

From reality-TV to rurality-TV

Exploring the genre of idealised rural lifestyles in Nordic public service television

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ABSTRACT

This chapter introduces rurality-TV as a genre, and we discuss how public service media, through this genre, contributes to symbolically resolving tensions between the rural and the urban, and we address processes of mobility and urbanisation in the Nordics. Three popular reality-TV programmes depicting rural life are analysed: *Bonderøven* [loosely translated as *The Hillbilly*], later known as *Frank & Kastaniegaarden* (DR), *Hjælp vi har købt en bondgård!* [*Help we have bought a farm!*] (SVT), and *Oppfinneren* [*The Inventor*] (NRK). These are approached through three questions: What constitutes public service rurality-TV as a genre in terms of form and content? What values are negotiated in the programmes? How can we understand rurality-TV in the context of public service broadcasting in the media welfare state?

KEYWORDS: reality-TV, lifestyle-TV, public service media, rural

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Introduction

It is the life story of a man in the wilds, the genesis and gradual development of a homestead, the unit of humanity, in the unfilled, uncleared tracts that still remain in the Norwegian Highlands. It is an epic of earth; the history of a microcosm. Its dominant note is one of patient strength and simplicity; the mainstay of its working is the tacit, stern, yet loving alliance between Nature and the Man who faces her himself, trusting to himself and her for the physical means of life, and the spiritual contentment with life which she must grant if he be worthy. (W.W. Worster, in an afterword to his translation of Knut Hamsun's novel *Growth of the Soil*)

Knut Hamsun's 1920 novel *Growth of the Soil* depicts a mythical primordial scene: a man who mixes his labour with the land to make a living for himself. The novel can be read as an anti-modern romantic, and it earned Hamsun the Nobel Prize in 1920. Arguably, this literary rejection of modernity is not an entirely Nordic phenomenon but finds its counterparts in the American transcendentalist's movement of the late nineteenth century (High, 1986). However, in their Nobel Prize presentation speech, the Swedish Academy stressed how the setting and theme for the novel is as familiar to Swedes as it is to Norwegians: The story of a man, on his own, developing a homestead with his bare hands, is a theme that seemingly runs deep in Nordic culture.

A more recent contribution to this mythology is a television genre that has gained popularity in Nordic public service broadcasting over the past decade, a genre that invites the viewer to witness how a man (and his family) turn their back on urban modernity to cultivate the land and connect to a pre-modern tradition, supposedly more authentic than what an urban lifestyle has to offer. We call this genre rurality-TV, and our aim in this chapter is to use it as an example for discussing the role of public service media in the current media welfare state model at a time where ideological conflicts are cast in an urban–rural framework. The purpose is to discuss how public service media contribute to symbolically resolving tensions between the rural and the urban and processes of mobility and urbanisation in the Nordics. In doing this, we focus on three popular programmes: *Bonderøven* [loosely translated as *The Hillbilly*], later known as *Frank & Kastaniegaarden* (DR), *Hjälp vi har köpt en bondgård!* [*Help we have bought a farm!*] (SVT), and *Oppfinneren* [*The Inventor*] (NRK), asking what constitutes public service rurality-TV as a genre in terms of form and content. For example, what values are negotiated in the programmes? And how can we understand rurality-TV in the context of public service broadcasting in the media welfare state?

In this chapter, we argue that this television genre, as developed in the context of public service, should be understood in relation to the media welfare prospect of universal services (Syvertsen et al., 2014) and community building (Jakobsson et al., 2023). Since the concept of the media welfare state was

introduced, it has been the subject of various reinterpretations and rearticulations (Enli & Syversten, 2020). Primarily, the concept has been applied to system level analysis, showing its heritage from Hallin and Mancini's (2004) comparison of media systems. Our chapter addresses a conventional aspect of the media welfare state: public service television. However, it focuses on an aspect often overlooked in the media welfare state literature – content – and a form of which is seldom discussed in relation to media welfare: entertainment. Essentially, we are interested in meaning and how the principles of media welfare translate into the symbolic realm through popular television. It is well-documented how public service media institutions in the Nordic region enjoy a high level of trust among their audiences (Kalsnes et al., 2021; Lindell et al., 2022). The high support and trust in public service broadcasting organisations that can be found in the Nordic region ultimately come down to the programming, or at least we can assume that the average media consumer is more likely to encounter public service broadcasting through its programming rather than the policies and broadcasting agreements. Nevertheless, the Nordic public service broadcasting companies airing the rurality-TV programmes under scrutiny here (DR, SVT, and NRK) all adhere to various content regulations, and these regulations constitute an important aspect of the media welfare state. For example, the interrelated media welfare values of universalism and community are evident in regulations declaring (albeit in slightly different words) that these public service broadcasting companies must provide diverse programme content that connects and reflects the whole population across geographical and cultural differences (Ministry of Culture Denmark, 2023; Swedish Press and Broadcasting Authority, 2023; NRK, 2023). The principle of universalism in the context of public service broadcasting thus extends beyond questions of universal access to services and includes also universal rights to be represented on television.

Lifestyle media and reality-TV have been described as a kind of modern moral theatre that stages a normative boundary work to separate legitimate and illegitimate ways of life, often with implied class connotations. For example, Raisborough (2011) has pointed to the role that lifestyle media plays in late modernity as a guide to assist the self in navigating the uncertainties and multiple choices in late modernity. Jakobsson, Lindell, and Stiernstedt (2021) have shown how the turn to reality and lifestyle programming among Nordic public service broadcasters has been understood as an adaptation to neoliberal governance structures.

Media welfare in the Nordic region

In their 2020 report on the state of the Nordic region, the Nordic Council of Ministers declared the following:

Compared to other countries in Europe, the populations of the Nordic countries stand out as being the most mobile which contributes to the ongoing urbanisation of the population. This shift in the population away from periphery rural areas towards urban centres brings about planning challenges in both shrinking and growing regions. (Heleniak, 2020: 45).

These migration intensities are comparable to other highly mobile societies, such as the US, Canada, and Australia. Still, the Nordic region is more rural than urban, and the rural–urban divide has become increasingly politicised and understood as a source of polarisation (Kenny & Luca, 2021). Public service media, then, must navigate a landscape marked by internal mobility, urbanisation, and a threat of rising conflicts between the cities and the countryside.

Public service broadcasting is central to theories of the media welfare state. It is a manifestation of universal access, but also an institution upholding the responsibility to represent the whole country. Part of this responsibility draws on mass media's power to symbolically establish divisions in terms of centre and periphery, and to charge place with social and cultural significance (see Couldry, 2004). Following Jakobsson, Lindell, and Stiernstedt's (2023) discussion of the normative foundations of media welfare, this responsibility can be framed in terms of compensation for inequalities in recognition due to an uneven distribution of symbolic power. Public service's ability to deliver on this responsibility has been debated for decades, and in Sweden, the relationship between the site of production and the quality of the programme content (in terms of representing the whole country) has been discussed (Reimer et al., 2004). A more recent article about the neoliberal media welfare state (Jakobsson et al., 2021) argued that Nordic public service broadcasters have adjusted to a neoliberal model of governance, and that this adjustment can be considered a turn to reality- and lifestyle programming. Aside from this, Nordic public service television in this era displays a certain type of output that can be understood in a media welfare state framework. Among the successes of Nordic television over the past decade, we find at least three genres that are interesting from this perspective. The first two genres are slow-TV (Pujik, 2021), and Nordic Noir (Creeber, 2015), genres that have received much scholarly attention – slow-TV as a reinvention of the television medium and its relation to the audience; Nordic Noir as a theme that explores the trauma of a failed utopia in Nordic welfare states. The third genre is less exploited: a type of lifestyle television that idealises rural life, and we suggest the label rurality-TV for this genre.

Rurality-TV programmes are produced and broadcast in all Nordic public service television organisations, and they are also transmitted to neighbouring countries. Examples of programmes included in this genre are *Frank & Kastaniegaarden* (DR), *Mandelmanns gård* [*Mandelmann's farm*] (TV4), *Karl Fredrik på Österlen* [*Karl Fredrik in Österlen*] (TV4), *Hjälp vi har köpt en*

bondgård! (SVT), *Oppfinneren* (NRK), and *Strömsö* (Svenska Yle). Although clear examples of lifestyle-TV, these programmes differ from the lifestyle programmes described by Raisborough (2011) in that they do not intend to display and correct the behaviour of “failed subjects” but instead promote a way of life that is down to earth, in sync with the seasons, and far from the urban way of life. Furthermore, these programmes do not involve external experts who intervene, but the protagonists themselves are the experts, or are in the process of becoming experts with help from the community.

Reality- and lifestyle-TV

Much of the critical engagement with reality- and lifestyle-TV has focused on genres that strive to discipline individuals who express a lack of control when it comes to eating, exercise, financial matters, clothing, or relations. According to Raisborough (2011), the significance of lifestyle- and reality-TV is closely linked to the decline of the welfare state in the neoliberal era. When the state fails to provide, production companies step in to help deprived families and failed individual life-projects in exchange for framing their misfortunes as entertainment for a television audience. This has been interpreted as an exploitation, but Raisborough has stressed how the lifestyle television provides a narrative with a happy ending, something that is quite unusual in other forms of reality-based mainstream media. The underlying promise is “the good life”, and that this can be available to all.

Literature on reality television has identified various subgenres. According to Hill (2007), there are two types of lifestyle programmes: instructional and makeover programmes. The former offer straightforward advice, while the latter present the transformation of something (the self, the body, a home, etc.). Ouellette (2016) expanded Hill’s classification into four types: 1) how-to and advice programmes, 2) makeovers, 3) talk shows (e.g., Dr. Phil, Oprah Winfrey, Judge Judy, etc.), and 4) docusoaps. Christensen (2010: 129) has applied a specific Nordic or Scandinavian perspective on lifestyle television, arguing that Nordic broadcasters have introduced a category “in which lifestyle is neither related to tips and handy advice nor has it to do with a makeover”. Christensen called these programmes expository, as they invite the viewer to enter the home of ordinary or semi-well-known personalities.

The countryside is a well-known setting for establishing authenticity in popular culture. As such, this “rural idyll” emerges in various media: magazines (Lagerqvist, 2014), television (Fountain, 2020; Fountain & Bulmer, 2022; Kraszewski, 2017), and social media (Linné, 2016). Moreover, it takes on different forms in various geographic and cultural settings (Fountain, 2020). Central, however, is the rural idyll as a space for projection, promising a simpler, more genuine way of life than what urban modernity has to offer. Furthermore, as noted by Fountain and Bulmer (2022: 85), mediated

representations of farming and agriculture are under-theorised in academic research. The rural–urban divide is a common theme in reality-TV. In fact, one of the first programmes to contribute to the genre’s popularity in early 2000s was *The Simple Life*, where celebrities Paris Hilton and Nicole Richie were confronted with “real” America and had to perform various manual jobs. Stiernstedt and Jakobsson (2019) have shown how the masculine, working-class ideals of “real men” are established in contrast to urban life in Swedish reality-TV programmes. In a more international context, Kraszewski (2017: 142ff) has written about rural reality television as a specific subgenre of reality-TV, as represented by programmes such as *Swamp People*, *Moonshiners*, and *Alaska: The Last Frontier*. Kraszewski (2017: 142ff) traced the fascination with the rural in reality-TV back to how country life has been portrayed in fiction as a refuge from the chaos of urban life, offering “peace, innocence and simple virtue”. Kraszewski (2017) identified two types of rural representation and nostalgia in reality-TV. One is the countryside as an expression of a lost golden age: “simplistic celebration over complex understanding” (Kraszewski, 2017: 139). The other is the countryside seen as “so backward that viewers aspire to the opposite values to those seen on the screen” (Kraszewski, 2017: 150), where the rural population is presented as a contrast to the urban middle class. While the latter is more in line with an understanding of lifestyle-TV as a display of “failed subjects”, the former provides a fruitful context for discussing rurality-TV as a genre that attempts to reconnect with traditional values and the countryside as a site for community and meaning.

Our aim is not to prove how well these programmes represent these intentions on behalf of the producers, but instead to offer an interpretative argument where we ask how the rurality-TV genre can be understood in a media welfare framework. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to make any claims about explicit intentions when it comes to this type of programming. Any comments on the relationship between the rurality genre and the broadcasting companies will necessarily be speculative. However, production studies of similar programmes, for instance, Puijk’s (2019: 127–166) study of Norwegian slow-TV, suggests that NRK producers stress how programmes such as *Norge rundt* [*Tour of Norway*] or *Der ingen skulle tru at nokon kunne bu* [*Where no one would expect that anyone could live*] reflects a programming “ideology” of the broadcasting company that involves simplicity and nostalgic views of the rural. An interview study with Swedish and Norwegian public service broadcasters (Larsen, 2014) found how quality was contrasted with commercial programming and an active ambition to preserve national language and culture.

Rurality-TV as a genre

Our approach to analysing rurality-TV as a genre is in line with the theoretical genre concept (Todorov, 1990), as we argue that there is a specific genre of Scandinavian lifestyle television that shares common themes and aesthetics. Theoretical genres, according to Todorov, are created through analysis by identifying common traits among texts that originally have little to do with each other. Nordic Noir is an example of a theoretical genre that appeared as a marketing label, quite similar to its namesake film noir. The label was constructed through the observation and argument that Scandinavian crime fiction shared some common themes and aesthetics. Moreover, we draw on Feuer (1987), who divided genre analysis into three areas of focus: the aesthetic, the ritual, and the ideological. Our analysis of the aesthetics combines attention to technical and semiotic codes (Selby & Cowdery, 1995), with the visual and auditive ingredients, as well as their combinations in creating an “overall semiotic effect” (Chouliaraki, 2006). The ritual dimensions of rurality-TV are explored through an analysis of how this genre can be understood in terms of an “exchange between industry and audience [...] through which a culture speaks to itself” (Feuer, 1987: 119). More specifically, this involves an examination of which cultural beliefs and values are expressed and negotiated through public service rurality-TV programmes, and the potential meaning of this exchange in relation to the social order and challenges of contemporary Nordic societies. The analysis of ideology focuses on three dimensions, drawing on Chouliaraki (2006): space, time, and agency.

We have selected three texts for analysis: *Bonderøven*, later known as *Frank & Kastaniegaarden* (DR), *Hjælp vi har købt en bondgård!* (SVT), and *Oppfinnere* (NRK). The criteria for selection was that they are produced by national public service broadcasters, set in a rural setting, and portray a lifestyle far from urban environments. Moreover, we have limited our analysis to the first season produced of each series. Our main motivation for this delimitation is that the first season establishes the narrative and presents the premise and characters.

As can be seen in Table 13.1, there are some obvious differences and similarities between the programmes. The number of seasons is one distinction, where *Frank & Kastaniegaarden* is a long-runner, whereas the two other programmes are more recent additions. On the other hand, they all follow the same format of an eight-episode season.

Table 13.1 Overview of analysed programmes

Title	Network	First aired	No. of seasons	Episodes season 1	Also shown on
Frank & Kastaniegaarden	DR	2008	15	8	SVT, NRK, YLE
Oppfinneren	NRK	2016	3	8	SVT
Hjälp vi har köpt en bondgård!	SVT	2020	3	8	no info

Frank & Kastaniegaarden

During the first seasons, the programme was called *Bonderøven*, a degrading term in Danish suggesting an unsophisticated and simple peasant, perhaps similar to the American term hillbilly. The intro, however, shows an ambition to reclaim the term and appropriate it as something desirable: not only is Frank a genuine “bonderøv”, but he is also proud of it. The narrative arch is about Frank transforming an old, abandoned farmstead into a proper, fully functional farm by using traditional tools and techniques. The promotional material from DR describes the programme in the following way: “In Frank & Kastaniegaarden (formerly *Bonderøven*), Frank Erichsen shows the way to a life with a focus on sustainability and self-sufficiency. The starting point is family life at Kastaniegaarden, where he comes up with new ideas with inspiration from near and far” (DR, 2024).

Oppfinneren

Oppfinneren [*The Inventor*] is a strange mix of personal nostalgia, ethnology, and retro-futuristic mechanical imaginaries. The promotional material from NRK states: “Multi-talent Erik Alfred Tesaker realises his dream of creating a mechanical paradise for the whole family on the small farm Øystøl. Playful creative joy is combined with old craft traditions, and the result is solutions far outside the box” (NRK, 2024).

Hjälp vi har köpt en bondgård

Hjälp vi har köpt en bondgård [*Help we have bought a farm!*] is a more hyperactive programme about an urban family well-known to Swedish viewers from previous reality programmes (e.g., *Kalles & Britas hälsoresa* [*Kalle's and Brita's health journey*]) who now decide to leave their urban life to become farmers. The premise is that they are absolute beginners and that they will learn as they go. SVT describes the programme as follows: “Brita Zackari and Kalle Zackari Wahlström have long dreamed of changing lifestyles,

leaving anxiety and stress in the city and moving to the countryside with the family. And now the dream has come true: Brita and Kalle have bought a small farm” (SVT, 2024).

The following analysis combines the three perspectives of genre – aesthetics, ritual, and ideology – in order to address the research questions:

- RQ1. What constitutes public service rurality-TV as a genre in terms of form and content?
- RQ2. What values are negotiated in the programmes?
- RQ3. How can we understand rurality-TV in the context of public service broadcasting in the media welfare state?

In the first part, we describe what constitutes rurality-TV as a genre, focusing on the form (technical semiotic) and content (themes of space, time, and activities). In the second part, we analyse values expressed and negotiated in the programmes, including sustainability, community, and de-alienation. In the final part, we position the genre within a framework of the demographic development in the Nordics and discuss how public service broadcasting contributes to address these challenges.

Constituents of the rurality-TV genre

This section gives an overview of the overall semiotic effect and the aesthetic qualities of these rural lifestyle programmes. This overview combines the technological and semiotic codes of the visuals, the verbal and auditive, as well as the relationship between the two. Moreover, it addresses narration and themes explored in all three programmes that relate to space, time, and activities.

Stylistics

Overall, the rurality-TV programmes share the stylistics as well as technical and semiotic codes typically found in reality television: There is a direct address to the viewer and it is filmed on location (not in a studio). Unlike talk shows and docusoaps, it is scripted, and the programmes are clearly edited to include “spontaneous” events such as mistakes. Using the categories described by Ouellette (2016), they are a combination of how-to or advice programmes and makeover programmes. But there are some specific aspects that make these types of shows different. While there is a focus on performing a craft, in contrast to cooking and home improvement programmes, this craft is exclusively expository (similar to the cases described by Christensen, 2010). Craftsmanship is shown, but not in an instructive way. The viewer is invited to be a spectator but is not expected to acquire the skills presented.

Basically, it is a type of programme that includes the spectatorship of work, but it is not work as we recognise it from everyday life in late modernity; it is premodern work, with simple machinery and a lot of manual input. Moreover, the makeover is not a process initiated and guided by an expert, as the cases described by Raisborough (2011), but driven by the inner motivation of the protagonists. The makeover is both internal and external: By learning and developing skills, they become proficient “farmers”, and this transformation involves turning a run-down and abandoned farm into a homestead.

In terms of narrative, the rurality programmes under analysis are formatted in seasons of eight episodes. They have a seasonal arc, which in all three examples consists of the process of making a run-down farmstead into a fully functional homestead. In addition, each episode has its own narrative arc focusing on the fulfilment of one or more specific tasks. When performing the tasks, the images are shot in close-up, which invites an intimate relation with the protagonist, who displays and explains the different steps in the process. Still, the mode of address is expository rather than instructive. While the process is heavily edited, there is an emphasis on the slowness of the handicraft. One interpretation of this is that the concentration on one thing – performing one task and indulging in the work – is something that stands in contrast to the chaotic and distracting urban life.

The tempo is slow, and the point of view is close and involved. In *Frank & Kastaniegaarden*, there is no zoom but much panning with a hand-held (shaky) camera. Lighting is low-key (natural), low contrast, often smooth, and with cool colours. In *Oppfinneren*, the environment – the mountains and valleys – appear in lengthy, static tableau-style shots. This type of environmental shot is also found in *Hjälp vi har köpt en bondgård*, where they display two things: wildlife such as elk and deer, and the seasonal shifts. *Hjälp vi har köpt en bondgård* is the only programme out of the three that includes graphics to introduce participants and mark out different parts of the farmstead planned for development.

The rurality-TV programmes focus on one to two protagonists – *Frank & Kastaniegaarden* and *Oppfinneren* revolve around a man (while partner and kids make occasional appearances), whereas *Hjälp vi har köpt en bondgård* depicts a heterosexual couple where both a man and a woman are equally active in developing the narrative. In both *Frank & Kastaniegaarden* and *Oppfinneren*, the wife is more of a supporting character who does not actively nor frequently pursue her own projects but mainly acts as an enabler of her husband’s ambitions (e.g., by taking responsibility for the children and the household). Here, too, the absence of time as a constraint becomes a fact. For Frank and Erik Alfred, work and leisure are closely intertwined and enabled by a traditionally gendered division of responsibilities. The verbal statements are always in the form of the first person singular (“I have always wanted...”, “My philosophy is...”, “I am starved of old culture”, “This is farm life, and

this is my project”, etc.). This further reinforces the sense that this is Frank’s and Erik Alfred’s project, respectively, and that the rest of the family are more like fellow passengers on an already mapped-out journey. For Kalle and Brita, the planned joint work is challenged by Brita’s pregnancy, which makes it difficult for her to carry out her parts (demolition work, heavy lifting, painting, etc.). The division of responsibilities and the need to rethink and reschedule due to Brita’s condition are, however, explicitly negotiated in the programme, further emphasising the joint project.

Like typical makeover programmes, invited experts play a central part in each episode, but often these experts are family members or neighbours rather than professionals. And in the cases where external professionals are involved, they are introduced as friends or acquaintances. Dress codes in all three programmes depict a premodern style. The protagonists in *Frank & Kastaniegaarden* and *Oppfinneren* are seen wearing traditional knitwear and a flat cap. In Frank’s case, his clothes are torn and dirty, whereas Erik Alfred is more clean-cut in appearance. The dressing style of the couple in *Hjälp vi har köpt en bondgård* is more eclectic. Kalle can be seen wearing a cowboy hat, a knitted wool cap, or a sheepskin vest. This is the only programme where we also see modern, professional outfits when Brita is clearing the forest, taking down trees in a signal jacket and proper helmet.

The audial editing gives an extra dimension to the philosophy expressed in the programmes. The programmes include both diegetic and non-diegetic verbal commentary from the protagonists. *Frank & Kastaniegaarden* and *Oppfinneren* include a lot of silence, contributing to the slow pace of the programme. However, *Hjälp vi har köpt en bondgård* is more quick paced, and never silent; the protagonists are talking all the time, either diegetically or in voice-overs. There is also a lot of pop music of various genres heard in the score of *Hjälp vi har köpt en bondgård*, though they are used more sparsely in the other two programmes. In *Frank & Kastaniegaarden*, some lyrics are frequently used in most episodes and by artists like Maria Frank, Colorblind, Natural Born Hippies, Anastacia, and Kira & the Kindred Spirits, among others. Phrases like “I’m just a symptom of my time” and “...sick working nine to five” amplify the message. *Oppfinneren* does not have the same audial settings, but in one episode, a Norwegian singer-songwriter amplifies the magic of Erik Alfred’s “dream tower”, the key building project of season 1: “On the call in the forest no one will have an answer, find the way back to what you have...”

Space

The setting of all three programmes is the rural landscape, since it is the idea of the programmes overall. However, unlike the rural programmes described by Kraszewski (2017), these programmes make little to no use of maps or

other graphics to display where the farms are located or the geographical distance from modern urban life. Instead, these farms are dislocated from space. There are also many dimensions of the rural space shown in the different programmes, just as there are dimensions of time and ideological agency. To start with, the openings of the programmes have similarities and differences between the visual editing. Both *Frank & Kastaniegaarden* and *Oppfinneren* flirt with old times. In the opening of *Frank & Kastaniegaarden*, we find the setting of the farm combined with a somewhat old-looking car and close-ups of old tools with a voice-over announcing that this is a farmer who wants to do things the old-fashioned way, and the farmer himself, Frank, stating in every episode's opening: "It is not to get back to the old stone ages, but to make things more simple". In the opening of *Oppfinneren*, the rural landscape with an old-fashioned factory once built by the grandfather of the main character, Erik Alfred, is presented and with old still photography. The opening of the third programme, *Hjälp vi har köpt en bondgård*, differs from the Danish and Norwegian programmes in that the emphasis is on the main characters' own "journey". The moment the family decides to buy a farm of their own is also where the story begins: Brita Zackari and Kalle Zackari Wahlström have long dreamed of changing their lives, leaving all the anxiety and stress of the city and moving to the country with their family. The visuals offer glimpses of the buying process, with explicit markers like the symbolic handshake between the real estate agent and the couple when the deal is sealed. The couple expresses happiness at the decision while also describing an almost panicky feeling of not knowing what they have gotten themselves into (hence the title of the programme).

Time

Time is a central theme in rurality-TV programmes, most visible in the focus on seasonal changes. Life on a farm is in sync with seasonal changes, and most activities are determined by nature. Old-fashioned crafts are essential in *Frank & Kastaniegaarden* and *Oppfinneren*. A visual intertextuality repeated in different episodes is Frank's references to an old book: the Danish Farmers Dictionary from 1951. In this sense, the linguistic reference becomes obvious. In *Oppfinneren*, the relation to time has similar features to *Frank & Kastenjegarden*. As Erik Alfred says: "If we are able to combine the best from the present with the past, I think we are able to create a fantastic future".

Oppfinneren has the most explicit style in reconnecting the present with the past. The opening vignette consists of a montage where two videos are placed next to each other framed by graphics. One video is old and grainy, with black-and-white or faded colours, showing people involved in carpentry or farming activities. The quality of the footage together with the clothing of the people signals that these are old films, either archival footage or family

Super 8 films. In the frame next to this footage are clips from the programme where the protagonist is performing the same or similar activities: operating tools in the woodshop, tending to animals, and so on.

A similar relationship with the past also characterises *Hjälp vi har köpt en bondgård*. Despite a lack of previous knowledge and experience, both Kalle and Brita are keen to use materials on the farm for new purposes. The relationship between then and now becomes essential as the couple reflects upon the renovation of the house and how past choices and materials can be brought back to light: “We want to bring out the things that remind us that there have been people here before us”. In *Hjälp vi har köpt en bondgård*, a recurring humorous theme is the main characters’ constant need to re-evaluate the difficulty and time involved in each step of transforming the run-down farm into a functional, self-sustaining home. Brita reflects on her earlier statement: “How cute it was when I previously imagined this would be easy!”

The lack of time as a constraint is a recurring theme in all three programmes. Frank’s quote – “to make things more simple” – is not related to the actual time spent. Although it occurs in all three programmes, it is possibly more noticeable in the Swedish programme, where the main characters’ initial level of knowledge is significantly lower. Making one’s own planks for an interior wall from trees on the land is time-consuming, especially when each step is done for the first time (although Kalle and Brita use more modern tools and machinery than Frank and Erik Alfred). At the same time, Kalle expresses frustration that all ambitions for the farm take a long time to realise, creating a tension between modern life’s desire to control time and space and a necessary adaptation to rural life and the actual conditions of nature (the drying time of wood, etc.). The main characters address this tension on several occasions, distinguishing the Swedish programme considerably from the others.

Activities

Many of the activities that engage the protagonists are similar between the programmes. Kalle in *Hjälp vi har köpt en bondgård* and Erik Alfred in *Oppfinneren* go into the woods to cut down trees or collect logs that they bring to their sawmills to produce lumber for building. On some occasions, chainsaws are used, but often trees are cut down by axe. Another activity is purchasing animals to have on the farm. This activity not only includes the actual purchase but also making room for the animals: building pastures for goats and sheep or building a chicken coop or hen house. A third activity seen in *Frank & Kastaniegaarden*, as well as in *Hjälp vi har köpt en bondgård*, is slaughter. Here, the farm animals are transformed from cute family pets into a nutritional resource, and the procedure is commented on and contrasted with modern food consumption where meat is a commodity that bears no

traces of its origin. A fourth activity, recurring in all three programmes, is cultivation of the land by planting crops, harvesting, and preservation. How to store crops using traditional methods is explicated quite thoroughly in both *Frank & Kastaniegaarden* and *Hjälp vi har köpt en bondgård*.

The values of rurality-TV

Many of the values that we find in these rurality lifestyle programmes are similar to themes Fountaine (2020) identified in their study of *Country Calendar*, New Zealand's longest-running television programme, which for over 50 years has depicted "those who live and work on the land". Those themes are family, community, the pursuit of a dream, and connection to history and tradition (Fountaine, 2020: 114).

Rurality-TV as a genre is also characterised by the ways in which it communicates several different but interrelated beliefs and values to the audience. First and foremost, in all three programmes, the viewers are invited to reflect upon and reconnect with a shared national and agricultural history, thus adding to the community-building project of public service media and its historical role in "representing the nation" (Jakobsson et al., 2023). The past as a value is perhaps most explicitly negotiated in *Oppfinneren*, where long and detailed sequences of various forms of traditional craftsmanship (such as the use of the Norwegian building technique "stegeverk") are regularly accompanied with short "lessons" on their cultural history, including archival footage. The project of restoring connections with the past is very much a personal one for the programme's protagonist, Erik Alfred, whose dream of a "self-sufficient, mechanical paradise" is traced back to the summers he spent at his grandfather's homestead as a child and his admiration of the inventive capabilities of his grandfather. In the first episode, we learn that Erik Alfred has recently bought the old factory where his grandfather used to work. While working in the factory he says:

It's nice to think of how grandpa worked here when he was at my age. Now I'm back to my roots, in a way. A lot of things are so rootless. You need foothold and support to continue to build on something. It's nice to show that it's possible to make use of our heritage. To find a way of living in these times, while also preserving the old and not ruining it for those coming after us.

Here, the personal biography of Erik Alfred transforms into a narrative of society's past, present, and future, inviting the viewers to recognise not only the value of their shared history but also how our current way of life has consequences for future generations. This points to another central value in public service rurality-TV: sustainability – or, more specifically, sustainable consumption.

By turning to the past, all three programmes suggest we might find guidance in developing lifestyles that are more ecologically, economically, and socially sustainable. In *Frank & Kastaniegaarden*, for example, Frank frequently consults old books as well as senior farmers in order to acquire the knowledge and skills he needs on his route to self-sufficiency. A stubborn and explicit critic of contemporary consumption society and urban life, Frank is determined to completely stop the few shopping tours he is still forced to do to the nearby city of Aarhus. Instead, he strongly advocates the reuse of old materials: “From scrap to gold”, he calls it. Erik Alfred has a similar approach to second-hand materials: “It’s some kind of treasure hunt to see what’s inside an old house – doors, windows, trims – that could be used again”. This approach is not primarily about saving money but is rather represented as a respectful way of dealing with the past. “The nice part of reusing is that you give an old thing a new life”, Erik Alfred says.

The value of sustainable consumption is also communicated through the protagonists’ relationship to nature, their family, and the local community. In *Hjælp vi har købt en bondgård*, for example, the audience is invited to follow Kalle and Brita in their gradual acclimatisation to a life closer to nature. While this process involves friction – nature is sometimes represented as invasive (e.g., when flies and mice enter the house) or dirty (e.g., when Brita refuses to eat a hare full of ticks out of fear of it being infected) – they always strive for a harmonious relationship with nature, to unify with nature and become pure. When asked to get horse manure and urine-imbued hay while planting a tree, Kalle declares: “You feel like you’re part of the circle of life instead of just standing on the outside looking in. I like it a lot!”. The value of sustainability is further consolidated by Brita when watering the newly planted tree: “Now we have our tree where our grandchildren will swing one day. If the Earth still exists then. Planet Earth, I mean. We’ll see”. These programmes are thus inviting the viewers to consider themselves not only as part of history but as part of nature, too. Towards the end of the season, Kalle articulates this sense of wholeness when talking about his relationship to the farm:

So, I’m a part of this place. I make it better. I don’t suck the power out of the place until it’s dead and I need to move on like a swarm of locusts. Instead, I’m involved in developing this place into something better than it was when I arrived.

When extracting birch sap, Frank voices a similar caring attitude towards nature: “It’s on nature’s premises”, he says, explaining how an over-extraction of sap might jeopardise the survival of the trees – and deny the ants a tasty meal as well.

The cultivation of sustainable lifestyles – based on self-sufficiency, recycling, and care for nature – in these programmes is accomplished through the

intergenerational learning taking place within the extended family and local community. The tricks of the trade are often learnt from senior experts in the community or from the protagonists' own parents, and in the case of *Oppfinneren* and *Hjälp vi har köpt en bondgård*, they are also passed on to their children, who are regularly encouraged to participate and help their parents with various projects on the farm. These programmes thus emphasise social interdependency as part of the human condition and the value of tight-knit families and communities. Indeed, such relations are represented as a precondition for increased self-sufficiency vis-à-vis the market. In the final episode of *Hjälp vi har köpt en bondgård*, Kalle explicitly acknowledges this to the camera: "It's nice to think of the network we have built since we moved here [...] The dream of fending for oneself is not true. You are part of something bigger together with the people you live with".

The same episode includes Brita's attempt to finalise the realisation of Kalle's dream of wearing a cap knitted of yarn from the wool of their own sheep. "Honestly", she says, "that should be everyone's dream", implying that self-sufficiency, sustainable consumption, and traditional handicraft are parts of an ideal way of life. In this project, Brita involves her mother, who teaches her how to knit using a "lovely old book from 1946" with "various knitting patterns approved by the state", as she puts it, for a laugh. At the end of the episode, when Brita is handing over two identical knitted caps to Kalle and their new-born baby in front of the sheep, whose wool has been used in the process, several core values of public service rurality-TV are reaffirmed. Not only do the gifts confirm their bonds to each other, and hence the family, as value, they also represent the value of reconnecting with the past (through the traditional craft of knitting), sustainable consumption practices (make your own caps from scratch instead of buying them in the market), and cultivating a close and harmonious relationship with nature (symbolised here by the sheep). The scene also points to a final central value of these programmes: meaningful work.

The value of meaningful work is negotiated in various ways. First, work is represented as an activity of care. In all three programmes, the work on the farm is carried out for the benefit of those that our protagonists deeply care about (i.e., themselves, their partners, and their children). For example, throughout the whole season, Frank struggles with completing the new residence on the farm so that his wife will not have to suffer another winter in their current non-insulated house. Likewise, several episodes of *Oppfinneren* end with Erik Alfred handing over a gift, made by himself, to his wife or children. In the first episode, for example, he builds a "pop pop boat" for his son's birthday, and we get to follow how they paint it together and then launch it in a pond in an intimate moment of family affection.

Second, work is represented as a focused activity, especially in *Frank & Kastaniegaarden* and *Oppfinneren*. Here, the different steps involved in

completing a task are carefully exposed in long and rather slow sequences, inviting the viewers to reflect upon the hasty and distracted character of modern working life, where a deep focus and unbroken concentration on singular tasks are rare opportunities. These programmes thus remind the audience that work might actually be a rewarding or even healing activity rather than a never-ending surge of disintegrated and potentially disintegrating tasks and duties.

Third, public service rurality-TV de-alienates work in the sense that these programmes are carefully detailing the labour involved in manufacturing the products most of us simply encounter and purchase in stores and supermarkets. In both *Hjälp vi har köpt en bondgård* and *Frank & Kastaniegården*, for example, the acquisition, nurturing, and slaughter of animals is depicted and acts as a reminder of the labour hidden in meat products sold in the supermarket. Similarly, all three programmes expose the time and energy invested in the complex processes of producing timber and growing vegetables. In *Hjälp vi har köpt en bondgård*, the viewers are even invited to reflect upon the labour behind the honey jars piled up in shelves in their local grocery store, as Kalle starts practising beekeeping.

In this sense, public service rurality-TV, with its do-it-yourself ethos and focus on work as process rather than product, can be read as an attempt to repair a set of understandings and skills that has been broken in the urbanisation and high-level division of labour and specialisation of modern societies. The genre encourages its audience to participate in a collective project of recollecting and perhaps also learning from a shared agricultural past, in which work had not yet been internally divided into bits and pieces and externally separated from domestic life and nature.

Rurality-TV and media welfare

According to Kraszewski (2017), the rural–urban tension as a theme in popular culture is particularly strong in times of profound transformation. The turn to rurality in reality-TV is visible in commercial and public service broadcasters alike. The examples discussed by Kraszewski (2017) are all from commercial channels. Still, we argue that the public service version of this turn has a stronger institutional meaning than is the case with the programmes analysed by Kraszewski. Even though they too are edutainment programmes that represent an idealised, “simpler” way of life far from urban modernity, they are not produced within a social responsibility framework where universality, recognition, and representation are normative values. As already mentioned, broadcast mass media exercises symbolic power by establishing differences in terms of centre and periphery (Couldry 2004; Andersson & Jansson, 2012). Symbolic power is unevenly distributed, and one way of understanding universality and equality in a media welfare context is public service broadcasting’s responsibility to redistribute symbolic power.

The urban–rural tension has been present throughout the history of public service broadcasting. With production concentrated to the urban areas, concerns are raised about how the country is represented. In the governmental directive to SVT, the company is obliged to have 55 per cent of its production outside of Stockholm. Earlier reviews have shown that this “55% rule” does not guarantee an equal distribution of visibility among regions. Reimer and colleagues (2004: 116) pointed to three principles that decide what parts of the country are visible in television and how these are shown. The first is journalistic, based on norms about what issues are important to cover and assess. The second principle is democratic, where the coverage of events and actors located far from the centre of power is an end in itself. The third principle is popularity: SVT wishes to offer programmes that engage a large audience. The report is old and the changes in terms of production and consumption of media has since changed, but these principles are still relevant for understanding rurality-TV as a genre within the public service commitment.

The journalistic principles of relevance and actuality can here be understood in relation to the demographic dynamics mentioned above. Even though these programmes are meant for entertainment, they exist in a historical context marked by urbanisation and migration, and where the climate crisis has made values such as sustainability a serious concern. To reconnect with the past, to become self-sufficient, contribute to a circular economy, and foster community can be seen as values that become desirable in an age of mobility, polarisation, and climate change. The protagonists of *Hjälp vi har köpt en bondgård*, *Frank & Kastaniegården*, and *Oppfinnaren* share a dream of settling down and make a place their home. This illustrates and sets an example of a more holistic and meaningful approach to life.

The democratic principle can here be understood in the rural focus of these programmes. They are evidently filmed on locations outside of urban areas, and the countryside is granted significant airtime; at least, this is true at a glance. A more critical view might suggest that the rurality-TV programmes are far from the reality experienced by people populating the countryside where small-scale, self-sufficient farm life is more of a curiosity than a norm. An aspect of this was a brief controversy that erupted when journalists found out that the family in *Hjälp vi har köpt en bondgård* still formally lived in their terraced house in a Stockholm suburb, despite the claims in the programme that they “left everything and moved to a farm” (Carlsson, 2020).

The principle of popularity can be seen in the relative success of the programmes: *Frank & Kastaniegården* has run for fifteen seasons, whereas the other two programmes have three seasons each (they started much later). Moreover, the fact that the programmes are aired in other Nordic countries adds to this principle of popularity. But popularity in a public service setting is not restricted to quantitative measures. It can also be a qualitative virtue as the opposite of elitism. Accusations of elitism and paternalism has long

accompanied public service policies, but as pointed out by Jakobsson, Lindell, and Stiernstedt (2023), the Nordic broadcasters display less paternalistic traits than their counterpart in the UK. Again, a critical viewer could point to the privileges that condition the rurality-TV programmes: Practices are often time-consuming, and the definition of sustainability is restricted to strictly material aspects (reusing, repurposing, etc.). In a broader sense, the cost and time that goes into these traditional methods are arguably less sustainable than buying commodities, and the skills and handicrafts are remote, not only from the average urban audience, but from modern rural life as well.

Discussion: From reality to rurality

It might seem contradictory to, in a book about the future of the media welfare model, spend time on content that is preoccupied with the past. Public service broadcasting's role for social cohesion is perhaps a lost cause. Still, it would be difficult to imagine a discussion about Nordic media welfare without addressing the social responsibility model strongly associated with public service institutions. This discussion is important in the context of our current digital social spaces. Recently, Couldry (2023) asked whether the current model of social media platforms is toxic for solidarity, making our societies ill-prepared for meeting the challenges posed by climate change. Social media platforms, argues Couldry, encourage competitive behaviour and polarisation when we are in desperate need of solidarity. Here, public service broadcasting, and perhaps the genre of rurality-TV with its focus on community and sustainability, represents an alternative.

Our aim with this chapter was to introduce the term rurality-TV to discuss a certain genre of Nordic lifestyle television programming, and to suggest how it could be understood within a broader framework of public service broadcasting in the media welfare state.

By way of summary, the genre of rurality-TV can be defined as a serialised text that follows some of the well-known patterns of reality-TV (documentary footage, meta-commentary from participants, scripted but spontaneous), but set in a rural environment where premodern technologies are favoured, exposing a dream of a simpler way of life.

Our analysis shows that public service rurality-TV communicates a number of different but interrelated values to its audience. By turning to a shared agricultural past, this genre suggests we might find clues on how to deal with the challenges of modern life and develop lifestyles that are more sustainable, both materially and spiritually speaking. Self-sufficiency, the reuse of old materials, traditional craft, care for nature as well as for family and local community, and slow, undistracted, meaningful work – these are represented as important values and practices constituting a sustainable way of life as well as a remedy to the unwelcome side effects of modernity and its intensi-

fied processes of individualisation, urbanisation, mobility, secularisation, and digitalisation. Our study contributes to further understanding of mediated representations of farming and agriculture, and based on our findings, we see implications for further research in two main areas. The first would be comparative approaches between cultures and media systems. We have argued that there is a difference in how public service broadcasters approach rurality compared with commercial outlets, but it would be interesting to also see how the values and representations of rurality varies between countries and cultures. Secondly, the urban–rural theme can be further problematised and approached not so much as a divide but as a continuum. What role do televisual representations of rural life play in this process?

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