

Bringing the power of sharing to public service

Public service broadcasters all over the world are facing considerable financial challenges and being expected to produce more public service content on more platforms at the same time. These challenges are constantly growing, and meeting them calls for a new approach to international cooperation among public service broadcasters radically different to all that has gone before. Digital global collaboration is one approach that could lead to more unique, cheaper public service content.

By Henrik Hartmann, Secretary General, Nordvision

Financial constraints for public service broadcasters and the need for more content

Most public service media corporations are currently making more content on more platforms for the same or fewer funds while still being required to make a “public service difference”.

This is clearly reflected by the many new niche channels proliferating nowadays; many of them have very limited resources for producing their own content. It is also reflected by the “off-primetime slots” on the primary channels with schedules being padded by content and programmes that are cheap, free, bought-in, or repeats.

There seems little prospect of any immediate change to these conditions; indeed, in my view the finances of our public service broadcasters are going to be stretched even further.

On the other hand the niche channels and off-primetime slots often show narrow, historical or cultural programmes of high public service value, sometimes with content obtained from elsewhere in the world.

Huge growth of free content and global collaboration via the internet

Meanwhile the growth of free content on the Internet is growing apace. Amateurs, semi-amateurs and professionals develop, share and cooperate to extensively on the Internet. Wikipedia, Flickr, Apache, Open Source software projects, YouTube, Mysq, Ohioh, Linux: there are all platforms that evolved through global cooperation.

Digital evolution has eroded the monopoly on the production and distribution of media content previously enjoyed by the traditional media. The technical barriers to producing and publishing are very low today, and the Internet enables content to be distributed easily and free of charge.

User-generated content and social networking are but the top of the iceberg: a new global form of production is on its way: mass collaboration!

This form of cooperation challenges the traditional corporations and commercial content providers by making a non-commercial alternative available.

Today digital networking enables the creation of a simple, creative infrastructure between partners and of considerable valuable content. Free of charge!

A culture of digital sharing among public service broadcasters

The trends I have described above actually accord well with the public service principle that the content has already been paid for and might as well be made available to other users (or partners) too.

One way public service broadcasters will be able to exploit digitalisation is by trying out new forms of production and new partnerships in order to generate cheap, unique public service content.

Cooperative efforts by Nordvision and the other regional television and media partnerships (such as the EBU) have until now concentrated on knowledge sharing and traditional co-productions. But Nordvision and the EBU have witnessed a fall in the number of co-productions over the last couple of years.

The straitened finances of the public service broadcasters are probably the most important single cause of this, and it is a trend that looks set to continue.

Corporations do not wish to risk their limited resources on international co-productions.

Conversely, Nordvision, the Nordic television and media partnership, is experiencing a dramatic increase in the need for gratis public service content, and one consequence of the introduction of our new digital distribution system (Nordif2) is that we are also witnessing growth in the number of programmes being exchanged, with benefits to all parties.

Nordif2, the Nordvision partnerships digital distribution system, makes uploading programmes for screening quick and easy; it is also quick and easy for Nordvision partners to download the programmes (with the associated supplementary material: programme descriptions, press releases, music listings, etc) in broadcast quality.

We have thus created a digital platform for the distribution of public service content that makes it easy to search, preview and obtain "free" programmes and other relevant public service content from the Nordic partners via our shared system.

Digital distribution 1.0 and the future

In 2009, the first year of Nordif2, Nordvision partners offered each other over 1100 unique programmes (c. 550 hours of television).

Combined with a metadata archive of all programmes exchanged and coproduced since 2000, Nordvision now has c. 10 000 unique public service programmes in its archives!

The next digital step will probably be for the partners to give each other access to their own archives. This is where things get really interesting, because Nordvision partners will be able to search each other's archives for the cheapest, best, most relevant clips if they can't find them in their own archives. This way the Nordvision digital platform will become part of the editorial production process.

The third step, on which we have as yet to make a decision, might be to gather all the EPG (programme information) issued by the Nordvision partners into a single shared database. This joint Nordic database would be searchable, and its structure would make all the unique public service programmes produced by the partners accessible for sale or exchange within the Nordvision partnership.

Each of the four "big" Nordic public service broadcasters produces c. 10 000 unique hours of television a year. That is over 40 000 hours of public service television that would become "metadata-accessible" via the Nordic regional database.

Public service broadcasters need global alliances

I think it is time to take stock of the position of public service broadcasters against the background of the financial and technological changes we have witnessed in the

last few years. The time is also ripe to develop new visions as to how regional and continental television and media organisations (the EBU, ABU, Nordvision etc) can be of more tangible benefit in the new media landscape.

The need for more, cheaper, unique public service content is huge. There are all kinds of social or creative networks already helping to meet it: they share content, develop content, and distribute it. Surely public service broadcasters can get in on the act!

The ultimate goal of public service broadcasters must be to have access to the huge variety of existing public service content. Although we live in a world in which the cultural and dramaturgical differences are manifold, the standard of the moving images produced today is now of such high quality in most parts of the world that the time is ripe to take the first step.

There are more similarities than differences when it comes to public service television. So the task facing us as I see it is to develop new ways of sharing research, raw material, content, programmes and archive material. Let us create a culture of digital sharing among public service broadcasters! The technology exists; all we need to do is to create the structure!

Welcome to the Global Media Exchange & Cooperation Network during BaKaFORUM on 29 and 30 January 2010. If you have not registered yet, you can find more information here: <http://www.bakaforum.net/>

You are also welcome to contact me directly by e-mail at hrh@dr.dk or by phone: +45 24 24 83 05

Henrik Hartmann
Secretary General Nordvision

www.nordvision.org

DR, DR Byen, Emil Holms Kanal 20, 0999 Copenhagen C

Nordvision works to strengthen Public Service Television in the Nordic region. The Nordvision partners, DR, NRK, RUV, SVF, KNR, KVF, UR and YLE, co-produce, exchange programs and know-how, generating over 1800 hours of television a year.