

**SWEDISH**  
**PUBLIC SERVICE**  
**BROADCASTING**  
**UNDER FIRE**

**SVERIGES TELEVISION**

**POLITICIANS ARE DEMANDING  
FUNDING CUTS, A NARROWER  
MISSION AND PERSONAL PENALTIES  
FOR JOURNALISTS.**

**ONLINE ABUSE HAS INCREASED  
AND A NEW FINANCING MODEL HAS  
DRAWN CRITICISM.**

**IN MANY PARTS OF EUROPE,  
PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTING IS  
ALREADY UNDER SEVERE PRESSURE.**

**IS SWEDEN NEXT IN LINE?**

Over the past decade, the debate about Sweden's public service broadcasters has become a battlefield.

Some politicians have proposed that the country's three publicly funded radio and television companies – SVT (television), SR (radio) and UR (educational content) – should be completely abolished. Others have demanded tougher political control or that journalists who are deemed to be lacking in impartiality should be penalized or fired.

The criticism of Swedish public service media is multipronged. One line of criticism, according to Lars Anders Johansson, former editor-in-chief of the free market think tank Timbro's magazine Smedjan, is about distortion of the media market.

Digitization has led to reduced advertising revenue for private media. Therefore, public service broadcasters shouldn't use tax funds to compete in the online news market or to produce mainstream entertainment programs, according to the free market argument.

Another line of criticism is that public service media only permits some voices to be heard.

"We have seen a form of backlash from conservatives, market liberals, populists and nationalists, who react to what is perceived as a progressive dominance," says Lars Anders Johansson.

Or, put another way: Public service media is perceived as left-wing.

When poet Athena Farrokhzad spoke on an iconic radio show in the summer of 2014, she called for, among other things, sham marriages to help undocumented immigrants gain legal residence in Sweden. An MP from the conservative Moderate Party, Gunnar Axén, was so outraged that he drove his TV to the dump in protest.

At the time, a public service broadcasting fee was paid by all Swedish households that owned a television set. But since January 1, 2019, the fee has been replaced by an individual public service tax, which is paid by all adults with a taxable income.

It is no longer possible to opt out of the public service payment, as Gunnar Axén did by disposing of his TV. One avenue for the expression of dissatisfaction has thereby been closed.

**10 480**  
The number of hours of radio and television in minority languages in Swedish public service terrestrial broadcasting in 2019.

## A NARROWER MISSION

Historically, there has been strong parliamentary support for the idea that the public service companies should broadcast a wide range of programs. But, changing their stance, the Moderate Party and their conservative allies the Christian Democrats are now advocating a narrower focus. They argue that tax money should not be spent on sports and entertainment, and that the focus of public broadcasting therefore should be on expensive, socially important content that private media can't, or does not want to, offer.

At the Moderate Party's conference last year's, the local chapter from the capital Stockholm motioned to completely abolish public service media, but this was not supported by the rest of the party. Instead, a working group was set up to carve out the party's new media policy.

The objective reads: "A significantly reduced amount" of tax revenue should be allocated to public service media, while the impartiality and objectivity requirements must be strengthened and tougher penalties applied for violations.

The Christian Democrats' party board also decided last year to pursue suggestions for a narrower public service media in the future. "Public broadcasting is important, and its credibility is

not being served by broadcasting nonsense,” the party’s cultural policy spokesperson Roland Utbult responded when surveyed by SR.

A broad or narrow mission – a bit of everything or just what’s good for us? “Healthy options” dished up by the public broadcasters include news, in-depth current affairs programs, regional coverage, a broad range of cultural programming, programs in Swedish and minority languages – in short, television and radio to serve the general public.

**80%**

**The percentage of Swedes aged 12–79 who listen to public service radio broadcaster SR an average week.**

However, some argue that if there are no “treats” in the mix – such as the popular Melodifestivalen, where Swedes choose their Eurovision contender – the audience will leave. That would mean fewer “healthy options” are consumed and, in the long run, public broadcasting would lose its legitimacy.

Between 2008 and 2016, SVT accounted for about 30 per cent of the television viewership share, writes media researcher and Professor Kent Asp. SVT has thus succeeded in “balancing the public interest (fulfilling its public service mission) with an audience interest (still a relatively strong position with the television audience)”, his conclusion reads.

## IMPARTIALITY QUESTIONED

When the Public Service Media Tax Act was passed by the Swedish Parliament in 2018, it was supported by all parliamentary parties except the Sweden Democrats. The right-wing party justified its rejection by stating that the funding reform had not been preceded by reforms to strengthen impartiality.

Public service media must be impartial and factual – this is a requirement set by the broadcasting permit. But its impartiality is increasingly being questioned – both by politicians and by “alternative media”, which now form a larger part of the media landscape and have made criticism of traditional media and public service one of its main messages.

During the Sweden Democrats’ 2017 national conference, one of the party’s chapters presented a motion stating that the public service broadcasters were biased and distorted public debate. As this bias could not be rectified by political means, the chapter argued, the only solution was to scrap SR and SVT altogether.

The motion was eventually rejected. The Sweden Democrats’ party program states that public service media is important, but that “reforms are needed to ensure the objectivity and impartiality of the broadcasters’ program offerings”.

In February 2020, Sweden Democrat Linus Bylund, a member of the public broadcasters’ ownership foundation, floated the idea that public service journalists should be held personally accountable for the content they produce – under the current system, legal liability is assumed by the publisher – and be subject to salary deductions or dismissal if found to be partial.

When the new broadcasting permits for SVT, SR and UR for 2020–2025 were approved by the Swedish Parliament in October of 2019, the Sweden Democrats, the Moderate Party and the Christian Democrats wrote a joint reservation that demanded a new regulatory system for media ethics.

“It is obvious that the impartiality and objectivity requirement has been the subject of great debate – a debate that deserves to be taken seriously,” the three parties wrote.

## A LINE IS CROSSED

In February of 2020, many Swedish publishers got a fright when the Sweden Democrats demanded that the Parliamentary Committee on Culture call up the heads of SVT and SR to discuss two published segments that the party considered lacking in impartiality and objectivity.

Dissatisfied listeners and viewers can report programs to the Swedish Broadcasting Commission, the independent regulatory authority in charge of supervising the implementation of Swedish broadcasting legislation, which then investigates the matter. But parliamentarians discussing individual segments was something entirely new, raising concerns about political interference.

The request was rejected by the committee and subsequently criticized by all other parties in parliament. SVT's chief executive Hanna Stjärne was among those who reacted strongly.

"One of the main tasks of journalism, perhaps the most important one, is to hold power accountable. Therefore, it is very important that there is a clear gap between journalism and politics, that there is no reason to think that politicians are trying to influence journalists," she says.

But elected officials trying to control the news media, does that really happen in Sweden?

According to Nils Funcke, freedom of speech expert and media law teacher, there are recent examples of Swedish political censorship of individual publications.

"In 2006, the then-Minister of Foreign Affairs intervened and actually stopped a publication that was considered to be detrimental to Swedes or Swedish interests abroad. It was a publication in the Sweden Democrats' online newspaper of a caricature of the Prophet Muhammad," he says.

The Danish daily Jyllands-Posten had previously published Mohammed caricatures, which triggered strong reactions in the Muslim world. When the Sweden Democrats' magazine SD-Kuriren followed, Foreign Minister Laila Freivalds of the Social Democratic Party, via her closest political official, turned to the web host, which closed down the site of the online publication.


After Nils Funck disclosed the Foreign Minister's involvement, Freivald was strongly criticized in the Constitutional Committee of the Swedish Parliament and ultimately resigned.

What happened then could happen again, says Funcke. And to other media.

"If there is a sensitive situation, the regulations governing public service media provide far reaching possibilities to call the shots as to what should be broadcast," says Funcke.

**74%**

**The percentage of Swedes who report high trust for SVT. The corresponding share for SR is 72 per cent.**



## CONSTITUTIONAL PROTECTION

In Reporters Without Borders' annual World Press Freedom Index, Sweden has slipped from third place in 2019 to fourth place in 2020 following online harassment against journalists, including from the Chinese state.

In Europe as a whole, the trend is also negative: Between 2013 and 2020, freedom of the press has only increased in four EU countries, while it has declined in 23.

Independent public service media is a litmus test of the freedom of the press in a country. And freedom of the press is linked to the degree of democracy, according to Pavol Szalai, who is head of the EU and Balkans desk at Reporters Without Borders' headquarters in Paris.

The political debate in Sweden, as well as developments in the rest of Europe, shows that independence can no longer be taken for granted.

In June 2018, Justice Minister Morgan Johansson of the Social Democratic Party appointed a parliamentary committee to evaluate, among other things, whether public service media should be protected in the Constitution. With such protection, changes to the editorial independence of public service would require two parliamentary votes with a general election in between them.

Hanna Stjärne would welcome that the threshold for making fundamental changes be raised. "It would be a signal that one wants to strengthen independence," she says.

## LEFT-LEANING?

Critics often refer to a 2012 study by media professor Kent Asp that showed that Swedish journalists sympathize with left-of-center parties to a greater extent than the population at large, which many have interpreted as evidence of left-leaning media coverage.

Answering the question "Which party do you currently prefer?", more than 80 per cent of the surveyed SVT and SR employees responded the Social Democratic Party, the Left Party or the Green Party .

But relatively few employees – only about 100 from each broadcaster – were included in the survey. In addition, the surveyed group included everyone from children's programmes managers to audio technicians – not necessarily news reporters.

Also, the results varied across the parties. Support for the Left Party was just over 12 percentage points higher among the public broadcaster employees than among the general public. However, support for the Social Democratic Party was 16 percentage points lower. The biggest difference was in support for the Green Party, which 53 per cent of public service media employees preferred compared to 12 per cent of the general public.

But with a response rate over 60 per cent, the scientifically accurate study did show that in 2012 Swedish public service media employees were more left-leaning than the general public.

**133 Euro**

**The maximum annual public service fee per person in 2020.**

But can it be concluded from this that public service journalism itself is leaning left?

Research shows that journalists' personal views have a limited impact on journalism itself, since the editorial process is professional, collective and the principles governing newsworthiness carry great weight. Journalists as a group also identify emotionally with political parties to a lesser extent than average citizens do.

That personal opinions is of minor importance is also supported in studies of Swedish electoral coverage: During every Swedish election campaign, from 1979 until today, Swedish media favours one party or government alternative above the others. But SVT and SR favour and disadvantage parties less than other news media do.

And – and this is the main point – there is no systematic support for particular parties.

Different parties are favored in different election campaigns, determined by media dramaturgy and which political narrative gains the most traction at the time.

## WHO GETS A SPOT ON THE QUIZ SHOW?

But if public service journalism is not party political, then what about “culture war issues” such as gender issues and integration?

In Sweden and in large parts of the western world, political conflicts these days are more about identity and values and less about economic distribution. One way of describing the new line of conflict is the so-called GAL-TAN scale, which distinguishes between the value clusters green, alternative, libertarian (GAL), and traditional, authoritarian, nationalist (TAN).

Lars Anders Johansson, himself a former news journalist at SVT, believes that there is a left-liberal bias within public service media.

“At the same time, I have high confidence in the professionalism and for SVT as a news channel.”

The problem is not the news but the broad entertainment programs, he says.

“Who gets to speak? Who is selected for a spot on a popular quiz show? How come left-wing activists get to participate, but very few from other political spheres?”

Johansson believes that the Swedish public service broadcasters should examine themselves and points to a survey that British BBC did in 2007. At that time, the company examined its impartiality in a broad sense, through interviews, seminars and role-playing for employees. The process resulted in new recommendations.

**48%**

**Increased viewing of public service channel SVT 2 during April of 2020, compared to the same month in 2019.**

## POLITICIZED CONFIDENCE

Judging by the aggressive debate of recent years, one would be forgiven for thinking that Swedish public service media enjoyed low public confidence. But that’s not the case.

Last year, 74 per cent of respondents in an annual survey by the SOM Institute of the University of Gothenburg, stated that they had a high degree of confidence in SVT, while 72 per cent said the same for SR.

The high level of confidence has been stable over time. But if you scratch the surface, the question has been politicised. Between 2010 and 2019, high trust for public service media has increased with those who like parties on the left and in the center and decreased in those on the center-right to right.

However, confidence is still high in almost all groups. Among Left Party and Social Democratic Party sympathizers, more than 80 per cent exhibit high trust in public service media. In Christian Democrats and Moderates voters, the figure is about 75 per cent.

But the Sweden Democrats stand out – less than half state that they have high confidence in the public service broadcasters.

As the total confidence is more or less even, it is likely that people who have low confidence in public service media and who were previously scattered in different political parties have now gathered in one party, says Ulrika Andersson, associate professor of journalism and Deputy Director of the SOM Institute.

“Since 2010, they have found a common gathering place in the Sweden Democrats.”

## ATTACKS ON JOURNALISTS

How does the current climate of suspicions and accusations affect journalism and journalists? As a former US correspondent and current climate correspondent at SVT, Erika Bjerström has covered several of the topics that stir the most emotions.

“The big change is the tone, how aggressively people express themselves now,” she says.

Attacks have increased and intensified. The contempt for journalists is something new, according to Erika Bjerström.

“We have this polarization where people are think in terms of the elite versus the people. Journalists have to accept that we are suddenly considered part of that elite, even though many of us became journalists due to a strong desire to hold those in power accountable.”

# 23

**The number of foreign correspondents employed by SR.**

With polarization comes an uncertainty about what words and expressions can be used in news reporting, says Erika Bjerström. In December of 2019, she analysed a speech Greta Thunberg held in Madrid, where the young climate activist strongly criticised a lack of commitment from politics and business.

“Talking about the people against those in power, she sounds rather like a populist left-wing politician,” Erika Bjerström wrote.

The reactions were harsh and numerous. Bjerström, who was used to being called a crypto-environmentalist and communist, was now accused of being neo-liberal and affiliated with the oil industry. She says she does not shy away from any topics or angles out of fear of being attacked. But it does affect job satisfaction.

## HAS COVID-19 CHANGED EVERYTHING?

The massive criticism of public service media culminated during the end of 2019 and beginning of 2020, following years of heated political debate. But then Covid-19 changed the deal.

Not able to carry out planned reporting trips, climate correspondent Erika Bjerström has instead filled in as general news editor, and is experiencing a boost for public service media.

“Now we receive a lot of praise, because we are fact-based, question the authorities, and don’t take politicians’ statements for granted,” she says.

In times of crisis, when the thirst for news is great, people mainly turn to traditional media outlets. SVT’s news program Aktuellt had a top listing on March 22, with almost two million viewers. Television viewing has increased in general as more people stay at home. But it has increased more for SVT’s channels SVT 1 and SVT 2 than for commercial competitor TV4 – by 36, 48 and 14 per cent respectively during April, compared to the same month in 2019.

“In this situation, it is obvious what a central role journalism plays in society,” says SVT Chief Executive Hanna Stjärne.

As a result, Swedish public service media is currently experiencing something of a honeymoon. It provides a chance to think about how to build on that trust – because on the other side of the coronavirus pandemic, polarization and political demands remain.

It remains to be seen whether the favorable conditions for public service broadcasting continue after the crisis, or if this is just the calm before the storm.



# REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS SWEDEN RECOMMENDS:

**Maintain the distance between the political sphere and public service – give editorial independence constitutional protection.**

**Protect journalists from legal threats – preserve the system of publisher's liability.**

**Strengthen protections against threats and harassment – investigate and prosecute attacks against journalist.**

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[www.reportrarutangranser.se/hoten-mot-public-service/en](http://www.reportrarutangranser.se/hoten-mot-public-service/en).

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