

## Community TV and digitalisation in the Nordic countries

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Text prepared with occasion of the seminar "Community TV and digital transition in Europe", organized by the UNESCO Chair in Communication InCom-UAB with the collaboration of the Community Media Forum Europe.

Autonomous University of Barcelona (Barcelona, Spain), 31 May 2012.

Community television has been established in the Nordic countries since the 1980's. In contrast to public television, Community TV in the four major Nordic countries differs quite a lot from each other when it comes to organisation, financing and distribution channels. Iceland the fifth Nordic country has no community media at all.

Only in Denmark and Norway, digital transition for on-air television has modified community TV structure by change from cable to DTT. In Denmark and Norway the frequencies allocation for the sector have been considered as legitimate as public-governmental and commercial. In Sweden the digital transition has made a considerable impact for cable distribution because there are must-carry rules for both analogue and digital distribution on cable.

This talk presents an overview of community television in the Nordic countries, focusing on the digital transition. Of special interest might be a discussion about how different basic media ideologies have impressed upon how community television in each country has been organised.

### ***Public access and the early introduction of community media***

In some countries, *public access* orientation is more important than the incentive for *local television*. This was a natural ideological development which was not considered in the legal framework based upon the ideology of public access in the U.S. That was not the case of the German Open Channels, which were created with a legal framework partly based on that ideology.

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Public access is based on the aspects of freedom of expression and is understood to put the right of citizens on own terms to have access and resources to produce and distribute radio or TV programs on a cable network or on air. This includes the citizens' right to own and operate their own radio and TV station.

Another very important factor contributing to the early introduction of community radio and TV in the Nordic countries is that until the end of the 80's there were no private commercial radio or TV stations all other radio and TV was state controlled public service media de facto monopolies. In contrast to many other countries in Western and Southern Europe thus community media came before the introduction of commercial radio and television.

### Denmark

Community TV in Denmark started in 1984 based in the ideal of *public access* and with major impressions from the developments in neighbouring Sweden.

Like Australia, community TV in Denmark has from the start being accessible on air, first analogue and today digital terrestrial (DTT) as well as on cable.

Since the 90's there is a quite generous state annual financial support for community media. This year it is 6,16 million euro of which 60 % is dedicated for television (on DTT). The government is financing this out of the TV license fee. The support scheme has a broad political support in the parliament including the conservatives and the social democrats. The only sharp opposition comes from the extreme right.

Before DTT was introduced in Denmark the state support (for program production) community television both on analogue on air and on local cable could receive this. Today community television on local cable get no support any longer – only for broadcasting on air = DTT.

The problems for Danish community television today are that there are too many associations based on religious interests holding licenses. Valuable broadcast time is blocked by religious groups some with American interests. Like Sweden there is no law defining an association and its status.

### DTT

When Denmark shifted from analogue to digital it was seen as natural that there should be an allocated channel for community television on DTT replacing UHF-allocations. There is a total of 365 various associations holding licenses to broadcast on 9 DTT-stations in 8 regions and on one national network. An interesting fact is that there are fewer permits for radio

than television; 179 associations are holding license for 100 community radio stations. This indicates that the access to the DTT network opens up new opportunities for civil society media.

A problem to be solved today is a change of law which sets a must-carry rule (that a local cable network must distribute for free any local community channel on air). People watching TV only on cable usually don't use DTT and without must-carry obligations will not receive the local community channel via their cable boxes.

### **Finland**

First community TV's in Finland developed on a small scale during the 1980's with the geographical philosophy of *local broadcasting* rather than public access. In Finland the second language is Swedish (6%). Community television is mainly run by the Swedish-speaking communities along the East coast.

Today, since 2005, there is only a community TV station M2HZ which broadcast in the major language, Finnish. It is on the digital cable network in the capital Helsinki. This is an open channel (public access)

The community media sector is yet not recognized by law and is thus quite weak. Community media operates formally as private media but even if it is possible there are no commercial advertisements.

The community TV stations in the "Finlandsvenska Lokal-TV Förbundet" (Finnish-Swedish Local TV Association) were the first in the Nordic countries to establish a program exchange network via Internet. The network is financed by membership fee and various culture related foundations.

There are only five community radio stations in Finland.

### **DTT**

As there is no legal framework for Community media sector in Finland any station can ask for DTT-license, but most of them have to pay for the access in the same way as a commercial channel. So CT stations which have not applied have not enough means to pay for DTT and are staying on free cable only (unlicensed but legal). Two of the 14 Finnish-Swedish CT stations are however also broadcasting on DTT with private license and with local sponsorship support.

## Norway

There are no *local* community televisions in Norway. In contrary to the community radio sector the community television has not been around very much until a couple years ago when the parliament 2008 took decision to establish a national community television channel – in law stated as an Open Channel (the *public access* ideology). Prior to establishing this there was a movement from the civil society and a good response from the social democratic minister of culture <sup>1</sup>. It is named officially “Frikanalen” (The Free Channel) owned by more than 60 different non-profit associations. The channel is financed by support from the Department of Culture and membership fees. Commercial advertising is not allowed.

Frikanalen is organized as an association, where each member organization has one vote. The air time is divided into ten categories (ex. Culture, Sport, Youth, Religion etc.) and is organized with equal transmission time for each category.

## DTT

Frikanalen is carried on the national DTT network. It is a must carry obligation. Any operator of a DTT distribution system must distribute this channel for a non-profit fee. This fee is indirectly paid by the government through the annual support scheme.

Just because of the digital transition the opportunity came up to create this national CT channel. Prior to this there were no community television established on any analogue platform. There was not any resistance from the commercial sector when setting aside space on DTT for this community television channel. An important factor that gave “Frikanalen” a broad political support was the opportunity for more core Norwegian content to balance the foreign input (dominated by U.S. programs).

## Sweden

The Open Channel Stockholm started 1993 and was created very much with public access television in the USA and Open Channels in Germany as models. There were experiments of “local television” during the 80’s but those always ended up as commercial oriented non-profitable projects and thus failed economically.

Today there are 25 named in law “local cable associations” of which 15 are “Open Channels” which are organised as a non-profit association. Open Channel is more ideological based

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<sup>1</sup> The whole process and the motives behind this are documented in detail in the government’s proposition and the Stortinget (the parliament) decision 2008.

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mainly “public access” than the others which still try to survive with a “local TV” ambition, which are unsuccessful. Usually it is very difficult to produce enough local content with some quality to uphold viewer interest of a channel based solely on such content.

Concerning the Open Channel, the member organisations pay membership fees and transmission-time fees. Totally the Open Channels reach approx. 2 million Swedish cable households most of them in the major cities. In Stockholm reach 400.000 cable households from its studio in the City center.

The Open Channel Stockholm has 70 member organisations each paying a membership fee of 1.000 euro (This includes one hour broadcast time per week). About 50% of the associations are related to minority or immigrant groups. Typical languages are Persian, Spanish and East African languages. An local Open Channel often broadcast program from other parts of the country via a program exchange with other channels and even internationally for example Democracy Now! a news show daily and directly from New York.

There is no governmental support for community media in Sweden. Commercial advertising is not allowed.

### *DTT*

Sweden was the first European country to introduce DTT and switch-off analogue TV. However, community TV is still broadcast only on cable. As in Finland CT has the right to buy space on a DTT multiplex, but cannot compete economically with public or commercial channels. Open Channels in Sweden have for a long time asked for a must-carry rule or special assigned channel on DTT like Denmark and Norway.

But there have been some significant improvements as the new law 2010 makes it mandatory for cable companies to carry for free a local community channel on both analogue and a digital cable platform. Also telecom and like distributing a general television output on internet must also include this channel for free. *(This improvement to add ip-TV for must-cary rules is an interesting implementation of the EU Audiovisual Directive).*

### **Summary of the Nordic situation**

As you can see the structure of community television is surprisingly different in the four major Nordic countries. On the contrary the public service sector is very much alike with all the four national public service companies organised in the same way and financed with a licensee fee with no commercial advertising allowed.

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Community TV in Denmark and Norway is quite well off when it comes to be on DTT because space on the multiplexes has been allotted already from the start of DTT. On the other hand, still there is the need to get a must-carry rule for cable in those countries. Because of the widespread uptake of cable in the Nordic countries community television should be on both DTT and digital cable.

Concerning the Swedish case, the Open Channels have quite a good position on cable (70 % reach for cable television in Sweden) but still want to be on DTT in order to reach all of the citizens. Finland still has to establish a third media sector formally. This represents a handicap if the sector wants to go digital. It is expected in the present future the situation will improve as the Finnish government has read the message put forward by the European Parliament 2008.

Denmark is well-off when it comes to financing, but the three other countries still have a struggle in front of them. Commercial financing of community TV is not on the agenda in any country. Except for the Finnish-Swedish local television the local content connection is secondary in Nordic countries. "Local content" is valuable for CT but is not any longer seen as a major political driving force for community television.

Finally, it must be stressed that the public access-ideology (the freedom of expression) is dominating community television in Denmark, Norway and Sweden. This together with the European resolution of 2008 more clearly outlines the character of this third media sector contrasting to state/public or private/commercial radio and TV. Thus the sector will be a stronger player in order to get more equality for allocation of space on DTT.

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Recommended web site for community television:

*<http://communitymedia.se/cat>*

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