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The Rise and Fall  
of Public Service Media Fee Proposal  
in Finland

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Marko Ala-Fossi, Taisto Hujanen

## **The Rise and Fall of Public Service Media Fee Proposal in Finland\***

### **1. Abstract**

This article describes the background and history of funding for public service broadcasting (PSB) in Finland as well as recent discussion on alternatives to the television fee, especially the public debate on the public service media fee proposal made in 2009.

The article discusses the 'sectorisation' of the broadcasting market and policy after the so-called big channel reform and the consequent special *Act on YLE*, the public service broadcaster, in 1993. Since the late 1990's digitalisation of terrestrial television has steered strategic development of broadcasting in Finland (HELLMAN 2010). Due to technological convergence the identity of public service broadcasting is changing to that of public service media (see LOWE/BARDOEL 2007). These transformations together with the decreasing number of valid television licenses were behind the proposal about a public service "media fee" as the source of future funding for YLE.

Finally, the article seeks to identify and analyse the main reasons for the failure of the public service media fee proposal. Despite the clear need for a reform and a preliminary political agreement on it, the Parliament was unable to reach a solution and decisions have now been postponed after the next general elections in 2011.

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\* The first part of this article is based on HUIJANEN (2010) published in *Central European Journal of Communication* (Vol 3, No 1, Spring 2010); the latter part is based on Ala-Fossi's presentation given at the conference "The Future of the Broadcasting License Fee in Times of Media Convergence", Bonn, Germany, May 7, 2010. The authors work at the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication of the University of Tampere, Finland.



## 2. Funding for PSB in Finland – A Short History

The dual funding of license fees and advertising revenues has been part of Finnish public service broadcasting since the introduction of television in the late 1950's, although YLE has never been directly involved in selling ads or airing commercials. In the poor post-war economy advertising revenues were considered necessary to secure the fast launch and steady growth of television transmissions. In comparative terms, however, the share of advertising in the total funding remained rather modest. According to comparative statistics from the Euromedia Research Group from 1982 (MCQUAIL/SIUNE 1986, p. 46), the share was 22 per cent in Finland, which was similar to Switzerland (also 22 per cent) and a little less than in the Netherlands (26 per cent). The same statistics showed that Belgium, Denmark, Norway and Sweden were in that group of countries that did not allow advertising as a source of revenue for public service broadcasting. The British ITV system was based exclusively on advertising; in France, Greece, Ireland and Spain the share of advertising was around 50 per cent (or more).

The peculiar feature of Finnish broadcasting funding was that the public service broadcasting company itself, now branded as YLE, had no right to sell or air advertising. That right was given to a private programme company, MTV, which annually delivered a part of its revenues to YLE. Formally, YLE's share of the advertising revenues was considered to be a payment for the airtime that the commercial programme company was entitled to lease on YLE's channels. The share of advertising revenues was typically one-fifth of the total and, at the highest, one-quarter of YLE's total funding.

This commercial partner for YLE, originally called Mainos-TV<sup>1</sup> (MTV) operated within YLE's legal franchise. This dual structure was broken in 1993 when MTV got its own operating licence and independent channel. As YLE already had two national television channels, this new third national television channel was named MTV3. It continued operating a transmission network originally launched in 1987 as a joint venture between YLE, MTV and an already rapidly growing Finnish electronics company, Nokia.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, 1993 is a milestone year in the post-war broadcasting history of Finland, comparable to 1948 when parliamentary jurisdiction over YLE was introduced through the so-called Lex Jahvetti, and to 1985 with the launch of independent (local) commercial radio broadcasting. For MTV3, the channel reform of 1993 fulfilled a long-term goal of becoming a fully competent independent broadcaster. This franchise emphasised MTV's position as a competitor to YLE, while in the earlier dual structure the competition aspect was much more latent.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Advertising TV' in English

<sup>2</sup> At that time Nokia was the largest TV receiver manufacturer in Scandinavia. (HÄIKIÖ 2001, p. 140)



For YLE's part, an important dimension of the new competition situation was a special act passed by parliament in late 1993 concerning the company's public service remit, status and position in Finnish society. Since the beginning of 1994 YLE's operations have been based on special *Act on Yleisradio*.<sup>3</sup> In terms of broadcasting regulation, the principal change in YLE's position was that it was not dependent, any more, on periodic licensing by the government. In the long run this was supposed to strengthen YLE's independence and to make the company more resistant to short-term political pressures.

The 1993 act on YLE created the basis for a sector-specific media policy, which has characterised Finnish broadcasting regulation since that time; the private sector is regulated through governmental licensing and the public sector by the special Act on YLE. This sectorisation was confirmed by the reform of the old broadcasting law (from 1927) in 1998 that maintained the practice of governmental licensing for private operators. The cable operators need not, however, apply for a license.

The 1993 channel reform and the special Act on YLE did not cut the financial link between YLE and its commercial competitor MTV3, which was compelled to continue paying a public service fee to YLE based on a contract between the companies. The same practice was included in a later franchise the government granted in 1997 to a new commercial television channel, the fourth national channel named *Nelonen*.<sup>4</sup> The government's competence to enforce such a practice was put into question immediately and in 1998 parliament decided to change the *Act on State Television and Radio Fund*<sup>5</sup> so that the practice became part of the Act under the rubric of an 'operation license fee'.<sup>6</sup> The fee applied to all private television and radio operators and was paid as a progressive percentage of the annual turnover.

Although advertising-derived revenues continued to contribute to YLE's economy after 1993, the fees from private operators never reached the level typical in the earlier dual partnership between public service and commercial television. In 2001 the fees represented approximately 13 per cent of YLE's budget, but were in sharp decline already in 2002 when parliament decided to cut the amount of the operation license fee by half and to make digital operations altogether free of the fee. The changes were proposed in a report to the Ministry of Transport and Communication by a work group chaired by Jouni Backman, a Social Democratic Member of Parliament (MINTC 2001). Another task force soon followed, chaired by Seppo Niemelä, a known political figure from the Centre Party. Based on its proposal (MINTC 2004), it was decided that the collection of operation license fees would end with the close of analogue television transmission in August 2007. In its evaluation of the fee system the task force

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<sup>3</sup> Laki Yleisradiosta 1380/1993

<sup>4</sup> 'Fourth' in English

<sup>5</sup> Laki Valtion televisio- ja radorahastosta 745/1998

<sup>6</sup> 'toimilupamaksu' in Finnish

referred to the critique from private operators who considered YLE increasingly as their competitor and felt it was unfair that they were forced to subsidise YLE's activities. In practice, YLE became now almost solely dependent on the licensing fee income.

The abolition of the operation license fee in the connection of the digital switch-over completed the sectorisation of broadcasting policy that had been opened by the Act on YLE in 1993. But as recent debate about YLE's remit and the future funding of Finnish public service broadcasting demonstrates, it did not create any status quo between YLE and its commercial competitors. The technological convergence of broadcasting and telecommunications is a source of increasing conflict that has been sharpened by the recent economic crisis and the worsening financial situation in the newspaper industry.

At the initiative of the Backman working group, YLE's remit was complemented in 2002 by adding a note that the remit applies to all telecommunication networks. The most recent task force led by Mika Lintilä, a Member of Parliament representing the Prime Minister's party, the Center Party, reported to the Ministry of Transport and Communication in April 2009 (MINTC 2009). It proposed that the above network reference should be changed to all public communications networks, following the classification in the *Act on the Communications Market*.<sup>7</sup> The definition refers to open communications networks available to a set of users that are not subject to any prior restrictions.

Since the late 1990's YLE has been active in developing a digital strategy, which has transformed its organisation and identity towards what the European Broadcasting Union EBU (2006) characterises as public service media. YLE's internet portal, *yle.fi*, is among the most popular internet services in Finland. The key part of programming is now available in the internet through *YLE Areena*; another service called *Elävä Arkisto*<sup>8</sup> offers a growing amount of archived materials for users to access. YLE is also involved in mobile distribution and has a long history of teletext services. In terms of production all these services are organized as a unit for new services whose share in YLE's budget is still rather low, four per cent of the annual costs in 2008.

As part of its digital strategy, YLE reorganized its news services and set up an internal news agency around the YLE24 concept, originally started as a new channel in YLE's digital television supply. Because of high costs of digitisation, however, YLE was forced to close the channel although the firm kept the name as a brand for its centralized news organization. As part of this reform, YLE broke up its long-term relationship with the Finnish News Agency, STT, which lost its biggest customer as a result. For YLE's part, this was a small but symbolically important step in balancing a budget deficit created by the digitalisation of terrestrial television transmissions. For newspapers, which owned STT, YLE's decision gave reason to suspect the maintenance of diversity of YLE's news.

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<sup>7</sup> Viestintämarkkinalaki 393/2003

<sup>8</sup> 'Living Archive' in English

Digitalisation of television was a more painful and costly operation than originally forecast. The digital switchover was postponed until 2007 instead of the earlier proposed date in 2002, but the sell off and privatisation of YLE's transmission network was not enough to cover the extra costs of the transition. Additional trouble was caused by stagnation and, closer to the final switchover, some decrease in the number of Finnish households paying the television fee. As noted earlier, the television fee is currently the main source of funding for YLE and since ending the operation licence fee in the summer 2007, it has been almost the exclusive source of funding. In order to support YLE's possibilities to manage digitalisation, the television fee was raised by 11.3 per cent in 2002 and another 13 per cent in 2004. After that, the fee has grown annually in correspondence with general inflation plus one per cent. In absolute terms the fee grew from 148.30 euros in 2001 to 224.30 euros in 2009. The number of valid, paid television fees was at the highest in 2003 at 2,02 million, but it has been gradually decreasing ever since, being 1,90 million in 2009.<sup>9</sup>

In European comparison the Finnish television fee corresponds approximately to the amount that German households pay for public service broadcasting. In all other Nordic countries as well as Austria the sum is bigger, so there might be some potential still to raise the television fee in Finland. The cause of insecurity about the future after that is the number of households ready to pay a continuously higher fee. The continuous decline of the number of paying households after the digital switchover is a worrying signal. Another critical dimension of digitalisation is the increase of numerous pay-TV services which condition users to a selection of strictly customised closed services instead of open generalist channels. Simply put, the number of services to be paid for out of pocket will make people more aware of their role as payers of all media services, including YLE's.

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<sup>9</sup> See <http://www.tv-maksu.fi/index/tietoa/tilastot.html>.

### 3. A Parliamentary Agreement on Public Service Media Fee – With Mixed Reception

Such insecurity was the background to the latest task force, the so called Lintilä working group, which the Ministry of Transport and Communication set up in February 2008 to investigate YLE's public service remit and funding. The working group reported its conclusions and proposals in late April 2009 (MINTC 2009).

The new and unique feature of newspaper reporting about the work of Lintilä group was its systematic nature as a coordinated campaign which accelerated after publication of the proposals. The scale of this reached a volume seldom seen in Finnish broadcasting history. Due to space and time restrictions for this article, we are not able to describe the campaign and the public debate here in full detail, but we have tried to include all the most relevant comments and issues. The press campaign had two major themes, one focusing on the character of the public service fee as a flat-rate tax independent of the use and ownership of reception equipment, and another that stresses the need for a stricter definition of YLE's remit. The representatives of newspaper companies also emphasised in their editorials and interviews an issue which they had raised earlier in relation to YLE's newest digital strategy, the development of YLE's internet services on the regional level.<sup>10</sup>

However, these themes were not completely new. The Finnish newspaper industry had been very critical towards both current television fee system as well as all YLE efforts to expand its services from traditional radio and television broadcasting at least since the mid-2000s. It may now sound a bit odd, but in 2004 the CEO of Sanoma<sup>11</sup> Hannu Syrjänen seriously insisted that YLE should be kept out of the Internet and other new media services – although YLE had offered services on the Internet already since mid-1990s, even before Sanoma.<sup>12</sup> (MEDIAVIIKKO 2004). Two years later he also suggested that license-based funding for YLE should be replaced with tax funding from the state budget (HS 2006).

Diverging from the critique in early 2000 by private television operators against the operation licence fee, the newspapers have been active in efforts to shape and mobilise public opinion for their own cause by ordering opinion polls and organizing seminars about the future role and funding of YLE. In December 2007, soon after the switchoff of analog television, Aamulehti – and later also Helsingin Sanomat – reported about an opinion poll commissioned by the paper according to which about 65 per cent of respondents supported the abandon-

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<sup>10</sup> See for example HS (2008a) and HS (2008c) as well as SS (2009b).

<sup>11</sup> Sanoma WSOY changed its name to Sanoma in 2008. It is the largest media company in Finland and the second largest in the Nordic countries. It is also the publisher of Helsingin Sanomat, the largest subscription-based daily newspaper in the whole Nordic region.

<sup>12</sup> See LINDBLOM 2009.

ment of television fee system and preferred to replace it with funding from state budget. Only 23 per cent would have kept the current system. (HS 2007) In September 2008, the Helsingin Sanomat Foundation invited a Portuguese media mogul, the chairman of the European Publishers Council (EPC), Fransisco Pinto Balsemao, to Finland to give a keynote address in their seminar about public service broadcasting (HS 2008b). His prediction about the end of license-fee model was two days later quoted and supported in an editorial of Helsingin Sanomat (HS 2008c).<sup>13</sup>

However, in October 2008, the newspapers found out that Lintilä working group was supposed to propose a house-hold-based media fee to substitute the current television fee (HS 2008d). After this point, the criticism concentrated more on the idea of the new media fee than the existing funding system. Very soon it was noted that the possible new system would be unfair to people who do not currently have television sets (HS 2008e). A few months later, the CEO of Sanoma News and the chairman of the Finnish Newspapers Association, Mikael Pentikäinen, argued for funding YLE from state budget in his debate article in Helsingin Sanomat (March 8, 2009) and suggested also that public service in Finland should not be a YLE monopoly in the future (HS 2009a).

In this context, it is interesting that the Lintilä working group was actually able to reach an agreement and make a unanimous proposal about the new **public service media fee**. The working group had representatives from all Parliamentary groups, and that is why it was reasonable to anticipate that its proposals were to be passed by the Parliament.

Unlike the present television fee, the new public service media fee was to be paid by all households independent of whether they use any technical equipment to receive public service contents or not. In addition, the fee would have applied also to enterprises and other organisations whose annual turnover exceeds 400,000 euros. Thanks to the larger pool of payers, the annual media fee for a household in 2011 was suggested to be about 175 €, which was about 22 per cent less than the present television fee (224 €). The enterprises and other organisations would have paid a higher media fee (525 €), three times the amount for individual households. However, the working group proposal was rather straightforward in its rationality, because there were absolutely no exemptions for paying the fee. The system was expected to raise annually 450 m€ which is more than YLE's total budget in 2009 (415 m€). This was supposed to be enough to guarantee YLE's funding at the introduction of the fee in 2011 on the same level as in 2008 as well as to cover all the expenses of the system.

It was no surprise that the Federation of the Finnish Media Industry FINNMEDIA<sup>14</sup> as well as Mikael Pentikäinen immediately opposed the public service media fee proposal and described it as "a great disappointment to the private

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<sup>13</sup> In addition, Helsingin Sanomat published Fransisco Pinto Balsemao's article about restricting state support to public service media organizations on February 16, 2009.

<sup>14</sup> Viestinnän Keskusliitto in Finnish



media sector” and “even worse than expected and tailor-made for YLE”. (YLE 2009; HS 2009d) Both of them warned quite eloquently that if the proposal were approved, it would strengthen the role of the state and the public sector in communications at the expense of diversity. The leading economic weekly in Finland, *Talouselämä*, put it more bluntly on the next day by choosing a headline which could be translated as “The Media Fee Would Be Just a Piece of Ridiculous Crap” (TALOUSELÄMÄ 2009). Also the Federation of Finnish Enterprises<sup>15</sup> immediately rejected the idea of media fee – partly because many family businesses would have had to pay the fee both for the enterprise and their private household.<sup>16</sup>

In the newspaper campaign, direct state funding of YLE’s operations was again presented as an alternative to the present television fee and to the planned public service media fee. State funding was considered to be the fairest system because of the progressive nature of taxation. It is tempting to conclude that the newspaper industry’s point of view resulted most probably in a gradual deterioration of public service funding and a more restricted remit for YLE’s operations. The Lintilä working group had acknowledged the fairness of direct state funding but pointed out several serious problems, as well. It can risk the editorial independence of YLE and make it subject to short-term political conflicts. As a result, public service funding might become subject to continuous fluctuation.<sup>17</sup> The working group noted also that the strength of the television fee in a competitive broadcasting environment is that it has maintained the motivation to take care of an intensive relationship with audiences, and the same applied to the proposed public service media fee.

Although the new fee originally had a rather neutral name in the proposal, the newspapers argued now that because all the money collected were to be given to YLE, it would in practice be a **YLE fee**.<sup>18</sup> And because there were no exemptions, it would rather be like a tax than just a fee. Jari Tourunen, the Editor-in-Chief of a regional newspaper *Savon Sanomat*, even argued that the working group had intentionally tried to distort truth about the new system by calling a YLE tax a public service media fee (SS 2009a). For a month later, Tourunen claimed in his editorial that the new YLE fee – or tax – actually endangered the freedom of speech in Finland (SS 2009b).

The tax-like nature of the proposed media fee was soon noted also by a group of researchers at the Helsinki School of Economics. In their public blog<sup>19</sup>, they

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<sup>15</sup> Suomen Yrittäjät in Finnish

<sup>16</sup> See <http://www.yrittajat.fi/fi-FI/suomenyrittajat/a/?groupId=104696c9-6870-40b6-b6fd-3ae12ab4f3c4&announcementId=0e4be54e-8789-42ba-bd4c-3490931dace4>.

<sup>17</sup> See JAKUBOWICZ 2007.

<sup>18</sup> This was mentioned already earlier in April (HS 2009c) and repeated in many comments after the report was published.

<sup>19</sup> See <http://blog.hse-econ.fi/?p=135>.

compared it to the unsuccessful poll tax<sup>20</sup> proposal in the UK. The idea of a flat-rate tax for every adult was eventually so unpopular that in 1990 there were wide-spread protests and even a violent riot<sup>21</sup> in central London which has been considered to be one of reasons for the resignation of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher later same year. Only a few days later, a former Foreign Minister of Finland and an influential Social Democratic Member of Parliament, Erkki Tuomioja, made a similar comparison in his public blog<sup>22</sup> and suggested that a better alternative for the media fee proposal should be found before YLE is made as a scapegoat for inventing a new unfair tax. Tuomioja's comments were immediately reported in the leading newspaper, Helsingin Sanomat (HS 2009e).

The newspapers' critique of the proposals by the Lintilä working group symbolised the convergent media environment that has made newspapers and YLE competitors in the same platforms. But the recent debate on the public service media fee also demonstrates that the social and political construction of support for public service media has changed in Finland. In this context, one of the most interesting aspects of the recent debate was that newspapers did not really succeed in recruiting critical voices from the political elite at least in the beginning. Erkki Tuomioja and the former Prime Minister, currently a Member of European Parliament, Anneli Jäätteenmäki (Centre Party), were among the very few high-profile politicians who publicly opposed the media fee right after it was proposed.<sup>23</sup> From the newspapers' point of view it may have looked like most politicians belonged to 'the YLE Party'.

However, within a month from the publication of the media fee proposal, the Finnish newspaper industry got new allies from perhaps somewhat unexpected direction. Although the media fee proposal had meant a lower rate of fee for an individual household, the Finnish Consumers' Association stated that a lump-sum media fee with no exemptions is simply unfair.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the youth league of the former communist party, the Left Youth of Finland, as well as the youth organisation of the conservative National Coalition Party (NCP) decided in May 2009 to oppose the media fee<sup>25</sup> – while the Finnish Centre Youth took a similar stand later in October.<sup>26</sup> All these political youth organisations were acting against the official stand of their respective Parliamentary groups – and the Social Democratic Student Union had suggested funding YLE from the state

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<sup>20</sup> The official name of the proposed tax was Community Charge.

<sup>21</sup> See for example [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/magazine/8593158.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/8593158.stm).

<sup>22</sup> See <http://www.tuomioja.org/index.php?mainAction=showPage&id=1604>.

<sup>23</sup> See <http://jaatteenmaki.blogit.uusisuomi.fi/2009/04/26/mediamaksu-hylattava/>.

<sup>24</sup> See [http://www.kuluttajaliitto.fi/?5\\_m=1290&s=2](http://www.kuluttajaliitto.fi/?5_m=1290&s=2).

<sup>25</sup> See [http://www.vasemmistonuoret.fi/?/site/vasemmistonuoret\\_yleisradiolle\\_verorahaa/](http://www.vasemmistonuoret.fi/?/site/vasemmistonuoret_yleisradiolle_verorahaa/) and <http://www.kokoomusnuoret.fi/index.php/kannanotot/65-tarvitaanko-yleaenaee-lainkaan>.

<sup>26</sup> See [http://www.keskustanuoret.fi/portal/suomi/politiikka/keskustanuorten\\_kokoukset/liittokokous/liittokokous\\_2009/aloitteet/](http://www.keskustanuoret.fi/portal/suomi/politiikka/keskustanuorten_kokoukset/liittokokous/liittokokous_2009/aloitteet/).



budget already in January 2008.<sup>27</sup> Another blow came from the Finnish Competition Authority which in its official comment<sup>28</sup> to the Ministry of Communications preferred state budget funding over the media fee proposal.<sup>29</sup>

The overall political climate in Finland had changed in May 2008, when it was found out that in the parliamentary elections of 2007 many Members of Parliament had taken money from various companies and businessmen without reporting that as the law required. The whole scandal started when the Centre Party parliamentary group chair, Timo Kalli, stated in a YLE current affairs programme that he is not going to report his election funding because there were no sanctions for not reporting it.<sup>30</sup> By June 2009, the corruption scandal was raising its head again – now the Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen from Centre Party defended himself against accusations of lying over the financing arrangements of the Centre Party election campaign (HS INT 2009b).

Almost at the same time in June 2009, Suvi Lindén, the Minister of Communications, finally came out and publicly supported the Lintilä working group proposal. It should be noted that although she had said already for two years ago in two separate interviews that the television fee system was outdated, she did not praise the media fee proposal straight away. She more or less waited until the Ministry had received all the comments on the media fee proposal from about 80 different organisations and interest groups – which took several weeks – until she formed an opinion on the issue and said it aloud. In an interview she gave for the house organ of her party (NCP), she stated that funding YLE from state budget were in practice impossible and characterised the **YLE-fee** (emphasis added) as “the least worst option” (NYKYPÄIVÄ 2009). So the key Minister’s personal support for the media fee proposal was by no means ever very strong or spontaneous.

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<sup>27</sup> See <http://www.sonk.fi/sonk-vaatii-ylen-rahoituksen-siirtamista-budjettiin>.

<sup>28</sup> See <http://www.kilpailuvirasto.fi/cgi-bin/suomi.cgi?luku=aloitteet-ja-lausunnot&sivu=aloit-laus/a-2009-20-0505>.

<sup>29</sup> The Finnish News Agency (STT) and most of the commercial media outlets like MTV3 have reported incorrectly that Finnish Competition Authority would have proposed media fee proposal. The vice manager of the Authority corrected the news later on the same week, but the correction was not published by all media outlets (HS 2009f). (See for example <http://www.mtv3.fi/uutiset/kotimaa.shtml/arkistot/kotimaa/2009/06/897529>.)

<sup>30</sup> See <http://yle.fi/elavaarkisto/?s=s&g=1&ag=4&t=650&a=5490>.



#### **4. The Media Fee Proposal Turns into a Political Bone of Contention**

Even after becoming a member of the EU, July has remained the main holiday season in Finland. That is why no major openings were made in the media fee debate during the most warm and sunny weeks of 2009. But right after the mid-August, a new opinion poll commissioned by the Finnish Newspapers Association showed that 62 per cent of respondents resisted the idea of a flat-rate public service media fee (HS INT 2009c). When compared to the earlier poll commissioned by Aamulehti in 2007, it seems that the newspaper companies had succeeded in re-directing the (often latent) critique of Finnish people against the present television fee system to against any kind of flat-rate fee for YLE's funding. On the other hand, the same opinion poll indicated that most people might be ready to pay the fee if it was lower than the proposed 175 euros per household.

In September 2009, the Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen got involved in the media fee debate at least on two different levels. First of all, Vanhanen publicly suggested that it should be possible to get an exemption from the fee by providing a written statement about not using YLE services by any means of communication (HS 2009g). This was supposed to help people with very low income to avoid media fee by rejecting YLE services, but the suggestion was not much supported. Only two weeks later, YLE made the so far most direct corruption claims against the Prime Minister. According to the YLE story, Vanhanen had received building materials from a construction company without any payment. YLE told that they had been preparing this story already for over a year - and for some reason they decided to air it just now, although it was still based on only one, anonymous source. (HS INT. 2009d) The chairman of the Centre Party Parliamentary group, Timo Kalli, was so angry and upset about this move that he called almost immediately for the resignation of YLE's CEO Mikael Jungner, who in his part had strongly defended YLE and the media fee proposal against the newspaper industry in the on-going debate (HS INT 2009e).

Although there seemed to be exceptionally much tension between the political elite and YLE in the beginning of October 2009, the cabinet parties were still able to agree on continuing the preparations for the reform of YLE's financing and control system. At this stage, at least all cabinet ministers were supporting the media fee proposal. (LVM 2009; YLE 2009b) At the same time, Aamulehti reported about its new survey among the Members of Parliament which suggested that numerous MPs were actually against the so called YLE-fee. The web newspaper Uusi Suomi described this as a "huge opposition" (US 2009). However, only 132 MPs out of 200 had responded, 82 of them had an opinion on the YLE-fee and about half of them - approximately 40 MPs - opposed the media fee proposal which makes about 20 per cent of all MPs. Also Mikael Pentikäinen continued by arguing now in October that a public service media fee of 175 € was not only a threat to the freedom of speech but also too high, providing too much resources for YLE (LK 2009).

Later in October 2009, Prime Minister Vanhanen started feeling that YLE was systematically trying to topple him by constantly putting out contradictory infor-

mation and altered accusations about corruption. Vanhanen stated that he is ready to fight for his position as the Prime Minister and the chairman of the Centre Party (HS INT 2009f). However, only for two months later in December 2009, Vanhanen announced just before Christmas that he would step down both as the party leader and Prime Minister by the next Party Conference in June 2010, almost a year before the next Parliamentary Elections (HS INT 2009g). One of the public reasons for his withdrawal was a forthcoming leg operation, but just before his resignation Vanhanen told that there were also other reasons which he may reveal later. Whatever the reasons, he became a lame duck in the political arena immediately after his announcement. In June 2010, Vanhanen told that he will also leave the Parliament in order to become the CEO of the Finnish Family Firms Association. (HS INT 2010b; YLE 2010b)

Vanhanen was not the only central political figure and participant of the media fee debate to leave his post before decisions about the YLE financing reform were to be made. In February 2010, YLE's Board of Directors decided to replace Mikael Jungner with Lauri Kivinen, the Head of Corporate Affairs at Nokia Siemens Networks, as the new CEO for YLE. Social Democratic group leader Eero Heinäluoma blamed now Centre Party group leader Timo Kalli for the decision to drop Jungner - and stated that "this leaves a rather strong lack of trust between the YLE board and us". (HS INT 2010a) In less than a month after his term as YLE's CEO had expired in April 2010, Jungner was elected as the new Party Secretary of the SDP. Jungner is also going to be a SDP candidate in the general elections of 2011. (HS INT 2010c)

New social networking tools in the Internet can be used for all kinds of purposes, and by March 2010 the opponents of the media fee proposal had created several virtual communities to express their opinions. The largest one was a Facebook group called *Total revolt against the YLE-fee*<sup>31</sup> which had over 100 000 members, but there were at least three other large Facebook groups with over 20 000 members against the media fee proposal or "YLE-tax". There were also other web-based initiatives, like at least two separate petitions against the media fee. It is impossible to know to which extent the same group of people was involved in all of these actions, but this sort of an **active** opposition against public service media funding system among young<sup>32</sup> people with quite provocative, anti-YLE banners was a new phenomenon in Finland.

Minister Lindén continued publicly supporting the media fee proposal - until she made a very sharp turn on Thursday, March 11. On that afternoon, Lindén announced that she will not bring the media fee proposal to the current Parliament, but will rather leave it to be presented by the next Government after the general elections of 2011. The formal reason for pulling the brake was a dis-

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<sup>31</sup> Täysimittainen kapina YLE-maksua vastaan in Finnish - see <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=282001975149>.

<sup>32</sup> In May 2010, over 50 per cent of Finnish Facebook users (1,75 million) were 18 to 34 years old. (<http://www.digitoday.fi/viihde/2010/05/25/joka-kolmas-suomalainen-on-jfacebookissa/20107450/66>)



agreement over the new model for YLE administration and control between the government and the Social Democratic Party. In addition, Lindén told now that a flat-rate annual fee was unfair for low income households and that she personally was in favour of financing YLE from state budget. In this way she ended up in a disagreement with all her previous statements about the media fee and YLE's financing. Later she has explained that her decision to withdraw the media fee proposal was meant mainly to protect the future of YLE. She told about a massive amount of comments opposing the media fee from ordinary citizens and argued that no public service institution could survive for long on such an unpopular funding system. (Kaleva 2010; HS 2010a; HS INT 2010d)

Among others, Mika Lintilä was surprised – he believed that this was probably “the first time in the Finnish political history that the government does not come up with a bill after a unanimous proposal by a Parliamentary working group” (HS INT 2010d). Lindén's unexpected announcement opened also a window of opportunity for the Social Democratic Party to do some high-profile opposition politics. Later on that same day, the group leader Eero Heinäluoma told that SDP considered now budget financing as the best alternative for YLE's funding instead of the media fee which they had so far strongly supported along all other Parliamentary groups. In the next week, the group leaders made some serious efforts to find an agreement on YLE's financing and administration models, but without results. (HS INT 2010e) However, a couple of weeks later in April, they were able to agree on the level of YLE's financing from 2012 onwards. YLE was promised to get an annual funding of 480 m€ for providing all of its current services (YLE 2010a).



## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

Despite its promising start, the public service media fee proposal clearly ended up to be a political fiasco. Who is to be blamed for ruining this initiative? If there should be only one person to blame (or praise, depending on one's point of view), a favourite candidate is Minister Lindén who should have had the power to continue with the plan which was originally supported by all main parties in the Parliament. However, it seems that by making an imposing u-turn instead of supporting an unpopular media fee, she was able to improve her personal position for the next general elections. This goes also for the Social Democratic Party which may have had also other tactical reasons to start opposing YLE's administration reform and the media fee proposal after the former CEO Mikael Jungner had to resign from YLE. In addition, it is obvious that public campaigning in the commercial media, especially in newspapers, had an effect at least on the public debate – besides their possible success in lobbying the politicians.

Another candidate to be responsible for ruining the media fee initiative is Mikael Pentikäinen who is now the new Editor-in-Chief of Helsingin Sanomat and continues as the chairman of the Finnish Newspapers Association. But he does not want to get any credit for successfully shooting down the media fee proposal and messing up the political plans for YLE's financing reform. Instead, he has publicly accused the so called "YLE-party of the Parliament" – a group of politicians currently or previously involved in YLE's administrative council, the political body for the parliamentary control of YLE – for preparing the proposal only inside a small circle. (HS 2010b) Pentikäinen did not define, however, who or which interest groups had been missing from the working group where all Parliamentary groups were represented.

Traditionally the strongest political support for YLE has come from the political centre and parties on the left. The political right has been in favour of more competition and in support of independent commercial broadcasting. Since the mid 1980's, all major parties have, however, supported the gradual change towards a more competitive model of broadcasting. Recently, the most interesting and noteworthy change of position is the active support from conservatives for a strong public service sector in order to maintain a diversity of voices. The conservatives form the present government in Finland, together with the political centre, the Greens and the Swedish People's Party. Traditionally newspapers have been able to rely on conservatives in the political right, if they have needed to recruit spokespersons for their critique of state-owned media.

The question is how to explain the present dissonance between the commercial press and its traditional advocates in the political right. One reason certainly is the overall commercialisation of the media environment and the consequent internationalisation in its ownership and orientation. Against this background, YLE looks more domestic not only in orientation but also in terms of governance and control. In fact, within EU's frame, this is guaranteed by the so called Amsterdam Protocol (1997) which gives competence to member states to decide on the remit and funding of public service broadcasting.

Another reason for the growth of ‘the YLE Party’ might be that the company’s image as a politically independent actor is now clearly stronger than it used to be. Several steps in favour of YLE’s more independent status have been taken since the adoption of the Act on YLE in 1993. The Act itself strengthened YLE’s position. Later several organisational changes have aimed at clarifying the division of responsibilities between the parliamentary control of YLE and the Director General of the organization, now identified as Executive Director, and other management. Since 2005, YLE’s Board of Directors<sup>33</sup> is solely composed of outside experts from business and culture. It is responsible for YLE’s operations as a limited company and reports to the parliamentary control body of YLE called the Administrative Council.<sup>34</sup> As noted earlier, it is the Board of Directors, and not the Council, any more, which nominates the executive director and other higher management of YLE.

However, instead of just blaming certain Finnish individuals or groups for the fall of media fee proposal, we should try to see the case in a wider international and ideological context in order to understand it properly. It is obvious that the disagreement and tension between the newspapers and a public service media organisation over the remit and funding of public service is not just a Finnish curiosity, but a part of a larger process. From a strictly commercial standpoint, the two sectors have become direct rivals to each other at the same time when it is becoming more and more difficult to sustain also the new expanded services on the basis of earlier economic models. These challenges caused by digitalisation and convergence for newspapers as well as for the traditional-style license-fee systems are practically the same throughout Europe. That is also why the argumentation of the newspaper publishers does not represent purely domestic markets, but is co-ordinated and orchestrated on the European level by organisations like the European Newspaper Publishers Association (ENPA) and the European Publishers Council, as the direct involvement of the EPC in the Finnish debate well indicates.

As DWYER (2010) has noted, media convergence is not just a difficult process of accommodating new technologies by existing media industries, but also a new media ideology, “a way of thinking that facilitates the operation of neoliberal global markets”. It is used to justify the inevitability of increasing business expansion, rationalization and ownership concentration – and all this is changing the ability of media organizations to sustain democracy. In general, a democratic form of governance needs several well-resourced media organizations – not just one – to keep the authorities and public officials accountable for their decisions. In a very interesting twist, this was also one of the main arguments of some Finnish newspaper editors against the media fee proposal. They argued that a relatively independent public service media organisation with a more stable funding system would actually decrease media diversity and freedom of speech – and in this way, be a threat to democracy!

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<sup>33</sup> ‘Hallitus’ in Finnish

<sup>34</sup> ‘Hallintoneuvosto’ in Finnish



In addition, one of the most interesting features of the recent Finnish debate about the media fee proposal is that the possible effects of state budget financing model on the editorial independence of YLE were practically a non-issue. Hardly anybody outside the Lintilä working group seemed to be worried of the idea of strengthening direct government control over the public service media organisation through a direct budget funding - and in this way turning to practices which were more typical to authoritarian political systems than for example to any of Finland's Nordic neighbours or to the Western democracies in general. At least one reason for this ambivalence might be that Finnish people in general have a pragmatic approach to democracy; they appreciate more the results than the formalities of the democratic governance (PETTERSSON/NURMELA 2009, p. 26).

Another interesting issue is how most political youth organizations strongly disagreed over the media fee with the official policies of their own parties,<sup>35</sup> ending up supporting the basically commercial interests of the Finnish newspaper industry. This happened most likely because of the unpopularity of the media fee proposal among the youth than for any other reason. Television fee has never been too popular among the young people, and it is no wonder that an idea of not being able to legally avoid the fee has been considered as unfair. This assumption about a political generation gap in relation to media fee proposal is also supported by the rise of the unofficial opposition groups inside social media, especially in Facebook, which in Finland is most popular among young adults. On the other hand, it is very unlikely that these young politicians would have been eager to forbid or restrict anyone – even YLE – to open up and develop new services on the Internet, although this could well be one of the likely consequences of state budget financing model. It should be also noted that most political youth organizations – except the conservatives (NCP) – were by no means opposing YLE and public service media as such, but only the new and “socially more unfair” funding system.

To sum up, the fall of the media fee proposal in Finland seems to prove at least that a general agreement among the Parliamentary groups about the reform was not the same as the actual agreement over the issue inside the political parties – and that was not really enough in the end. A proposal about a new kind of obligatory fee imposed on all households will obviously be quite unpopular at all times, and it becomes more and more difficult to make any hard decisions as the time goes by towards the next elections. Moreover, the financing model of a PSM institution is clearly a highly delicate political issue, and there are many interest groups – also outside the Parliament – who may want to do their own politics with it. The newspaper industry is probably one of the best-equipped and influential among these groups.

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<sup>35</sup> In May 2010, only the chairman of Svensk Ungdom (The Swedish People's Party) gave conditional support for media fee. See <http://www.verkkoapila.fi/opencms/opencms/apila/news/articles/9349.html>.

Finally, it is very interesting and somewhat surprising that the media fee proposal was so passionately opposed in Finland, because in practice it was only about replacing a tax-like flat-rate payment system with another one. The critical differences with the current license-fee system were the a) idea of charging the fee whether you were able to receive the content or not and b) not to give any possibility to avoid the obligation to pay the fee. It seems these were also the main weaknesses of the original media fee model. First of all, from the collector's point it is rational and cost-effective not to give any exemptions, but this also makes the flat-rate fee to look very insensitive and in some cases even unfair - especially in a country where even speeding tickets are income-related. Moreover, totally breaking the link between the *possibility to receive* the content and *being obliged to pay* and forcing every household to pay a flat-rate fee might also be more economically rationalistic than socially acceptable. In addition, many people – even politicians – may have had difficulties to understand why there should be a separate system for collecting only one tax-like fee for only one purpose. So it seems that all arguments for proposing such a special new tax system should have been much more thoroughly explained and justified, for example by appealing to the need for sustaining a strong domestic media content supply in an increasingly globalised media environment. If these issues are not seriously taken into account in some way or another, further efforts to reform PSM funding may lead again into unexpected – or possibly even to unwanted results.

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