

**Key Note Speech**  
**EBU Knowledge Exchange 2014**

**Public Service Media and the Young**  
 Media use and challenges to democracy from a Nordic horizon

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*“The flight from home and meaningless activity are hallmarks of a general trend in recent years. Dance-hall mania and a thirst for pleasure have gone hand in hand to alienate young people more and more from serious and thoughtful pastimes. There’s no wonder words of warning have issued from many different quarters! But there is no cause for despair. **Youth is always of the soundest mind and spirit. The problem lies in the times themselves, and what they offer the young.** In our view, it seems that radio has the potential, more than anything else, to return youth to “the serious game”, activity that offers more than “idle pleasure”, that leaves deep impressions that have a decisive influence on the course of a person’s life.” Radio, No. 1, 1939*

This passage reflects the ideas that were current in the early years of public service radio: an unashamed paternalistic attitude, with an emphasis on learning – in a context of democratic development – with the understanding that *Youth is always of the soundest mind and spirit. The problem lies in the times themselves, and what they offer the young.*

As long as media have existed, there have been ideas about the unique possibilities inherent in young people’s contacts with new media and communications technology. And, as well, it has always given rise to a sense of ‘wonderment’. The text continues:

*“The wireless telephone is adventure at its greatest, it entices with all the mysteries of the firmament. It defies the constraints of time and space, it reaches from coast to coast. It embodies everything an optimistic youngster can wish for – with this little apparatus, made by his own hand and wits, he casts himself into the mysteries of the universe.” Radio, No. 1, 1939*

Not so different from the exuberance of the early 2000s. These words from the 1930s give us some perspective on developments in media technologies.

Within the media companies there has always been a focus on reaching young audiences – albeit the motives for reaching them have differed.

But, since the 1960’s a ‘youth culture’ in symbiosis with the commercial media industry, has grown stronger and more widespread under new socio-economic conditions. The need to win the hearts and minds of the young has become increasingly important; it is repeated like a mantra over the decades. At times it has been seen as absolutely *crucial* even to the future of public service media.

The communication society of today has a tremendous potential. Media and communication represent social and cultural resources that can empower people, in both their personal development *and* their development as citizens from a democratic perspective. We have

access to knowledge and an awareness of events that only 'yesterday' were far beyond our horizons.

We can make our voices heard in many different ways. Each of us can be our own writer, editor or director. We can communicate and interact as never before – across many different boundaries.

In the midst of this development are young people.

Back in the 1930s, public enlightenment was in focus; today, the focus rests on young people's rights and preferences. The younger generation of today is presumed to consist of sophisticated and competent media users – they pick, choose and interact from an enormously rich selection of media and communication platforms. And media companies devote a lot of energy to analyzing young people's preferences - and many times their efforts fail.

Diversification, fragmentation and a pronounced age segregation are frequently recurring themes in Nordic analyses of contemporary media culture.

Media have long served as central, shared sources of information, as 'watchdogs' and as fora of discussion – in short, they have provided a public sphere – and, clearly, public service media have played a decisive role in maintaining the 'public conversation' in the Nordic countries.

Digitization, with increasing commercialization and far-reaching media convergence, is changing our communication systems – in terms of time and space, as well as modes of social behaviour.

The ongoing process has altered not only the function of the media, but also the structures of governance *and* the nature of markets, with new kinds of transnational companies in the global media/communication system. Some of these assume no responsibility whatsoever vis-à-vis the societies in which they operate. They are solely accountable to the market *or* holders of the political power.

On the web we see an ongoing struggle for internet freedom – addressed to both ideologically driven governments and commercially driven actors.

These changes are transforming the public sphere. Which has repercussions on democracy, on freedom of expression - and poses a challenge to public service media.

The Nordic region is among one of the most technology-intensive, one of the most 'wired' regions in the world, and is also one of the wealthiest regions in the world.

All these countries share long traditions of public service broadcasting; strong newspaper industries at regional and local levels; long traditions of protecting freedom of expression and freedom of the press in law; early development of ICT, and media ownership is largely in Nordic hands.

The Nordic countries rank generally high up in indexes measuring democracy, prosperity, absence of corruption and similar indicators – associated with the Nordic Model. The Nordic public broadcasting system, is one of the elements in this Nordic Model.

In this era of globalization, however, the Nordic countries are undergoing changes on many fronts. Extensive deregulation has changed the relationship between government, the market and citizens. Furthermore, once homogeneous populations are today truly multicultural. Our national self-images are under review.

These changes pose numerous challenges – even for the public service media – not least in the context of an altered public sphere.

Undoubtedly the Nordic public service media enjoy a very high level of confidence among the general public. In Sweden and Finland, for example, more than 80 per cent of the population say they put great confidence in public service radio and television – over a long term – in contrast to the commercial channels where confidence is low (Hujanen, Weibull & Harrie 2013). The young are no exception.

In practice, the ranking of public service media is closely related to how they report news and current affairs, and the high priority they assign to children’s programming.

For decades now, the vast majority of children in Sweden and the other Nordic countries have grown up having day-to-day contact with their public service companies’ in-house productions for young audiences – produced in keeping with the old BBC remit to “educate, inform and entertain”. Many of the programs have won international awards. Today, audience ratings are falling – a contributing factor may be the choice some ten years ago to establish a special ‘children’s channel.

Nordic public service companies’ commitment to news and children’s programming goes back to the era when public service radio and television had a remit to promote citizenship in a relatively uniform cultural community. In these respects public service media in the Nordic countries have become *institutions* in contrast to the commercial channels, which are only actors on the market.

This is probably also part of the reason why public service media enjoy such broad approval, across the political field. In this context I might mention a recent global study that found that the audience share and reach of public service broadcast platforms fell in most countries between 2005 and 2010 – with the exception of Australia, Canada and Sweden. The researchers’ conclusion is that a “well-run, trusted public service broadcaster can still thrive. And the long-term efficiency benefits of digitization only become available after very significant new investments.” (*Mapping Digital Media. Global Findings 2014*, p. 24)

This situation has of course caused some discussion regarding the character of the public service television in most Nordic countries. Representatives of the commercial television channels have argued that broad public service amounts to unfair competition, that it

distorts the market and causes problems for commercial channels. That issue has also been raised in the political debate, and in Sweden it also includes the issue of the licence fee: should it continue or be replaced with another fee.

Even if young people express great confidence in the public service media, they are the least loyal viewers and listeners, and least willing to pay the annual receiver licence fee - despite public service companies' attempts to exploit the emergence of new platforms on the Net in a bid to re-engage with the younger audiences. This should hardly come as a surprise in view of what 30 years of audience measurement tell us about young people's media use.

Media researchers speak of a 'television generation' and an 'internet generation', terms that refer to those who were young when the respective media came on the scene. The underlying assumption is that a new medium will in some respects continue to 'form' its generation, even in later life (Findahl 2012, 2014).

But, from time to time, both debatteurs and policy-makers seem to forget that so-called 'old' media still exist and continue to play a role in most people's interaction with media. Occasionally myths about the media develop and distort perceptions of reality. Changes can be overwhelming, but, still, some patterns remain stable – in new contexts – and the result will be new patterns – in a long perspective.

The *Nordicom Media Barometer* – an annual survey of media use that started in 1979, 35 years ago, allows us to see longer-term trends in Sweden. It gathers data for nationally representative samples of the population between the ages of 9 and 79. The *Nordicom Media Barometer* is unique – I think in the world.

Thanks to these data, we can be quite sure of what has happened these past few decades. Predicting future developments, however, is entirely another story.

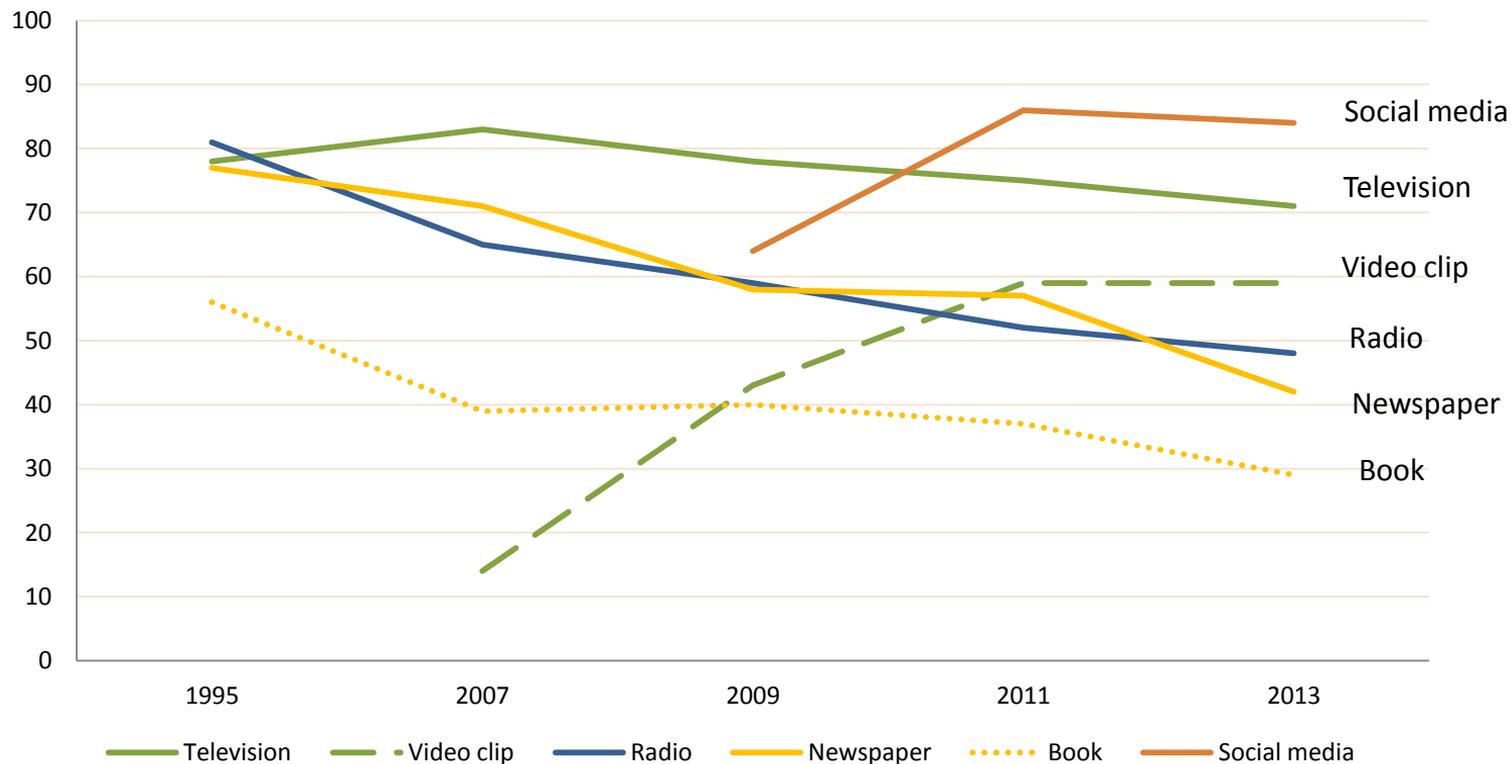
In the Nordic countries people devote more than half of their leisure time to media. Television viewing still remains the single most common leisure activity. Among young people, however, social media have come to occupy that principal role.

Nearly all of the young have access to internet and smartphones. Young people devote an accumulated time of seven hours to media the average day – social media, music, television programs, YouTube and online games dominate.

Their media use is characterized by a strong increase in *intensity*.

But, that young people spend a greater share of their daily lives with social media and other activities online hardly means that they have abandoned traditional media.

Fig. 1: Share of the population aged 15-24 using different media the average day 1995-2013 (per cent)



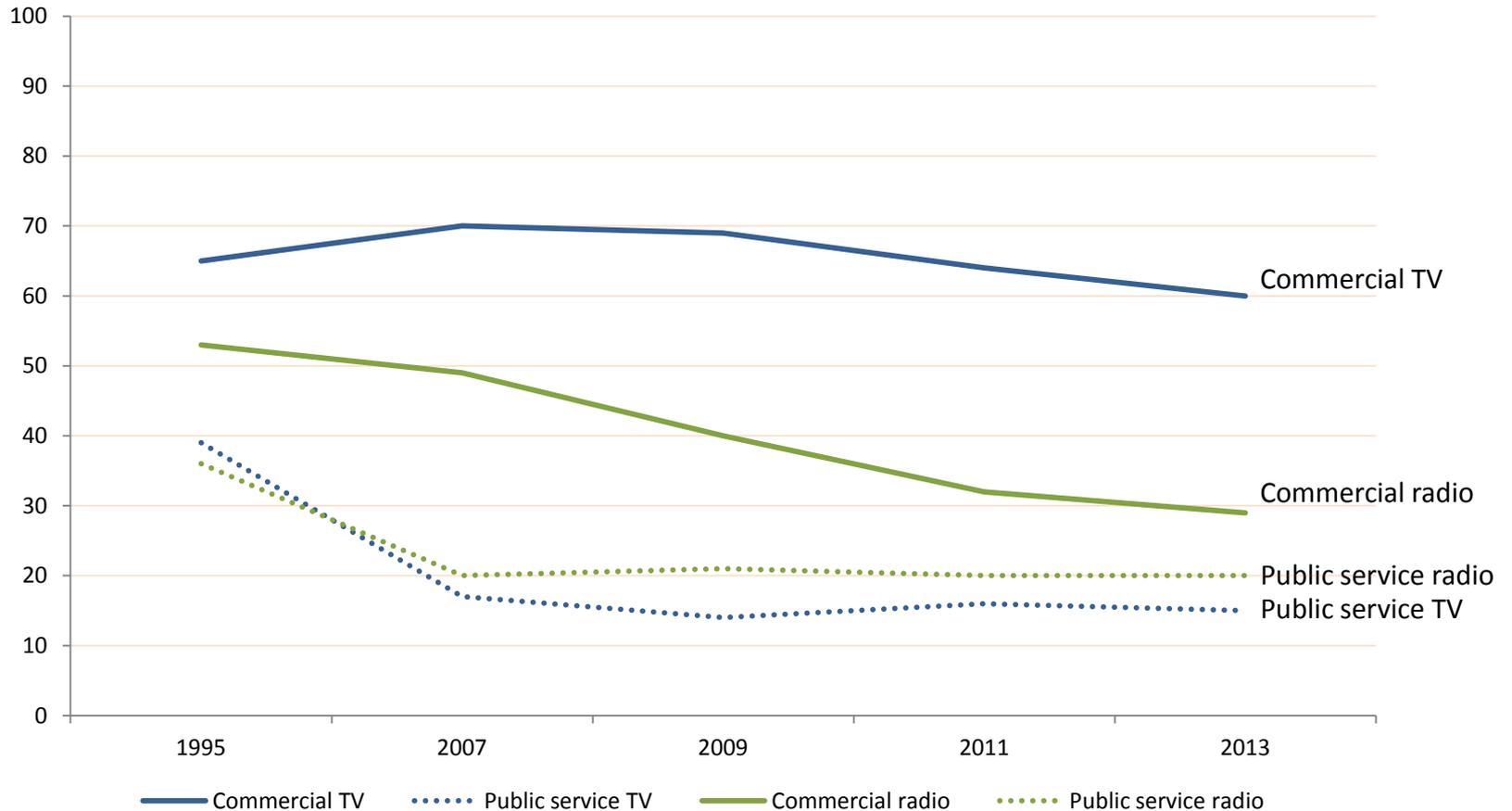
**Figure 1. Young people's use of media an average day 1979-2013 (all media)**

Television and radio programs continue to play a significant role in their lives – this is apparent not least in the comments they post on social media. But, they watch and listen to programs at times of their own choosing. Consequently, viewing and listening patterns have changed considerably since the 1990s.

In the case of young people, 15-24 years old, the biggest changes to be noted are in their radio listening, reading of newspapers, reading of books, and television viewing.

But still, seventy per cent of Swedish youth watch television, mainly commercial channels, the average day - by all means of distribution. So, television continues to have a strong position in the contemporary media culture – even among young people.

Fig. 2: Viewers and listeners aged 15-24 the average day 1979-2013 (per cent)



**Figure 2. Young people's use of public service media an average day 1979-2013**

The pattern for young people's use of public service media has remained stable over the years – most probably thanks to the 'on demand' facility.

But, television viewing in Sweden *does* show a downward trend – it is particularly marked for the commercial channels.

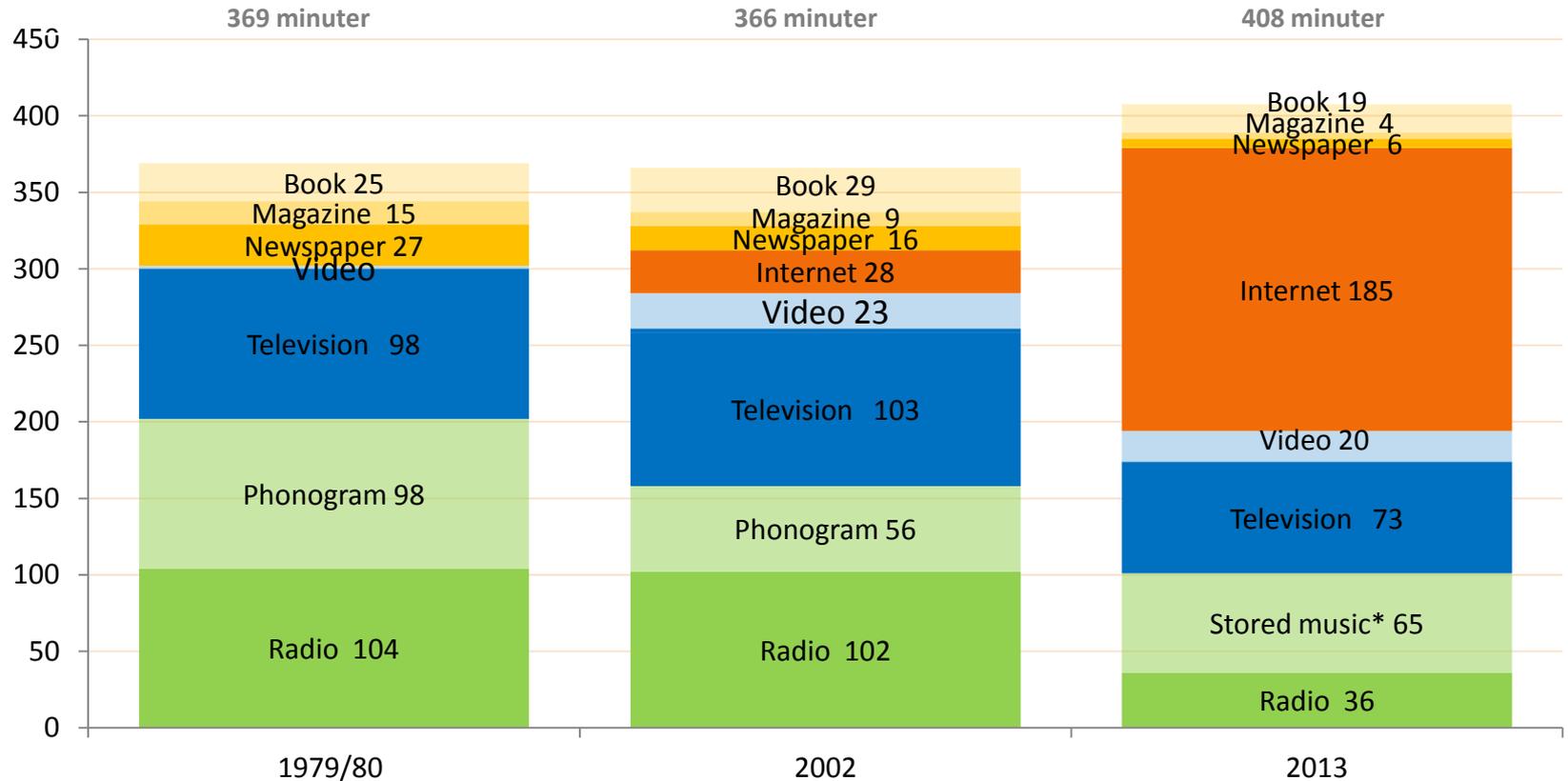
If we are looking for the real rival to television among young viewers - within the realm of moving pictures - it would appear to be YouTube. YouTube's audience share an average day 2014 is 65 per cent among the young, and the corresponding figure for commercial television is 53 per cent. Half a year ago, in 2013, the shares were equal.

Music is an important part of youth culture, and more than 75 per cent of Swedish youth listen to digital music the average day. Radio was long the prime source of music for young people. Today, a variety of online music sites offer a far greater volume and broader selection of music than radio ever could.

Be that as it may, radio continues to be a medium that many young people are acquainted with and use – not least for listening to documentary and factual programs. Sveriges Radio can, for example, boast of a major success with a series called "*P3 dokumentär*".

Also nearly 45 per cent of young people used the programs regarding the election to the European parliament this spring – and a majority said that the coverage of the election gave them crucial information for the election.

Fig. 3: Time spent using media among the population aged 15-24 the average day 1979/80, 2002 and 2013 (minutes)

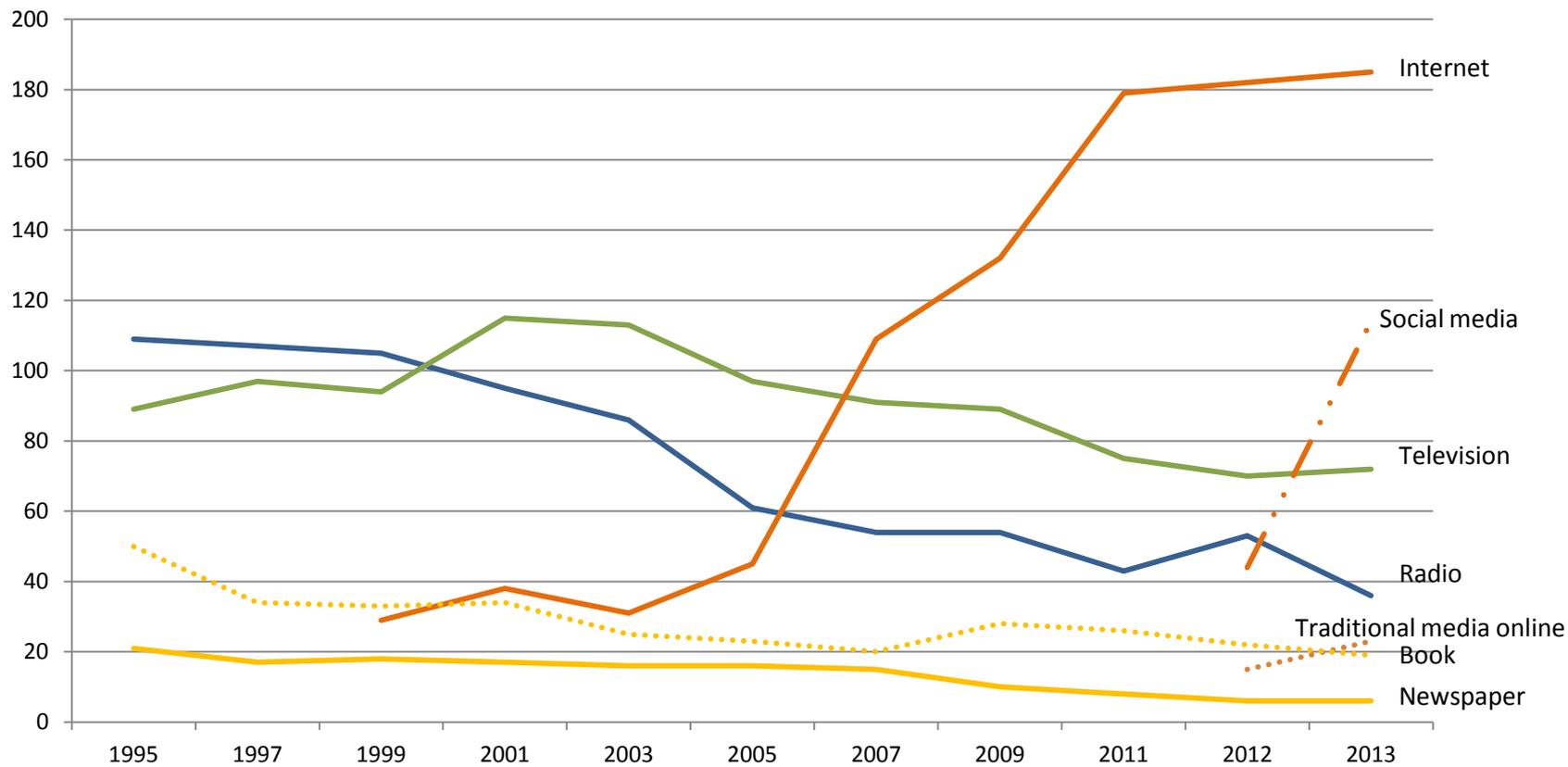


\* radio and television not included

**Figure 3. Young people's use of media an average day 1979-2013 (minutes)**

Over the past decade, media output has expanded enormously, and many new communication services have become available. During this period total media time the average day has increased by about 20 minutes. Among young people, the increase is around 40 minutes. Many media, both on and off line, are competing for the same time. From whatever angle we look at it, there are only 24 hours in the day.

Fig. 4: Time spent using media among the population aged 15-24 the average day 1995-2013 (minutes)



**Figure 4. Young people's use of media an average day 2013 (minutes)**

Today young people use several media *simultaneously*. Old and new media are mixed. Hybrid forms emerge out of an expansive screen culture. Young people of today are growing up and maturing in a media environment that puts a premium on visuality, sociality and mobility, and for many, social media are predominant (Persson & Sjöberg 2014).

Social media are in a class of their own when it comes to young people's media use. Eighty-four per cent of Swedish young people, aged 15-24, use social media the average day, and the time spent is nearly two hours. Social media account for two-thirds of young people's internet use.

The popularity of social media has to do with the processes that are part of being young: identity-formation – establishing and maintaining new relations with people who share the same interests. The media and the ways they are used are involved in a complex pattern of interactions between young people and their surroundings, as is expressed in new modes of communication, socializing, learning and shopping (Persson & Sjöberg 2014).

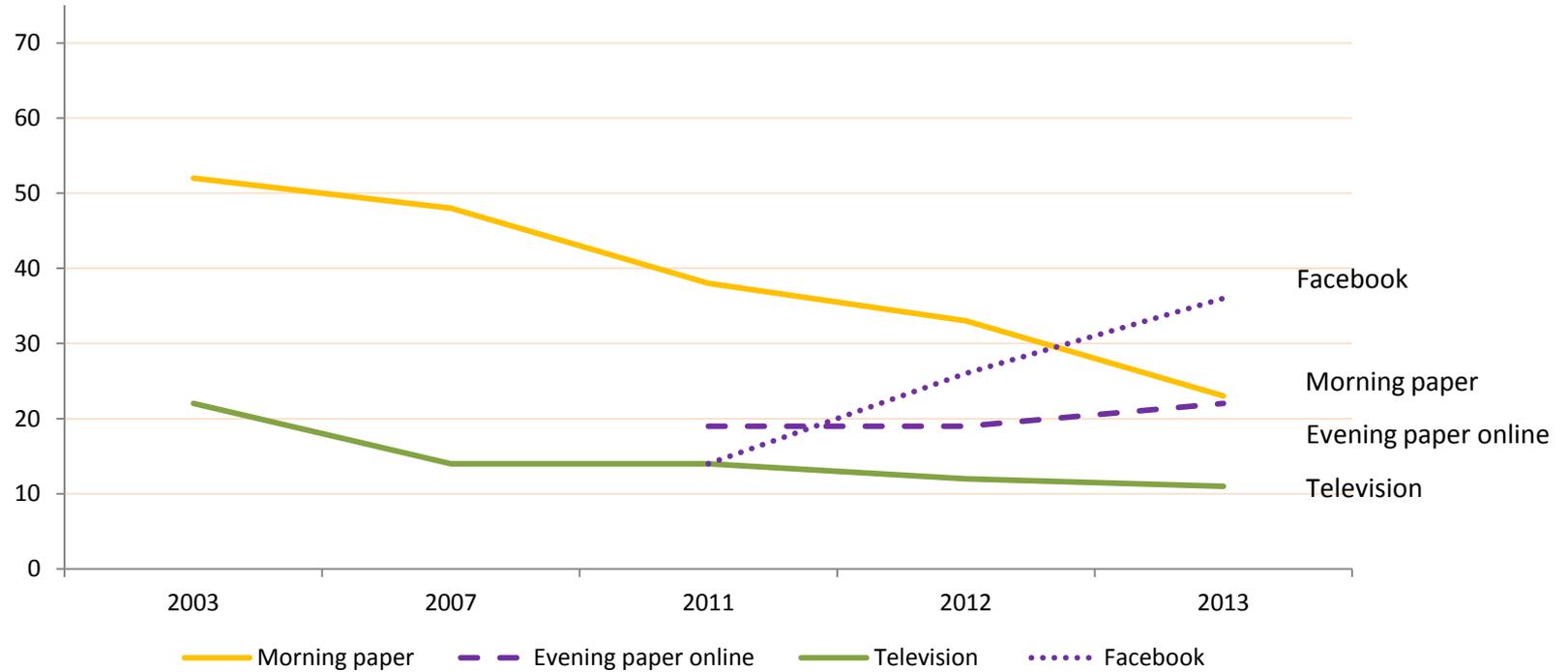
Social media pose the prime challenge to traditional media.

People – especially young people - create their own 'flows', customized according to their own personal interests; at the same time, they opt out of other flows. Never before has it been so easy for those who are interested in politics and public affairs to find news and quality journalism, and many people have increased their consumption of such news and information.

But the opposite is true, as well. For those who are *not* interested in current affairs, it has never been easier to avoid such information in the media. And, never has it been easier to be misinformed or manipulated. (Strömbäck 2013)

It is in this context that we should consider the *Nordicom Media Barometer* data showing downward trends in reading of news in morning newspapers and television news viewing by all means of distribution.

Fig. 5: Use of news in traditional and online media, 15-24 years, the average day 2003-2013 (per cent)



### Figure 5. Use of news among the young 2003-2013

For young people, visiting news services through links on social media, chiefly via Facebook, has become a most popular way to acquire news. But this does not compensate for the decline in news in traditional media. It is also important that the concept, 'news', very likely has a different meaning among the younger generation. More than half of the news as young people are looking for in Facebook is not about current affairs.

In a recent survey of first-time voters in Sweden 40 per cent of the respondents say that they *never* look for political news and information on Internet, and 19 per cent have done so only once or twice.

In this context it is interesting to recall the findings of a study by Shanto Iyengar and James Curran – from 2009 - on the impact of public service requirements on the delivery of news and citizens' knowledge of current affairs in four countries: the USA, Great Britain, Denmark and Finland. They found that in the Nordic countries, where news is broadcast in fixed slots during prime time, a relatively large share of the population watch the news, whether or not they are interested in politics or world affairs.

As a consequence, they are better informed than viewers in countries where newscasts are not accorded the same prominence in program schedules. The authors conclude that newscasts aired in prime time make an important contribution to what they call citizens' "civic competence". Children and youth made up a good share of the viewing audiences they are talking about.

So, how may the more fragmented patterns of media use that we find today affect citizens' 'civic competence' in the Nordic countries? – from the notion that public sphere relate to the nexus between the media, democracy and civic engagement.

It is most encouraging that it has become far easier to find information, to express one's views without any gatekeeping, and to participate in various public discussions.

In these respects freedom of choice and freedom of expression have never been greater.

But, it is a problem that differences in the use of the media, and especially news media, are increasing – differences between age groups and social classes, as well. This implies a risk of widening knowledge and participation gaps. Which in turn can weaken social cohesion and lead to greater inequalities between social classes (Strömbäck 2013, 2014).

Young people have grown up in the digital age and they are developing fundamentally different communication habits than their elders. This gap between the generations needs to be bridged – for the sake of democracy. That is a great challenge facing many different actors – not least for public service media.

Democracy requires well-informed citizens with critical faculties, and to be well-informed, citizens require reliable sources of information and knowledge. But what repercussions may

current 'digital divides' and ever more fragmented patterns of communication have on democracy and freedom of expression in the longer term? Might the result be a both weaker and less egalitarian democracy? (Strömbäck 2013)

Well-informed citizens cannot exist without reliable media and journalism that trains a critical eye on those who wield power. This has long been considered axiomatic. But does it still hold?

What happens to qualified journalism – critical journalism, investigative reporting – when media houses cut their costs, culling their intellectual resources in the process? And, for that matter, what is happening to journalism education, as concerns about 'rankings', 'market shares' and extensive specialization steer our universities?

One thing is certain. The people in any media and communication culture that undergoes such far-reaching change as we are experiencing have to be 'media-savvy' and media-critical. It is not enough to be technology savvy. This is something we in our high-tech world don't seem to fully understand.

The ability to use media; to choose, evaluate and understand content, messages and flows; to understand how media work, how they create meaning and how they make money; to communicate; and to express oneself via media involves many different kinds of knowledge and skills. No doubt, media literacy is a key competence in society today. That is about democracy.

Media literacy is an important concern for our schools - good schools, for all - girls and boys, women and men - but it is also essential for public service media. As a researcher in the recent RIPE reader - *the Value of Public Service Media* - concludes: "The promotion of media literacy is one way of creating public value, as it goes beyond the interests of individual consumers and benefits society as a whole" (Radoslavov 2014).

Ultimately, it is a question of defending the public sphere and freedom of expression – recalling the public service media's commitment to the public interest, to the common good.

The public service media can contribute by offering their audiences programs of the highest quality and relevance, and above all else, by ensuring the conditions that make excellent journalism possible. In short: by relying on their experience and accumulated knowledge rather than worrying about the ups and downs of the ratings game.

As for the younger generation, let us keep in mind a couple of lines in the starting quotation:

"Youth is always of the soundest mind and spirit. The problem lies in the times themselves, and what they offer the young."

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