

## Book review:

# The Media Welfare State

Robert G. Picard

Reuters Institute, University of Oxford

robert.picard@politics.ox.ac.uk

The approach of this book holds great promise, but delivers a short, idealized general description of Nordic media and brief identification of some fundamental policy commonalities across the region.

Nordic nations have long intervened in media markets, first in broadcasting, through the establishment of public service broadcasting monopolies in the 1920s and 30s, and then in newspapers, through establishment of the most significant subsidy systems in the world during the last part of the twentieth century. The decisions to do so were driven by the unique geographies, small populations, political systems and cultures of the nations. This book contends that Nordic media systems thus differ from those in other parts of the world and are unique cases, but it makes no comparisons to demonstrate that.

The book provides a brief discussion of concepts of the welfare state and how they apply in the Nordic

region. It considers the extent of media use in the region, providing brief overviews of the press and state subsidies for it, of public service broadcasters and the rationales for them, and major private media companies and their performance. The brief historical and developmental descriptions, statistical information, and descriptions of how they are adjusting to the digital age are useful for those unacquainted with Nordic media.

The book fails to live up to the promise of its main title, however. The title would lead one to expect a serious discussion of the Nordic media welfare state, the effects of neoliberal policies on the media systems over the past 25 years, the significant domestic debates over the extent to which welfare policy apparatuses should continue, and the declining effectiveness of the existing policies. Such in-depth discussion and debate

**The Media Welfare State: Nordic Media in the Digital Era**

By Trine Syvertsen, Gunn Enli, Ole J. Mjøs, and Hallvard Moe

University of Michigan Press, 2014

ISBN: 978-0-472-05215-8 (paperback)

THE MEDIA WELFARE STATE

Nordic Media in the Digital Era

Trine Syvertsen, Gunn Enli, Ole J. Mjøs, and Hallvard Moe

would be welcome and highly informative. It is, unfortunately, absent from this volume.

A significant reason for this deficiency is that the authors take a highly normative approach and base the book primarily on media studies and historical literature and assume perspectives that support their normative view. They thus downplay or ignore significant critical perspectives, noteworthy policy and business studies, and a good deal of professional literature that focuses specifically on the mechanisms and operations of media welfare, the effectiveness of that support, and its effect on the media system as a whole.

The authors do not address significant studies on state intervention in media systems in both the Nordic nations and Europe as a whole. It ignores important contextual debates about press support generally (Fernández Alonzo, de Moragas, Blasco Gil and Almiron, 2006; Netherland Press Fund, 2009; Murschetz, 2013) and significant debates about the contributions, challenges to, and efficacy of public service broadcasting generally (Peacock, 2004; Donders, 2011; Picard and Barwise, 2012; Brevini, 2013).

Inexplicably, the authors even miss a large body of significant Nordic literature related their

topic, including the series of books based on the RIPE (Re-Visionary Interpretations of the Public Enterprise) public service broadcasting conferences that document debates and were published by NORDICOM in Sweden (see for example, Lowe and Hujanen, 2003; Lowe and Jauert, 2005; Lowe and Bardoel, 2008; Lowe, 2010). They further do not address important literature on Nordic press subsidies by authors such as Karl Erik Gustafsson, Rolf Høyer, Mikko Grönlund, Mart Ots, Arne Krumsvik, and myself.

These omissions, and the limited discussion the authors provide, lead to a relatively uncritical book with limited value to scholarly and policy debate, but one that can provide some basic descriptive information about the Nordic media system.

## REFERENCES

Brevini, Benedetta (2013). *Public Service Broadcasting Online: A Comparative European Policy Study of PSB 2.0*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Donders, Karen (2011). *Public Service Media and Public Policy in Europe*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Fernández Alonzo, Isabel, Miquel de Moragas, José Joaquín Blasco Gil and Núria Almiron, eds. (2006). *Press Subsidies in Europe*. Barcelona: Generalitat de Catalunya, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.

Lowe, Gregory and Taisto Hujanen (2003). *Broadcasting & Convergence: New Articulations of the Public Service Remit*. Göteborg: NORDICOM.

Lowe, Gregory and Per Jauert (2005). *Cultural Dilemmas in Public Service Broadcasting*. Göteborg: NORDICOM.

Lowe, Gregory and Jo Bardoel (2008). *From Public Service Broadcasting to Public Service Media*. Göteborg: NORDICOM.

Lowe, Gregory (2010). *Public in Public Service Media*. Göteborg: NORDICOM.

Murschetz, Paul, ed. (2013). *State Aid for Newspapers: Theories, Case, Actions*. Berlin: Springer.

Netherlands Press Fund (2009). *Press and Press Support in a Digital Age*. AMB Publishers.

Peacock, Alan (2004). *Public Service Broadcasting Without the BBC?* London: Institute of Economic Affairs

Picard, Robert G. and Patrick Barwise (2012). "The Economics of Television in a Digital World: What Economics Tells Us for Future Policy Debates," *RISJ Report*. Reuters Institute, University of Oxford, 2012.