

The Norwegian Radio Reform

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On 2 October 1993 the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK) launched its new radio, with three profiled channels. The event had in advance been characterized as no less than a revolution in the history of NRK Radio. Two weeks previously P4, the first private commercial radio channel with national coverage, had started broadcasting. The almost simultaneous occurrence of the two events was no coincidence. NRK was and has the ambition to continue to be the leading public service broadcaster in Norway. To meet the mounting challenge from an increasing number of competitors and ensure its hegemony, radical changes were considered necessary in order to get rid of old political regulations and to modernize the institution and its output.

With hindsight, and at least to outsiders, the reform seems inevitable and the changes undertaken obvious. But they met with considerable resistance; commentators characterized the changes as cultural apartheid¹, and listeners complained that the new program offer completely violated their daily routines. The reform and the resistance against it can only be understood in the light of our broadcasting history. I shall therefore start with a brief overview of the historical background and of the main competitors. Then I shall describe how the channels were profiled in response to the competition, and round off with

present aspects of and future prospects for the radio offer from NRK.

Historical Background

From 1933 – when NRK was given monopoly on broadcasting, until 1981 – with the advent of local radio, the radio history of our country was characterized by remarkable stability. During this period we had only one radio channel with national coverage, NRK P1, which in addition was given the responsibility of running the seventeen regional offices started during the seventies.

From One to Two National Radios

The fifty years of protection and peace abruptly changed with the deregulations of broadcasting in 1981. The number of local radio stations exploded, within a few years it exceeded 300. To the NRK management it was clear that something had to be done. Four years later, in 1985, NRK officially opened its second national radio channel, P2². Political disagreement had delayed the opening. The debate concerned whether the new channel should compete with or complement the old one and where it should have its main editorial base. Against the wishes from NRK, it was decided that the two channels should be competitors and that the headquarter of P2 should be

placed in Trondheim, the third largest city in Norway. According to the ruling ideology of decentralization, the new channel would thereby reflect the realities of our society in a different way from the old channel, P1, seated in the capital together with the administration and NRK TV.

The enforced move to Trondheim has proved to be an advantage. Many consider the mother institution in Oslo to be too rigid, bureaucratic and narrow in its myopic focusing upon the capital and its immediate surroundings. At safe distance, the new radio centre for P2, Tyholt, had more opportunity to evolve in a different direction. It became less bureaucratic and with a stronger feeling of unity, as reflected in better cooperation across editorial lines. It developed into a magazine channel and acquired a distinct programme profile, although by malevolent tongues condescendingly referred to as tabloid radio. Above all, it put more emphasis on local news across the whole of this elongated, thinly populated country, crisscrossed by mountains, valleys and fiords setting the conditions for considerable regional plurality. It did indeed become a national channel in a different way from P1, thus fulfilling the intentions of the politicians when they placed it in Trondheim.

P1 was and still is the only channel technically equipped to carry the regional programmes. It may therefore seem strange that P2 should developed into the regional channel. The explanation to the apparent paradox is found in the way NRK is organized. The regional offices hold a special position in the NRK hierarchy, as they are not part of any of the radio divisions, but sort directly under the general director³. To ensure regional output on the national channel, a net of P2-reporters was established at the regional offices across the country.

Whereas one of the two major decisions concerning P2 thus turned out to be sound, the other one, that the programmes should be competitors, was not. As I have indicated, in spite of the decision the two channels developed distinct profiles and became in reality complementary. Most of the time the listener could choose between light programmes at one channel and more serious or informative ones at the other. However, both had to be all round channels covering the traditional public service duties, such as information, education and entertainment. NRK was therefore forced to have two news editorial offices, one in Trondheim and one in Oslo. According to the management, this resulted in much double work, making it an expensive and inefficient solution for the NRK. It was definitely not a good way to meet an increasingly competitive environment.

Deregulation

Local radio was permitted in 1981, initially on an experimental basis. In line with regulations for all the broadcast media in Norway, advertising was prohibited. In 1987, new legislation opened for local broadcasting on a permanent basis and allowed advertising as a source of income. From its beginning local radio has been the battleground for several conflicts. A major one has been the continuing tug-of-war between those who hold the view that local radio mainly should be based on idealist engagement and regard it primarily as a way of enhancing local democracy, and those more interested in exploiting the considerable economic potential in this area. Most of the time, the latter have proved the strongest. Even though the regulations on local radio encouraged local attachment – at least half of the programmes had to be produced within the

cover area and the owners had to be local residents, chains of local radios started to emerge. This happened both through illegal trade where radios were bought and sold, usually camouflaged as fusions, and through a sophisticated network where national news, produced by large media companies, was bartered for time for advertisement in the local radios. Through this barter agreement the owners of the news source could offer their advertisers near to national coverage. With the limits of the law so manifestly pushed, the politicians were forced to react. In line with the prevailing liberal ideology, the solution was simply to move the limit and allow a national commercial radio channel.

On the FM band, there is only room for four radio channels with national coverage in Norway. NRK held two of these, and with the prospects of a commercial national channel they had to act fast to get their hands on the last one, to make a third NRK channel. A third channel was an old wish, dating back to and made explicit in the early sixties when the public service radios in Sweden (Sveriges Radio) and Denmark (Danmarks Radio) started their third channels. In 1987, NRK submitted the first application to the Ministry of Culture, asking permission to establish a third channel. Their main arguments were the need to reinforce the offer from the regional offices, to make more room for programmes for the Sámi population and other linguistic minorities, to satisfy the needs created by the new wave of immigration, and to strengthen the music offer, especially for classical music. In 1988 a new application followed. The arguments were largely the same, but in addition time for programmes directed against young listeners was emphasized. It had become clear that NRK had lost listeners amongst the youngest

part of the population, and NRK depicted a grim, not too-distant future when the last listener to the nation's leading public service radio would turn off the set if nothing was done to win the young back again.

Regional identity is strong in Norway, a sentiment respected, if not outright exploited by many of our politicians. Few politicians would therefore object to more regional programmes. Likewise, political correctness dictated that few would protest against more programmes for the Sámi population and other minorities. For the same reason classical music is a hit amongst most politicians, even though they tend to play down their role as part of the elite and instead take on a role as deep-rooted in the people; cultural elites give too few votes as they have only a marginal place in the Norwegian egalitarian social democracy. This dilemma between political correctness and populism was cunningly evaded in the application by arguing that it was not classic music in itself that was the main objective for more time, but that NRK did not have enough programme time to transmit free Euro concerts available through the EBU agreement and through cooperation within the Nordic countries.

Most politicians were positive towards the application, but it was made clear that the profiles of any channel were not to be changed in a more commercial direction. What really won the politicians' hearts was that listeners seemed to get more programmes without an increased license. A conservative minority objected, claiming that NRK's real intention was to create a channel that could directly compete with the local radios; they could not see that such a channel was needed. The proposal was granted by the parliament in 1991. At the same time it was decided to license P4, a national commercial radio channel with

private ownership. The new channel had to adhere to the principles of public service broadcasting.

The Competitors

The National Commercial Radio, P4

License for P4 was given to Radio Hele Norge (RHN), a company where the Swedish Kinnevik is the dominant shareholder. RHN thereby out competed P4 AS, another constellation of groups investing in the rapidly growing media market, where in particular the Danish media company Aller⁴ has strong capital interests. RHN chose to place their main editorial base at Lillehammer, where the Olympic Winter Games were held in 1994.

In their application, RHN stated that the channel would build on the fundament of public service in its widest sense. In their definition of public service RNH emphasized news, debate, sports, service radio, interaction with the listeners and 'experience radio'⁵. They also stated that, as a consequence of their being a commercial channel, the main ambition was to obtain high audience figures. Later, they have reinforced this by stating that their ultimate goal is no less than becoming the biggest radio station in Norway.

Their target group is adults between thirty and fifty. Music plays the leading role in nearly all the programmes, with seventy percent of the broadcast time devoted to it. All the music is formatted according to the AC (Adult Contemporary) concept, following the principle of the least objectional music for the target group. The schedule consists mainly of interactive programmes, i.e. phone-ins⁶ (competitions, phone-in debates, greeting programmes, etc.), news bulletins and various magazines. The magazines may be in the form of flow programmes, with exci-

ting titles like "Good morning" or "Good afternoon". They take great care in building up presenters, with the aim to develop easily recognizable, personal styles. In addition to music, the magazines contain short items, studio links based on notices, telephone interviews, competitions and visitors. The channel has got few reporters outside their main studios in Oslo and Lillehammer.

It is a success. Above all is their success in music formatting envied by NRK, and probably by several local radios. So far their highest rate obtained is 25 percent. The rate is presently stable around 22-23 percent of the population⁷.

Local Radio

When advertising was allowed in local broadcasting, it was predicted that only a handful of big commercial radio stations would survive. Contrary to expectations, the number of radios has increased. When P4 and Petre started, the same predictions were again advanced, this time with the reservation that it might take some time before the stations would give up. Nearly three years later, we still await the big shut down of local radios. A few have disappeared. And the number of issued licenses should not be taken at face value; buying and selling broadcast time is widespread, and some licenses are "empty", applied for by larger radios to ensure that they can have most of the time on a channel for themselves.

From the point of view of the local radios, some of the figures are alarming. Since the advent of P2 and NRK Petre they have lost half of their listeners, with audience rates dropping from 25 percent in 1992 to 12 percent in 1994. At present, they are down to 10 percent. But there are still several sound local radios across the

country, following dissimilar survival strategies, as a consequence of different pursued aims and differences in available resources. After 1992, some of the commercial channels changed their profile. Instead of appealing only to the young, they have engaged in the local community. In this way, they have become competitors for the regional radios in NRK. But also local radios concentrating only on a young audience constitute a challenge for NRK. In Oslo Radio 1 claims to have more listeners among their target group than NRK Petre.

Profiled Channels

The NRK management could have chosen to adapt to the new reality by accepting that NRK was to be one among equals. It did not; probably because it could foresee a future where the umbilical cord, the license system, would be cut. Without having developed a system for independent existence, the institution is vitally dependent on the stable, relatively rich flow of license money. In the long run, however, a license fee system could not be defended if the share of listeners fell below a critical limit, e.g. fifty percent. In reality the management therefore had no option but to fight back. It was decided that the best strategy for a counterattack was to make profiled channels.

A first suggestion on how to profile the channels was presented to the management in 1990. Four different models were presented, but were all turned down, criticized for being too conservative, keeping the existing two channels unchanged and just adding a new one. A channel which tried to combine programmes for young people with classical music and news in Samí was not left any chance to attract new listeners, even less to keep them. Most of all did NRK want loyal listeners. But the manage-

ment realized that the laudated homogeneity of our society did no longer exist, if it ever had, and discarded all kinds of combined solutions with channels aimed at the whole of the population. They had three channels on their hand, and the only remaining possibility where to create channels specialized on different parts of the population. With this starting point, the challenge was how to divide the population into sections and how to create the optimal complete offer for each of them.

Thus the consumer, the listener came into focus. According to the radio management, perhaps the most important feature of the reform was the reassessment of the attitudes held towards the listener. Market ideas crept into the old social democratic bastion. It was made clear that thorough changes were needed both within the organization and in the program offers. The aim was to turn the institution from an introvert, transmitter oriented institution into an extrovert, listener oriented, business-like organisation. Throughout the institution 'listeners orientation' was repeated like a mantra.

A new committee, set down in 1991, with the mandate to design the new three channel system had to start with available knowledge about the listener. The material consisted of statistics from various sources, in particular NRK's own audience figures, showing reach, share and consumption time, and a new source – the life style-surveys. The lifestyle survey Norsk Monitor was used extensively in forming the new channel system. Norsk Monitor is conducted by MMI (Market and Media Institute), in connection with the RISC (Research Institutes on Social Change) analyses. The analyses are often presented as cultural maps or coordinate systems of attitudes in a population. The two main axes are modern-traditional and idealist-mate-

rialist. Life style surveys were also used in forming the new radio offers in the national broadcasters in Finland, Sweden and Denmark. On the basis of these analyses, the committee decided to create one channel specially directed at young people. This was the really completely new channel, and it was called Petre (the way P3 is pronounced in Norwegian). Of the other two, one should be a broad popular channel, whereas the other should represent the cultural alibi. The new popular channel was in many ways similar to the old P2, whereas the new cultural channel resembled the old P1. To demonstrate that the people rather than the cultural elite was put first, it was decided that the two channels should change names.

The popular channel thus became P1 – the Norway Channel. It was supposed to attract the largest numbers of listeners of all the radio channels in Norway. As mentioned, only one channel can be separated for regional transmissions. The regional programmes and the so-called silver heritage, i.e. programmes with a long history or tradition, were placed on P1. The target group is the population over thirty, with emphasis on those who feel strong local identity, those who are more likely to hold traditional, as opposed to modern, values, and on elderly people – those above 65. The channel was supposed to be a nice companion in everyday life, the channel that "talks with you and listens to you"⁸.

P2 – the Culture Channel was profiled for "those who would like to get new knowledge, acquire new insight, listen to debates, satirical programmes, who want challenges and for those who are active consumers of culture"⁹. The target group for this channel was "modern idealists".

Even before it was started Petre – the Youth Channel – was nick-named the 'turbo-channel', by the media. It was crea-

ted to get back young listeners. The target group is the population under thirty, with emphasis on those with modern, materialistic values. The channel should be "modern, young, energetic, informal, personal, engaging and changing"¹⁰. Seventy percent of the broadcast time is devoted to music, with play lists for most of the programmes.

The division was not without problems, the most urgent was where to put sports and programmes in Samí. Sports were first placed in Petre, mainly because this channels had the most flexible schedule. Eventually, in 1996, it was moved to P1 with the plain explanation that sports had to be on the most popular channel, which is P1. Wherever they were put, programmes in Samí had to become a problem, as only a minority of the population understands the language. So far the solution has been a half hour long national news service on P2. The channel is in addition divided each morning: in the northern parts of Norway programmes in Samí opt-out the other programmes. NRK would prefer to have one channel solely for classical music and one for Samí.

Judging from audience figures alone it is difficult to tell whether the reform has been a success, as we do not know what the figures would have been without the changes. NRK has lost listeners. In 1992 fifty-five percent of the population listened to NRK. Today the audience figures show that just below fifty percent listen one of their three channels. But not everyone do listen to the radio at all; of those that do NRK hold a sixty-two percent share of the market, only five points down from 1992.

The New Listener Oriented NRK

According to the new philosophy, the flow of the sound on the channels – the total

sound scape – is of foremost importance. P2's schedule, however, still resembles an old-fashioned block format, with the programme production made in specialized editorial offices. But even here is the target group taken into consideration when the programme and the schedule is evaluated. The difference between the channels is not so much which subjects they bring, as they way they view the world. As a producer on P2 rather jokingly stated:

If all three channels were to report from a sports arrangement, the reporter from Petre would talk to the athlete, the one from P1 would talk to his mother, and the one from P2 would consult a professor in psychiatry and ask why the audience cheers.

As long as they present the material differently, in three different wrappings, the three channels can bring the same kind of information. When the listeners tune into formatted channels, they are supposed to know how they will be addressed and which type of music to expect. With a flow format they will expect a well known schedule where every item soon will be succeeded by music. Programme hosts and reporters are important in such formats. Even though NRK do not make extensive use of lifestyle surveys any longer, the ideas and stereotypes has gotten into their bones. Presenters, both hosts and reporters, have to identify with the channels target group, listeners should feel familiar with them. The stereotype example is that the reporter who prefers cappuccino and VSOP fits into P2, whereas he who rather enjoys black coffee with home-made liquor into is a P1 man¹¹. The point is that the presenters should talk with, not to the target audience group, a task made easier if s/he identifies with the target group.

With the reform NRK got more time to fill, but not more money for doing it. Reducing expenses was therefore a prerequi-

site for the changes, in which they have succeeded. The cost per hour on the national programmes was reduced by twenty percent after the changes, from 25 000 to 20 000 NOK per hour¹². Also the regional offices, which increased their output with twenty percent, managed to lower their costs. The rationalization and increased efficiency have not been implemented without objections. More programme production has become deskwork as the scarcity of resources prohibits travels and expensive production. As an example, instead of features they have to make telephone interviews or direct broadcast without the refining editing process. Some claim that this leads to less variation in the programmes and reduced quality. The answer from the management is clear: studio and desk production is the modern way of radio production.

After the reforms NRK Radio developed a new "slogan":

NRK radio shall give the listeners

- *increased knowledge and insight,*
- *increased experience and*
- *increased happiness.*¹³

The first point, increased knowledge and insight, follows the traditional Reithian definition of public service: to educate, inform and entertain. The entertainment part of this doctrine has been stressed by NRK in the latter years, but actually the programme statistics from NRK show a marked reduction in programmes of the entertaining category from 1992 to 1994.¹⁴ Now entertainment is supposed to be a part of most programmes, an aspect that is to be recognized in how the program addresses the audience, most audible through the program hosts.

Two new programmes, which the radio management presented with pride, were

the one hour long news service with News in English and Program in Urdu, Turkish and Vietnamese on P1. Later, they were regarded as "stoppers" in the total sound package that this channel is supposed to offer. Now Program in Urdu, Turkish and Vietnamese is shortened to nine minutes and moved to P2, and will probably be moved again to NRK2, the new television channel, when it starts this autumn. The flow, the soundscape is evidently regarded as the superior guiding-line in the new three channel system.

What about Public Service?

Public service is contestable concept, if not an outright manipulation device, where various groups try to get their opinion across as the only legitimate definition. Only two radio broadcasters in Norway are obliged to adhere to the public service principles, NRK and P4. The view, held by the government as well as by the common citizen, of NRK as the most important public service broadcaster in Norway¹⁵ put special demands on the institution. These are not explicitly stated, but a result of more general expectations which have to be extracted and interpreted from parliamentary debates and treatment of questions concerning programmes in NRK and related issues over the years. For the commercial broadcasters, the public service principles are stated as national coverage, editorial independence and that the program profile over time has a sufficiently varied programmed menu. This should include offers not only for the broad interests, but also for smaller groups such as for young people and children and for the Lappish population and other minorities. Daily news services should be included, and the programmes are in addition sup-

posed to contribute to strengthening the Norwegian language, identity and culture.

The committee that worked out the program profiles claimed that they have re-defined the public service principles by making them broader. Accessible was a key word. Whereas BBC use the word in the sense that the institution can be reached by the common man, NRK has chosen another interpretation of accessibility: of a form that can be readily grasped intellectually. The programs should not only be understandable, but also in contact with the listeners, reflecting their interests and lives. The management put great emphasis on NRK's role as the major broadcaster in Norway; if it did not succeed in attracting the majority of the population, it would no longer be a service to the general public. And if NRK was to remain the major broadcaster, it had to get rid of the widespread impression of a paternalistic institution. After the deregulation, NRK operates on a commercial market, competing for listeners and programmes. They have to sell audience figures to the politicians as well as to the audience – following the notion that the popular gets more friends, to ensure their source of income, the license fee.

As formats change it becomes increasingly difficult to evaluate how the public service broadcasters fulfil their obligations. P4 is accused of not having enough culture on their program. Culture is a very slippery concept, however. Even with a narrow, elitist definition it is difficult to pin down the amount of culture in a flow format.

The Absolutely DABulous Future

Whatever problem NRK Radio is facing at the moment, DAB may give the answer. DAB is the solution on the problems with separate channels for Sami and classical

music. And with DAB it will be possible to listen to car radio in Norway without repeated trouble with interference.

On 2 October 1994, exactly one year after the radio reform, NRK started experimental transmissions in DAB, as one of the first broadcasting institutions in Europe. Two transmitters, one covering the Oslo area and one outside of Kongsberg, carries a new channel, NRK Always Classical, in both digital and analogue modes. Classical music was chosen for several reasons. The general director of NRK, Einar Førde, stated that a classic channel is regarded as an "important bait to get people to invest in these expensive receivers"¹⁶. At present only a handful of digital receivers have been sold to the public. Classical music is also one of the best ways to show and compare the difference between digital and analogue signals. NRK often refers to expected competition from a national classical FM network, and in the Oslo-area they already encounter competition from an existing local radio, *Klassisk radio* (Classic Radio).

When the DAB-system is established, NRK have plans for a "NRK – Always News and Sports" and they would like to have separate national channels for the regional broadcasts. Their plans already succeed the number of accessible DAB-channels. The only other broadcaster that is ensured a channel within the DAB system is P4. NRK will not get a monopoly, but they have plans for enough channels to keep other parts out of the system.

At present Norway has been delegated two DAB blocks. How many channels these blocks permit is not yet clear, it depends both on technical improvements and what kind of programme content the different channels are supposed to carry.

Concluding Remarks

Competition was the main objective for the radio reform in NRK. And they have succeeded in creating an alertness among the employees towards their new situation in a broadcasting market. This alertness can be traced on various levels. So far it is not visible in the program offers, but there are hints on what to expect. The flow format is at present seen as the only viable way of radio production in a competitive environment, a format that encourages formatted channels with a continuous flow of music, items and personal hosts. A format where the listeners recognize and meet with certain expectations the kind of music they will hear and how the various items will be presented. In order to create better formats, or better profiles NRK need more channels, a request that can only be fulfilled when DAB takes over as the leading broadcasting system.

NRK also wanted to get rid of old political restraints. As such the radio reform has only been a single step in a longer process. Two other major steps were the reforms in 1987, when NRK became an independent foundation, and on 29. april 1996, when it was converted into a limited company with the state as sole shareholder. As a shareholding company the management claim it will be easier to lay down new strategies and bring them to fulfilment, without having to go the slow steps through the parliamentary system. Whether the new dynamic organization in NRK will bring us, the audience, better programmes, we just have to wait and listen. At least those who intend to invest in the new digital receivers.

Notes

1. Klassekampen 1. oktober 1994
2. Transmission started in 1979 on an experimental basis (Toft 1985).
3. Bimediality is strong in NRK. All regional offices make both their own radio- and television programmes and items for the national programmes.
4. Both Kinnevik and Aller are among the largest mediacompanies in Scandinavia.
5. In Norwegian: ”nyheter/debatt, sport, serviceradio, delaktighet/lytterinteraktive, ”opplevelsesradio”. Appendix 2 in Application for the P4-license from Radio Hele Norge.
6. Phone-ins are not only a simple and inexpensive format, they can actually be a way of improving income. By using special numbers where the service costs 6-7 Nkr per minute for the caller. P4 uses these phone-numbers in all kinds of phone-in programmes, NRK, as far as I am aware of, only for competitions.
7. These and all the following statistics on rating and share are taken from *Lytting på nær-radio 1995*. Rapport nr. 2. Norsk Gallup Institutt A/S.
8. In Norwegian ”snakker med deg og hører på deg”. NRK Radio i ny drakt. PR-materiell.
9. In Norwegian ”dem som er innstilt på ny viten, ny innsikt, debatt, kommentarer, analyse, satire, utfordringer og for dem som er aktive kulturkonumenter”. NRK Radio i ny drakt. PR-materiell.
10. In Norwegian ”moderne, ung, energisk, uhøytidlig, personlig, engasjert og foranderlig”. NRK Radio i ny drakt. PR-materiell.
11. These examples are stereotypes, and are made from the presentation MMI and the radio management gave when introducing the new radio. The same kind of example was later repeated by a senior editor when explaining the criterias for choosing new employees. As all stereotypes, they contain a grain of truth.
12. NRK internal newspaper *Tidssignalet* 6/95:5
13. In Norwegian: ”NRK Radio skal gi lytterne – økt kunnskap og innsikt – økt opplevelse og – økt glede”.
14. *NRK Tall og fakta* (Facts and figures) 1992 and 1994
15. St. meld. nr. 32 1992-93 Media i tida.: 127.
16. In Norwegian ”et viktig lokkemiddel for å få folk til å investere i de foreløpig dyre DAB-mottakerne” *Aftenposten* 11. june 1995.