Public Service Media, Old and New: Vitalizing a Civic Culture?1

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Abstract: By the mid-1990s, the crisis in public service broadcasting in Sweden had passed and a new stability had emerged. In this situation, the two non-commercial television channels share the airwaves—and the public—chiefly with the new commercial terrestrial channel, TV4. This channel manifests a form of "popular public service." Yet the new stability is being challenged by social and cultural developments in Sweden, especially various forms of social fragmentation. The main argument is that a key role of public service broadcasting must be to enhance the democratic character of society. This can best be achieved by promoting what is called a civic culture, and the text discusses what this entails. The discussion concludes with some reflections on the emergence of digital television and how it could best further the public service project.

Résumé: Au milieu des années 90, la crise dans la radiodiffusion de service public en Suède prend fin et une nouvelle stabilité s’instaure. À ce moment-là, les deux chaînes de télévision non-commerciales partagent les ondes—et le public—principalement avec TV4, une nouvelle chaîne terrestre commerciale. Cette dernière offre une forme de «service public populaire». Aujourd’hui, cependant, certains développements sociaux et culturels, surtout sous diverses formes de fragmentation sociale, sont en train de bouleverser cette nouvelle stabilité. L’idée principale est qu’un rôle clé de la radiodiffusion de service publique doit être de mettre en valeur la nature démocratique de la société. La meilleure façon d’accomplir cet objectif est de promouvoir ce qui s’appelle une culture civique, et l’article discute de ce qu’une telle culture comporterait. La discussion prend fin avec certaines observations sur l’émergence de la télévision digitale et la manière dont celle-ci peut faire avancer le projet de service au public.

In international discussions about the media one of the words most often associated with public service broadcasting is “crisis.” Yet in Sweden today this is less the case than in the past. Over the past five years or so, public television in Sweden has stabilized itself, financially and institutionally. This is immensely gratifying to see. At the same time, the present situation is hardly characterized by business as usual. While “crisis” may not be on people’s lips in Sweden to the same degree as in the past, there is still a lingering sense of uncertainty. At the

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bottom, of course, the questions—in Sweden as elsewhere—have to do with the basic *raison d'être* of public broadcasting: what is its role, what are its visions today, in a historical context very different from when it was first conceived and launched?

Indeed, the dilemmas of public service are, in large part, ideological ones, as Michael Tracey (1998) argues. In trying to come to terms with the situation, he takes stock of all the factors now confronting public service, such as the altered conditions of the nation state, the onslaught of global commercial media, and a pervasive regulatory climate of deregulation which strongly favours unbridled market forces in the shaping of television. He arrives at an obituary that is both extensive and, at first glance, compelling—history has eclipsed the purposes of public service. However, at the end of this wake he still manages to detect some life in the alleged corpse and affirms that we simply cannot bury it at this point. Its importance demands that we find ways to keep it among the living and to aim it in the right direction. Tracey does a good job of cataloguing the various impediments to public broadcasting today, and highlights the profound difficulties of clarifying its mission. Yet this is what we must endeavour to do—and continue to do.

During the difficult years in Sweden—and in other countries as well—much of the debate around public service focused on issues of financing, details of regulation, and proposals for reorganization (Weibull & Gustafsson, 1997). These topics were and are clearly of central concern, but now that things have settled down to a considerable extent, in the Swedish context, I feel that it is opportune to try to go beyond the mere reiteration of classic principles. We need to look at the public service vision against the backdrop of the current historical juncture. My presentation here is a contribution to that end.

It is important to keep in mind that the notion of public service is, at bottom, a prismatic one: it refracts our vision in slightly different ways as we turn it and apply it to different issues and concerns. Its meaning and significance will vary somewhat with the circumstances. I say this to indicate that I will be taking a particular path here—enacting a specific turn of the prism.

My point of departure is the inexorable link between public service and the democratic character of society. However, I wish to extend the conventional and largely formal notions of democracy which have been in circulation in regard to public service. I want to develop a perspective on democracy which brings to the fore its cultural dimensions, its anchoring in the practices of everyday life. This takes me into the realm of civic culture. It is my view that by expanding our understanding of democracy in this way we can shed more light on the role and position of public service in a democratic society. In short, if one of the enduring visions of public service is a democratic society, then one of its tasks must be to vitalize the civic culture.

I will first briefly review some of the key features in the evolution of public service television in Sweden and sketch its present situation against a brief backdrop of the social and cultural landscape. This provides the reference points for
my reflections. I then take up the themes of democracy, civic culture, and citizenship. Next, I return to public service television and address the topics of commercialization, popularization, and their relationship to civic culture. I conclude with some reflections about the impending developments of digital television and what they may mean for public service.

**Making the transition**

Public service broadcasting in Sweden has been through several major reorganizations over the past decades in response to economic difficulties and changes in political climate. For our purposes here it is not necessary to trace all these developments, but I will note a few key features.

To begin, while public service broadcasting used to be organized under one large structure, since 1993 it has been comprised of three independent companies: radio, television, and educational broadcasting, the latter of which transmits its programs via the radio and television companies.

The turbulence in public broadcasting has a long history, and it may be relevant to know that the first major rounds of cutbacks began back in 1974 in response to the oil crisis. From an international perspective, public service broadcasting in Sweden thus began fairly early on to tighten the strings and rationalize its operations. The rough weather continued through the 1980s, with a relative equilibrium establishing itself only in the early 1990s. A similar pattern is found in the other Nordic countries (Søndergaard, 1996).

A second non-commercial television channel was in operation by 1970 and, from the beginning, the relationship between the two channels has been one of out-and-out competition for viewers. This experience is significant for understanding the situation today. Co-ordination between the channels was formalized in 1996 (see Edin, 1998; Hultén, 1997), and the experiences gleaned from internal competition has since been put to use in confronting the commercial television channels.

As in other countries, the advent of commercial television completely altered the circumstances for public service. A non-commercial monopoly existed until the late 1980s when satellite channels began beaming into the country. At the time, however, only a small portion of the population had access to cable systems and satellite dishes were quite rare. These channels had only a minor impact on viewing patterns although one of them, TV3, which was beamed from London in Swedish, did attract a relatively large audience.

The major impact of TV3 was to open the door for the idea of a terrestrial commercial channel. In part, the reasoning was that without a national commercial channel, a good deal of advertising revenue would, in the future, seep out of the country to such foreign commercial channels. More important, however, were the ideological arguments. Political parties of the centre and right, as well as industrial and financial interests, were not only clamouring for a commercial station, but also in many cases attacking the fundamental premises for public broadcasting. Market forces were evoked as the only justifiable and feasible way to finance broadcasting. Deregulation was in the air. At this time, Sweden was
caught up in a major turn to the right; the social democrats lost the 1991 election and a bourgeois coalition came to power. The social democrats did not have a carefully developed policy on broadcasting and culture and it could be said that they were doing a lot of improvising on broadcasting issues before they were voted out (only to return three years later).

In retrospect, one may well argue that this turned out to be for the best: with a minimum of grand vision and a lot of pragmatic maneuvering, they paved the way for the introduction of the commercial terrestrial channel TV4. It was awarded a concession and signed a detailed contract with the state. From the standpoint of public service, this development has proven to be both positive and very interesting. There were, of course, many voices expressing concern and even distaste for the advent of commercial television within Sweden. And admittedly, TV4 was somewhat of an enfant terrible at first: it chalked up a long list of violations against its contract (interrupting films with commercials, aiming some ads at children, etc.) and some of its journalistic ventures were quite brash. However, TV4 has “matured,” even if it still maintains a popular profile. I come back to this below.

Thus, today we have a mixed system with the non-commercial SVT 1 and 2, and the commercial TV4. The Swedish-language satellite channel TV3 is also part of the landscape, as is the array of other satellite channels. The obvious point of interest here is how the non-commercial channels have adjusted to commercial competition. Another interesting issue is how the major commercial channel has adjusted to a socio-cultural climate which has been so shaped by the public-service tradition.

**Television today**

Let me provide a quick overview of the current situation. TV4 has been very successful in attracting audiences, which showed a steady increase since its start and now seem to have reached a plateau. With a monopoly on national television advertising, TV4 has done very well economically. Like the two non-commercial channels, TV4 reaches all households in Sweden. Looked at from the perspective of daily channel reach within the population, the three major national channels all cluster between 45 and 50%, while the satellite channel TV3 attracts less than 20%. In terms of market share, the statistics are as follows: SVT1 and STV2 both hover around 25% while TV4 has a slight edge with 28%; TV3 has 9%. Given the limited dissemination of cable and satellite dishes, transnational programming does not have full penetration. TV3, for example, can be seen by only 56% of Swedish households, Eurosport by 46%, MTV by 35%, and CNN by only 20%. The remaining satellite channels have, in comparison, small penetrations and even smaller market shares, hovering around a few percent (Carlsson & Bucht, 1997).

Looking at programming category statistics for a moment can further fill in the picture. If the three terrestrial channels have a fairly even share of the viewing public, we should note that this is not a neat reflection of actual broadcast hours. TV4 has many more transmission hours during an average week: SVT1 transmits about 70 hours per week, SVT2 about 80 hours, and TV4 about 115 hours, while
TV3 broadcasts about 120 hours (1995 statistics). More program hours, in other words, do not *per se* translate into more viewing hours.

Table 1 presents programming categories as percents of total transmission time (1996 statistics). If we take together the categories of “news” and “non-fiction,” TV4 has a respectable 37%. TV2 is the “serious” channel, with 62% news and non-fiction. TV4 has, in terms of hours, twice the fiction of SVT1 and of SVT2, yet the extent of its news programming lies between that of the two non-commercial channels. Moreover, 23% of TV4’s programming is devoted to non-fiction. This commercial station has a number of impressive investigative journalism and discussion programs in its schedule. All this suggests that one does not attract the largest television audience in Sweden by merely developing a thoroughly entertainment-oriented profile. The satellite channel TV3 has chosen that route, but its success is modest in comparison.

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<th>Content</th>
<th>SVT1</th>
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Source: Carlsson & Bucht (1997).

Clearly, however, TV4 does have a more popular profile compared to the non-commercial channels, in the sense that the categories of fiction, entertainment, and sports together yield 58%. Here we see the policy dilemmas faced by the non-commercial channels: given that TV4 has been such a success, how should the non-commercial channels respond? Indeed, how have they responded? We can emphasize that the response has not at all been what alarmists had feared. Program statistics indicate that since 1993 news and non-fiction have actually increased on SVT2, each category by an impressive 10%. Non-fiction has increased on STV1 by 6% in this same time span, while fiction has actually decreased by 6%. On STV2 fiction has remained about the same. This is an impressive tally. We must conclude here that the non-commercial channels responded to the commercial challenge in part by increasing their programming for news and current affairs, solidifying their public service profiles. In the process they have managed to retain large audiences.

We can look at another criteria, namely diversity, which is one of the pillars of public service. Diversity of programming can be measured within a channel
and for a whole television system. Research has shown that the two non-commercial channels continue to maintain an impressive level of diversity, with many programs clearly intended for only small segments of the viewing population—even if many of these programs have been relegated to less convenient viewing times. In the face of commercial competition, the traditional public service channels may have been groping in a confusing situation for a while, but they did not get lost. With their emphasis on minority interest programming, they are clearly doing the best in reflecting the growing heterogeneity of society. TV4’s diversity also remains fairly high, though clearly not as high as that of SVT 1 and 2. Within the context of the whole television system, it can be said that TV4’s more broadly popular programming relieves the non-commercial channels of having to pursue that strategy. A division of labour between the channels has emerged, but without creating a highly polarized situation.

Thus, the 1990s can be seen as a period of successful readjustment for Sweden’s public service television. STV1 and STV2 continue to maintain strong public service profiles, and have even increased their role as media of news and current affairs. TV4, for its part, has found that a high level of journalism and non-fiction are part of a successful popular formula. This does not mean the current situation is tension-free. TV4 plays an important pivotal role between the public service channels and the more hard-nosed commercial channels available on cable; it sees itself as an expression of “popular public service.” However, it remains under pressure to enhance profits for its owners and there has been growing conflict over what it feels to be inhibiting restrictions in regard to advertising practices, which limit the amount and the scheduling opportunities for showing ads. TV4 occasionally threatens to terminate its contract with the state and organize its operations as a satellite channel, beyond the reach of Swedish regulation; thus far it apparently still prefers the present arrangements.

The social and cultural landscape

In sum, we have a situation that, in a global perspective, looks not too bad. Institutionally, the dust has settled and the smoke has cleared—for the moment. The histories of public service within different countries share many features, but there are of course many national variations. My intent here is not to export a “Swedish model,” although some features of our experience can certainly be of interest abroad. Rather, the point of this brief overview is to anchor my reflections on public service in a specific national context. To round out the picture, let me mention a few key factors about the general social and cultural landscape.

The theme I underscore here will be familiar, if perhaps somewhat surprising when applied to Sweden (old stereotypes tend to linger!): social fragmentation. We can locate the dynamics of this chiefly within four mutually reciprocal domains: economy, politics, ethnicity, and cultural choice.

• In economic terms, Sweden is an established welfare society, though its welfare has been drastically dismantled in the past decade. Unemployment figures are stagnating at levels comparable to the 1930s.
Class divisions are growing, and the mechanisms of global capitalism are increasingly deferred to in the political realm. Our entrance into the European Union has not brought with it the prosperity its promoters promised.

- Politically, Sweden is in the process of moving away from the basic corporatist model that has prevailed since the social democrats came to power in the 1930s. In this model, political and civil life was well organized around party affiliation, labour unions, employer associations, and classic popular movements such as sports. This model was predicated upon the predictability of political preference and behaviour: For example, with centralized wage negotiations and the link between the unions and the social democratic party, votes could be promised and delivered, collective contracts could be signed. Today, party loyalty, class identification, and movement membership are not only less predictable, but also generally declining, especially among the young. They are not drawn to the traditional institutions and the established rhetorical formulations as before. There is an “anti-political” sentiment among many young people, a distancing from the established political arena.

- In regard to ethnicity, Sweden is a society that until recent decades has been very homogenous. Today some 20% of the population has an immigrant background. Sweden, like many other countries, now has a mix of dominant, immigrant, and indigenous ethnic groups (though the Same, or Lapps, are a very small population). In Malmö in the south, Sweden’s third largest city, about one third of the population has an immigrant background. Like other West European countries, we witness the growth of high-rise ghettos in the suburbs of the cities. In some schools north of Stockholm, the mother tongues of the pupils number over 20. Value systems and religious views are often at variance with the dominant culture. Discrimination in the areas of employment and housing is pervasive and well-documented, while at the same time progressive forces throughout society are trying to counter such trends.

- From the perspective of cultural choice, Sweden manifests similar patterns of differentiation as in other industrialized nations. While Sweden is coping with a limping economy, it still manifests a very high level of consumption, not least in the area of media technology and products. (For example, the number of cellular phones—282 per 1,000 inhabitants—is among the highest in the world.) Generally, advanced consumer culture fosters “nichification,” or even “neo-tribalism” as some observers put it, as the pluralization of tastes, interests, and lifestyles in late modern society accelerates. Production of everything from homes to sneakers is moving away from the standardized
and toward the individualized. The media, not least television, both reflect and foster this trend.

It is easy to see how these domains of economy, politics, ethnicity, and culture reinforce each other. The result is the erosion of the unified and homogenous national society on which public service was originally predicated. There is no longer one audience, but many. To this I would add that since about the mid-1980s—one could take the assassination of Prime Minister Olof Palme in 1986 as a symbolic turning point—many Swedes find themselves in various degrees of what I call “domestic cultural shock.” They have difficulty orienting themselves in this period of rapid social transition. The older co-ordinates are less helpful today: Is Sweden a welfare society? What does social democracy mean today? One of our sacred cows, our “neutrality” during both the Second World War and the Cold War, has been revealed to have been profoundly compromised and now has become merely an exploded myth. Scandals about Sweden’s illicit international arms deals, the endless revelation of national political corruption, the traumas of immigration, the loss of considerable sovereignty to the European Union, and generally a damaged faith in the “system” and in the future make many people wonder what Sweden is today and where it is heading.

Now, I do not cite an inventory such as this to elicit sympathy from the outside world; in a global comparison, Sweden does not qualify as a hardship case. But the developments I refer to are significant because they are real and important in the Swedish context: they point to an experiential reality which shapes the perceptions of its people.

If television has now arrived at what appears to be a stable situation, there is nothing to suggest that social and cultural change will simply come to a stop. Indeed, having arrived at this point in the late 1990s, public service television in Sweden must now look ahead to a society that is in dynamic flux and where economic, political, ethnic, and cultural factors will continue to accentuate fragmentation and differentiation. In this regard, Sweden is certainly comparable to many other Western societies. The historical present is in transition: nothing stands still, and public service will have to continue to adapt itself to new conditions. How will public service define itself? What traditions will it try to pass on, what modifications will be made in interpreting its role?

We see concretely the difficulty of “passing on the tradition” even within the television companies themselves. With all the cutbacks and the many stoppages on new employment over years, SVT has a somewhat unfortunate demographic profile, being top-heavy in the age bracket of 50 and over. Many of the younger employees have come of age after the passing of the public service monopoly; they have grown up with commercial television. The older, battle-scarred veterans within SVT can discuss today’s ambiguities of the public service tradition with some historical perspective. For some of the younger ones, who have grown up in a very different media world, the notion of public service is diffuse. It does not automatically resonate. The distinction between commercial and non-commercial broadcasting is readily understood, but some of the senior personnel have noticed
how the younger ones bring with them different frames of reference. Public service as a concept, as a vision, is far from self-evident, even within the company. The encouraging side of this can be that the young are less burdened with the past. Yet the cautionary side is that they (as well as us older folks) still need contact with tradition in order to adapt it—not least when looking ahead to the emerging new digital technology.

**Democracy’s horizons: Retrieval and renewal**

If public service is a prismatic concept, then certainly one of the angles of refraction must be towards democracy. This is fundamental both for its legitimation at the societal level and its coherence at the level of daily organizational practices. We can readily retrieve the notion of democracy via the idea of universalism embedded within public service. Not only should all citizens have access to such broadcasting, but the programming should, as far possible, be aimed at everyone, in the sense of striving to address the needs and interests of the many different groups which comprise society. Public service is premised as a right for all members of society, that is, for all citizens. Here we have a sort of bedrock, where the principles of public service interlock with the fundamentals of democracy. This is important, this is basic, this should be reiterated.

Yet there is a danger, at least at the rhetorical level, that such reiteration of democracy as a first principle for public service after a while takes on the character of ritualistic incantation, of a mantra. We pay lip service to “democracy,” which, like motherhood, everyone can unreservedly support. The understanding of democracy evoked in such discussions easily becomes a bit stilted, a bit formalistic; it is a view of democracy that we learn in the classroom. There is absolutely nothing wrong with classroom definitions as far as they go, but what I would suggest is that if we are to retrieve from democracy something that we can find compelling and useful for public service broadcasting in the context of society today, we need to go further.

In the Swedish Television’s current annual self-evaluation report (Sveriges Television, 1998), which has been required by Parliament since 1996, the discussion is organized around a number of key themes, including democracy and freedom of expression, cultural responsibility, and diversity/breadth (of programming). I would like to see the theme of democracy extended to interlace with cultural responsibility and diversity/breadth, and not be partitioned to just the realm of formal political participation.

I find it a useful entry into the theme of democracy to make a simple distinction of perspective. On the one hand, democracy is seen as an institutionalized system (the classroom version I referred to above). This view emphasizes formal and legal dimensions such as the branches of government, elections, and the participation of citizens in the system. On the other hand, democracy must also be understood as a form of culture, a civic culture, anchored in everyday life. This perspective focuses attention on values, norms, practices, and frames of reference. The first view leans heavily on political science, the second makes extensive use of contemporary cultural theory and research.
The two perspectives are not in competition with each other; rather, democracy must be understood as an interplay between a formal system and a civic culture. For democracy to work, both are mutually dependent. This is a line of argument similar to that proposed by exponents of the civil society argument (see Cohen & Arato, 1992; Keane, 1988). The basic reasoning is that the state and political system require a cultural domain that reproduces and renews democratic values, socializing citizens and preparing those who will specifically enter into the political arena. Civil society, on the other hand, is dependent on the state to guarantee basic rights and conditions (to free speech, to assembly, as well as socio-economic regulation, etc.) which make civil society possible. While the notion of civil society is beset with conceptual and empirical difficulties, as many have pointed out (for example, Resnick, 1997), these fundamental points about it run parallel to my view of civic culture, which I find to be less theoretically problematic and more helpful here.

The idea of a civic culture points to the issue of some kind of unity in the face of increasing social fragmentation and differentiation. Difference as such has been high on the public agenda over the past decade. It has perhaps found its most vocal articulation as many nations come to acknowledge—and try to come to grips with—their multicultural character. All this clearly puts strains on public service broadcasting. Such situations raise not only practical issues about how to address national audiences as they become increasingly heterogeneous while budgets are limited, but also normative ones: what view, which versions of the national should be fostered? The axes of assimilation and separateness, inclusion and exclusion, and the national and the global problematize not only the political system but the notion of the nation state as well. The politics of difference flow into the practices of public service.

Within political philosophy, these developments have prompted a renewal of reflection about the nature and goals of democracy itself. (There is already a large literature here; some key texts are Kymlicka, 1995; Spinner, 1994; Taylor & Guttman, 1992. See also Favell, 1998, for a handy introduction to several themes and authors.) Without delving into all the issues and perspectives, the upshot of these endeavours for the present discussion is that they shift the footing away from some of the traditional assumptions about democracy. Differences among citizens were in the past, at least at the theoretical level (especially within liberal democratic theory), treated as variations among individuals or seen in terms of competing (and ultimately transitory) interest groups. Now democracy is confronted by groups who are often united culturally as collectivities in a variety of ways, which requires a reconsideration of classic precepts. The challenge of making the whole thing work involves more serious attention to the balances between, on the one hand, the distinct groups and, on the other, the system as a political whole and as a national unity.

Civic culture: Democracy’s everyday life
How does public service television foster a civic culture when the national culture and viewing audiences have become so pluralist? First of all, a civic culture does
not presuppose homogeneity among its citizens. Fundamentally, a civic culture exists in people’s shared values and commitments to democracy, a kind of civic loyalty to the democratic vision (Clarke, 1996; Mouffe, 1993). This means adherence to both the ideals and the procedures of democracy. This commonality can be manifested by social and cultural groups who are very different from each other. Civic culture can be exercised and expressed in many different ways.

For television, this means both fictional and non-fictional programming that offers images, frames of reference, and values that deal with daily experience in terms of democratic themes. Diversity and even contention must be given expression. Democracy is not about full consensus, but about compromise, trying to live together without oppressing each other while we grapple with our divergent views. There are and will be deep tensions. For example, Sweden is culturally in the process of moving from an ethnic understanding of Swedishness to a civic one. But it is difficult for many Swedes to let go of attributes of name, skin colour, and speech in classifying who is and who is not Swedish. Media visibility is very important in this regard.

Another example: the democratic ideal of gender equality meets with resistance among certain immigrant groups in Sweden. Who can say for sure at what point assertion of this ideal by the dominant culture veers into a form of internal cultural imperialism? Yet it is important that such topics are addressed in the programming, and in ways which make them relevant for the lives of these groups. In my view, how we go about resolving such contentions is at least as important as the resolutions (if any) that we arrive at. A robust civic culture, committed to democracy, assumespluralism and conflicts.

Secondly, there is also a need for a more tangible sense of community, a more concrete experience of we-ness. The ideals and commitments to democracy must have a home in the social world, they cannot merely hover about in our heads. Here we cannot sidestep the idea of the nation as a frame and as the location for civic culture. Public service broadcasting is inseparable from the national project but it must adapt, of course, as “the nation” historically evolves. The nation is not only internally multicultural, but it is also porous in relation to global realities. There are many more transborder flows of all kinds. Yet, even in this late modern world, nationalism remains a very compelling basis for identity for most people. Public service must continue to help construct versions of community at the national level, which of course is not to be confused with the dark sides of nationalism.

We seemingly have a contradiction here between a plural civic culture and an integrating national setting. The resolution is found at the level of people’s identities. One of the hallmarks of late modern society is the pluralization of our “selves.” Without getting tangled up in any postmodern theorizing, we can simply take note that in our daily lives we operate in a multitude of different “worlds” or realities; we carry within us different sets of knowledge, assumptions, rules, and roles for different circumstances. Some of these elements reside more in the core
of our identity, others more in the periphery. Yet all of us are, to varying degrees, composite people.

This idea becomes pivotal in the multicultural setting. Multiculturalism means “many cultures,” but we should see this as referring not just to the nation but to individuals as well. We need to accentuate and cultivate what Michael Walzer (1997) terms our individual “hyphenated selves”: as Swedish and Iranian, Muslim and British, and so on.

The idea of composite identities also pertains to citizenship. We are used to thinking of citizenship in relation to the formal, systemic view of democracy. A citizen is a legal category with rights and obligations. Yet citizenship can also be seen as a dimension of individual identity. One experiences oneself as a member and potential participant in not only a particular community, but several. Thus, one can carry an ethnic identity as a Greek-Swede, but also as a citizen of the Swedish nation and of the Greek community in Sweden. In the role of citizen, the principles of democracy pertain to one’s everyday involvements, be it in one’s neighbourhood or in national political issues.

Public service television needs to promote our various identities: national and particular, citizen and ethnic member. Yet it must do so in a doubly centripetal manner: it needs to promote loyalty to a democratic civic culture and a pluralistic national community. Schematically, I would summarize the tasks as follows:

- To provide a shared communicative space which thematizes democracy at the level of people’s everyday lives. This includes a shared public culture in the media and the knowledge necessary to understand and participate as citizens—what Graham & Davies (1997) term “common knowledge.”
- To ensure what Charles Taylor & Amy Guttmann (1992) have eloquently argued for, namely, visibility and recognition of minorities. In a related vein, Michael Walzer (1997) speaks of “toleration.” If tolerance is an attitude, toleration is the practices which achieve it.
- To ensure cultural boundary-crossing in this communicative space. A pluralistic society does not consist of mutually exclusive groups and communities but of shifting and overlapping constellations, where the plural is often embodied within the individual, within families. Thus, while public service must attend to the separate communities to whatever extent possible, it also needs to address and promote the hybrids which are emerging, especially the co-mingling of the national culture with all the particular cultures.

This is admittedly a tall order, and we would be wise to maintain a realistic grasp of the doable. Yet it is important that our ideals point us in a clear direction and challenge us in the process. As has often been argued (e.g., Raboy, 1996), the audiences for public service broadcasting are a public, not a market. This, in turn, means that public service must treat its viewers as citizens, not just as audiences. Programming must have an eye to offering significance and serving people’s lives—including the civic culture—beyond the site and circumstances of recep-
tion. Public service has, in other words, a catalytic function. It aims to engender the good society. It can do this not least by enhancing the experience of citizenship, by touching upon this aspect of peoples’ identities and their varied experiences of community, of belonging—even in the face of a rampant commercial climate.

In this, the goals of public service broadcasting are different from those of commercial broadcasting, where the logic of the market says that merely enticing people to watch the screen counts as mission accomplished. Robert Putnam (1993), a strong defender of the civic culture, observes how commercial television in the U.S.A. is a factor in the erosion of a civic culture. Given the sheer number of hours spent in front of the screen, people are less able to participate in the associations and activities that constitute a civic culture (Putnam, 1995). In the face of commercial television, public service will always be but one set of voices in a larger media environment. It is important to underscore what these voices can say and do that others cannot or will not: to stress the shared, the common, but also the divergent and the plural, while underscoring belonging and participation.

Popular public service?
Let me now shift gears and return to the institutional arrangements of television in Sweden. I mentioned earlier that the commercial channel TV4 has become very successful. TV4 is in competition with SVT 1 and 2, yet I would argue that this competition has, in fact, benefited the overall television landscape in Sweden. It raises the issue of whether commercial television is always an enemy, always a hindrance for civic culture. If, as I mentioned earlier, the channel competition has led to a division of labour whereby TV4 relieves SVT of the burden of having to aim for the broadest popular appeal, it must be acknowledged that TV4 is “helping” SVT in its public service role, since broad entertainment is also a part of the public service menu. SVT has more diversity of programming, but TV4 has a programming profile that is at least compatible to a large extent with the overall goals of public service. The fact that there is a concessions contract with the state also raises some ambiguity about its status: should it be seen as quasi-public service? Could a channel such as TV4 be seen as a “new” medium of public service, albeit a popular one aiming more often than not at large audiences?

These questions cannot be answered with full certitude at the moment. And given the specifics of the Swedish situation, it is unclear what lessons might be drawn for other countries. However, there is another theme here that has a more direct bearing on civic culture, namely, popularization. Commercialization has, of course, low esteem in the eyes of public service, but popularization is perhaps more ambiguous, especially in the domain of journalism. What is interesting about the success of TV4 is the questions it raises about popularization. TV4 is a commercial channel and it uses popular formats in its journalism to a greater extent than SVT. Yet it would be inaccurate to dismiss its journalistic programming as the product of crass commercialization. Moreover, these popular formats are of special significance when viewed from the standpoint of the civic culture.
As I have argued elsewhere (Dahlgren, 1995), we should avoid knee-jerk negative reactions against journalistic programs with a popular bent. Popularization certainly can involve the pitfalls of trivialization and sensationalism, but it can also make news and non-fiction more accessible and more involving for many viewers. Thus, the main news broadcast of TV4 uses a popular style which tends to make less use of official sources and emphasizes the perspectives of everyday life. It clearly contains less dense information when compared to the news programs of STV1 and STV2, yet I would argue that TV4’s news programs’ more popular format has an important role to play in the overall civic culture. They invite involvement for many people who may well find the news on the non-commercial channels too difficult or too dry. These viewers may be getting fewer hard facts, but at the same time they are being made aware of what topics are on the public agenda. Their identities as citizens are still being cultivated in some way. TV4 contributes to a diversity of journalistic styles within the overall television output in Sweden.

If we look at other kinds of programs within non-fiction, including talk shows, we have seen a real explosion in recent years. Many programs, even some on STV1 and STV2, seem to prioritize spectacular arguments and inflamed controversy over substantial discussions. Yet we also can see that many such programs have a short life; they disappear after a season or two. The importance of many of these programs—when they are at their best—is that they invite involvement from citizens; they promote discussion. Also, these talk shows can take up a variety of topics and experiences that are of importance to people in their everyday lives, such as moral issues, questions of identity, and themes around personal relationships. Just the visibility of such topics and of people who are concerned about them can, in and of itself, be a positive force: it accords legitimacy to people’s experiences. While these particular programs are not always successful as journalistic endeavours, and much of their raison d’être can be traced to their relatively inexpensive production costs, it is important for television to remain open to new program formats. Television must always be looking for new ways to resonate with its viewers. One may wonder how television journalism would have looked—and what the consequences might have been—had TV4 not been launched.

Digital developments
The launching of TV4 can be seen, nonetheless, as a development within the “old” media order: terrestrial broadcasting has been with us most of this century. There are, of course, “newer” technological and institutional developments that already have a sizable history, such as satellite and cable transmissions, and there are the very “newest” forms still being launched, such as digital television. Historical circumstances have been such that public service has largely stayed within the domain of terrestrial broadcasting, leaving cable and satellite for the commercial market. This is not the case with regard to digital television. Already two of the world’s most respected public broadcasters, the BBC and Japan’s NHK, are involved in planning and preparing for the advent of—and transition to—digital television. Various experiments are under way. In the spring of 1999, SVT
launched an all-news digital television channel as a pilot project. Thus far very few viewers have receivers for digital transmission, but all indications suggest that in the long run (though nobody at present can say with certainty just how long) digital television will become the norm. What will this mean for the traditions of public service? What could it mean for the character of civic culture? Obviously at this point we have no clear answers since these will depend to a large extent on how policy in this area is shaped.

The technology of digital television must be understood as part of a pervasive development in the media industries towards convergence, towards a common digital “language” for all text, sound, still- and moving-images media. Broadcasting, telecommunications, and computer technologies are converging; the television screen and the computer are moving towards each other (though we cannot say whether they will become one or not). The development of the digital standard, which is increasingly replacing the analogue, is fundamental for the emergence of what is called “multimedia.” More specifically for television, the digital technology makes more efficient use of the frequency spectrum, being able to compress about four channels into the same space that analogue broadcasting requires for one channel, if the same level of definitional quality is maintained. This heralds the possibility for more programming, more reprise transmissions, and more schedule flexibility. Alternatively, digital television can transmit attractive “wide-screen” visuals, which take up more frequency space than the older analogue broadcasts. Signals can more easily be encoded without reduction in quality for purposes of user payment-based decoding (subscription channels and pay-per-view). The distribution can take place via terrestrial transmission, cable-TV networks, satellite, the telecommunications network, as well as the newer fibre optics cable. The policy issues proliferate . . .

One of the definitive features of digital technology is its capacity for interactivity. In regard to television, this means more possibility for adaptation to individual preferences: arrangements such as pay-per-view and delayed broadcast open up the door to more tailor-made output, shaped by individual audience members. Possibilities for video on demand, and the use of broadcasting companies’ own archives as video libraries also enhance the options available for viewers. The interactive domain readily opens up via digital television, with distance learning games, home shopping and banking, social services, and Internet link-ups all quite technically feasible.

At a recent conference, the BBC’s then deputy director-general, Robert Phillis (1998), reaffirmed the BBC’s commitment to the traditional ideals of public service in the digital age. He spoke of new services being developed: a 24-hour news channel, the use of wide screen for selected programs, the use of subsidiary transmissions to augment the two main channels, and more educational output. At the same time, he spoke of further developing the BBC’s commercial activities, so that this sector would account for 15% of the company’s total income, up from the present 5%. This is presented as a way of further stabilizing its financial situation. The use of pay-for themed, subscription channels based on
drama, lifestyles, entertainment, and so forth is a major part of the plan. Not surprisingly, some critics (e.g., Goodwin, 1997) have argued that the really motivating principle here is commerce, not public service.

Major media actors—Murdoch, Kirch in Germany, Berlusconi in Italy, and an array of others within several sectors of the media industries—are positioning themselves. At present, there is a good deal of economic uncertainty. The basic premise is that people will be willing to pay to have the specific program they want at a time that they choose, with the strategic use of wide-screen transmissions as an extra pull.

Shelton’s (1998) journalistic overview of this budding industry underscores that this premise cannot be taken for granted: so far, considerable money has already been lost in digital television investments. There are big questions: how many will purchase the digital “set-top boxes” needed for analogue television receivers to make use of digital transmission? At what point should one cease with analogue transmission entirely and expect or demand that everyone now has fully digital television receivers? One can only speculate. Yet a lucrative potential is seen here. There is a sense of an impending take-off. It is not surprising that public service broadcasters, who recently had to adapt themselves to a new media landscape in the wake of deregulation, satellite channels, and commercial terrestrial channels, are seriously thinking about how to respond to the next impending stage of media development.

With digital television we will no doubt see a further fragmentation of the audience, but at the same time there are real possibilities for it to further strengthen public service, to serve as a centripetal force for a pluralistic communicative space and a vehicle for a vitalized civic culture. At the risk of seemingly looking through a rearview mirror, I would suggest the digital television will do this best on the basis of its continuing character as television, rather than on its resemblance to the interactivity of the personal computer equipped with a modem.

It is easy to begin fantasizing about the use of digital television as a way of enhancing communication between the viewer/citizen and the social world outside his or her home. For along with services and games being made available, one might speculate that newer forms of civic and political communication might emerge. From responding to discussion and debate programs, to various forms of opinion polling, to actual referenda being held—all will be technically possible and no doubt attempted to various degrees. However, we should be selective with our enthusiasm here. There is a risk that such practices may foster a form of “hyperdemocracy” or “push-button democracy” where the speed of the response that is technically possible may serve to actually undercut that which is so fundamental to a civic culture, namely, real discussion, interaction, reflection. Faster is not always better.

At the same time, I am not too worried about this use of digital television since I would wager that it will, in the long run, turn out to be a minor aspect of it. It can be helpful here to make a simple distinction between what I call mild and intense interactivity. Mild interactivity is one characterized by “strategic selec-
tion”: using digital television to select favourite programming and at times which are convenient. Intense interactivity is best illustrated by the chatting of Internet discussion groups. Television is largely a low involvement medium whose entertainment value prevails over other purposes. The odds are against intense interactivity. What the digital revolution offers public service television is an opportunity to do more with the medium as television. The mild interactivity of strategic selection will be important: certainly wide screen will be nice for some programming, but the possibility of more frequency space, to be used for more programming, more diversity, more reprises of key programs, less collision between channels, and video archives is very promising. The civic culture will be best served—at least in the short term—by this expansion of public services’ televisual capacities.

On the computer side, however, we have another situation. We can note, for example, that while the use of the Internet for political purposes remains very much a minority activity (see Hill & Hughes, 1998), it still has important consequences for public life (Hague & Loader, 1999; Holmes, 1997) and for the public sphere (Dahlgren, 2000). Computer-mediated communication is an increasingly important factor in the formation of new communities (Jones, 1998; Smith & Kollock, 1999) and thus will be of mounting significance for the development of civic culture. Moreover, the mass media are moving into the Internet and the technologies of television, the computer, and telecommunications are converging. In the long term, “television” will become integrated within larger multimedia. This is already a technical fait accompli, but in terms of innovation and social uses, I think this larger transformation is still some years in the future. Public service policy discussions will clearly have to come to grips with the larger landscape of the new digital media; it is not too early to begin preparing the groundwork.

In Sweden, the immediate policy issues around digital television have barely begun to be discussed (Jonsson & Ulin, 1998, have taken an initial step). There are major principles, like universalism, involved and there are major issues, like financing, to be dealt with. Digital television, like analogue, will consist of a melange of commercial and non-commercial elements. Perceptions as to what is the ideal mix and the politically achievable one will certainly vary between countries. Yet it is imperative that policymakers on both the national and international level do their utmost to strengthen the viability of public service and the vitality of the civic culture in this transition.

Notes
1. This article is based on the 1998 lecture of the Graham Spry Fund for Public Broadcasting, delivered at the University of Montreal and Simon Fraser University in October 1998.

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