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Contemporary threats and opportunities for public service drama production

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Publication date:
2018

Document Version
Other version

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Hansen, K. T. (2018). *Glocal perspectives on Danish television series: Contemporary threats and opportunities for public service drama production*. Paper presented at Transnational television drama, Aarhus, Denmark.

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Glocal perspectives on Danish television series

Contemporary threats and opportunities for public service drama production

*Paper by Kim Toft Hansen
Transnational Television Drama,
Aarhus University June 2018*

Two interwoven and increasing tendencies characterise the development of Danish television drama during the past two decades.

On the one hand, drama produced for Danish public service broadcasters have received international attention to an increasing degree and, alongside, the financial composition and the narrative strategies of the dramas have become explicitly transnational.

On the other hand, local municipal administrations and local funding opportunities have shown a growing attention towards the local impact of co-funding television drama productions. As a result, the financial composition of television drama funding has become exceedingly complex (see Hansen and Waade 2017).

One way to describe contemporary television drama funding models is by way of Roland Robertson's notion of 'glocalisation' (Robertson 1994). For several contemporary media scholars, the enhanced attention towards processes of global trends also results in a centring of attention towards the local. Back to back, contemporary television funding schemes comprise of local and transnational institutions of various kinds going from small local industrial partners to larger supranational framework programmes.

In order to analyse the complexity of especially commercial public service drama, I will give short representative analysis of two recent Danish dramas from this spring, the commercial PSB drama *Greyzone* (TV 2 2018-) and the 'traditional' PSB drama *Liberty* (DR 2018).¹

¹ I would claim that this particular glocal funding for television drama describes commercial public service drama better than 'traditional' public service drama, even though glocalised funding schemes have also clearly influenced both types of public service drama.

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2018 public service battle in Denmark

During the recent years, Danish commercial public service drama from Danish TV 2 has really been able to challenge DR's attraction of viewership. Even if that is the case, for decades the Sunday evening slot for television drama has been reserved for DR dramas. However, this spring TV 2 took on DR in an open battle when they premiered their new series *Greyzone* at the same time of the DR premiere of *Liberty*. As the table below shows, this was a strategic positioning of the drama, since a number of unusual characteristics marked the DR series.

Liberty	Greyzone
Premiere Sunday 25 February 8PM	Premiere Sunday 25 February 8PM
Adaptation of a novel	Creative co-production with German ZDF and Swedish TV4
Miniseries in 5 episodes	10 episode serial
In-house production	(Complex) out-house production
Postkolonial Africa drama	Crime drama with strong female characters

Liberty was an adaptation of a Danish bestseller, which has been very rare since the systemic production changes during the 90's for DR. In the same period, DR has produced only a few miniseries, and these miniseries have not had quite the ratings that their longer serials have. Alongside, the theme of the series used the politically sensitive theme of foreign aid in a critical way that, for some, may seem like a way to show critics that 'traditional' public service drama in Denmark is *not* left wing oriented.

In other words, for TV 2 *Liberty* seemed like the right time to 'attack' DR on home turf. The assault, then, came by broadcasting a drama production that shows a great deal of similarities with previous DR productions. *Greyzone* was co-produced by ZDF, a financial co-producing partner for DR for a number of years, and compared to the usual episodic structure of many other crime dramas from TV 2 the drama was much more serial, having only one central plot.

Brought on by the full frontal attack by TV 2, this encounter between 'traditional' and commercial public service drama was an important part of the press coverage of the two dramas. The question is, of course, who won the battle?

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Seertallene afsløret efter tv-krig søndag aften: Her er vinderen mellem DR og TV 2



Foto: DR

 **JEPPE PEDERSEN** FØLG

Det blev DR, der vandt seerkrigen mellem de to tv-stationer DR og TV 2.

Søndag aften kl. 20 havde begge kanaler valgt at vise premieren på deres nye tv-serier. Her så 860.000 'Liberty' på DR, mens 611.000 valgte at se TV2s 'Greyzone' viser Gallup.

Here, an example of the press coverage of the TV war between DR and TV 2²

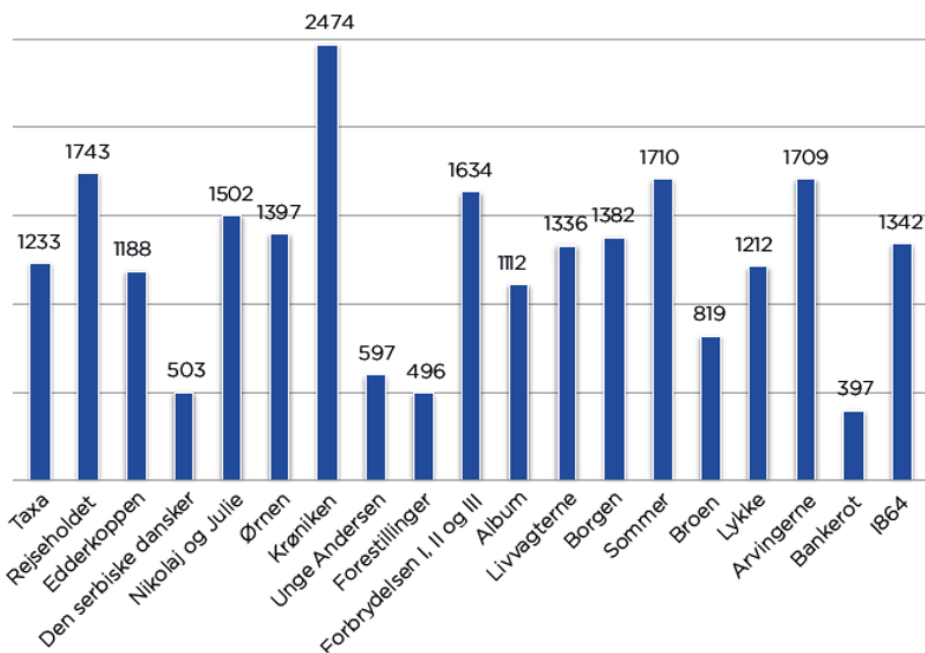
According to Danish newspapers, DR fought back the TV 2 attack and won what was termed 'the TV war' with 860,000 against 611,000 viewers. Obviously, comparing such figures indicates that DR won a battle, at least, but it does not really suggest that they won the war.

My main point is that, if we add up the ratings for both series, we end up with a combined viewership of 1,47 million viewers for the first episodes. If we

² The article from the Danish tabloid newspaper BT reads: "Ratings unveiled after Sunday night TV war: Here's the winner between DR and TV 2. DR won the war of viewership between the two TV broadcasters DR and TV 2. Both channels chose Sunday evening 8PM to premiere their new TV series. According to Gallup, 860,000 viewers watched 'Liberty' while 611,000 chose to watch 'Greyzone'." (Pedersen 2018)

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compare this combined rating with previous DR series, this is altogether right around the average viewership of a DR drama production. Since the late 90's only five series have had a viewership less than a million, and three of these were in fact miniseries too (here, the ratings of *Bron/The Bridge* (2011-18) is a striking story in itself). In other words, it may seem that the battle may have had no clear winner, and that we instead, based on these two dramas, may identify contemporary threats and opportunities for public service drama rather than only seeing this as a national competition. The financial composition of, at least, *Greyzone* suggests a production culture in hasty transition, a transition in which commercial public service drama funding at the moment seems to include the threats as opportunities.³



Ratings of DR series since *Taxa* (1997-99) until *1864* (2014) (Kring et.al. 2015: 120).

New funding schemes for public service drama

Now, I do not have time to go through the history of television drama funding in Denmark. Together with Anne Marit Waade, I have partly covered this issue somewhere else (Hansen and Waade 2017). To put it very briefly, the

³ In addition, the viewerships of the series only tell the story about a flow-TV viewership and does not include the number of viewers on VOD. In Denmark, DR's streaming service is freely available while TV 2's streaming service is a paid subscription. This may indicate that DR still had the upper hand, since viewers did not choose to watch *Greyzone* free on live TV and watch *Liberty* afterwards. Nevertheless, according to sources within TV 2, *Greyzone* did quite well on the VOD platform, which makes the comparison somewhat muddled.

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funding schemes for Danish and much Nordic television drama has, since the middle of the 90's, developed from mostly national funding to a complex funding scheme that includes both transnational sources, national funding systems and local sources, altogether what I refer to as glocal TV funding.⁴



Funding scheme in the end credits of *Liberty*.

However, when DR dramas are in-house productions, external funding mostly comes from other Nordic 'traditional' public service broadcasters, and often through the transnational coloration in Nordvision – a Nordic collaboration set up already in 1959. For *Liberty*, the financial composition of the production is, then, fairly typical of an in-house DR production, co-financed by Nordic Film and TV Fund, and where DR secures the creative control while Nordic broadcasters secure the right to broadcast the drama afterwards (Bondebjerg 2017: 194).

If we go through recent dramas produced out-house for DR, the funding scheme becomes much more complex and shows a great number of similarities with the financial composition of *Greyzone*. I have analysed the increasing complexity of commercial public service drama in TV 2's dramas elsewhere (Hansen and Waade 2017; Christensen and Hansen 2018), which includes a) new transnational co-production strategies, b) city branding interests and c) branded content as co-funding for television drama.

⁴ Jean Chalaby makes a similar point in his work on transnational television in Europe (Chalaby 2009).

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The funding scheme for *Greyzone* outlined in the title sequence.

However, the funding scheme for *Greyzone* is interesting for a number of reasons:

- 1) It is the first largescale transnational co-production for Danish TV 2. Before this, TV 2 has been engaged in financial co-production agreements with several Nordic broadcasters and production companies, but the creative collaboration in the drama has a direct influence on the narrative and setting of the drama. *Greyzone* takes place in a transnational, North European urban mobility space.
- 2) It involves an explicitly glocal support scheme that involves various kinds of co-funding: local (Copenhagen Film Fund), national (Public Service Fund in Denmark, The Swedish Film Institute), regional (Nordic Film and TV fund) and transnational (Creative Europe). However, if we look closer at the various funding methods individually, they have all become marked by transnational media policies – some go

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back decades, others within the recent decades.⁵ So, even if the different funding sources have specific local incentives, they are at the same time based on a transnational stance.

- 3) The German connection in Nordic television drama has been active since the early 90's and especially the broadcaster and distributor ZDF has had a heavy hand in the international attention towards Danish and Nordic television drama. Especially the producer Peter Nadermann has been very active in profiling and co-producing especially Scandinavian crime series.⁶ However, Nadermann left ZDF in 2013 in order to start the production company Nadcon Film. Here, he has continued his interest in crime fiction from Sweden, Norway and Denmark – and *Greyzone* is the Danish first series co-produced by Nadcon Film, with ZDF as a broadcaster on board too. As a result, in the series the German connection shows up in the plot development, including the spectacular Frankfurt skyline in the first episode.⁷



The 'German connection' as a textual result: the so-called 'Mainhattan' in Frankfurt am Main (*Greyzone*, episode 1).

⁵ Copenhagen Film Fund is a transnational Danish/Swedish fund with a categorical global funding policy; the Nordic film institutions also involves a global policy outlook; and the Nordic Film and TV Fund is transnational from birth.

⁶ This includes TV 2's crime drama *Den som dræber/Those Who Kill* (2011) too. The drama was co-produced by Peter Nadermann for ZDF.

⁷ One striking aspect about the ZDF connection in *Greyzone* is that the ZDF channel listed as co-producer is ZDFneo, the ZDF channel for a younger audience (years 25-49), a viewer segment that for TV 2 would be the oldest section of their youth channel segmentation.

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means that broadcasters need to look elsewhere for co-funding. As a result, commercial public service broadcasting has become increasingly entangled with private and transnational players – a direct policy agenda in Danish public service legislation.

Lastly, in the past years we have seen several public service producers leave public service institutions in order to start private production companies that would produce for PSB television. In my case here, this is illustrated by Peter Nadermann setting up Nadcom Film. Indirectly, this development could indicate the consequences of contemporary political pressure on public service television in Denmark and elsewhere across Europe.¹⁰

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¹⁰ There are several other issues to address in these discussions regarding both market and political pressure on PSB, some of which are touched upon in Lowe, Bulck and Donders (2018).