

Swedish television news

Driven by the invisible hand

This essay is based on a PhD thesis in which Camilla Hermansson assesses how Swedish television journalism portrayed environmental, consumption and lifestyle issues from 1987 to 1998. Hermansson argues that TV contributed to an ideological shift in Swedish society. Previously the reporting focused on crisis and disaster and government's efforts to manage these through legislation, but recently the journalism has bought into market ideology and portrays environmental issues through the discourses of individual consumer choices and confidence in technology.

Environmental reporting, like all reporting, is strongly influenced by the cultural values considered relevant by society at a given point in time. The manner in which environmental issues are mediated changes over time in context with a society's perspective on its own development and purpose. These fluid and mediated cultural conceptions of society's appropriate manifestation do not fluctuate limitlessly however, but are significantly constrained by such factors as the market and the format which the medium allows. Thus, one can say that news reporting has a "system maintenance" function and that mediated discourse is designed not to exert critique on the existing system, despite the fact that journalists often regard themselves as defending the interests of the weak in conflicts.

Rather, journalism can be regarded as a means for perpetuating the overarching structure of society, or, the popular vision of the contemporary society's functional conditions. Television journalism has a specific authoritative character. It conveys a symbolic type of power which is evident in the manner in which information and messages are communicated in a journalistic context and via one specific medium. While it is expected to act as a critical observer and commentator on state power and reflect on that which transpires within the society, it is at the same time preoccupied with ensuring popularity and marketability. Journalists must design the news in such a manner that it is contextually meaningful, regardless if they are employed by a public service or commercial station.

ECONOMY AND ENVIRONMENT

One trend seen in the environmental reporting in Swedish television news is that the environmental question is understood in economical terms. The solution to environmental problems lies in principles of a free market economy and at the same time environmental concerns are also seen as something that can generate economic gains.

One of my findings is that the ideological metaphor 'market', works as a positive frame for interpretation of environmental problems and their solutions. The 'market' has enabled journalism to depart from catastrophe reporting and engage themselves in presentation of more pleasant solutions. The opportunity for journalists to reveal environmentally-friendly discoveries and to report on recycling and consumption habits which the 'normal' citizen engages in is evident in this context. The headlines for such stories are not 'disaster' or 'crisis', but rather technological or social innovation, emphasis on locality and everyday activities and taking care of the environment.

REFLECTION WITHOUT CRITICISM

Notwithstanding this development, there are subtle differences in how this information is conveyed, something which demonstrates the relationship the journalist has to environmental problems and the formal political context. A common thread in environmental politics regards journalism as politically constrained, merely reflecting issues as they are presented without critically analysing the issues at hand. Environmental reporting often originates outside the centres of power of established politics. With respect to international conferences on environmental themes, the focus is typically on visiting dignitaries and their perspectives, and domestically, on the Minister of the Environment, unless the Prime Minister happens to make a statement pertaining directly to the environment.

Journalism has had a tendency to build its stories on preconceptions of how political power is centred with respect to a particular issue, and thereby contributes to the preconception that it is actually these people who are dealing with the issue in question.

Due to the limited time for reflection and contemplation of issues in television journalism, the ideological profiles of different actors in conjunction with their programme for ecological modernisation is often simply not

portrayed. Journalists thus convey, in a largely non-reflective fashion, a liberal and pro-market perspective during periods of conservative rule and perspectives with more emphasis on state involvement during periods of social democratic rule.

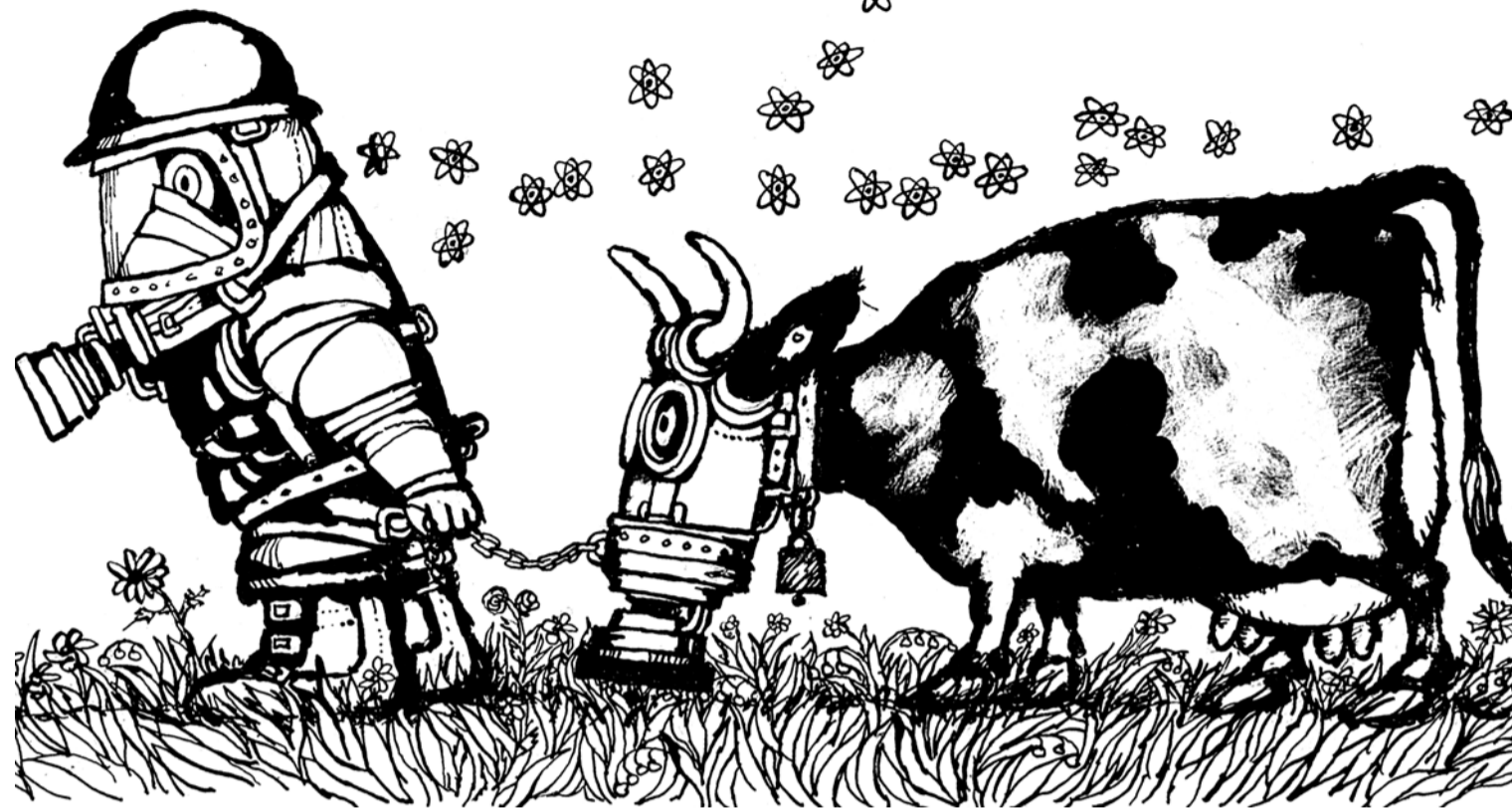
Other market-oriented themes stemming from a generalised subscription to the guiding principles of the "invisible hand" are conveyed to a greater degree than environmental politics, which is comparatively formalised in its coverage, and typically presented in a political context. Consumers, guided by environmental convictions, are to spur on producers in their manufacture and sale of environmentally-friendly wares and services, and such reports convey a message that the solution to environmental problems is found in the relation between the producer and the consumer.

When for example, recycling behaviour is depicted in the television media with realistic scenarios, the consumption-oriented environmental discourse is also embodied and made real in different activities that show contributions to the environment, in a manner corresponding to visions of the ideal society depicted in the television news.

INDIVIDUALISATION AND ECONOMY

Following the social theorist Ulrich Beck a tendency towards individualisation can be seen in industrial societies in the late 20th century. The individual is no longer tied to binding structures based on social stratification, estates or class as in rural societies. Because of this individuals start to create self biographies and show their personalities through symbols. In late modern society where surface takes precedence over content, it has become important for individuals to position themselves with the help of symbols on a fragmented social arena.

One of my findings is that environmental television news not only shows individuals, but also commodities, and the news reporting guides the individual to make environmentally friendly choices at the supermarket. Television



journalism is here the co-creator of framing environmental issues as connected to people's choices to consume. Commodities and consumption are not problematised.

One specific individual that is accentuated is the entrepreneur, ie: the small businessman who innovates new environmentally-friendly uses of old technology, for example by recycling used car parts. Another role model depicted is the 'dedicated person', a committed individual who feels a responsibility for coming generations, often has inherited ecological knowledge and is prepared to work for the environment without economic gain. These 'dedicated persons' are elderly retired persons, the ones who have time to recycle and are not used to fast food. The committed individual is depicted as a prerequisite for environmental work.

Organisations that are depicted – in the consumption-oriented environmental discourse – are the ones that have harmonised their profile towards informing consumers and using environmental labelling, for example The Swedish Society for Nature Conservation (SNF). The more action-based environmental organisation Greenpeace is not shown to a great extent, because activism is not seen as a useful way of making one's voice heard when it comes to questions of consumption. One gains nothing by civil obedience, the solution to the environmental problem is depicted as increased sales of environmental-labelled durables and through technological improvements.

Television news reports depict consumption-oriented environmental discourse, where the human relationship with nature is illustrated in economic diagrammes and increased sales of different merchandise that are labelled as environmentally-friendly, portraying a 'cleaner' nature. The development of new technology is linked to human interest in saving the environment. Technical innovations and increased sales of, for example, environmentally-friendly batteries, cars with catalytic converters and toilets that separate urine and faeces are held up as examples of environmental engagement, but

the total increase in consumption is something which is not depicted. The economic gains of environmentally-friendly products are relativised yet one gets no feeling for the percentage of that which is relativised.

PRESERVING THE WELFARE STATE

Pictures of the nature people want to protect are shown in television news, and it is not a utopia or a return to a Garden of Eden. Rather, the nature that Swedish people have become accustomed to since World War 2 is depicted. The vision we aspire to is conveyed through pictures of open landscapes and rural environments – the nature of summer vacations. This is the nature of the acclaimed Swedish economic and social welfare state.

A radical shift can be said to have taken place whereby environmental issues previously seen as problematic are now seen as solutions to many of the challenges that society faces. But at the same time this shift is based on a view of nature that is almost nostalgic, like a traditional pastoral idyll, an idyll that can be said to have been left behind us during the societal transformation from first a rural society, to an industrial society and towards an information/knowledge-based society.

This vision is a containment of the Swedish welfare system and a promotion of the Swedish middle-class ideal. The Swedish middle-class is staged; ie: the persons who have the money to go on vacation to the Swedish countryside are depicted, not the urban poor.

In a time of globalised economic markets and environmental problems that know no territorial bounds, the depiction of the green 'People's Home' is not about showing a vision of a coming "global village", but a conservative containment of what is regarded as 'typically Swedish'. The notion of the green 'People's Home' rests as much on visions of the genuine Swedish characteristics, as what is supposed to make Sweden unique from an international perspective. In television news reports pictures are shown of Swedish nature enthusiasts, people

taking a swim in the archipelago during their holidays and people paddling canoes, as well as forest scenes that people recognise from their Sunday outings.

'Naturalness' is also depicted in the sales promotion of environmentally-friendly goods, such as green electricity. Merchandise that we have among us becomes vivid and is equipped with inherently natural qualities. In the depiction, the goods speak to us; they bear promises and offer moral restoration. If we buy a certain consumer durable, we have thus taken responsibility for the environment and done our part.

SWEDISH CONSUMPTION AND 'THE OTHERS'

At the same time the 'others' are shown, the ones who are a threat to the green 'People's Home' and to the environment. TV reports have covered the threat towards the western lifestyle and the environment that would appear, should for example, the Chinese increase their levels of consumption; increased levels of consumption in the richer parts of the world have however, frequently not been problematised.

News reports have a national and ethnocentric focus and the supposed changes in lifestyle are not related to the so-called 'third' or 'industrialising' world. Changes in lifestyle are connected to the use of new technologies and consumption of environmentally-friendly goods. The total level of consumption is not problematised and, correspondingly, new technologies make it possible to maintain and justify a lifestyle based on an increased level of consumption. The concept of lifestyle disappears from the consumption-oriented environmental discourse and is replaced with an optimism regarding progress and the maintenance of pro-market and economic functions, rather than a problematisation of the relationship between poorer and richer countries. The 'others' and the potential for their increased consumption becomes a threat to the environment, while economic growth in Sweden and environmentally-friendly consumption becomes an idealised vision.

*After Chernobyl by
EWK*

Hermansson Camilla (2002)
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