

# Defending Nordic Children Against Disney

## *PBS Children's Channels in the Age of Globalization*

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### Abstract

This article analyses the key strategies for serving children that were developed in Nordic public broadcasting during the first decade of 2000s, with reference to US and European parallels. The main goal is to investigate how PSB serve the children audience in an age of global competition and media convergence, and to what degree children's content is regarded as a key to legitimacy for public broadcasters. Based on document analysis, qualitative interviews, and programme analysis, the article explores the launch Norwegian PSB niche channel for children *NRK Super*; both as institutional strategy and as implemented in programming. This study demonstrates that a key PSB strategy for children's content is to reflect national culture, language, and identity, and thus represent an alternative to global niche channels such as *Disney* and *Nickelodeon*. In addition, the NRK's children's content is also highly influenced by the PSB strategy to reflect "cultural pluralism" (NRK 2007). A key argument in the article is that in order to be considered as relevant for children in the culturally changing Nordic societies, the public service broadcasters need to provide original programming, which reflect national identity and culture without ignoring the increased multiculturalism and global influences on culture.

**Keywords:** public service broadcasting, niche channels, children's television, Disney, globalization, original productions

### Introduction

A key question in research on public service broadcasting is the degree to which publicly supported broadcasters are still relevant in an age of commercialization, convergence and globalization (Syvertsen 2003; Scannell 2005; Jauert & Lowe 2005). One might expect the market of multiple national and international channels to offer diversity and quality programming, and that the rationales for public service broadcasters are decreasing. In the Nordic region, children's television is no longer an arena without competition from commercial broadcasters. Rather the opposite, the public service broadcasters have been challenged in their heartland by the launch of global channels such as *Disney Channel*, *Nickelodeon*, and *Cartoon Network*.

The Nordic region has been recognized for its specific scarcity of programming for children, and thus been particularly attractive to global players in the market for children's entertainment. Nordic PSB channels have traditionally been reluctant to encourage

children to spend their leisure time watching television, and the channels have been fairly restrictive towards entertainment. The approach to children's programming in Nordic public broadcasting has characteristically aimed to contribute to learning and enlightenment. However, with a changing media landscape and tendencies towards globalization, commercialization, and convergence, the national PSB channels have also adjusted their strategies. The present article analyses the key strategies for serving children that were developed in Nordic public broadcasting during the first decade of 2000s. It addresses the following question: How does PSB serve children in an age of global competition and media convergence, and to what degree are children's programmes still a key to legitimacy for public broadcasters?

The study draws on a document analysis of strategy plans and policy statements from the British broadcaster BBC, the Swedish broadcaster SVT, and the Norwegian broadcaster NRK, in addition to research interviews with senior executives at the Norwegian public broadcaster NRK, and a content analysis of the drama series *Jul i Svingen* (Linus & Friends II)<sup>1</sup> aired on the niche channel *NRK Super*. Accordingly, the analysis will focus mainly on the Norwegian public broadcaster NRK, while British BBC and Swedish SVT serve as supplementary cases to illuminate international and Nordic tendencies. The article will first present a historical analysis of the development of PSB children's TV in the monopoly age, the multi-channel age, and the digital age. Then the article will move on to discuss the development of children's niche channels, and the PSB response to multi-national players such as *Disney Channel*. The article will subsequently analyse the content offered on the Norwegian children's channel *NRK Super*, including a close reading of one drama series. Lastly, the findings will be drawn together, and discussed in a concluding remark.

## Children's Television in the Monopoly Age

Since the introduction of television in Norway in the 1960s, politicians, broadcasters, and the general public have discussed how to serve children within the PSB remit of enlightenment, education and entertainment (Enli 2001, Dahl and Bastiansen 2008). Among the prominent worries and concerns were the *passivity of children*, the risk of children becoming inactive as a result of watching television, and that the influence from US television would result in Americanization. In the Norwegian political debate and public life, one response to worries about the threat of television to national identity and culture has traditionally been the public service broadcaster, the NRK (Enli et al., forthcoming). The NRK was thought of as a guaranty for serious programming, particularly as a result of the institution's respectable reputation as a provider of children's programming in radio since the early 1930s. As a state-owned monopoly, the broadcaster's legitimacy was related to serving children by providing educational and enlightening programmes (Bakøy 2000; Hake 2006). The political intention behind public service television for children was to contribute to their learning and development, within the framework of the NRK.

Seen in retrospect, the risk of television resulting in significant passivity among children was not realistic, given the scarcity of programming during television's early phase. In a context of general scarcity of television programming, with just a few hours of broadcasting each day, programming for children was aired only once a week during the first years of television in Norway. The programme *I kosekroken* (The Cuddle

Corner), which was aired once a week at 6 p.m. and was produced by the NRK with the assistance of professional teachers, offered the children pedagogic content. Consequently, the influence from US commercial television was not actually a dominant tendency in children's programming. From 1963, children's programming was gradually expanded, with for example the launch of the programme *Eventyrstund* (Story Time) on Sundays (Hake 2006).

However, from the very beginning children were considered a specific *audience segment*, and thus served with programmes made for that particular group. The invention of a regular slot for children in the schedule was introduced in tandem with the introduction of television in Norway. At this point in history, the notion of niche audiences was generally absent, because the monopolist broadcaster addressed the entire population as a fairly unison target group (Dahl and Bastiansen 2008). Quite tellingly, NRK's TV programmes for children – which gradually expanded from one to several days a week, until it became a daily show – were named *Barne-TV* (Children's TV). This term was first introduced in autumn 1970, and has since then the programme name has had a high degree of resonance among several generations of Norwegians. Since the mid-1970s, the format *Barne-TV* was aired on a daily basis, except Fridays, and by the 1980s, it was aired every day throughout the week (Bakøy 2000). In fact, the programme *Barne-TV* with its traditional slot (6 p.m.) on the NRK's main channel is one of the longest running TV formats in the world, and the show is among the key pillars of Norwegian children's culture.

### **From Scarcity to NRK Super**

The role of the NRK as the guarantor for children's television within the ideals of public service broadcasting, and with a solid foundation in Norwegian culture, was to some degree challenged as a result of the introduction of cable and satellite television in the late 1980s (Viasat TV3 and TVNorge) and commercial public service television in 1992 (TV 2). However, the NRK kept its hegemony in children's content throughout the 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s, and was not threatened in their main arena: the 6 p.m. slot (*Barne-TV*) and original programmes. The commercial channels did not schedule children's programmes in the evenings, because the early evening slots around 6 p.m. were used strategically for programmes with a lead-in function, intended to attract viewers before the increased channel competition during prime time. Equally important, the commercial channels did not prioritize children's programmes as a result of the lack of income potential for advertisements. As demonstrated by the broadcasting act, Norwegian media regulation is aimed at protecting children against commercial pressure:

Advertisements may not be broadcast in connection with children's programmes, nor may advertisements be specifically directed at children (Broadcasting Act, 2005, section 1-3).

This regulation is characteristic of current Norwegian broadcasting policy, which, in line with the Swedish, is more restrictive than the EU regulations as formulated, for example, in the AVMSD directive (2010). As a result of the commercial channel TV3's airings from Britain to Norway, the channel was not affected by the national broadcasting regulation and could thus include advertisements for children in their television broadcasts. With this regulatory leeway, the commercial channel TV3 started to air

children's programmes in their morning slots, which became popular among children, and also well appreciated by parents who used the programmes as a baby-sitter during the weekend morning hours. This way of serving children (and parents) with programming that increased the hours children spend watching television was contradictory to the ideal in the monopoly age, in which a key goal was to avoid passivity.

In spite of the hegemony in the evening slot (6 p.m.) the NRK was clearly threatened by the commercial channels' appeal as they prioritized entertainment and popular culture (Hagen and Wold 2009). Imported cartoons, in particular from the US and Japan, were the main genres of children's programming offered by the commercial channels. In addition, the airings on the commercial channels seldom included presenters who introduced and explained the cartoons, a practice the publicly funded public service channel NRK had seen as a virtue. The presenters were regarded as framing the content blocks within the PSB trademark of quality and authority. In general, the commercial channels represented an approach to children's television that was in sharp contrast to the traditional public service ethos, which until then had dominated the NRK's productions and scheduling.

The NRK was not unaffected by deregulation of the TV market and increased channel competition, and the public service broadcaster also searched for new ways to connect with children. Since the launch of commercial channels and increased competition, children and young people have been a difficult segment for traditional public service broadcasters to reach. As a result, public service broadcasters across Europe have developed a wide range of strategies to target the hard-to-reach and increasingly disloyal group of young people (Syvertsen 2003). Changes in children's programming in the NRK, however, were not simply a direct result of channel competition, but also a result of gradual adjustment to societal changes. The pedagogic approach and educational focus had already, since the late 1960s and early 1970s, been supplemented by programmes with a mix of entertainment and education such as *Lekstue* (Playschool) and even anti-pedagogic content such as *Pompe og Pilt* (1969). Even though ongoing adjustments had been made, the introduction of commercial channels resulted in a new situation in which the NRK had to compete for the children audience. A first strategy to "win back the kids and youngsters" was to increase *broadcast hours* for children's programming, including morning shows for children. But in contrast to the host-free cartoon hours on the commercial channels, the PSB channel continued to present the content within the framework of a studio production hosted by one or two presenters. The second strategy was to include more *entertainment*, and even imported cartoons in the content. The PSB ideals of education and enlightenment were nevertheless not abandoned, as this aim was kept also within the realm of entertainment and the desire to compete for viewers. The ideal programme would thus be able to *entertain* children and *attract viewers*, as well as be a source to *inspiration and learning*. The implementation of these key strategies resulted in the launch of the PSB niche channel for children: *NRK Super*.

## PBS Children's Channels

The first Norwegian niche channel for children *NRK Super* was launched in 2007, which was fairly late in an international context. Since the early 2000s, European public service broadcasters began to identify children as a prominent target group, and niche children's channels were included in their institutional strategies. Internationally, public service

broadcasters have regarded children's programming as one of their main activities. This emphasis on children audiences is particularly evident if we take a look at the US public broadcaster *Public Broadcasting Service (PBS)*. While the European public broadcasters are generalist channels, meaning that they offer mixed programming and aim to attract all target groups, the US public broadcaster offers more specific programming. Generally speaking, European public broadcasters compete with commercial channels in all genres, including entertainment and sports, while PBS in the US has targeted two specific audience segments: children and business people. According to Hoynes' (2003) study of the US public broadcasting company PBS, the reason for PBS to single out these particular niches is their ability to generate loyal audiences, who in turn might donate money to the company:

PBS has long been a supplier of innovative children's programming; indeed parents, and young children are among PBS's most loyal viewers. As the market for children's media has exploded in recent years, PBS has been in a position to cash in on this loyal audience and a reputation for quality education programming (Hoynes 2003: 126).

The importance of children's programmes for public service broadcasters in their search for legitimacy as a relevant and valuable alternative to commercial channels is thus not restricted to Europe. Among the most emblematic elements of US public broadcaster PBS is children's programming: "PBS is perhaps best known for its long-standing commitment to quality children's programming, which has often stood in stark contrast to commercial children's television" (Hoynes 2003: 123). The US public broadcasting model is more oriented towards 'market failure' and the aim to provide programmes disdained by the commercial channels. The prominence of children's programming in the American PBS hence provides a perspective from which to view the situation in the more generalist European PSB model. In spite of obvious differences between US and European public service broadcasting, not least their models for financing, it is relevant to notice that, in both cases, children's programming is a key to legitimacy (Messenger Davies and Thornham 2007). As pinpointed by Syvertsen (2003: 170), the general dilemma for PSB institutions is to convince the political authorities and the public that they represent a valuable alternative to commercial broadcasting, while at the same time presenting an output that is sufficiently broad and popular to appeal to large audiences. In light of this dilemma, children's programming seems to be a key to legitimacy and also to gaining popularity, in both the US and European models of public broadcasting.

In Europe, the British BBC is a forerunner in the launch of niche channels for children, just as the broadcaster also had been a leading player in other renewals of PSB. Often referred to as the 'mother institution' of PSB, the BBC has had a significant influence on the strategies developed in public service institutions in Europe and other parts of the world. Among the Nordic PSB institutions that have been inspired by the BBC are the Swedish SVT and the Norwegian NRK. Children's television is no exception to the rule of BBC inspirations in Nordic broadcasting: In February 2002, the BBC launched two digital children's channels, *CBeebies* and *CBBC*, aimed at 3- to 6-year-olds and 6- to 12-year-olds, respectively. Earlier research commissioned by CBBC had already indicated the benefits of separating the older and younger programme portfolios into two separate brands, aimed at different age groups (Eryl-Jones 2003). The development of

sub-brands under the umbrella of the public service broadcaster BBC is a well-known strategy in commercial broadcasting. The ultimate example is the Disney brand, which was applied from the 1950s onwards to a range of products from toys to theme parks. Consequently, the Disney brand was easily adjustable to the marketplace of multi-channel television. Throughout the 1990s, the public service broadcasters followed this trend, and began to discover their nature as brands (Ellis 2000: 165). The BBC has for example launched numerous niches under the broadcasting brand BBC, and among these are *BBC News* and *BBC Parliament*, which similar to the children's channels provide the media company with legitimacy in the context of the PSB remit. The niche channels might to a degree strengthen the arguments that PSB should be sustained and protected. The twin launch of *CBeebies*<sup>2</sup> and *CBBC* was important as a signal of recognition of children as a target group that could no longer be taken for granted by the public service broadcasters, as global competitors such as *Disney Channel*, *Cartoon Network*, and *Nickelodeon* had expanded into their national markets. For the children's channels under the BBC umbrella, the brand name is important as a means to distinguish the public channels from the commercial children's channels. The BBC's launch of both niche channels in general, and children's channels in particular, was a strategy that was copied by several European PSB institutions, and *CBeebies* and *CBBC* can be regarded as marking the beginning of a process towards the launch of PSB children's channels in Europe.

Simultaneously, serious concerns about the new competition from global children's niche channels had begun to spread among executives and senior management in the Nordic public service broadcasters. As a result, PSB institutions in Sweden (SVT), Norway (NRK), Finland (YLE) and Denmark (DR) contemplated the launch of a Nordic children's channel. Through the Nordic company *Nordmagi AS*, the Nordic licence-fee-funded public service broadcasters aimed to take advantages of their joint production and distribution in an attempt to "strike back at the competition from the global media companies Disney and AOL Time Warner" (Propaganda 2001)<sup>3</sup>. The plans for a Nordic children's channel, however, were cancelled because of diverging interests, and the fact that Finland and Sweden had decided to launch national children's channels.

The Swedish public service television broadcaster SVT launched *SVT Barnkanalen* on December 23 2002, only ten months after the BBC launched the children's channels. Even though there were obviously strategic reasons for SVT to establish the new channel, there were also dilemmas associated with their increased television programming aimed at child viewers. Particularly in light of contemporary debates about passive lifestyles, obesity and increased screen media use among children, it might seem paradoxical when PSB channels based on an ethos of social responsibility (McQuail 1987) encourage children to increase their TV viewing rather than encouraging them to engage in more physical activities such as sports and outdoor activities. Swedish SVT however countered this criticism by using a legitimizing rhetoric based on three key arguments. First, arguments related to the *participatory* aspect of TV: The strategy documents for the channel *SVT Barnkanalen* included rhetoric and buzzwords such as 'active children', 'engaging' and 'interactive'. Moreover, the document promised that the TV productions should actually activate and involve their target group – children: "The children's channel promises to turn the entire Swedish nation into editorial members of *Barnkanalen*. The channel buss will visit schools and playgrounds nationwide" (SVT Strategier 2003). A second strategy was to emphasize the classic PSB ideal of *educational program-*



ming, even though presented in an entertaining package. The online presentation of the Swedish PSB children's channel underlines the aim to solve the dilemma of PSB, that is, that it should entertain and attract audiences, on the one hand, and be educational and informative, on the other:

Barnkanalen – our own place: SVT Barnkanalen (translates as The Children's Channel) is a whole world for the kids. The viewers and the presenters meet as friends. A channel which takes the children seriously. Fun, exciting but never ever really scary. A preparation for life, without you noticing it (www.svt.se, 08.09.08).

A third strategy to legitimize the need for a PSB children's channel was the aim to create a *community* in which the children could feel connected, not least by the use of an active presenter. The quote above claims that "the viewers and the presenters meet as friends", and thus signalling an ambition to create a community and to raise the standard by offering more than just a stream of cartoons. The presenters serve an important function as the channel's representatives, and the bridge to the child audience, and thus aim to create an atmosphere where impressions from the programming can be talked through and digested together with an adult. In sum, the Swedish children's channel was launched as a channel with added value compared to the commercial channels.

### ***NRK Super* – An alternative to global niche channels**

On December 1 2007, five years after the British BBC and the Swedish SVT had launched children's channels, the Norwegian NRK launched *NRK Super*. The channel brand *NRK Super*, including the institutional logo NRK and an artistic image resembling a smiley face.<sup>4</sup> The main impact of *NRK Super* on the Norwegian TV market was the *increased availability* of children's programming offered by the public service broadcaster: In contrast to the era of scarcity in the 1960s and 1970s, with a maximum of 30 minutes of daily children's programmes, the availability had increased to 12 hours daily airing in the digital age. *NRK Super's* broadcasting hours are from 7 in the morning to 7 in the evening, in the digital terrestrial network, and shares the frequency with the niche channel for youth and young adults NRK3<sup>5</sup>. The amount of children's programming had been stable at about 10 per cent of transmissions, about 838 hours a year, until the launch of *NRK Super*, which increased the total NRK provision to more than 4,500 hours a year (NRK 2009). Hence, *NRK Super* was not launched as a full-scale thematic niche channel, but a 'half-way house' with a daily 12-hour children's block at the channel NRK3<sup>6</sup>.

Moreover, *NRK Super* was not solely a concept for television. Rather, the launch of *NRK Super* was concurrent with a process of transferring public service broadcasting into a *multi-platform environment*, and attempts to adjust services according to online media use. The emergence of the Internet and mobile media has changed young people's user pattern towards multi-tasking, and the exclusive position of the TV set in the living room has been challenged by multiple screens around the house (Livingstone 2002). For public service broadcasters, the migration of viewers – particularly children and young people – to online media imposed changes and further complicated their relationship with the children audiences. The strategies to counter this trend have partly been to introduce add-on qualities in existing programming, such as interactive services and multi-platform events, and partly through innovation particularly aimed at children and young people

(Enli 2007). *NRK Super* was from the outset a multi-platform concept, producing content for television, radio, and the Web. As illustrated below, broadcast TV was still regarded as the hub platform, while the Web was viewed as a supplementary platform. Still, the NRK identified the need to provide children with an alternative to harmful online content as a PSB responsibility. Moreover, the quote from the NRK website shows that the launch of *NRK Super* was surrounded by PSB rhetoric referring to aims to reflect Norwegian language, culture and identity, but also to reflect cultural diversity:

We aim to provide experiences and inspire activities and reflection. We aim to serve children with Internet, radio and television tied to the Norwegian language and culture. Our aim is to be a channel which reflects cultural pluralism and strengthens children's identity and belonging. (...). The NRK Super's web-pages will provide a generous room for creative reruns. The children will recognize familiar characters from *Children's Television* (Barne-TV), and we also hope that the web pages will be a creative playground with sizeable room for user-generated content. New technology provides opportunities for children to produce their own material, which in turn can be published on radio and TV. We will promote children's right to information, and to express themselves. We aim to protect children against harmful online content (NRK 2007).

The realization of *NRK Super* was a result of the launch of digital terrestrial television in Norway in 2007, and the increased frequency capacity following from digitalization. In addition to the technological rationale, the launch of *NRK Super* was motivated by a strategic goal to represent a PSB alternative to global niche channels such as *Disney Channel*. The background for NRK's strategy was the fact that the US-based *Disney Channel* had become number one among children's channels in the Norwegian market, thus challenging the PSB institution on their traditional home ground (Mjøse 2008). Moreover, *Disney Channel* had also become the symbol of a general threat from globalization and commercialism to the language, identity and culture in Norway. As pinpointed by the president of *Disney Channel*, Rich Ross, the *Disney Company* is often "portrayed as the big bad wolf in the business of children's TV". He attacks the PSB rhetoric and their scepticism towards and warnings against Disney: "Our strategy is to provide popular content, and not by talking about it" (Heftøy 2008). To a certain extent this argument is relevant, because legitimating rhetoric is highly important to PSBs in order to justify public funding, while *Disney Channel's* main concerns are ratings and income from commercial activities.

According to the NRK's strategy documents, the vision for *NRK Super* is to: "Create a world where children grow and are important" (NRK 2007). More specifically, the vision is pinpointed in four main aims:

NRK Super aims to be a universe where children are visible, their voices are heard, and the content is customized, and everyone finds something of personal relevance.

NRK Super aims to offer a diverse content, which to a high degree shall reflect a reality that children in Norway can recognize, and which is anchored in Norwegian culture.

NRK Super additionally aims to offer a glimpse of the world, and will thus offer imported quality content.



NRK Super aims to be a universe on all platforms of relevance to children (NRK 2007).

In light of these visions for *NRK Super*, it is clear that the public broadcaster NRK aims to represent an alternative to *Disney Channel* by providing content based on a double strategy: On the one hand, the NRK will offer *Original content*, meaning that programmes are produced in Norway, that reflects the local culture and protects the Norwegian language against increased international (English/American) influence. In the current political climate, this strategy is highly valuable for the public service broadcaster in terms of defending the license fee. Compared to global channels such as *Disney Channel*, where the local adjustments are limited to dubbing, the NRK's greatest advantage both in the apolitical legitimacy market and the viewer market is their domestically produced programmes. As a rule, the NRK aims to reach 25 per cent originated programming, which also implies a large percentage of imported programming in the channel portfolio. This brings us to the other part of the double strategy: The aim to import "quality content", which quite paradoxically includes many Disney productions. Two months after the launch of *NRK Super*, the president for global children's media in Disney, Rich Ross, was asked to comment the new competitor in the Norwegian market: "*NRK Super* has helped *Disney Channel* grow. The only change is that more children watch TV and the most popular programmes on *NRK Super* are imade by the *Disney Company*" (Heftøy 2008). Executives at the NRK defend the appearance of Disney productions in the PSB schedule by arguing that the Disney Company "produces fantastic programmes" (Quoted in Mjøs 2011). The executives at *NRK Super* regard Disney productions such as *Hanna Montana* as tools to connect with their target audience, and in particular with older children, such as 'preteens'. According to head of programming at NRK Television, the most hard-to-reach group of children is the oldest: "Our major headache is how to reach young people from 11-12 years up. There are many theories, for example that they don't watch TV, but prefer Internet. But it is not that simple. They watch a lot of TV, but most of it is American series" (Helsingør 2009). *NRK Super* combines domestic productions with imported productions: The regular airings are dominated by British animation such as *Fireman Sam* and *Charlie and Lola* during the daytime, American series such as drama and sitcoms in the evenings, while the Norwegian-originated productions are reserved for the most prestigious slots. The prime time for children's TV has remained strikingly stable since the introduction of TV in the 1960s, as the slot from 6 pm to 7 pm is still the most attractive television hour for children. In particular this prime time in the weekend tends to draw large audiences, and is thus a typical slot to schedule costly domestic productions for children and youths. Moreover, an outstanding season for original Norwegian drama productions for children is the advent time before Christmas, because of the popular phenomenon of a televised 'Christmas Calendar', a concept first and foremost referring to TV series made for children consisting of 24 daily episodes. These series are aired in children's prime time every day at 6 p.m. from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 24<sup>th</sup> of December. The 'Christmas Calendar' is among the most expensive and prestigious original productions aired on *NRK Super*, and thus provides a fruitful case to study how the PSB rhetoric and the explicit aims to promote national language, culture and identity<sup>8</sup> are implemented in programming.

## Original Productions and ‘The Christmas Calendar’

The prestige of ‘The Christmas Calendar’ is illustrated by the simultaneous launch of the children’s television channel *NRK Super* and the originate production *Jul i Svingen* (Linus & Friends II) in 2007. For the public broadcaster NRK, this parallel launch was related to two key strategies: first, the series *Jul i Svingen* (Linus & Friends II) provided the channel with tradition and credibility, and a tested format, as the first season *Linus i Svingen* (Linus & Friends) had been well-received in the target group when aired in 2003.

Second, the Norwegian drama production was a signal to the public that *NRK Super* could be expected to serve their PSB obligation to represent an *alternative* to the global children’s channels, by providing original drama production. The new channel *NRK Super* gave the NRK a unique window for exposure of in-house productions for children.

The phenomenon of Christmas Calendar was first introduced in the monopoly era, when the series *Jul i Skomakergata* (Christmas in the Shoemaker’s Street) was so successful that the viewers demanded reruns, and the series was broadcasted six times between 1979 and 1998. Many viewers have a nostalgic and ritual relation with their favourite calendar, and public protests against NRK’s decision to never resend the series *Jul i Skomakergata* were heard as late as in 2011. Since the introduction in 1979, the televised calendars have become an integrated element of the Christmas celebration; the series gained status as a collective memory, and functioned as an important ritual in an increasingly secular society. Based on the success of the first Christmas TV Calendar, the NRK produced a range of series, such as *Teodors Jul* (1986), *Jul på Sesam Stasjon* (1996), *Jul i Blåfjell* (1999), *Jul på Månetoppen* (2005). The series *Jul i Svingen* is thus characteristic for its combination of tradition and innovation, which is a key strategy for the public service broadcaster in the digital age (Enli 2008). With the series *Jul i Svingen*, the newly launched channel *NRK Super* tapped into the tradition of a national common ground, and a yearly ritual viewing. Simultaneously, the series represented innovation, by being a multi-platform production, combining TV, radio and the Internet, and can thus be regarded as an integrated part of an expansion strategy for the NRK.

### *Jul i Svingen* (Linus & Friends II)

A key rationale for launching PSB children’s channels in European countries is the need to protect national identity and culture in a time when American children’s channels increasingly dominate the global market. Small language areas like the Nordic countries are considered as particularly vulnerable to international influence, and not least children and young people tend to quickly pick up, for example, US slang. Children TV viewers in the Nordic countries are thus not just audiences, but as representatives of the next generation also a prism for future prospects for national language and culture.

A key challenge for public broadcasters in the global age is to connect with viewers with a multi-cultural background. The aim to promote national culture, language, and identity might conflict with the aim to connect with the entire population, including immigrants. This dilemma is reflected in strategy documents produced by public service broadcasters such as the British BBC and the Norwegian NRK, which define the balance between representing a national culture and reflecting a multi-cultural society as a prominent goal (BBC 2004; NRK 2002). Based on viewer statistics showing that

commercial channels generally attract more people with a multi-ethnic background than the NRK does, the public service broadcaster is currently in a self-reflexive process (Paulsen 2010). A key strategy is to hire a greater number of staff members with an immigrant background, particularly in TV and radio production. Moreover, on-screen appearances by multi-cultural people, in roles such as TV hosts and leading roles in drama series, are used as a strategy to increase the representation of the increasingly multi-cultural Norwegian population. Again, children viewers are understood as a key to future legitimacy and relevance for PSB, and NRK's children's programmes are among the genres with the highest representations of immigrants.

The TV series *Jul i Svingen* (Linus & Friends II) is no exception, as the production obviously intended to reflect contemporary Norwegian society, including its social and cultural complexity. Already in the slogan which promote the series, the production signals an ambition to be different from previous calendar TV series: "A different Christmas calendar about the little, important things in life". The 2007 series thus stood in contrast to former years' calendar series, which had told stories based on Norwegian cultural heritage, and representation of a fairly homogeneous population. Even though the NRK's calendars had also previously represented social change through new family patterns and gender roles – such as the single father and the female electrician in *Jul i Blåfjell* (1999) – there was generally little room for cultural diversity and multi-ethnicity in the series which were produced to connect with classic, nostalgic images of Christmas.

Turning now to analyse more closely the representation of a multi-cultural Norway in the Christmas calendar *Jul i Svingen* (Linus & friends II), I will first draw attention to the main characters. The main characters in the series are seven children, and their families, who live in the small village 'Svingen' in the countryside, which seems like an idyllic contrast to the hectic and urban cities. 'Svingen' is a small community of people who know each other through generations, and have daily contact. Contrasting this stable community, two families with multi-ethnic backgrounds have recently settles in 'Svingen'.

### ***"We are not here to celebrate Christmas. We celebrate Id"***

The series might be regarded as a story about belonging and continuity, and how these are important values for children in a changing world. The village's inhabitants participate in collective events, often set in a Nordic winter landscape and including typical outdoor activities, such as ice-skating and cross-country skiing. To a degree, this focus on traditional Norwegian winter activities might conflict with the fact that 'Svingen' has become a multi-cultural village.

Among the seven main children characters, two of them have multi-cultural backgrounds: Atif lives in a family from Pakistan, and Akaya lives in a mixed family with a mother from Indonesia and a father from Norway. Particularly the Muslim Pakistani family plays an important role in contrasting the traditional Norwegian Christmas celebration, and pinpointing the excluding aspects of Christian Protestant Culture. The producers have chosen a humoristic approach to the cultural differences, and used the contrast to create funny situations in the storyline. The Muslim family is generally sceptical towards Christmas celebration rituals, and repeatedly rejects invitations from the Norwegian community to participate in arrangements. The parents' standard phrase

in this rejection is: “We don’t celebrate Christmas. We celebrate Id”. Ironically, in the end, they always change their minds and take part in the celebrations; the Muslim family redefine the arrangements into a non-Christian event. For example, when Atif is invited to sing in the Christmas choir, the parents first forbid him to join, but he secretly sneaks out to rehearse. In the end, however, the parents show up at the choir concert, because, as they argued: “We are not here to celebrate Christmas. We are just here to hear our son sing”. The TV series includes several similar developments, from scepticism about to somewhat reluctant acceptance of Norwegian culture and tradition. A second example is when Atif’s mother wins a marzipan pig in the Christmas pudding, and exclaims with self-reflective humour: “We don’t eat pork. We’re Muslims”. The comic relief in the series is a fresh approach to conflicts and tensions between different ethnic groups in a society with increasing immigration. And third, when the children take part in a skiing relay, and Atif is excluded because he does not have any cross-country skiing training, he is joined by another child (Nure) who is sick. The two boys serve as sports commentators, and Atif impresses everyone with his knowledge of Norwegian skiing legends (Oddvar Brå). The series thus communicates ways to build bridges between people from different ethnic backgrounds, and indirectly suggests solutions for practical integration in everyday life. These examples demonstrate episodes in which immigrants are integrated into the community because they have adjusted to the local culture and traditions.

The Norwegian-Indonesian family represents an *exotic element* in the National romantic village, for example by introducing Asian food and oriental wisdom, and the family is frequently used to demonstrate how the community can benefit from multiculturalism. The daughter Akaya frequently quotes proverbs such as “A stranger is a friend you just haven’t met”, and in discussions with her friends she represents an *insightful resource* for the community, by providing (anti-violent) wisdom, which turns out to be useful in solving conflicts and dilemmas. The Indonesian-Norwegian is also used to mirror attitudes and behaviour patterns among the local Norwegians when they are introduced to people with a multi-cultural background. For example, the name Akaya turns out to be complicated for the mother of a new friend, and when introduced to Akaya, the mother repeatedly asks: “what was your name again?”. Again the potential conflict was solved with a humorous approach; the mother tries to compensate by saying “Akaya! What an exciting name!”, but Akaya’s friend – with the typical Norwegian name Åsa – loudly protests: “What about Åsa? Isn’t my name exciting?”, and the mother agrees: “Åsa is also an exciting name!” In spite of these minor elements of tension, the general message in the series is that people from different ethnic background can live together in harmony, even though they have to deal with differences and challenges, and that children are a key to integration. As such, the TV series and Christmas Calendar *Jul i Svingen* would seem to have implemented two key – and seemingly contradictory – aims for NRK Super as a PSB niche channel for children: on the one hand, to reflect “Norwegian culture”, and on the other, to reflect “cultural pluralism” (NRK 2007).

## The PSB Approach to Children’s Television

As we have seen, the public service broadcasters’ strategies for children’s television have experienced changed significant since the PSB monopoly, and the contrast between the “age of scarcity” to “the age of plenty” (Ellis 2000) is tremendous. The transition from

reluctance to encouraging children to watch television, and thus being very restrictive with the amount of broadcasted programmes for children, to launching PSB niche channels for children represents a strategic turnaround.

The general tendencies of globalization, commercialization, and digitalization have imposed changes throughout all media genres, including children's television. However, children's programming has been at the heart of the PSB remit, not least in the Nordic region where restrictions against advertising aimed at children have limited the commercial channels' investments in original productions. Consequently, producing content for children has become a key concern for public service broadcasters. However, with the introduction of digital terrestrial television in Norway in 2007, children's programming was increasingly removed from the generalist channel (NRK1). The launch of *NRK Super* in 2007 made it possible to separate children as a niche, and thus to compete more directly with global niche channels such as *Disney Channel*.

The present article has demonstrated how the rhetoric used by the public service broadcasters to legitimate their increased availability in children's programming is influenced by classic PSB ideals such as national culture and identity. The strategic documents in the NRK, in line with other public service broadcasters such as BBC and SVT, underline the aim to reflect national culture, but also to reflect an increasingly multi-cultural world. The analysis of the NRK-produced Christmas Calendar series *Jul i Svingen* (Linus & Friends II), demonstrated that the strategies and rhetoric related to children's TV are implemented in programming. The analysed series is not representative of the children's programmes broadcasted at NRK, but rather among the most expensive and prestigious productions. The high costs are nevertheless regarded by the executives as justified investments, because quality series are often reused by the channel, both as reruns on the channel, and as re-sales to external channels. Moreover, the series *Jul i Svingen* (Linus & Friends II) played a strategic role in promoting and legitimizing the launch of NRK Super in 2007, and thus has played a key role in the transformation from children's TV on a generalist channel to a children's niche channel.

A key finding in this article is that children's programmes are still a key to legitimacy for public broadcasters, and that the aim to reflect and focus on national culture and identity is still of key importance, although increasingly mixed with an aim to reflect cultural diversity. The advantage of representing and reflecting national culture in interaction with a multi-cultural world, in fiction series such as *Jul i Svingen*, is characteristic of the role of public service broadcasting. In line with John Ellis' (2000) argument that public service broadcasting is an arena for coming to terms with tensions and problems in contemporary society – for reflecting on issues together, in a process of “working through” – the series addresses the current debate on immigration and integration. Serving as an alternative to the global hyper-commercial market for children's programming is probably among the most important public service remits of the next decades.

## Notes

1. The series *Linus i Svingen* (2006) was produced by NRK with a budget of 28 million Norwegian Kroner (NOK). The series has been sold to several public service broadcasters, and aired on channels such as Dutch *Nederland 1* (Kerst met Linus), Danish *DRI* (Jul i Svinget), Swedish SVT 1 (Vinter i Svinget), and *Faroese Kringvarp* Føroya (Jøl i Svingi). The series' official English title is *Linus & Friends II*; the series is internationally promoted as a sequel to *Linus and Friends* (2005) of the series: <http://nordic-world.tv/ready-made/catalogue/1138/program/program>.

2. *CBeebies* is the only BBC television channel that does not directly include the name ‘BBC’, but instead encompasses the colloquial term “Beeb”. Actually, the BBC chose the brand name *CBeebies* among names suggested by staff in an internal competition.
3. <http://www.na24.no/propaganda/arkiv/article2004603.ece>
4. The channel name thus has similarities with the leading children’s channel in Germany, *Super RTL*.
5. The launch of NRK3, in 2007 as a third channel within the public service broadcaster NRK, was enabled technically by digital distribution, and involved little political controversy compared to the launch of NRK2 in 1996, which had been debated since the 1980s and involved major political conflicts about distribution and financing (Syvertsen 1997).
6. A similar approach is for example used by public broadcasters in the Netherlands, who air *Z@pp* (pre-school) and *Z@ppeline* (older children) blocks on the Netherlands 3 channel, and VRT’s *Ketnet* in the Flemish region in Belgium (Screen Digest 2007:11).
7. A calendar series is a coherent storyline including 24 individual episodes within the same fictional universe, with a dramaturgic closure and celebration episode on December 24<sup>th</sup>.
8. “In NRK, we have the possibility to produce programming that is founded in Norwegian culture, and thus to reflect children’s reality” ([www.siste.no/NTB](http://www.siste.no/NTB)).

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