ (e.g. Puppis, 2010).

The question of whether or not public service broadcasters should employ social networking sites cannot be answered simply with a yes or no. On the one hand, one could argue that, rather than eagerly contributing to the growth of an established US-based, commercial service like Facebook, YouTube or Twitter, we should expect a public service broadcaster to spend time and money developing local alternatives characterised by non-commercialism and openness. On the other hand, it does make sense to try to reach the public where the public is. And in recent years, Facebook has indeed become an arena where the Norwegian public, for instance, spends a great deal of time – in contrast to Twitter, which fewer than 4 per cent of Norwegians used to post messages weekly or more often in 2011 (NRK/Ipsos MMI, 2011).

Still, there is something new about the web that makes reference to the number of users of a specific service less relevant in these arguments. The fact that more than half of all Norwegians use Facebook weekly does not mean the NRK can reach these users. It might be more fitting to compare the number of Facebook users to the number of print newspaper subscribers (still 69 per cent of Norwegians by 2011) or the number who watch television (81 per cent on an average day in 2011) (SSB/MedieNorge, 2011a, 2011b). Newspaper reading and television viewing are divided among a long line of papers and channels – one provider cannot reach every reader or viewer. The same is
true for Facebook. The users are spread across an exceedingly individualised list, based on available content from the hundreds of millions of users. An actor like the NRK will in any case merely reach a tiny fraction, even of Norwegian users. This reminds us not to oversell the potential of sites like Facebook for public service broadcasters. More fundamentally, it shows how the landscape within which institutions like the NRK currently manoeuvre is very different from what they are used to.

In a sense, the power shifts here from national policy actors to more or less global commercial actors. As the Swedish case illustrates, by operating within the domains of companies such as Facebook, the public service broadcaster risks falling outside reach of the national regulatory body. This does, however, not mean it is an unregulated environment. Anyone on Facebook must adhere to a user agreement. Much attention has been given to privacy issues for individual users, but organisations also face some challenges in this regard. One example is the detailed rules about competition and prizes held by companies via their Facebook profiles. A Norwegian survey found that two out of three companies acted in violation of these rules (Kampanje, 2011). On a more basic level, as more and more parts of our mediated communication move to social networking sites or similar services, important questions about archiving and documentation arise. It is not easy to balance the need to protect privacy with securing the future archives of key parts of contemporary public life. Even if it is possible to store the massive amount of data on services like Twitter or Facebook, the question of whether or not it should be stored, by whom and how remains to be answered.

The distribution of public service media is no longer something that is easily controlled by a national regulatory body. This fact changes the game, and it is in this sense that the seemingly peripheral and ephemeral development of public service broadcasters’ use of social networking sites signals a fundamental rethink of the relations between public service media and the commercial world.

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Hallvard Moe is Associate Professor of Media Studies in the Department of Information Science and Media Studies, University of Bergen, Norway.