Scenes from a Swedish Sabbatical

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For one all-too-short but most enriching academic year, 1992-1993, I had the opportunity to "sit" at Stockholm University's JMK, to visit media and academic institutions throughout the Nordic countries and thereby to broaden my perspectives – both scholarly and existential.

What follows remains highly impressionistic and without any pretension of scientific rigour. In order to be conclusive, as we say in our profession, more research is needed...

Culture and Society

In the courtyard of Visby's 13th century Gothic cathedral one afternoon last autumn, I came across two late-teenagers, their bodies punctured with metal in all the appropriate places, exchanging videocassettes. A stolen glimpse showed one of them to be a tape of the Irish neo-underground classic film, The Commitments. For me, such a scene was pregnant with irony.

North Americans (at least those of European ancestry) still look to Europe as a preserve of the traditional, of the firmament of our own modernity – what we find so fascinating about 13th century church courtyards is precisely that we have none of our own. I am, of course, used to scenes like the one I just described, but they are usually set in shopping malls. In Sweden too, this is increasingly the case, but at least you still have the courtyards.

As a Canadian, as a Québécois (it is still, for the time being, possible to be both), I often feel suffocated by our obsession with questions of "cultural identity". In Scandinavia, I acquired a new appreciation of this provocative issue, particularly thanks to the way you use the English language as an instrument of communication, unselfconsciously stripping it of its threatening aspects. English is far more present, more publicly visible, in Stockholm or Copenhagen than in Montreal. Yet one does not sense the indigenous culture to be any less robust for it.

The same is true for the apparent Nordic attitude towards American culture. We Canadians couch our protectionism in a terribly prudish public discourse, while gorging ourselves on American cultural produce in the privacy of our closets. You seem to face it head on. For a time last year, the Swedish oil company Statoil ran a television commercial in which a stereotypical American couple pulls in to a gas station to ask directions. They refuse to buy any gas, though, because, they say, they support only American products. Responding to their final request – how to say 'See you' in Swedish – the boy at the pump avenges the nation: we last see our American couple innocently saluting a policeman with the words 'Kiss my backside, officer'.

Canadians would feel that such a commercial might be bad for tourism. I certainly can not imagine something similar being used to promote a state-owned oil company, if we still had one. Another scene from the same register: part of an imaginative series of ads conceived for the newspaper Expressen. A few days following the November 1992 US presidential election, billboards went up in Stockholm showing George Bush with a pained look on his face, and a comic-strip character's thought bubble had him thinking 'It's gotta be that damn Swedish newspaper again'. I feel safe to say that most Canadian newspapers would fear that such publicity might be considered disrespectful.

The Politics of Policy

I'm afraid I am much less sanguine about the future of Swedish media, however. The liberalization of Swedish society hit the media with a vengeance while I was there, and most people, even specialists, with whom I was in touch seemed strangely anaesthetised to what was going on.

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The superficial manifestation of what I am talking about is easy enough to identify, and can be reduced to a single word: privatization. Privatization usually refers to the selling of public enterprises to private owners. But privatization takes on a more insidious form when it involves the privatization of public space. This is what is happening in the Nordic media generally, but in a particularly forceful way in Sweden, in the way in which commercial radio and television have been introduced.

My friend Olof Hultén has written that the introduction of private commercial broadcasting in the Nordic countries has been "cautious" (Hultén 1992). With all due respect, I'm not so sure it has been cautious at all. While it may have taken some time and a good deal of parliamentary discussion, it seems to me that in the final analysis all caution has been thrown to the wind.

Commenting on the situation in Italy shortly after the 1976 court ruling that opened the door to private broadcasting in that country, Franco Iseppi wrote:

The way in which the relationship between the public and private presence is handled will determine in one sense or another the final structure of the public broadcasting system. In other words if the normalization of the relationship between public and private comes about through the recognition of a "mixed" economy, that is one of competition, there will not be many ways for a public corporation (which still wants to maintain its basic character as a public service) to survive. (Iseppi 1980: 350)

I like this quotation very much, and have used it before in discussing the Canadian situation. But I think it is even more appropriate with regard to Sweden, where, as far as I can tell, the impact of introducing privately-owned commercial services on the overall structure of the system has been hardly considered at all.1

Debate leading up to the introduction of commercial terrestrial television in Sweden focussed almost exclusively on the question of advertising, and the need to create a national television vehicle for Swedish advertisers in order to keep their kronor in the Swedish economy (Camauër 1993). This is clearly an important issue, with no simple solution, as the outcome of the Swedish debate indicates. Pressured by the fait accompli of the London-based satellite TV3, which introduced commercial advertising into the environment while draining the kronor away, and seeking to preserve the commercial-free purity of Swedish public television, the Riksdag legislated TV4 into existence.

Only one year later, TV4 was already citing economic problems in trying to wriggle out of its commitments (Hultén 1993) – a syndrome familiar to Canadians. At the same time, its promotional literature was replete with self-congratulatory claims such as the following:

The great breakthrough for TV4 came in the autumn of 1992. Entertainment programmes were particularly successful – the state lottery game show Bingoallo and the adventure show Fångarna på förtet (Fort Boyard) topped the Swedish combined ratings lists during the season. Both Bingoallo and Fort Boyard had market shares of more than 50 per cent. (Nordisk Television AB 1993: 1)

I leave it to more competent analysts than I to assess these programs' contribution to Swedish culture. I would suggest however, following Iseppi, that the landscape of Swedish television has been irrevocably transformed with the introduction of a sector driven by commercial logic, in ways that may take some time to become fully apparent. Again, coming from a country that has lived with the mixed model since the early days of radio, I find it particularly deplorable that no provision has been made for adjusting Sweden's emerging new system to the public interest needs of Swedish citizens.

Which brings me to the dreaded "r-word" – regulation. A wise Swedish friend of mine, commenting on the evidently thoughtless radicalism of the country's plunge from social democracy to liberalism, told me: 'Sweden is a small country, and can not tolerate more than one idea at a time.' In broadcasting, the current idea is deregulation. In his perceptive 1992 article in this journal, entitled "Five Second Thoughts", Karl Erik Gustafsson, wrote, among other things, of the need for "more systematic ground rules" with regard to European broadcasting regulation generally (Gustafsson 1992). Nowhere in Europe is there a greater need for this than in Sweden, it seems to me.

Yet Sweden, in the 1990s, has seen the introduction of not only the aforementioned commercial television, but also a unique model of unregulated competition in cable delivery and a virtual bazaar for the awarding of private commercial radio licences. In radio, the main justification for privatization has allegedly been sociocultural, not economic – to increase the freedom to communicate by introducing alternatives to the public service (Sköld 1993). But, paradoxically, nothing is provided to ensure that the awarding of private licences actually leads to pluralism on the air.

At the risk of appearing pedantic and being told (justifiably) to keep my nose in my own business, I will now repeat what I spent my time in the Nordic countries telling anyone who would listen, not only in Sweden, but also in visits to Norway, Denmark and Finland: lib-
ralization of broadcasting to make room for private as well as public institutions increases, not decreases, the need for regulation and independent, democratically-functioning regulatory mechanisms (see Raboy 1993 and forthcoming).

Regulatory mechanisms are not only, as is often believed, for interfering with the economics of the marketplace, but also for achieving "non-market public policy objectives" (Cave and Melody 1989: 224). Ensuring appropriate levels of service, equitable access, and standards of quality are all such objectives. It is not enough to say that public service broadcasting exists to serve these objectives, because – as the Nordic countries are learning painfully – public broadcasting is itself transformed by the pressure of competing for audiences in an increasingly commercialized broadcast environment (Nordic Media News 1993).

In Sweden, it is still possible, most of the time, to recognize the channel one is watching simply by the content on the screen. But for how long? In Canada, that is certainly no longer the case, most of the time.

Watching Television

In order to gain some insight into this question, I spent a day last summer, just before leaving Sweden, doing a little experiment: watching television. From my recently-cabled home base in Stockholm's Wenner Gren Centre, I scanned and recorded the available offer at regular intervals between 10 am and 1 am the following morning. This is what I saw:

10 am

National television has not yet started its day. TV 1, 2, and 4 are only showing their identification signals, while TV 3 is silently scrolling the text of the day's program schedule. The Nordic Channel, ZTV, Finland's TV and the Open Channel are equally silent. The various advertising channels are - surprise, surprise - showing ads; so, for that matter, is the London-based SuperChannel ("100% American-made" kitchen gadgets). Only MTV and the international francophone chain TV5 are actually showing "programs". On TV5, hip sociologist Alain Touraine (who rather resembles a Swedish bank manager) is hyping his new book, about democracy, telling anecdotes about Sartre and Malraux. I actually quite enjoyed this one, and couldn't help wondering what market there was in Stockholm for Touraine at Ten, en français. 1

12.30 pm

We're now up to four programs - two of them music videos (SuperChannel is challenging MTV), but none of them Swedish. TV3 is screening a show about animals, and TV5 is re-running a variety spectacle. All the Nordic program channels are still quiet, but the ad channels are on a roll. Consumerism comes before culture, or at least starts earlier in the day.

3.45 pm

Six programs, but still nothing Swedish, with the noble exception of a production from Norra Järva lokal tv on the Open Channel. TV2 is showing an old black-and-white American western with Jimmy Stewart in the role of a preacher. An American soap is running on the Nordic Channel, an animal adventure on TV5. SuperChannel and MTV are still rocking timelessly.

8 pm

For the first time in the day, a majority of channels are actually showing programs, but the only manifestly Swedish shows on the air are a folklore program on Kanal 1 and a home-made film on the Open Channel. TV2, 3, 4 as well as the Nordic Channel are all screening American programs (another old western on TV2, a police drama on TV3, a drama on TV4 and Bonanza on the Nordic). ZTV, the lively Kinnevik local cable offering, is screening an upbeat video. A documentary on Africa is on TV5, MTV is doing what it does, and SuperChannel is currentaffairsing about Bosnia. The Finns are now finally talking too.

10.30 pm

Two Swedish programs: variety on TV2 and horseracing on TV4. LA Law on Kanal 1, Thirtysomething on TV3, and John Wayne on the Nordic Channel. ZTV and MTV are showing videos. TV5 and SuperChannel are into news and current affairs. Finland's TV is showing a film and the Open Channel is featuring Andean music. Diversity is the order of the hour.

1 am

The program day is over at the top of the dial. TV1 and 2 are showing their colours. TV3 has sold time to a commercial program. TV4 is promoting tomorrow's
schedule. The Nordic Channel is off the air. ZTV and MTV are rocking us to sleep with videos as usual, and has been joined once again by SuperChannel. TV5 is back to Africa. All is silent on the Finnish front. Svenska Kabel and the Open Channel are self-promoting too. It is a very quiet time in televisionland.

All told, the range of programs on offer appears to be somewhat broader than what I am used to at home, where we have more to choose from but less real choice.

But there would seem to be an embryonic identity crisis at the high-minded end of the scale. Where is the public service, in the overall program mix? What can we deduce from a program strategy that pits LA Law against Thirtysomething in prime time? Where is the cultural flow (or is it flaw?) in this 15-channel cable universe?

As I stated earlier, in order to answer these questions, more research is necessary. It would be a pleasure to have the opportunity to do it.

Notes

1. I was fortunate to be able to persuade two doctoral candidates at Stockholm University, Leonor Camauñer and Gullan Sköld, to do some fundamental documentary research on this subject in the course of a postgraduate seminar I taught on media policy at JMK during the winter of 1993.

2. With thanks for the inspiration to the work of Raymond Williams (1973) and Bill McKibben (1992).

3. Personally, I also came to appreciate the benefits of globalization during this time in Sweden, as I was able to receive the main Radio-Canada evening news program on TV5 every morning, only a few hours after its initial broadcast.

References


