

Public service broadcasting under threat

Threats to the Danish Broadcasting Corporation (DR) will have significant and far-reaching consequences. This is the message in an open letter from the Directors-General of some of Europe's most renowned public service broadcasters.

Over the last few days we have been reached by deeply worrying signals from Denmark. During the Autumn the Danish government has held negotiations with the Danish People's Party (Dansk Folkeparti) over a major tax reform. Discussions are ongoing over whether to abolish the licence fee that funds Denmark's public service broadcaster, DR, and to replace it with a tax. The Danish People's Party – whose politicians have, on occasion, claimed DR to be “a democratic threat” – have added an additional demand: to cut DR's budget by 25 per cent.

According to Danish media reports, the Danish government was trying initially to limit cuts to 12.5 per cent. The negotiations are ongoing and the risk that the cuts end up being much more severe cannot be dismissed.

What values are at stake in the negotiations underway between the Danish politicians? What values are at stake when other European governments either cut budgets for public service broadcasting or increase their control over journalism through draconian legislation?

According to a report published in November 2016 by the Reuters Institute at Oxford University, and commissioned by the Danish Department of Culture, the cultural and democratic impact of public service content is significant. Public service broadcasters publish more news content than comparable commercial media; they increase citizens' knowledge of politics, and have a positive impact on political participation.

In an era of increased polarisation and greater alienation between different groups in society, the importance of well-functioning, trusted public service broadcasters, side-by-side with high quality commercial media, can hardly be stated too clearly. The pressure that democracy is under when both fake news and news produced to suit a particular political agenda gain ground is likely to have a much greater impact than we have seen so far.

The response from liberal democracy cannot be to diminish media organisations with a remit from the public, and that enjoy an incredibly high level of public trust built up over decades. The only beneficiaries would be forces for which it is less than self-

evident that free and independent journalism are a foundation of democracy. We read with concern an interview with Henrik Söndergaard, a Danish researcher at the University of Copenhagen. In the interview with the Danish newspaper Politiken, Söndergaard underlined that “the risk of political interference is clearly present.” It is also important to put the Danish developments in a broader perspective. Danish democracy is, of course, not necessarily in direct and imminent danger. But free and independent journalism around the world is under greater pressure than it has been for a long time. The causes are numerous: an increasingly polarised political landscape and tough economic pressure from multinational players has weakened the development and stability of many high quality media organisations. Increasingly authoritarian regimes in some parts of Europe have made public service broadcasters subject to comprehensive changes. For the time being two of the most troublesome cases are Hungary and Poland. It is no coincidence that both countries have plunged down the Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index in recent years.

One thing is absolutely obvious: if the plans to drastically diminish DR's ability to operate as a public service broadcaster are implemented, they will have significant and far-reaching consequences. The choice that Danish politicians must make when it comes to public service broadcasting can be seen in many other countries around Europe: Whether to cut budgets and increase the risk of political control; or to secure long-term funding and build up greater and more effective safeguards for the independence and stability of public service broadcasting. That the latter would promote democracy hardly needs to be pointed out.

Tony Hall

Director General, BBC, UK

Shula Rijxman

Director General, NPO, Holland

Thor Gjermund Eriksen

Director General, NRK, Norway

Dr. Alexander Wrabetz

Director General, ORF, Austria

Gilles Marchand

Director General, SRG SSR, Switzerland

Magnús Geir Þórðarson

Director General, RÚV, Iceland

Cilla Benkö

Director General, SR, Sweden

Hanna Stjärne

Director General, SVT, Sweden

Per Bergkrantz

Acting Director General, UR, Sweden

Tom Buhrow

Director General, WDR, Germany