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LEGITIMATIONS OF TELEVISION PROGRAMME POLICIES
Patterns of Argumentation and Discursive Convergencies in a Multichannel Age

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There exists an established distinction between two paradigms of television audience. The first approaches viewers as a public, or a group of citizens, while the other is a view of the audience as a market, or a group of consumers.\textsuperscript{1} According to Ian Ang, these two alternative configurations are 'each connected with one of the two major institutional arrangements - commercial and public service - of broadcast television' (1991: 29). In this chapter I suggest that these two conceptions of the audience also provide the founding paradigms of programming policy and, logically, of the legitimating discourse on programme policy.

The chapter deals with how programme policy discourse has changed along with the recent development of the multichannel television universe. In Western Europe, broadcasting regulations have traditionally emphasized general values like universality, diversity of opinion and a wide range of offerings. These were the core values that were employed to legitimize the privileged status of national public service broadcasting institutions. Commercial television was based on different values, those of popularity, choice and economic calculation. However, the recent liberalization of the airwaves appears to have contributed to a convergence of programme policy discourses.

With the two discursive ways of understanding the audience as my starting point, I will try, first, to sketch how the recent technological changes in the television landscape have resulted in an 'audience-oriented' turn in broadcasting which highlights the role of programming as the main instrument in broadcasters' constant struggle for an audience. Second, within these two basic approaches I will point to several patterns of
argumentation, or subdiscourses, and provide examples of how they are reflected in public debates on programme policy, particularly in the Nordic countries and Britain. Finally, I also wish to discuss a 'discursive convergence' between the two major philosophies of programming: public service and commercial television.

Two paradigms of the audience

According to Ang (1991: 26–32), the two paradigms of the audience stem from two diverse theoretical models of mass communication. The first, the idea of the audience as a public, fits the so-called 'transmission' model of communication. Implied in this model is the conception of audiences as 'receivers' of messages sent and meanings transferred. The other, the audience as a market, is related to an attention model of communication. Here transfer of meaning is of secondary importance, while communication is considered effective as soon as attention is given to it by audiences (see also McQuail, 1987).

It was the public broadcasters who traditionally approached their audience as a public to be served with social responsibility. National broadcasting institutions constituted a 'paternal system', as it was once called by Williams (1968: 117–18), which aimed at protecting and guiding the majority by transmitting values, habits and tastes deemed desirable by the enlightened minority. The audience of public broadcasters consisted of citizens who were to be informed, uplifted and educated. The purpose was to transmit the message to the entire nation – hence the principle of universal service.

In contrast, commercial broadcasters' purpose was primarily to gain the attention of the audience, and here it was the quantity of attentive audience and the duration of its attention that were important. The audience consisted of consumers of the messages. The viewers constituted 'a market to be won', as Ang (1991: 29) puts it, which also explains the importance of audience ratings in commercial television. In this view, the link between the TV station and the viewer is a consumer–product relationship, and 'not a moral or social relationship, as in the case of the audience as public' (McQuail, 1987: 221).

These two conceptions of the audience fit also with two distinctly different ways of legitimating programme policies. If the audience is regarded as citizens (audience-as-public), programming tends to be justified within a discourse of 'what the audience needs'. When translating the abstract principles of public service philosophy into concrete guidelines, this discourse 'puts a distinctive emphasis on programmatic comprehensiveness (i.e. varied range of informative, educational, high cultural and entertainment programmes) so as to offer the [...] citizen a responsible, meaningful TV diet' (Ang, 1991: 38).
If, then, the audience is considered as consumers (audience-as-market), programme policies are justified within a discourse of ‘what the audience wants’. Here programming is characterized by ‘a regular and predictable flow of entertainment programmes, so as to secure the prolonged attention of the [. . . ] consumer’ (Ang, 1991: 38).

I will later discuss selected patterns of argumentation, or subdiscourses, within these two alternative philosophies, but first a question must be raised whether and how these different lines of discourse are applied in public debates on programme policy. Therefore I will start by referring to a recent case which illustrates the present conflict and confusion between market-oriented arguments of ‘giving the audience what it wants’ and the public service-oriented rationale of ‘giving the audience what it needs’.

Conflicting values: a Finnish case study

Finland launched its fourth national television network – the second commercial one – in June 1997. The Government’s decision to liberate the broadcasting sector stemmed not from the needs of cultural policy to widen programme supply but, rather, from the interests of technology policy (to pave way for digitalization), competition policy (to stimulate competition) and industrial policy (to promote independent programme production). Nevertheless, in the public debate around the issue, arguments justifying – or judging – the new channel referred constantly to its programme policy.

A preceding strategy report, assigned by the Ministry of Transport and Communication (see Mykkänen, 1995), explicitly advised policy makers not to stipulate any strict obligations for commercial broadcasters. Quite the opposite, it suggested that

detailed standards concerning programming should not be applied in granting the licences. Instead, attention should be paid to the assessment of candidates. Too detailed definitions included in the licences easily become a dead letter impossible to obey for several reasons, the central explanation often being an economic one. (Mykkänen, 1995: 35)

However, the report set forth that in granting new licences candidates offering ‘new alternatives’ should be favoured, and held that YLE, Finland’s public service broadcaster, and commercial stations should operate ‘complementarily’ (Mykkänen, 1995: 16). Still another central criterion for the assessment of the applicants was the amount of domestic content offered.

When applications for the licence were invited in June 1996, it was required of the candidates that 50 per cent of the European content, as
defined by the EU Television Directive, should be in domestic languages (Finnish or Swedish), and that half of the domestic programmes should be made by independent producers. The Minister of Traffic and Communications, Tuula Linnainmaa, also announced that the candidates were expected to give an account of their programming plans.

Implied in this strategy of providing alternatives was an idea of increasing 'consumer choice' by liberalizing the radio spectrum. At the same time, a pragmatist tradition typical of Finnish media policy (see Hellman, 1996; Silvo, 1988) was continued, as only scant attention was paid to programme policy while safeguarding that a sound structure of the media industry and the viability of the business dominated. Instead of strict regulation of programming, the licensee would be obliged to pay an annual 'public service fee' to YLE and to make considerable investments in the build-up of the digital network.

What did the applicants promise to supply in order to complement YLE, on the one hand, and to propose an alternative to the existing commercial broadcaster, MTV3, on the other? How did the applicants argue for their programme offerings and how did the public debate react to them?

One of the two major candidates, A4 Media Oy, which was founded by distinguished ex-YLE journalists but financially backed by the Luxembourg-based media giant CLT, offered a 'quality channel' option targeted to selective viewers. A4 Media explicitly wanted to avoid the 'populism' of MTV3 by investing in news and current affairs, quality drama and arts programmes. Although resembling the public service YLE's fare, particularly that of YLE1, the candidate's justification for its programming profile was that it wished to serve viewers who were otherwise poorly catered for. Hence, A4 Media wanted to provide a genuine alternative that, as it argued, would contribute to the quality of television and was aimed at new audiences. Nevertheless, the company also put forward an economic argument. With the general-audience-oriented MTV3 already being the most popular TV channel in Finland, A4 Media believed that a carefully targeted commercial service would appeal better to advertisers, thus making it worthwhile in business terms too.

The other major candidate, Ruutunen Oy, an affiliate of the nationally powerful Helsinki Media Company with the Danish media conglomerate Egmont participating as one of the minor owners, offered a diet typical of a commercial station. A clear majority of its offerings consisted of theatrical films, series and serials, sports, talk shows, and so on. In its application Ruutunen Oy also emphasized domestic popular programmes. In line with its rival candidate, Ruutunen Oy underlined the need to increase 'programme quality' and to serve small target audiences. This was considered feasible, because 'the audience distribution between a greater number of channels has a decreasing effect on average ratings' anyway.

In the public debate, intellectuals strongly favoured A4 Media due to its quality profile, recognized professionalism and independence – in spite of
the CLT connection. A central argument in support for this candidate was that ‘we Finns don’t need any more of the MTV3 type of nonsense’, as a leading TV critic wrote. Also the Minister of Culture, Claes Andersson, a noted poet, referred to the ‘needs’ of the audience: ‘We do not need a “poor man’s” commercial television with a flimsy programme policy, interested only in hoovering the advertising money in the market. What we need are quality productions that pay attention to the needs of domestic production, minorities and cultural fare.’ In other words, Ruutunelenen was considered to provide a diet very similar to that of MTV3 and not as good quality as A4 Media. Another negative argument for Ruutunelenen was that independent producers who had allied with it were known not for quality programmes but, on the contrary, for their format-based quiz and talk shows. Here, a discourse of ‘what-the-audience-needs’ was applied by culturally committed actors who insisted that quality principles should have a decisive role in the competition for the new licence.

However, it was Ruutunelenen that was more successful in lobbying the support of the pragmatist policy makers. Also YLE, with its authority, backed Ruutunelenen’s plans. This was perhaps because of respect for its major owner, the Erkko family – a superior player in Finland’s media industry – and because the consortium was believed to provide a strong institutional structure not in danger of slipping into foreign control. Unlike CLT, the Helsinki Media Company was considered a trustworthy and interested partner in accomplishing the digitalization of the terrestrial network as a ‘national project’ in cooperation with the state, YLE and MTV. Indeed, the Government’s decision explicitly referred to the ‘national interests’ that tilted the balance in Ruutunelenen’s favour.

Thus, while finally granting the licence to Ruutunelenen, the Government only appeared to apply the policy lines agreed upon: the choice was based on the assessment of the candidates, not their programming policy. However, this is not the whole truth. The candidates’ programme offerings, too, were considered, and with due economic pragmatism. The policy makers reasoned that if the schedules did not appeal to advertisers, they would be subject to major changes anyway. Although the diet suggested by A4 Media was ambitious and justifiable in cultural terms, the economic viability of its plans aroused scepticism. If the programming was too exclusive, it would not yield sufficient profit to allow investments in digitalization.

Ironically, the first comments after the launch of the channel expressed disappointment. It was not only the critical intellectuals who vented their frustration, but also the very same key politicians who had supported Ruutunelenen’s application. One of them was Finland’s Prime Minister, Paavo Lipponen, who remarked that the new channel appears to have ‘passed under the bar rather than cleared it.’
Ambivalence of legitimation discourse

The Finnish broadcasting licence debate suggests that argumentation still follows the ‘paradigmatic’ lines of broadcasting organization. On the one hand, there are public service institutions that have particular, commonly agreed obligations in their programme policy. On the other hand, commercial stations are more or less free to apply another rationale, that of audience demand and economic viability.

At the same time, the debate points to an ambivalence of legitimation discourse. In principle, the new entrant was not obliged to supply public service fare. In spite of this, the public debate tended to use public service as a standard against which the candidates’ offerings were weighed. On the other hand, the entertainment-centric fare of Ruutunelon, providing a broader appeal and demonstrating better economic calculation than its rival candidate’s offerings, won the support of the policy makers due to pragmatic reasons of economic viability and popular appeal. Indeed, a programme policy legitimized by economic reasoning of ‘what the audience wants’ outdid a policy seeking cultural justification from ‘what the audience needs’.

However, in another sense it was the cultural, or ideological, rationale that was in the winning team. The launch of the new channel was justified by a version of ‘cultural nationalism’ (cf. Lowe and Alm, 1997) which, instead of having illusions about programme quality, aimed simply at combining the goals of competition, industrial and technology policies with a national interest to promote ‘Finnishness’ in general. It was the fear of international satellite channels and ‘imported digitalization’ that motivated policy makers and domestic industry. Whoever the licensee and whatever its production ambitions, according to this logic, domestic programming would be supported simply by ensuring that the main winners from commercialization were domestic forces.

In fact, this cultural nationalism combines discursively ‘what the audience needs’ with ‘what the audience wants’ by an intervention of institutional structure. Domestic programmes, it suggests, are best promoted and their popularity is best protected within a media structure which is firmly in domestic hands. Or as an experienced independent producer, an initiator of the Ruutunelon consortium, said, ‘We feel it is vital that we can provide a channel that supplies domestic programmes to the Finns, particularly now when broadcasting is rapidly expanding via satellite dishes and cables.’ The same strategy of cultural nationalism, a reconciliation of programme policy and industry structure interests, was applied earlier when Finland, in 1986, launched a semi-commercial Channel Three in order to fight back against the international satellite channels (Hellman, 1996). It can also be claimed that a similar rationale guided Sweden, Norway and Denmark when they liberalized their television sector in the late 1980s or early 1990s (Hellman and Sauri, 1997; Hultén, 1996; Humphreys, 1996).
For example, Meier and Trappel have remarked that it is in small states that ‘the contradiction between economic competition and cultural obligations is particularly obvious. Whilst larger states can fulfil both requirements to a certain extent, small states reach their limits considerably earlier for structural reasons’ (1992: 141). Indeed, the fact that economic necessities constrain culturally justifiable programme policy explains the ambivalence of the Finnish broadcasting debate. However, this contradiction is not necessarily restricted to small states, such as Finland. Rather, it characterizes broadcasting industry in general.

From a single market to a multiple market

The Finnish case indicates that the legitimating discourse on programme policy offers several arguments that conflict but also merge with each other. Several actors also participate in the debate, and it is as if different justifications were used in different arenas of discussion. Here these arenas are referred to as markets (see Lowe and Alm, 1997), by which I mean that they are instances where programme schedules are exchanged for revenue, political support and popular acceptance. Decisions on programme policy are made with reference to and in order to satisfy these markets.

For decades Western European television enjoyed a privileged status with almost no competition within the industry, thus operating in a ‘single market’ of national economies. National broadcasting institutions were state-owned, public service enterprises, financed by a flat-rate tax, a licence fee, paid by all television set owners. As they were ‘creatures ultimately of the state’, as Blumler (1992a: 12) puts it, it was the political market, consisting of appointed and elected national political elites competing over broadcasting policies, that gave a legitimation to broadcasters and their programme policies. Of course, the popular market, that is, viewers with their wishes and interests, was important, too, but as audience attention was taken for granted, the question of legitimation based on popular support never really arose.

Since the early 1980s, European broadcasting has experienced a termination of national public broadcasters’ hegemony (de- or re-regulation), unleashing of competition for revenue and viewers (liberalization), introduction of private commercial channels (commercialization), and an invasion of transnational players (internationalization). Spectrum scarcity, which justified monopolistic, or duopolistic, institutional frameworks, was relieved by compressing bandwidth, opening up new frequencies as well as substituting over-the-air distribution by cable, thus providing the public with an unprecedented channel abundance.

This ‘paradigmatic change’ (Humphreys, 1996) in broadcasting has decreased the importance of the political market in the public legitimation of television services. Instead, broadcasters, public and private stations
alike, are thrown into a *multiplicity of markets*, as has been suggested by Lowe and Alm (1997). It is the interdependent but distinctive interests of technological development and substitute technologies (or the 'technological market'), policy makers (the 'political market'), rival broadcasters (the 'business market'), broadcasting professionals (the 'professional market') and the audience (the 'popular market') that the broadcasters are forced to negotiate with. The multiple marketplace creates the battleground where socio-political legitimation and economic viability are sought and gained — and sometimes lost.

Due to this paradigmatic change, programme policies in general are increasingly justified on economic grounds and, in particular, with reference to the audience. It appears that actors within the multiple markets are joined, or separated, by their very conception of the audience, that is, the way they understand the status, needs and demands of the viewers. In other words, even the political and business market, both influential themselves, tend increasingly to justify their interests with respect to the popular market.

The audience is the new king

The changing television landscape has resulted in a growing *audience orientation* of broadcasters' strategies. This is due to at least two reasons. First, it stems from the change in the financial basis of television services. As advertising and subscription are increasingly replacing public measures of funding, such as the licence fee, it is natural that justification for programming is sought directly from audience ratings. No wonder the popular market has outplaced the decisive role of the political market.

Second, as a logical outcome of channel multiplication, audiences tend to fragment. Viewers are no longer stuck with the fixed schedules of established stations as videocassette recorders and specialized cable and satellite channels enable them to multiply the range of their viewing activities. What this means for the television industry is a growing uncertainty about audience preferences and the unpredictability of its choices.

The multiplication of channels and variety of programme offerings is gradually leading to a saturation of the television market. Although further technological leaps towards an interactive 'entertainment/information superhighway' are imminent, already today a 'policy of supply' has given way to a 'policy of demand' (Wolton, 1992). An increase in programme supply has emphasized the strategic role of 'consumer choice', which explains why individual programmes and even channels are carefully focused to reach the desired target group. Audiences 'must be continuously "targeted" and fought for, grabbed, seduced', as Ang (1996: 10) has put it. Yet broadcasters have no ultimate means to ensure that the audience will make the 'right' choice, because ratings figures acquired through
people-metering systems only provide indirect evidence of the demand, favour majority tastes and do not measure the intensity of preferences (e.g. Ang, 1991).

These factors of uncertainty, together with the new financial basis of the industry, contribute to the increasing audience orientation of programme output. Each programme, not to mention each programming schedule, is expected to produce its public. The range and choice of its offerings are now of strategic importance for the station's survival in competition. The programming schedule is broadcaster's best attraction for the audience. At the same time, expectations concerning the economic efficiency and viability of programming are pronounced.

While I in the following analyse the various patterns of argumentation used in the programme policy discourse, I will concentrate on the political market, business market and popular market, as it is within these three core arenas that most battles over programme policy are waged. I try to demonstrate the core arguments of the two paradigms of broadcasting, but I will also point to shifts and erosion within these discourses.

Legitimation by the audience-as-citizens

If the ideal-typical audience of public service broadcasting does not constitute a market but a public, consisting of citizens, how do public broadcasters, or those in favour of public service-type television, articulate in order to justify their programme policies? Thematically, at least four patterns of argumentation can be detected.

1. The audience needs diversity

Diversity, pluralism and range have been an established part of the public service legacy from the very beginning. It was already John Reith, the first Director-General of the BBC, who, according to Scannell (1990), decided that a wide range of mixed programming—a triad of information, education and entertainment—would best serve the promotion of national and social unity. Yet his understanding of diversity was biased by educational purposes and an elitist definition of enlightenment. As Curran and Seaton (1991: 178-9) have pointed out; the service was not planned to serve different interests; rather, Reith was determined that the audience should encounter the whole range of the company's offerings. Thus, the BBC's programme policy, and, it is suggested here, programming principles of most European public broadcasters, were originally based on an assumption of cultural homogeneity, according to which 'culture was single and undifferentiated' (Curran and Seaton, 1991: 178), and not on a more recent concept of cultural pluralism. This hierarchical juxtaposition of 'what the
people need' and 'what they want', as already Reith had expressed the confrontation, resulted in a paternalistic 'better knowledge' of what is good or what people should watch or hear, not necessarily in a genuine multiplicity of programmes and ideas.

Although the public broadcasters had already gone a long way towards popularising their programme outputs, the fundamental turn towards pluralism did not occur until much later. In Britain the differing broadcasting interests of an increasingly diverse society were recognized by the Annan Report (1977) and materialized, for example, in Channel Four's minority approach, whereas in the Nordic countries paternalist statements based on a homogeneous concept of culture predominated until the mid-1980s, when they were gradually replaced with a commitment towards cultural diversity (e.g. Silvo, 1988; Søndergaard, 1994; Syvertsen, 1992).

Indeed, this new definition of a balanced diet of programming is multifaceted, referring to diverse programming at several levels: in the multiplicity of audience types served; in terms of programme types supplied; and in respect of responsiveness to society (e.g. Blumler, 1992a, 1992b). The new orthodoxy of audience-oriented pluralism is well manifested by explicit statements of media laws, operating licences, and so on, as well as other principled definitions.

For example, the resolution by the Council of Europe, which in 1994 provided the first officially established mandate at the European level for public service broadcasters, states that these institutions have an obligation to develop 'pluralistic, innovatory and varied programming' and 'services of interest to a wide public while being attentive to the needs of minority groups' (CE, 1994: 9). Similarly, in Britain the Broadcasting Research Unit (BRU), which submitted its exposition of public service principles to the Peacock Committee in 1985, named the goal that 'broadcast programmes should cater for all interests and tastes' as the second of eight central principles, and supplemented it with another principle, claiming that 'disadvantaged minorities should receive particular provision' (BRU, 1985: 3–7).

These examples suggest that the principle of multiplicity of audience is aimed to cover both the general audience and special interest segments, or minorities. Perhaps the most detailed explication of this thinking is included in the BBC's 'statement of promises' (BBC, 1996), which, in addition to supplying 'the widest range' of programmes that 'inform, educate and entertain', also promises to 'work harder to reflect the wide interests and varied cultures of the whole of the United Kingdom' and to 'provide programmes of particular interest to ethnic minority audiences', too (BBC, 1996: 3).

Interestingly, the BBC argues for a division of labour between its two channels, with BBC1 offering 'a wide range of programmes that we hope will have a broad appeal for all ages and lifestyles, reflecting national issues and interests. BBC1 is the channel for a big event [. . .].' (1996: 4) In contrast, BBC2 is presented as 'a clear alternative to BBC1. It is at the heart of the
BBC’s reputation as a broadcaster which takes creative risks by trying out new programme ideas and performers. It serves a wide variety of tastes and explores a range of ideas. BBC2 aims to cater for special interests [..]. ‘(1996: 5.) In this way, by programming two channels so as to complement each other, a public broadcaster can use a ‘dual strategy’ (Søndergaard, 1994: 217) that balances between the general audience and minority interests.

However, today this programme policy is not applied because of the virtues of diversity in itself. This approach is not merely an effort to reflect better the various needs of information for and education and entertainment of the public, but is justified also on grounds of maintaining channel reach and popularity. Because it is no longer possible to capture all viewers all the time, it has become vital to provide at least something for everyone every once in a while. For example, in the late 1980s Denmark’s DR already gave preference to reaching every Dane at least once a week (Søndergaard, 1994: 222). Diversity of programming is the principal method of attaining this goal and, as an evidence of their good performance, public broadcasters have willingly referred to the vast body of research results revealing that they, indeed, provide a broader diversity of offerings than their commercial rivals (see, e.g., De Bens et al., 1992; Ishikawa et al., 1996).

On the other hand, diversity is no longer monopolized by public broadcasters only. Commercial channels can also claim to provide a wide variety of programmes, not lagging far behind public broadcasters. This holds true particularly for stations that apply a generalist strategy and represent a hybrid organization, constrained by certain public service obligations, such as Britain’s ITV, Finland’s MTV3, Norway’s TV2 or Sweden’s TV4. Here, diversity can easily be turned into an argument for ‘what-the-audience-wants’, thus being conflated with the expansion of consumer choice (cf. Ang, 1991: 168). In other words, broadening of programme options can be justified on the basis of the positive utility it produces for those who consume television (see, e.g., Litman, 1992).

In the new competitive environment, diversity, ‘the most prominent substantive principle in programming policy’, as Ang (1991: 116) characterizes it, has an ambivalent purpose. While, on the one hand, it fits perfectly with the performance goal of public broadcasters to balance between the various aspects of needs the public is considered to have, on the other hand, it also serves as a strategy to meet audience demand. Thus, diversity can be used as an argument in the political and popular market alike, while in the business market it provides a feasible differentiation strategy.

2. The audience needs quality

This pattern of argumentation was clearly present in the Finnish example. Instead of low-budget entertainment and televisial nonsense, as it argues,
the public should be supplied with quality programmes with high production values. In informative programmes this suggests an analytical procedure, impartiality and responsibility of reporting, and so on. In drama, 'quality' refers to an innovative and artistic approach, and in entertainment, for instance, to portraying the best of popular performances.

Apart from technical standards, the principle of quality can be divided into two elements: first, it refers to 'good programming' in general and, second, to an 'innovative' approach. This was clearly expressed, for example, in Britain by the BRU's requirement that 'broadcasting should be structured so as to encourage competition in good programming rather than competition for numbers' and that '[t]he public guidelines for broadcasting should be designed to liberate rather than restrict the programme makers' (BRU, 1985: 15, 19). The Council of Europe also refers to quality, while it expects public service broadcasting institutions to develop 'innovatory' programming which 'meets high ethical and quality standards' and 'not to sacrifice the pursuit of quality to market forces' (CE, 1994: 9). Similar to the BRU guidelines, quality is here presented as an opposite to the quantity-based philosophy of commercial services.

As a guiding principle, quality is not necessarily included in the official mandates of European public service broadcasting institutions. For example, the recent agreement which defines the duties and responsibilities of the BBC does name 'high general standards in all respects' as one of the two governing principles of the company ('a wide range of subject matter' being the other; Department of National Heritage, 1996: 4), whereas Finland's Act on YLE (1993) makes no reference to this argument in its definition of public service. Although absent in the explicit stipulation, today YLE strongly promotes its quality profile as a distinctive feature of its operations. Similarly, in the 1990s Denmark's DR and Norway's NRK have also applied a similar differentiation strategy (see, e.g., Søndergaard, 1994; Syvertsen, 1997), encouraging 'programmes of the highest possible quality' (NRK, 1987: 2).

Indeed, the importance of quality appears to have increased along with the intensification of competition. It has become, as Ang puts it, 'one of the spearheads of modern-day public service institutions' (1991: 167). In the arguments of broadcasters themselves, quality has become a discursive differentiation strategy that serves to distinguish public service institutions from their commercial rivals. For example, the BBC argues for its uniqueness in the following way: 'The more broadcasters you have to choose from, the more you might expect the BBC – the broadcaster you pay for through the licence fee – to provide something different. We should also have high standards, and a dedication to integrity in all we do' (BBC, 1996: 2). Accordingly, the company promises to 'provide a service which is acknowledged as a world leader' and 'to experiment and take creative risks' (BBC, 1996: 3).

On the other hand, one must remember two things. First, commercial broadcasters also provide quality programmes with high production
values. Second, it is the quality as defined by programme makers and broadcasters that has dominated the discourse (Mulgan, 1990). Quality may also be approached from other perspectives, such as individual viewers’ personal interests, programme appreciation, consumer demand, and so on (see also, e.g., Ishikawa, 1996), or, even more radically, as a ‘contingent criterion of judgement to be made by actual audiences in actual situations’, as Ang (1991: 167) puts it.

3. The audience needs information and education

Newscasts, current affairs programmes, features and documentaries, educational programmes and other social or practical information have gained a particular emphasis in public broadcasters’ offerings (see, e.g., De Bens et al., 1992; Ishikawa et al., 1996). Their specific mandate to provide information and education stems directly from the audience-as-public approach. The public is regarded as a group of citizens that need to be informed in order to secure an enlightened public discussion on public affairs.

Thus, public service broadcasting is ‘obliged to address its audience as rational citizens and to provide them with the information upon which alone rational debate can be based’, as the BRU (1985: 8) puts it. Similarly, Finland’s Act on YLE (1993) stipulates, as the first duty involving public service, that the company shall ‘support democracy by providing a wide variety of information, opinions and debates on social issues’. A conviction that only information can help people to understand political and social processes is well expressed also by the BBC, which justifies its news and information services by claiming them to ‘help people understand national and international events’ (BBC, 1996: 3). Hence, it is an idea of democracy, best maintained within an informed public sphere, that justifies informative programming.

Perhaps an extreme example of this ‘democratist’ rationale was provided by Finland’s YLE, which in the late 1960s started a radical experiment, known as ‘informational broadcasting’. By activating citizens, this project aimed to democratize the whole of society. Programming policy, being considered the central tool of activation, promoted objective, accurate and challenging information as the elemental resource of democratic participation; entertainment was appreciated, but only as far as it had critical and activating potentialities (see, e.g., Hujanen, 1998).

In the discourse of ‘what the audience needs’, information and education are presented with respect to the political function of public broadcasting, which is intended to provide an arena of debate, characterized by plurality, balance and access. For example, the Council of Europe’s resolution requires public service broadcasters to provide ‘a forum for public discussion in which as broad a spectrum as possible of views and opinion can be expressed’. In addition, they are obliged ‘to broadcast
impartial and independent news, information and comment' (CE, 1994: 9). Thus, the traditional values of impartiality and independence – the BBC’s ‘statement of promises’ links ‘accuracy’ into this context as well (BBC, 1996: 3) – are also justified in relation to democratic goals.

However, information is not only emphasized in the political market, or as a resource of the political realm. Owing to increased competition, informative programming policy also provides a differentiation strategy that helps public broadcasters to legitimize their existence. When commercial channels turn more and more towards international entertainment formulas, information has, paradoxically, become a niche that can be targeted and marketed to selective viewers. This is perhaps best illustrated by the BBC, which promises to ‘provide more factual programming during peak time on television than other broadcasters’ (BBC, 1996: 3). In the same vein, the Nordic public service broadcasting institutions also wish to perform as the major source of news and information for their citizens, in contrast to their rivals (see, e.g., Syvertsen, 1997).

In addition to the political and business market, information is widely used in programme policy discourse in the popular market too. As Alasuutari (1992) has pointed out in his study of Finnish television viewers, news casts, current affairs, features and documentaries are ranked high in the ‘moral hierarchy’ of viewing preferences. According to him, news and documentaries represent ‘the most highly valued types of TV programme in the Finnish moral hierarchy’ (1992: 563), and although ranking orders do not necessarily reflect actual viewing habits, what is reflected here is the popular acceptance of the educational public service ideology. On the other hand, commercial broadcasters also can utilize the political and popular value of informative genres. For example, Finland’s MTV3 is actively marketing itself as being ‘the leading supplier of news’, referring to the great number and innovative profiling of its daily newscasts.

Hence, ‘informing the national debate’ (BBC, 1992: 19) is a flexible argument in the legitimation of programme policies, as information and education can be justified in the political, business and popular markets alike. Emphasis on information by public broadcasters – and the popular appreciation of informative genres – provides a practical counterargument to the entertainment-oriented supply of commercial channels, but, at the same time, information involves values that can be shared by all broadcasters.

4. The audience needs cultural integration

National and cultural integration was one of the early legitimations for public broadcasting institutions. In the first place, this was expressed in the goal of providing a universal and comprehensive service, available to the whole nation – a goal which can be justified with reference to both equality and integration. However, integrating purposes can be traced also to the cultural vocation that characterized European public broadcasters from
their early days. In other words, broadcasting organizations were taken to be part of the sector of society which is responsible for generating and disseminating its linguistic, spiritual and aesthetic wealth (Blumler, 1992a: 10–11).

In the vision of the BRU (1985: 7), public service broadcasters ‘should recognise their special relationship to the sense of national identity and community’. Here, programming duties are connected directly to the idea of the audience as citizens, addressed in a common public sphere. This integrating function of programming may also be justified as a counter-measure to disintegrating tendencies within societies, as is done by the Council of Europe (CE, 1994: 9) when it ranks the duty of providing ‘a reference point for all members of the public and a factor of social cohesion and integration of all individuals, groups and communities’ as a principal mission of public service broadcasters.

What does this actually mean in terms of programme policy? It appears to refer, first, to a pluralist and sober reflection of the society in the media as discussed above, and, second, to providing integrating experiences and social interaction through programming. The latter function justifies broadcasting as ‘a crucial means – perhaps the only means at present – whereby common knowledges and pleasures in a shared public life are maintained as a social good for the whole population’ (Scannell, 1989: 164). According to this argument, broadcasting can contribute to a common ‘universe of discourse’ (Scannell, 1989: 143) that goes beyond the restricted public topics involved in news and current affairs. This integrating function is served by documentaries, drama, entertainment, sports and other broadcast events, such as royal coronations, Olympic games, Eurovision song contests, and so on. From this perspective, what the audience ‘needs’ is any broadcast which creates a feeling of togetherness and contributes to social cohesion. In programme policy, this has sometimes resulted in public broadcasters’ tendency to monopolize major national events in order to be able to provide a ‘national common arena’ (Syvertsen, 1997: 184).

Integration purposes have also justified public broadcasters’ special duties to domestic programming, particularly emphasized during the last few years. In Britain, the BBC’s commitment to ‘new modern drama and situation comedy’ and ‘period drama and classic adaptations’ (BBC, 1996: 4) demonstrates the corporation’s multiple duties to ‘support and stimulate the development and expression of British culture and entertainment’ (BBC, 1992: 21). In smaller nations, such as Finland and Norway, where original productions are constrained by market size and shortage of resources, public broadcasters’ special responsibilities for domestic fare tend to be even more pronounced. Emphasis on domestic programming with ‘a significant proportion of original productions’, as the Council of Europe requires (CE, 1994: 9), serves also as a comfortable differentiation strategy. On the other hand, the great popularity of domestic programmes, drama in particular (see Biltereyst, 1995), has encouraged commercial channels, too, to promote domestic culture and talent.
Finally, cultural programming and patronage of the arts by public broadcasters also are often justified by their culturally integrating functions. For example, the BBC is expected to 'enrich the cultural heritage of the United Kingdom through support for the arts' (Department of National Heritage, 1994: 6), and the corporation itself promises to 'support and stimulate the development of the best talents so that British culture in all its forms' can be represented in its programmes (BBC, 1996: 3). This argument is used to highlight the public broadcasting institutions' role as cornerstones of their respective national cultures and cultural policies. Hence, arts programmes, broadcast concerts, and so on, which do not necessarily perform so well in ratings, can be legitimized as a common property of the nation.

In conclusion, justification of programme policies based on integrating functions of public broadcasting is used as an argument for cultural nationalism that may take several forms, applicable to the political, popular and business markets alike. Nevertheless, as was demonstrated by the case of Finland’s fourth television network, this pattern of argumentation can be extended to promote and protect domestic broadcasting industry in general too (Lowe and Alm, 1997).

Legitimation by the audience-as-consumers

Legitimation by addressing the audience as consumers is not necessarily expressed in written policy documents. Rather, appealing to 'what-the-audience-wants' is manifest in promotional campaigns, media policy debates and broadcasters' day-to-day choices. This discourse can be analysed in terms of two major subdiscourses, complemented with a related economic argument.

1. The audience wants choice

'Consumer choice' is the magic word of this discourse, which suggests that consumers should have the widest possible choice of broadcasting services and that diversity of choice can best be guaranteed by the discovery mechanism of trial and error in a competitive market. What does 'increasing choice' mean as a programme policy goal?

First, it sometimes refers to a widening of the channel choice set, thus providing more simultaneous programme options for the viewer. The fundamental aim of broadcasting policy should be to enlarge both the freedom of choice to the consumer and the opportunities available to programme makers to offer alternative wares to the public, as the British Peacock Report (1986: 125), perhaps the most authoritative manifestation of this thinking, put it. This thinking often sees subscription television,
with its unlimited range of offerings, as a realization of consumer sovereignty while it ‘liberates the consumer by making him or her the best judge of good broadcasting – it gives them choice’ (Veljanovski, 1990: 19).

The argument of providing new alternatives to the viewer underlies every recent decision to introduce, at national level, new terrestrial channels. It was one of the justifying rationales behind Finland’s Channel Four as well as Britain’s Channel Five, both commercial enterprises. However, the argument for increasing choice played a role also in the launch of Norway’s NRK2 and Denmark’s DR2, both public service channels (see, e.g., Syvertsen, 1997). Hence, increasing choice is not a justification used by commercial channels only.

This justification does not necessarily claim to provide something qualitatively different. Rather, here ‘choice’ is reduced to quantity of options. As Dowding (1992: 312–14) has provocatively pointed out, the argument for ‘increasing choice’ does not usually refer to adding to the value of the choice set or necessarily provide the viewers what they really want. Instead, it assumes that adding new alternatives to a choice, first, increases statistically the probability of satisfying their needs; second, may also help viewers to discover their preferences through the very act of choice itself; and, third, may appeal to consumers, as it appears to give them a measure of control over the alternatives.

In this way, programme policy that values choice in itself is well justified in the popular market, but it provides a viable strategy for the business market, too, as it helps TV stations to map out consumer preferences and provide programmes that might meet viewer demand.

Another meaning of ‘increasing choice’ refers to providing something ‘different’ as compared to the existing offerings. Here, ‘choice’ refers to an ‘alternative’, qualitatively speaking. As the number of channels increases and the audience per channel, logically, falls, new commercial services can lay claim to apply new, alternative programming strategies. The argument of providing a new choice was used, for example, by Finland’s Ruutunen as it offered a more focused programme diet than its main commercial rival. According to the Channel Controller, Jorma Sairanen, the entrant would not try to compete with MTV3 with similar programming:

We can manage with some 200,000 to 300,000 viewers [compared to the 800,000 to 1.2 million viewers of MTV3’s top programmes], but it must be a targeted audience. Perhaps some two-thirds of our programmes are pretty similar to those of MTV’s but, as far as I can see, our opportunities are in the remaining one-third. We can take risks as we are not aiming at big volumes like MTV is.7

Here, the alternative is created by means of targeting, which in this case meant focusing on young, urban, female viewers. This strategy also can be justified with reference to both the popular market and the business market. Indeed, specialization as applied by various cable and satellite channels today provides a major programme policy strategy that has
enabled dozens of new outlets to establish their own audience segments and programme niches. While major TV stations, whether public or private, operate principally as generalists differentiating their products within a framework of a wide range of broad appeal programming, pay channels, in particular, introduce a choice by focusing on thematic programming and narrow appeal.

Currently, increasing choice is enthusiastically promoted in the popular market by the electronics industry promising by signal digitalization to multiply the present channel capacity and, hence, provide the consumer with an almost limitless abundance of programme options. Whether the business market can bear the forthcoming fragmentation and how much consumers will be prepared to pay for the improved service are critical unknowns, however.

2. The audience wants popular programmes

If a broadcaster is determined to 'give the audience what it wants', it tends to favour programmes that are watched by the greatest possible number of viewers. Indeed, as micro-economic theory of competition suggests, both advertiser-supported and pay television are biased against minority-interest tastes – and in favour of programmes that produce large audiences (e.g. Owen and Wildman, 1992: 148). However, commercial broadcasters have been able to justify their emphasis on the most popular categories such as fiction, sports and entertainment by appealing to audience demand, as expressed by people-meter figures.

Indeed, the argumentation for a popularity-based programme policy is strongly characterized by what Ang (1991: 50) calls a ratings discourse. Audience ratings, expressed as a percentage of all television households in the country, and shares, expressed as a percentage of all households that are watching television during a particular hour, have become a discursive framework that, on the one hand, enables the industry to know more about its audience and, on the other hand, has been accepted also by viewers themselves as an indication of what is popular and what might be worthwhile watching. Even more importantly, ratings provide the advertisers with vital information of audience size and composition and the rival channels with strategic knowledge of successes and failures.

As Ang notices, the ratings discourse 'charts the ways in which the industry defines the audience as a market' (1991: 48). In ratings, popularity is reduced efficiently to a matter of numerical superiority – and numerical superiority, then, is equated with audience preference. Ratings appear to provide an unambiguous measure of consumer demand, thus generating programming decisions that can be easily defended.

But public broadcasters also have discovered the opportunities provided by the ratings discourse. Ratings are now widely employed by these institutions as a measure of popular support, an issue of increased
importance. For example, Finland’s YLE had started its audience research department already in the 1960s, but it was not until the mid-1980s, and the introduction of people meters, that viewing figures grew in importance in the Finnish debate. While lists of top programmes are published weekly by, for example, the major TV guide, Katso, and the leading national daily, Helsingin Sanomat, ratings are extensively used as an argument for and against individual programmes. Hence the performance of broadcasters has come under a continuing public jurisdiction based on viewing figures and company viewing shares (see, e.g., Soramäki, 1994).

In his analysis of the Danish public service broadcaster, DR, Søndergaard (1994) notices a new responsiveness towards audience demand emerging during the 1980s. What was earlier termed the ‘public’ becomes ‘customers’, while the daily schedule in terms of programme placement becomes divided into separate sections for the general audience (prime-time) and special target groups (daytime, late night). Without changing dramatically the composition of offerings, a completely new programming schedule is created, based on targeting, standardization and regularity.

Hence, popularity serves as an argument not only in the popular and the business markets but also in the political market, where popular legitimacy can be used as a measure of performance and exchanged for political legitimacy.

3. Viability of programming counts

Relative to justifying programme policy on the basis of popularity, an explicitly economic argumentation claims that programming decisions should obey a strict cost–benefit analysis. Here, programme production and scheduling are guided by economic calculation or, to put it more poignantly, what reaps a profit. This rationale promotes low-cost programming that appeals to a large viewership, thus favouring imported serial drama instead of domestic original productions and studio-based talk shows instead of genuine features or documentaries, for example.

However, broadcasters whose driving force is the maximization of their long-run profits seldom use this argument publicly as a justification for their programme policies. Instead, while being well understood by rival broadcasters, this argument is valid in the business market, in particular. Interestingly, it is often understood in the political market, too, as was illustrated by the Finnish example, in which the state department in charge of media policy explicitly recommended not constraining commercial broadcasters by any strict stipulations on programming as, for economic reasons, they would easily become a dead letter.

On the other hand, public broadcasters’ programme policy is also increasingly guided by an effort to spend the licence-fee income ‘as efficiently as possible’ so that you get the maximum benefit through our
programmes', as the BBC (1996: 27) puts it. By appealing to cost-effectiveness, the British public broadcaster addresses its audience as a group of informed consumers, a hybrid representing properties of both a consumer and a citizen. This shows that economic reasoning serves as an argument in the popular market too.

Conclusion: Signs of discursive convergence

Above I have traced patterns of argumentation in issues of programme policy. I have distinguished between two discourses and several subdiscourses that are common in the multiple policy-making arenas. The two discourses appear broadly to follow the paradigmatic distinction between public service and commercial broadcasting. However, while the distinction between the two paradigms is broad, it also is vague and full of compromises. Whilst traditional arguments based on 'what-the-audience-needs' have partly been replaced by arguments based on 'what-the audience-wants', commercial broadcasters also have compromised their populist programme policies, resulting in a rapprochement between the two policy discourses. In conclusion, I shall summarize certain patterns of this convergence.

1. Popularity rules

Owing to increasing fragmentation of the audience, broadcasters will become more dependent than ever on viewers' expressed or anticipated interests, their actual viewing choices and, perhaps more than has happened so far, their programme appreciation. In order to 'keep what are defined as satisfactory audience shares' (Hulién and Brants, 1992: 122), public broadcasters have followed their commercial competitors by opening up new programme slots in the schedule and by standardizing their schedules. By 'popularizing' their fare, public broadcasters wish to appeal directly to audience demand, thus addressing the audience as consumers.

The outcome of the general acceptance of ratings discourse is a convergence of argumentation between public and commercial broadcasters. According to Ang, who has analysed the discursive shift among public broadcasters, 'these institutions [...] have responded [to competition] by adopting the discourse of the marketplace in their approach to the audience: defining “television audience” as a collection of consumers rather than citizens, thinking of it in terms of “what the audience wants” rather than “what it needs”'(1991: 165–6).

This tendency reflects the effort of these institutions to adapt to competition by balancing between normative justifications of range, quality, information and integration and pragmatic requirements of popularity.
and economic reasoning. This means applying a *mixed strategy* (Syvertsen, 1992), according to which, on the one hand, they confront their commercial competitors by representing the informative, cultural and national ideals they consider to be unique and crucial to their identity as public broadcasters, while, on the other hand, they take compromising steps towards popular genres in order to protect their share of viewing (see also Achille and Miège, 1994; Hultén and Brants, 1992).

2. Money buys

At least two reasons contribute to the fact that public broadcasters are more exposed than before to economic constraints. First, stagnating licence-fee revenue and growing production costs constitute a syndrome which can be faced only with due financial management. Second, criticism of public broadcasters’ extravagant spending has resulted in demands for efficiency and accountability as well as promises by them to ‘provide value for money’, as the BBC (1996: 77) puts it.

As Achille and Miège notice, the tendency to cut costs by externalizing productions also ‘favours the convergence of the structures of public and commercial television’ (1994: 38). This is supported by industrial policy, too, aiming to consolidate national culture industries. Here public broadcasting institutions are regarded as key players, whose programme purchases and co-productions can encourage the expansion of the independent sector, thus promoting the general interests of cultural nationalism (Lowe and Alm, 1997).

3. Variety is popular

In the new competitive situation, in which the most important arena of legitimation is the popular market, diversity, as an argument for programme policy, is no longer monopolized by public broadcasters only, or by the discourse of ‘what-the-audience-needs’. This shift towards a more multifaceted conception of diversity parallels the challenge of the new media and private commercial television and coincides with the development of audience measurement technologies. It also reflects a general cultural change in society as a result of which ‘citizens’ who formerly were served as equals become ‘consumers’ who demand various tailored services.

This suggests that the term ‘diversity’ conceals differences of meaning from one discourse to another. While the private, commercial sector tends to regard diversity narrowly as an economic concept, public broadcasters emphasize the cultural dimension of the concept. While the first approach understands diversity as a pragmatic goal, achieved by means of competition in the marketplace, the second approaches it as a pluralist and principled concept, acquired by public policy measures (e.g. Blumler,
1992a). However, these two meanings appear to be converging and merging with each other.

4. Duties are shared

Another source of discursive convergence is provided by commercial channels which are constrained by various public service-type obligations. The combination of commercial funding and regulation by public policy has resulted in programme policies that resemble more of a public service tradition than a genuine commercial diet (Hellman and Sauri, 1997). The willingness of these hybrid broadcasters to use the ‘what-the-audience-needs’ argumentation also reflects a ‘prestige strategy’ (Hellman and Sauri, 1994) which helps them to enhance their legitimacy.

Owing to this discursive convergence between ‘what-the-audience-wants’ and ‘what-the-audience-needs’, traditional public service justifications may be partly eroded, but more obvious is that they are transposed to carry new meanings so that both public and commercial broadcasters can use them. The justifications of genuinely commercial programme policy will also be shared, because public broadcasters find it difficult to escape economic necessities and the temptations of popularity. This will result in a legitimation pattern where programme policies are increasingly argued for by a mix of values of citizenship and consumerism, applicable to the popular, political and business market alike.

Hence, the sharp borderline between the public service and commercial way of argumenting for programme policy is, if not disappearing, blurring and decreasing in importance. It appears not to be feasible to treat the audience either as citizens or as consumers. Parallel with a general trend in modern-day society, the two roles overlap and merge with each other.

Notes

1. The distinction is widely used both in theoretical literature of the media (see, e.g., McQuail, 1987) and in empirical analyses of broadcasting and broadcasting policy (see, e.g. Ang, 1991; Sandegaard, 1994; Syvertsen, 1992).

2. The Helsinki Media Company is owned by the Erkko family and its Sanoma Corporation. While the Sanoma Corporation is the biggest newspaper publisher in Finland, the Helsinki Media Company has interests in magazine and book publishing and was the major owner of a national cable network, PTV.

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