

DOES SUBSIDISING COMMUNITY MEDIA MAKE A DIFFERENCE ?

**Presented at OURMedia III
Universidad del Norte
Barranquilla, Colombia**

May 19-20, 2003

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Introduction

Although the approximately 250 non-commercial local radio and television stations in Denmark far from assume a leading role on the media policy agenda, this does not mean that the stations have gone unheeded when media policy agreements have been entered into. After various and largely failed or, in terms of resources, minor attempts at offering some support to volunteer stations without any significant income, in 1996 the social-democratic government succeeded in earmarking funds for an actual subsidy scheme for the benefit of non-commercial local radio and TV stations. The subsidy was initiated in 1997, but already in 1998 political initiative was taken to change it so that from the middle of 1999 a significant share of the money was to be distributed according to applications from the individual stations. The aim of this change, which involved distributing the funds more selectively, was to be better able to meet the political expectation that the subsidies would lead to better programs; thus, that the quality would be improved. In connection with the changes in 1999, the Ministry of Culture contacted us in order to carry out the evaluation required by the change in policy. The evaluation was to cover administrative aspects, the stations' view of the changes, and not least an analysis of a number of the programs that received support. Considering in principle how many stations the report comprises, we chose to give the analysis a primarily qualitative structure, supplementing it with studies of documents (applications and so forth).

The qualitative part covers selected stations (21 in 1999 and 33 in 2000) that were characterized based on existing information and on interviews; the stations' programs, which they were requested to send in, were analyzed according to recognized principles. In connection with the program activity for the year 2000, we chose to expand the field of analysis to also include listeners and viewers, who at focus group interviews held at eight locations in Denmark were given the opportunity to comment on selected clips from the programs of the local TV station.

The selected stations and their programs were not chosen based on a statistical matrix such as random selection in the shape of random sampling. Rather we aimed at achieving as wide a distribution as regards geography and station characteristics as possible. We thus estimate that as a sample, the analysis gives a true and fair description not only of the selected stations, but also of the field as a whole. The analysis is documented in Jauert and Prehn (2002) and parts of it in Jauert and Prehn (2001) and pursues the work of previous studies, major ones being Jauert and Prehn (1995a, b

and 1998), which are all in Danish; for related work in English see, for instance, Petersen et al. (1992) and Prehn (1992).

The Danish local radio and TV system

The plans to establish local media in Denmark date back to the middle of the 1960s, when a committee appointed in 1966 states in its recommendation that programs spread by cable might undermine the monopoly of *Danmarks Radio* (Danish Broadcasting Company). On the other hand, at the same time various initiatives were taken in Canada and Europe, including the launching of pirate radios, which never achieved any significance in Denmark. In a report for the parliament in 1972, the then Minister of Culture, Niels Matthiasen, states:

... many places the local stations have been significant as a means to strengthen democracy and the communication between the local government and the citizens as well as among the citizens (cited in Prehn, 1981: 329)

This statement indicates the profile that comes to influence policy towards local radio and television for many years to come: these new media were viewed as instruments in the service of democracy, or, in other words, the political sphere was in focus.

The fact that events took an entirely different turn is demonstrated by the first Danish experiments with cable television. These experiments replaced an original bill that involved municipal and county councils being able to issue concessions for the operation of local stations. Thus, the minister's idea was that mini "Danmarks Radios" would appear throughout the country. However, the majority of the parliament had something else in mind and limited the bill to only concern cable programming monitored by a committee.

The experimental scheme was initiated already in 1973 and brought to an end in 1977 with the committee's report [*Ministeriet for kulturelle anliggender (Ministry of Cultural Affairs), 1977], which concluded that the experiments had been too few and too brief for them to be able to form a true impression of the new media. The committee therefore proposed that another round of experiments be initiated and that these should also involve economic support in order to make them more sustainable.

The limited experiences that formed the basis of the committee's conclusions showed however that the programming content far from corresponded to the political expectations. On the

contrary, the content was characterized by ‘soft’ programs on local life rather than by the local political agenda, or as a social-democratic member of a local programming committee put it:

Local TV should create a sense of community; this is not done through politics or by showing pictures of little children in Vietnam (Prehn, 1981: 337)

Or, as someone else emphasized:

One shouldn’t be too critical (...) because of course I also have to live in Haslev after these six months are over. (Prehn, 1981: 340)

Even though the first experimental scheme thus only consisted of a total of seven experiments of quite a brief duration, already from the start a pattern emerged in which the political center had one idea while the program-producing periphery predominantly had a different one.

The next round of experiments was initiated in 1981, but in actual fact not until 1983, due to preparations in the new committees that were supposed to monitor and evaluate the experiments and due to conflicts concerning the financial support.

This experiment turned out to be far more comprehensive than the previous one, for one thing because the stations now received a certain amount of financial support and because now wireless broadcasting was also officially permitted. A total of 150 stations (108 radio and 42 TV) received broadcasting licenses from the committee. Concerning the content of the experimental scheme, it was characterized by the fact that the only Danish alternative was Danmarks Radio. In contrast to the situation in the U.S., the experiments thus arose in an environment that might best be described as suffering from a “commercial deficit.” It is true that it was prohibited to broadcast advertisements, but at many of the stations, especially radio stations, programming and formats developed that to a large extent resembled those of commercial radios. This pertained to TV to a lesser extent, but in a number of cases, especially in Copenhagen, a lot of money was invested in experiments that anticipated the actual liberalization of media policy. In 1985 alone it is estimated that about 23 million Euros were spent, which should be seen in relation to the fact that the state and municipalities combined only granted 1.6 million Euros for the entire experimental period. Again, the experiments offered a manifold of programs that were largely beyond the scope of the usual conception of the political sphere. This was possible for one thing because the experiments did not make demands concerning program content.

The experiments became very popular among the population and in certain places they succeeded in bordering on or actually outdoing Danmarks Radio's programs, and there was therefore no doubt that the experiments would be replaced by a permanent subsidy when they came to an end in 1985 for radio and in 1987 for TV.

Media policy frictions regarding the establishment of the nationwide TV 2 characterized the transition from experiment to a permanent subsidy scheme. The local radios were made permanent in 1985 while TV did not enter into the bill on permanency until 1987, and not until 1988 was advertising allowed on local radio, while local TV had to wait until 1989. Concurrently, it was affirmed that with the exception of daily papers, business enterprises were not allowed to have any dominating influence on the stations. At the same time as the permission to send commercials was granted, a support fund was established for local radio, the funds for which came from taxes levied on profit-yielding stations. However, the result of this was that many of the commercial stations were split up into often complex structures, so only very little money came into the fund, which was thus discontinued in 1991.

The conflict over the fund illustrated the fact that the local media were developing in different directions: into commercial and non-commercial stations. At the same time, the legislation was basically organized according to non-commercial principles (low broadcasting volume and limited broadcasting areas, a ban on networking, and so on). Therefore, after the collapse of the support fund in 1991, the non-commercial stations could only be financed by such means as subscriptions and job programs, while the commercial stations did not have an adequate market.

In 1994, when the non-commercial local radios gained access to financial support from proceeds from the state soccer and lottery pools to the amount of 1 million Euros annually, the Ministry of Culture initiated a review of the situation (Jauert and Prehn, 1995) that was to lay the groundwork for a law reform. Not surprisingly, the report concluded that legislation and reality did not correspond and that the former should therefore make allowance for both the commercial and the non-commercial layers. When the report appeared, these layers consisted of 82 commercial and 174 non-commercial local radio stations, while the distribution for TV was 23 commercial and 30 non-commercial stations.

In 1997 the bill was passed, and it broadly followed the recommendations in the report from 1995, including its view of non-commercial stations as part of an expanded concept of public service. Consequently, a subsidy was established for non-commercial local radio and TV stations, the funds for which came from the license that had previously been reserved for Danmarks Radio

and TV 2. Other funds came from a tax on the local TV stations that by law could now enter into a network. This network, *TvDanmark*, is owned by *Scandinavian Broadcasting System*. A disputed element in the bill was that non-commercial TV stations were allowed to broadcast in windows on the commercial stations—also at times when this rightfully seemed to disrupt the commercially established flow of programming. The pool had a total of 6.7 million Euros at its disposal annually until the amount was increased in 2001. Until 1999 most of these funds were given as subsidies for operating costs and calculated according to the amount of broadcasting time used by the individual stations. This method of distribution was soon challenged because it was predominantly based on an automatic process, which led to thinking in systems—or in other words, quantity became the chief concern rather than quality.

In light of the above, the administration of the fund was changed with effect from the middle of 1999, so that the grants for operating costs were reduced—for TV, significantly—in order to be able to allocate significant amounts of the fund to program applications from the local stations; these stations first had to be prioritized by the local committees that had always been responsible for local radio and TV, while the central committee carried out the final distribution.

Thus, the Danish system of local radio and TV has depended on local administration from its very start in 1985/87, with local committees issuing broadcasting licenses but with a central committee serving as the appeals committee, and from 1997 also serving to administrate the fund for non-commercial stations.

No official account exists of the number of local stations in Denmark. The closest one gets is a privately published handbook, which is however incomplete. The absolute number of the local stations is thus difficult to specify. As for the non-commercial stations, it must nevertheless be assumed that most of the stations eligible for subsidies apply for support through the Ministry of Culture. Based on these numbers, the subsidy scheme has presumably led to an increase in the number of stations. Whereas in 1999 subsidies for operating costs were granted to 145 radio stations and 56 TV stations, in 2001 the numbers were 157 for radio and 89 for TV. Considering the entire period from 1999 to 2002, the net increase in the number of radio stations was 30 and in the number of TV stations no less than 45.

The concept of ‘stations’ should be viewed as a matter of broadcasting licenses; especially in the urban areas, the license holders share broadcasting frequencies, so in many cases it would be more correct to speak of program actors.

The Danish system of local radio and TV is unique for containing both a commercial layer and a non-commercial layer. The extent of the latter should be assumed to largely depend on the above-mentioned subsidy, which in 2001 comprised 6.7 million Euros annually.

However, with the accession to power of the right-wing Danish government at the end of 2001, this subsidy was challenged by the government's new media policy agreement for the 2002-2006 period, which reduced the amount to 5.3 million Euros, among other things because it lifted the tax imposed on networking stations. In addition, the media policy agreement contains elements that largely accommodate the demands of the local commercial stations. Thus, the limitations on the access of radio stations to networking were revoked; the broadcasting volume will be increased where possible, the ban was lifted on business enterprises exercising a decisive influence on the stations, and finally the windows were moved to before 3 pm for non-commercial TV.

The general consequences of the subsidy scheme

The revised subsidy scheme took effect in the middle of 1999, creating a good deal of turbulence for the stations, which had budgeted according to the former system. In addition to this, due to the committee's expectation that more stations would emerge, there were more funds available for distribution than usual in 1998 because the committee had reserved a fund from the previous year.

The new scheme continued to operate with a nominal fund of 6.7 million Euros. To make funds available for program subsidies, it was therefore necessary to reduce the subsidies for operating costs. Before the new scheme, radio stations could at most receive a subsidy of 27,800 Euros annually for their operating costs, and the TV stations a maximum of 138,666 Euros. In pursuance of the new scheme these amounts were reduced to 10,400 Euros for radio and 20,800 Euros for TV. Or in other words: radio fell by 62.5% and TV by 85%. On the other hand, all stations were given the possibility to send in applications for subsidies for specified programs. To be able to receive funding, in addition to a number of formal stipulations, the program was required to treat local information and debate or accommodate the needs of minority groups and/or groups that were underrepresented in the media, or to involve the citizens (public access) or give a local lift to the competence /quality of the programming.

These criteria correspond somewhat to those that applied to the distribution of proceeds from the state soccer and lottery pools from 1994-96, and in fact go all the way back to the first tentative assumptions as regards how local media could contribute to public debate. Even

though the criteria contain a certain flexibility, it nevertheless quickly became clear that quite a few stations sent in applications endorsed by the local committees that did not meet the basic criterion: that the program subsidy can at most amount to 66,666 Euros for radio and 200,000 Euros for TV, and that the total grant (the subsidies for operating costs and for programs) could not exceed the station's total operating budget.

Furthermore, quite a few applications were structured in such a way that it was not possible to identify the programs for which the stations were applying for funding. It was very clear that the stations and the local committees had not acquainted themselves sufficiently with the conditions for subvention. Nor did it help that in its refusal the Ministry did not give any reason for the refusal, which did not offer the stations the opportunity learn something from the process. In the following three years these problems were worked out, but the local committees still do not advise the stations adequately or at all before the applications are actually assessed. This means that a number of stations receive a negative recommendation from the local committee, a recommendation that the central committee predominantly respects. Thus, in respect to the smaller stations, the local committee only considers itself as an endorsing authority, allowing everything to get through, while the bigger ones consider themselves more as gatekeepers than as advisers, which in both cases can be characterized as administratively dysfunctional.

In addition, the supervision of the funds was dissatisfactory. According to the rules, it was the duty of the local committees to ensure through spot checks that the program funds were used in accordance with the application, that is, that the programs for which the money was granted were being produced and broadcast. Only very few committees have systematized this obligatory supervision. Since the subsidy as a whole represents quite a large sum of money, this must also be characterized as administratively criticizable.

As mentioned above, beyond the new subsidy scheme's quite radical reduction in subsidies for operating costs, the distribution of the subsidies between radio and TV was changed radically. This is demonstrated in following tables.

Table 1
TOTAL SUBSIDIES (DKK)

	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
Radio	13,088,570	16,179,503	18,985,313	22,232,616	23,717,922
TV	35,379,633	23,878,055	22,141,110	24,976,120	31,493,450
Total	48,468,203	40,057,558	41,126,423	47,208,736	55,211,372

TOTAL SUBSIDIES (PERCENT)

	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
RADIO	27	41	46	47	43
TV	73	59	54	53	57
TOTAL	100	100	100	100	100

From the tables it is clear that the total subsidies for TV decreased drastically from 1998 onward, while the opposite was true for radio. To this should be added the fact that the number of TV stations increased by no less than 89% during the same period—many more stations had to share the total grant. Overall, the changes thus resulted in money being transferred from radio to television and from the almost exclusive subvention of operating costs to the combined subvention of operating costs and programs, with the latter manifesting itself for good when the available funds were increased in 2001.

Table 3 shows the overall movement, indicating that TV lost more than 11 million DKK. Not until 2000-2001 does the picture change, because the funds were increased. On the other hand, looking at the distribution in percentages between radio and television and between subsidies for operating costs and programs, as is shown in table 4, a quite stable or robust system for distribution was established starting in the year 2000, when the new scheme completely broke through, 1999 being a mixture of the old and new schemes.

Table 3

Overall differences for radio and TV (DKK)

	1998-1999	1999-2000	2000-2001	2001-2002*
Radio	3,097,513	2,699,290	3,247,603	2,323,160*
TV	-11,501,568	-1,736,945	2,835,010	6,517,330*

*The amounts are based on the original subsidies for 2002, which however were reduced when the new government assumed office.

Table 4

Distribution of base and program subsidies expressed in percentages (radio/TV)

	OPERATING COSTS		PROGRAM	
	Radio	TV	Radio	TV
1999	39	61	46	54
2000	52	48	41	59
2001	51	49	44	56

2002	48	52	40	60
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It should be recalled that the funds for program subsidies are a function of the number of stations that receive subsidies for their operating costs. Therefore, we see that as a result of the growth in the number of TV stations, in 2000 the distribution was 52% for radio and 48% for TV while in 2002 the numbers were exactly the opposite.

The program subsidies are thus a residual entity. Table 5 displays the amounts.

Table 5
Base and program subsidies for radio and TV 1999-2002 (DKK)

	Radio		TV		Total
	Base	Program	Base	Program	
1999	11,954,803	4,224,700	18,890,100	4,987,955	40,057,558
2000	10,146,732	8,838,581	9,496,960	12,644,150	41,126,423
2001	10,649,300	11,583,316	10,126,000	14,850,120	47,208,736
2002	10,444,200	13,273,722	11,440,000	20,053,450	55,211,372

It is thus evident that while the program subsidies in 2000 amounted to 52.3%, in 2001 they rose to 59.9%, and in 2002 to 60.3% before the government's reduction. It is also evident that while the subvention of operating costs remained stable at about 10 million DKK, the subvention of TV rose by 2 million DKK in the same period. With the new amount of available funds, the media policy compromise results in the program subsidies falling from the original 33.3 million DKK (4.4 million Euros) to 18.1 million DKK (2.4 million Euros). Even though this will not cause the world to collapse, the reduced amounts will probably mean that at least some stations will have considerable difficulty making ends meet, and in any case this is a political signal that the non-commercial stations have the lowest priority in media policy.

TV Halsnæs

As mentioned above, as part of the study we selected a number of stations for closer analysis: 21 stations in 1999 and 33 in 2000. The reason why we increased the number in 2002 is that we noted a withdrawal rate of 38% in 1999. In 2000 the withdrawal rate was 36%, but the number of stations that figured in the study rose from 13 to 21. For a qualitatively oriented study the number for the 2000 is satisfactory, especially since the stations that withdrew are, in general, evenly distributed in

the categories. When the stations were asked to send in about two hours' worth of program examples each, this in itself caused big problems, because altogether the material represented more than forty hours of programs in 2000 and almost 30 hours in 1999.

Furthermore, we carried out a number of focus group studies in 2001, which is why we had to be extremely discriminating in selecting the programs and stations that the study examined in detail.

In the present article we must of course narrow down the field even further, which is why we selected a station that in many respects exemplifies the local stations.

The selected station is *TV Halsnæs*, which started broadcasting in 1997 and primarily broadcasts in the municipalities of Frederiksværk and Hundested in northern Zealand. The station is essentially operated on a voluntary basis, but in such a way that larger productions are made to order. The station is organized as an association whose aim is to carry out TV program activities in the municipalities of Frederiksværk and Hundested.

The station broadcasts new productions of its own about three hours a week and repeat programmes about 12 hours a week. The programming consists of a variety of news programs and reports, plus special programs.

In the local area the station has useful contacts among the population, which is encouraged to participate in the idea and adaptation phase, while the station is in charge of production, since the opinion is that TV, rather than being a sandbox, should be characterized by quality and planning. Only in this way can local TV be made attractive for the population. Moreover, the station has coordinated its tasks with the other two TV stations in the area, so that they avoid broadcasting the same types of programs. For instance, *TV Halsnæs* is thus responsible for the longer programmes, and it is often here, according to their self-conception, that controversial topics are addressed. By virtue of the many longer programmes, their programming is very flexible, depending on the individual topics.

The station is typical and exemplary in many ways. It is located in a region with both urban and rural areas, and even though the regional TV 2 (located in Copenhagen) formally covers this region, one rarely sees them. The region does not have its own newspaper and overall it can be characterized as a peripheral area. The station is also a typical example of the numerous stations that have gotten into a tight corner in connection with the criteria that have been established for program subsidies. Many of the programs for which the station has applied for funding are simply no longer included under the criteria, a fact that neither the local committee nor the central

committee brought to their attention in 1999 or 2000. Both these years the station applied for support to the total amount of about 1 million DKK, but received only 50,000 in 1999 and 200,000 in 2000. Obviously, this was a frustrating experience, for one thing because the station had put considerable effort into pre-research for the programs and also because the criteria had not been stringently implemented. The station could thus observe, for example, that while its programs on local history were not approved, another station received funding for a series of on the history of the tramway in Copenhagen. The mission of the station is precisely to contribute to creating a sense of identity, pride, interconnectedness, and initiative in the local community, including bringing programmes about the history of the region, and to maintain a variety of contacts with all parts of the community, which then in turn expects to be served by the local television. The quantity of topics and the fact that *TV Halsnæs* takes its time, so that the participants can finish what they have to say, has received much positive response, and the amount of topics suggested far exceeds what the station manages to produce. With the existing criteria nor is it possible to finance them.

Programs on TV Halsnæs

Quality is a disputed concept in the science of media and communication, and thus there are no clear or canonized conceptions of what is meant by the term ‘quality’ when it concerns media products. The concept of quality has been a fixed part of the public debate on media and culture that has been going on since the rise of the mass media, with one of the essential distinctions being drawn between high culture and popular culture—between ‘good’ taste and ‘popular’ taste. Since the disintegration of the monocultural view of quality, which seriously gathered momentum from the end of the 1960s—and as far as the broadcast media were concerned received its deathblow when the monopoly of the public service institutions disintegrated—the debate about criteria for quality has been lacking its former, apparently fixed, points of orientation.

One of the most important aims of this evaluation project was to describe and characterize the quality of the programs. Rather than defining quality as an absolute, in light of Nordic and Anglo-Saxon research that elucidated the topic (cf. James Lull (1980), Poul Erik Nielsen (1997), Paddy Scannell (1994), Kim Chr. Schrøder (1998)), we defined it as a contextual concept expressed on three levels: on the overall level of the media system, on the program level, and finally on the recipient level. All three levels are part of the focus group studies carried out in 2001, in part based on the studies (document studies and broadcaster interviews) done in 2000-2001 and in part based on the program analyses carried out during the same period.

In the interviews with the producers (station managers, those responsible for programming and the like), we tried to reveal the intentions considered important by the broadcasters. What was the aim of the programmes? Which genre conventions, which journalistic and aesthetic norms were they trying to live up to in their programs?

In the program analyses, we tried to identify how the individual program was oriented in respect to the genre conventions. How does it live up to these? Does it break the conventions? If so, is this intentional or was the broadcaster merely not capable of fulfilling the genre norm or living up to its technical or stylistic demands? We adopted similar points of view in our analysis of the form and content of individual programme, and we furthermore traced how the broadcaster addresses the recipient. How is the recipient present in the program? What possibilities for experience, empathy, or knowledge are they offered? Later, we will return to how we tried to identify the audiences' views of program quality through our focus group studies.

TV Halsnæs focuses on bringing news in the shape of background reports and debate programs; the other important program genre is the everyday documentary, which brings viewers in contact with, for instance, historical and cultural topics from the region's past and present or with a local industry or business. An example of this type is *Ko nr. 1220* [Cow no. 1220], a program selected for further analysis and one of the program examples shown to participants in the focus group study.

Ko nr. 1220 is about a local farmer's daily life and connection to nature, and the speaker places this action in the perspective of cultural history: the efforts to make agriculture more efficient and the rise of computerization. It was produced in 1999 and broadcast several times throughout the year.

Ko nr. 1220 lasts 35 minutes and is in the form of an interview with a local farmer, Søren Jensen. The program was recorded on Søren Jensen's farm and consists of five interview sequences, four of which last five minutes and the last, ten minutes. *Ko nr. 1220* draws on the documentary genre, but does not use the classical documentary features, such as information about the places and people involved. Thus, the farmer, the main character in the program, is not presented by name until the credits. A review of themes and content also shows that *Ko nr. 1220* does not make use of the interview roles typically found within the documentary genre ('midwife' or 'critic'), and one can thus characterize the program as a mixture of equal parts "soft documentary" and portrait.

The structure of the program is as follows: first it begins with a conversation about nature, which according to the intro speak is the original and ideal fixed point for the farmer, and then the program moves physically and thematically further into automated, modern agriculture. After discussing the milking computer and the perspectives for satellite-controlled agriculture, the program ends with a reflection on the extent to which it will even be necessary for future farmers to step outside a door.

This structure supports the premise of the program, which is to examine whether the modern farmer feels alienated from nature. The premise is based on a sense of decay—the idea that it used to be so wonderful and idyllic out in the country and now everything is being automated and ‘Big Brother-like’. This is nailed down in the intro speak and pursued throughout the program through the interviewer’s questions and comments: “*It’s a good thing that the cows have some grass to walk on, otherwise it would all be too computerized.*” The image that the interviewer Sven Berg apparently has of agriculture in the past shows a happy farmer who knows the names of all his cows and who cries when the family—out of necessity of course—has to slaughter one of them. While daily life on the farm is laborious, it is also fun and full of life, and in the evening there is always time to relax together at home. In the summertime, the farmer goes for evening walks—just to smell the air and look at Lake Arresø—and in the wintertime, the whole family gathers in front of the fire.

The idea of decline and the romantization of the past influences the whole program, the roles of both the interviewer and Søren Jensen being defined in this light. The interviewer, Sven Berg, essentially serves as prosecutor or skeptic—not so much through his concrete questions—but more through his entire attitude. By analyzing the questions posed in *Ko nr. 1220*, one cannot characterize Sven Berg’s interviewing technique as that of the “critic,” the “midwife,” or the “microphone holder,” inasmuch as on the one hand he does not confront Søren Jensen directly, and on the other he is too active and skeptical to seem neutral.

The form of the program is very simple, both regarding its technique and aesthetics. The sound consists almost exclusively of real sound from the interview with Søren Jensen, except for an introductory and a single linking voice-over spoken by Sven Berg. Thus, no post-production effects are used, such as background music or the insertion of pure background sounds—the first image after the intro (of a cow of course) is thus completely silent, causing the viewer to nervously fiddle with the volume button on the remote control. Likewise, no effects are used in the visuals except for the intro and the outro, which consist of simple black-and-white graphics.

The program is filmed with a single hand-held camera, which mainly makes a medium close shot of the interviewee. The camera is never turned directly toward Svend Berg, but he is glimpsed a couple of times from the side and from behind. Occasionally, the camera follows the action around or pans to a topic that is relevant to the conversation—usually a cow. Each part of the interview is introduced by a long close-up, after which the camera zooms or pans to the interview. These soundless long shots provide a moment's rest when moving from one interview topic to another or from one space to another.

In general, the tempo of the program is slow—both as a result of slow articulation and because of the very long shots and few cuts. A total of nine cuts are made in thirty-five minutes, and the longest shot lasts eleven minutes and three seconds. In compensation for the slow shots it should however be noted that the camera moves a lot, but it would still not be an exaggeration to say that *Ko nr. 1220* is an unquestionably slow program.

At no time does the camera imitate eye contact with the viewer or a program host who bids the recipient welcome. The only time the viewer is directly addressed is in Sven Berg's intro speak, in which he presents the issues that the program addresses. The viewer is thus allowed to be a spectator of the events, but not a guest. The program communicates an impression of the farmer's daily life, and we follow him before, during, and after the evening milking, which gives *Ko nr. 1220* a temporality that puts the viewer's own time in perspective.

Because the program is so slow it implies a relaxed reception situation, in which the viewer is interested in gathering food for thought. The primary target audience for the program is local citizens with an interest in the history and situation of local agriculture—perhaps somewhat older people who are sympathetic towards the point of view of the, almost unconditionally good, old days.

Ko nr. 1220 does not scintillate with variety and dynamism. It is, as mentioned, a slow program and herein lies its most important quality, perhaps because its simple formal principles are carefully chosen and consistently followed.

The program's moorings in the local community can be primarily attributed to the fact that the person interviewed is a local farmer who was born and grew up on the property. His dialect is also unmistakably local. In addition to this, he is a good narrator whose answers to the interviewer's often bombastic programme declarations seem honest and balanced. Beyond telling Søren Jensen's story, the program is also about the beauty and richness of the local countryside, and about the production of the region's foodstuffs.

Hence, there is no ‘glitter’ overshadowing the people in the program—it seems unpolished and honest. But due to its premise—the rigid skepticism toward the technologization of agriculture—it may not exactly serve to bridge the gap between the region’s ‘city folk’ and agriculture as an occupation.

TV Halsnæs and its viewers

No systematic studies of listeners and viewers have previously been carried out among the non-commercial local radio and TV audiences in Denmark, mainly because carrying out the traditional quantitative studies is linked with considerable statistical uncertainty. This problem is especially predominant in the big cities, where the degree of coverage for the individual station is often quite low. In smaller towns and provincial areas where the local station is alone on the market or where the competition is limited, the potential for obtaining useful results is greater, but most stations have still refrained from carrying out professionally organized studies, either for economic reasons or because their direct contact with the local population and its feedback on the programs are so good that it has not been considered worthwhile.

We did not consider carrying out quantitative reception analyses in connection with this study, partly due to the extensive methodological problems of a statistical nature, partly because we had assessed in advance that studies of this kind would be of a limited explanatory value in respect to what we considered pivotal in the study: to illuminate what is special about non-commercial radio and TV programs in respect to other kinds of radio and TV. What characterizes the special quality of local radio and TV, if any? We thus quickly embraced the idea that qualitative interviews should be done with randomly selected listeners and viewers among the target audience of the programs in the relevant station’s broadcasting areas.

We chose to use a qualitative method based on interviews because we did not want to study distribution or especially frequent or general patterns of use in the population, but instead to identify the special needs that these programmes fulfill in the recipients and the special qualities they contain. The questions of use and quality should of course not be taken to mean that we only inquire into the “positive” aspects of the programs. By posing open questions and by placing the use of the local programmes in relation in part to the recipients use of other media and in part to their conceptions of the political and cultural geography of the local community, we could probably identify some central, characteristic features of the recipients experiences with and attitudes toward non-commercial local radio and TV.

The focus group study was an obvious choice of method. Firstly, because we were dealing with a specific, limited and limitable topic. Secondly, because we wished to base our study on the recipients experiences and their assessments of the programs and of the phenomenon—in relation to their media use otherwise. The premise of the study is thus that we do not consider local radio and TV programs as isolated enclaves, but rather as phenomena whose special characteristic emerges through the way in which they enter into the everyday life of their recipients, including their media use otherwise.

We carried out a total of ten focus group studies from October to December 2001 at the eight stations that were chosen as a representative section of the participating stations. The studies were carried out according to a standardized procedure whose main features we will review below.

The participants in the focus group studies were selected by an independent opinion-research agency, *Jysk Analyseinstitut A/S*. We chose this procedure in order to guarantee that the participants were recruited neutrally and objectively based on a recognized professional method. We established the criteria for selection, i.e. the target group (e.g. age), listening to or viewing certain stations within a specified framework of time, just as we had questions posed about the recipients' media use and preferences. After recruiting the twelve participants, which occurred one week before the study commenced, we were sent participant profiles and schemas of the answers supplied to the standard questions. We only knew the participants' first names, and did not have access to further personal information, thus guaranteeing the participants' anonymity.

Prior to the focus group studies, we carried out detailed studies of the stations' backgrounds, including interviews with the station managers and the like, and we registered and analyzed the stations' programs, cp. above. Our first step was to establish a guide for inquiry, a catalogue of the topics to be taken up in the course of the focus group study, which in each case was to last about two hours on a weeknight. The questions and themes for discussion were based on the following four research questions:

- What is special about local radio and TV? (Compared to other kinds of radio and TV stations? Identification of a special characteristic of local radio and TV.)
- Its use-value? (From its explicit political value to a less specific cultural strengthening of identity.)
- Which individual needs do local radio and TV meet?

- In which way are the local media part of the respondents' everyday use of the media—do they have a niche in the media landscape?

The guide for inquiry was structured according to a predetermined systematics and rhythm in the course of the evening, but was of course varied according to the special circumstances of the station in question. Rather than being structured like a catalogue to be slavishly followed, it was more like a list of topics to ensure that all essential themes were illuminated. The participants, whose number varied between six and twelve, sat around a square table and in addition only the moderator and his assistant were present in the room. With the knowledge of the participants, the discussion was recorded on video and audio tape and at the same time played on a monitor in an adjacent room, where we and additionally two or three of our research assistants observed and took notes to use later in the data processing.

Subsequently, the tape recordings were transcribed in full, including observations from the notes taken during the evening and based on the visual documentation of the process on the videotapes. This collection of data material was then systematized and interpreted according to standard, recognized methods from qualitative media research. (Bloor et al., Fern 2001, Greenbaum 1998, Greenbaum 2000).

The focus group study took place in the evening at the local inn in November 2001. All twelve of the participants invited showed up.

We showed excerpts from the programme *Ko nr. 1220* and *Aktuelt*, a news program that treats a variety of local political topics.

From the start it was clear that we were in a very active local community. Many of the participants knew each other in advance or knew of each other.

The focus group was characterized by lively discussion, which was especially dominated by three young respondents—Stine, Hanne, and Trine—who made some very eloquent and thoughtful statements on local TV and its role in local society. Precisely the role of local TV compared to other media in the media landscape was treated in depth in this focus group. It turned out that they had many expectations for the role of a local TV station in local society, while at the same time they showed considerable understanding of the conditions under which this kind of station functions. In this focus group there were also many competent viewers who commented on form, content, and structure in a balanced and insightful way.

Several of them had ‘done their homework’ and had prepared for the discussion by bringing along short notes or memos with the key words they thought they might need. It was thus clear that the topic local TV and local media interested most of the participants, which was manifested in the engaged and lively discussion and much laughter. Overall, there was a good atmosphere, and the focus group was relaxed yet concentrated.

The focus group was relatively heterogeneous both in respect to age and occupation. This contributed to a good dynamic between the younger women and the somewhat older men in the group. The three young women mainly set the agenda as regards the themes the group discussed.

Occasionally, the group was very quick to form consensus on some topics, such as for instance *TV Halsnæs*’ very biased coverage of politics. But fortunately there was a good tone and a general interest in giving a balanced image of *TV Halsnæs*, so that some of the participants dared go against the flow and disagree with the rest of the group. Again, in this situation it was the younger women, Stine and Anja, who manifested themselves.

Since almost everyone in the group had in-depth knowledge not only of the programs from *TV Halsnæs*, but also those from the other local TV stations in the area, the discussion of program quality was both extensive and balanced. Based on the discussion of quality, a discussion naturally arose of wishes and demands for future programs and of the role of a local TV station. In particular, the desire for improved direct connection between the viewers and the station gave rise to a debate about public access for “amateurs” in relation to the viewers’ expectations of appealing and well-structured programs. In continuation of this, the participants were interested in kinds of programs that could to a greater degree address and involve younger viewers, e.g. families with young children, also as active contributors—and producers/suppliers of material—to *TV Halsnæs* and the other local TV stations in the area.

The discussions were influenced by the fact that not only the programmes from *TV Halsnæs* were in focus, but just as much the local TV channel as such, which is used by three other non-commercial local TV stations. The participants admitted to varying degrees to being critical of the quality of the programs as TV programs: of their form, the ‘journalistic’ treatment, and not least of all the slow tempo that many considered very discouraging. One of the participants said the following about *Ko nr. 1220*:

Hans: *I think that the interviewer wasn't very good at his job. He got stuck in a groove, and I think the features were too long. And it's probably his fault, since it's really slow stuff. In this case I think you're likely to zap on to the next program.*

On the other hand, many of the participants regarded the content of the programs as decisive. If it is local, relevant, and not too familiar in advance from the very popular weekly *Halsnæs-Posten* (called *Gulvmåtten* [the mat]), it has the possibility of making an impression, almost regardless of the form. This is true, for example, for the coverage of the local sports events or the more portrait-like reports from marina festivities or from institutions and businesses. Good pictures of familiar people and places can usually keep the viewers' interest and it is all the better if in addition to this some good stories are told. Too often, however, these 'good' programs or features are spoiled by far too frequent repeats that tire out the local viewers in the end:

Peter: *What irritates me most is that at the beginning of the month you watch something or other on TV and by jove if it's not also on at the end of the month! Then you really lose interest. Almost every time you turn it on, the same program appears, just at different times. So it isn't a channel you look for.*

Several mentioned that they preferred fewer and shorter programs and a fixed programming schedule so that they know when the different programs are being broadcast. Hence, quality above quantity. Preferably with far more and better previews—also in the local paper. It would be a great advantage if the station and the local paper started collaborating on program announcements in *Halsnæs-Posten*.

Even though many of the participants make critical remarks about the quality of the programs, they do however seem to understand that local TV programs should also be evaluated in relation to the available resources. For example, Birger says:

And they don't have any up here; they have to take what they can get. So the products are as might be expected. I think this is highly characteristic of local TV: there is not enough money. And this is the reason why we sometimes think that the quality gets too poor. There is a lack of money.

Several of them think that the channel's coverage of the local material is biased and unbalanced, and this applies in particular to political material; a couple of the participants were under the impression that the local mayors could use the channel at their own convenience, a criticism that was especially directed toward *Fjord TV*. Accordingly, they suggested more debate material and

direct confrontations between local opponents. Because direct debate could supplement and brace up the serial form that the letters-to-the-editor debate in *Halsnæs-Posten* is forced to follow because it only comes once a week. In the course of the discussion, Stine points out that especially *TV Halsnæs'* news program often serves as a fine corrective to smear campaigns and local rumours.

Stine: That's what's good about a program like Aktuelt [from TV Halsnæs, ed.] if you watch it and of course if it's current when it's shown. So it's good that they can stop some of the rumors that often get started in these small communities—the silos, for instance. They started talking about them down at the harbor, and by the time the rumor reached Lynæs there were 50 silos. So I think these topics are good—ones of current interest.

Several held the opinion that the connection between the local TV station and the local population could be much better. Especially the younger women were interested in more programs for younger age groups, both for teenagers and for families with young children. In this connection, they could easily see people borrowing cameras and filming the pre-school's summer outing, for instance, or the carnival at the recreation centre, so that the station itself did not have to use resources on it.

When this possibility was mentioned, Stine reacted spontaneously:

Stine: I think so. I don't think this is particularly common. Well, I've never heard of it before. And I've even called and asked if they could come... They could have told me that people can come and borrow a camera. Then I probably would have done it.

Gitte pursued this issue by mentioning the needs of the elderly. For them it is important to be able to keep up to date on the developments in the local community. From her work she knew how big a role local TV plays for the elderly:

Gitte [on TV Halsnæs]: Yes, many people watch the local TV station. Especially elderly who don't get out. They watch it a lot and are very pleased with this little local station.

Thus, *TV Halsnæs* and the other local TV stations in the area seem—judging from the participants in the focus group—to have involved, yet not uncritical viewers who would like closer contact with the station and would also like to contribute to the programs themselves.

Conclusions and perspectives

By means of interviews with broadcasters, program analyses, and focus group studies, the evaluation study seeks to reveal the special qualities—in the plural—that have appeared in three areas in the above-mentioned contexts: on the general level of the media system, on the program level, and among the public.

The broadcasters were generally reluctant to comment on questions of quality. Many stressed, however, that the starting point for all program production ought to be a fundamental understanding of the special characteristics of the media and thus a basic insight into the techniques to employ if they as program producers aim to “get their message across.” A good deal of them have also initiated educational programs for employees and volunteers, often in the shape of general courses, while others—with or without support from the subsidy—have affiliated expertise, in shape of, for instance, external consultants, to develop specific or general competencies at the station. But local stations are in general characterized by rarely aspiring to a high level of quality in their programs, in any case as concerns their form or what one might generally call the “aesthetic level.” The vast majority of the stations figuring in the study emphasize open access to the station—so-called public access. This may be practiced as totally free access, i.e., all citizens in the station’s home municipality have the possibility of expressing themselves in the program, or it may mean that those who would like to be part of the station’s activities and make a voluntary effort “in the service of the local community” are welcome to contribute to the production of programmes. In this light, participation, being part of the local network, knowledge of the local community, and so on, play the most important role.

The program subsidy has nevertheless undoubtedly increased awareness of the importance of developing the quality of the programs, because the stations have received the possibility of producing the attractive programs that they previously could not afford to embark upon. The stations commonly criticize the fact that some of the programs of a more general cultural nature, which they are very interested in producing, have not been subsidized for formal reasons, because the subsidy criteria prioritize the political dimensions of local societies—for example, by taking into consideration whether minorities have the possibility of expressing themselves—more than dimensions related to local culture or local identity.

On a general level, the stations are interested in broader criteria for the subsidy, which could then be used to support and further develop the variety of stations in the local media landscape.

As regards the overall media system, the study shows that both broadcasters and recipients consider the law on local radio and TV important, given that both the interview and focus group studies contain many statements about the importance of public access. This possibility is viewed as an unconditional boon in a democratic community governed by law, but it is striking that so many of the participants in the focus groups are sceptical towards the kinds of programs that propagandize, preach, or seem biased—thus, typically programs produced by stations that represent minorities of a political, religious, ethnic or other nature. One should of course think twice before generalizing based on a study like the existing one, since this scepticism among the recipients can be due to many circumstances. Many of the participants in the focus groups probably did not know beforehand about the special economic and organizational conditions governing the non-commercial stations and have thus—based solely on the programs—compared the local stations’ programs with the other ones they hear on their speakers or that appear on the TV screen. The basis of the media policy that has supported the program activities of the public service institutions for the past decades—and which among other things has comprised principles such as balance, impartiality, neutrality, reliability and the like—is apparently deeply rooted in the Danish sense of how programs should be—for example, news programmes. And this mental preparedness is thus easily implemented when one is confronted with programs that either seem to propagandize or whose broadcaster has a more or less distinctly acknowledged desire to influence the recipient in a specific direction.

In Denmark, there is a diverse host of non-commercial local radio and TV stations, and we are not able to cover all aspects of this diversity within the framework of this study. We have attempted to cover the dispersion based on geographical, genre-related, and target group oriented dispersal criteria, just as we have attempted to make contact with stations that in one way or another could be called innovative.

As regards the dimension of quality, the data material of the study indicates that, in general, two kinds of stations emerge that manifest different features. The one kind of station is typically rooted in a small and geographically limited local community and broadly appeals to local citizens or perhaps serves adults in particular, in that their younger fellow citizens are in many cases lost to the more commercially oriented stations, which to a greater degree make use of youth-oriented music and a style in keeping with the “tone of the times.” The other kind of station is often situated in larger urban communities and is typically the forum for an “interest group,” both regarding broadcaster and recipient, and does not necessarily have a close connection to the local

community to which it belongs. The question of quality is raised and often, but not always, answered differently in respect to these two main kinds. A variety of media—from the completely local to the global level—access to expressing oneself freely (material freedom of speech), and free access to receiving information about the local community (freedom of information) are considered an essential democratic boon.

The debate over the local community is experienced as meaningful and relevant, for one thing when the local TV station makes a virtue of covering an election, and in these contexts critical and informative journalism is valued. Correspondingly, in many cases the interest group station can serve to create debate, yet typically in smaller forums, just as it can be used as a tool for doing away with prejudices; for instance, by serving as a cultural bridge builder between Danes and immigrants.

But man does not live by and through politics alone, neither on a global nor a local level. The question of identity and affiliation plays an important role when the recipients are to define what they think are essential qualities in the local media on the general level of the media system. What is it that makes living in this particular city or region special? Here the diversity of programs and local voices can contribute to giving an impression of and expressing the experience of local affiliation for individuals in the community—strengthening the local cultural awareness of identity. Most of the participants emphasized “slow” images from the local countryside or from the city and the harbour, the good story on the radio, or the familiar voice as important program qualities. It should be possible to identify with what is happening—it should be relevant. In many cases, the special quality of these programs cannot survive on the other side of the parish boundary—or as concerns the interest group programs, outside the circle of, for example, jazz enthusiasts.

On the program level, the positive characteristic is the mental community to which they contribute. The participants emphasize the nearness and thoroughness - and in particular the special, lingering tempo - as some of the most prominent qualities of many of the local programmes. The slow tempo also gives people the opportunity to finish speaking, which for several participants is almost a relief compared to the fifteen-second democracy of “the big media” news programs. The “amateurish charm” exists and is appreciated, that is, the broadcasts are not judged primarily based on their technical or journalistic correctness, but rather on their ability to evoke or express participation and nearness.

But when this is not present and when the local program makers at the same time attempt to imitate a genre or a kind of program that they are unable to fulfil, then the criticism is straightforward and severe. The programmes may be unprofessional as regards style but not amateurish or dilettantish.

Just like other radio and TV broadcasts, the local programs form part of the recipients' everyday life and often fulfil fixed, routine functions. This may be the case, for instance, in so-called flow programmes, which allow the radio public to listen off and on. But often people prefer the big, professional channels to meet these needs, especially because in these contexts the music plays an important role.

The local media also fulfil entirely everyday or service functions. The constant updating of minor and major events through the co-existence of local printed and electronic media contribute to strengthening the loyalty of the local network and practicing social control, which is often expressed negatively. Local weather reports, a local info-channel with traffic reports, calendars of events and the like are at a premium among the citizens, and for many elderly the local programs serve as a connecting link to the local, social context in which they are no longer able to play an active role.

The local radio and TV stations are also exposed to criticism because they are not visible enough. This is merely due to the fact that they are ignored by the bigger local media, for instance, the local paper or the regional radio, but also because the program schedule is not respected, program announcements do not exist or are not updated, and so on. In several cases, participants severely criticize the number of repeats. The local public seems to prefer a stable program schedule with timetables that are respected, perhaps fewer programs and in any case fewer repeats. If their economy is meagre—and in general everyone understands this—most of them prefer quality (fewer programs) to quantity (many programs).

In summary, the study shows that the local, non-commercial stations constitute “breathing space” or enclaves in respect to the “big” media; one can either linger with the good stories, the evocative or immediately recognizable images, or one can get information and participate in debates on local situations that are impossible to track down on other channels. The following key words sum up the common features of the good, local program: proximity, relevance, and a sense of participation and sincerity.

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