

Maintaining confidence

– the Swedish Broadcasting Commission’s review of public service companies

Summary and recommendations

The Swedish National Audit Office (Swedish NAO) has audited the Broadcasting Commission’s review of public service companies. Our overall conclusion is that the Broadcasting Commission’s review functions appropriately. The review meets high demands for effectiveness and transparency. It also contributes to good regulatory compliance among the broadcasters. However, there are some deficiencies with regard to the Commission’s follow-up of processing times. There is also a need to expand the reasoning behind certain decisions.

Audit findings

The Broadcasting Commission’s assignment is to review whether the content of radio and television broadcasts complies with the regulations and conditions applying to the broadcasts and to annually assess whether the broadcasters have fulfilled their public service assignment.

The Swedish NAO’s audit shows that the Broadcasting Commission’s case management functions well. It is easy to make a report to the Broadcasting Commission, which is important, since the review of radio and TV programmes is mainly based on reports from the public. There are clear procedures for how cases are to be handled by the Commission and efficient prioritisation of cases which are of principle importance.

The Broadcasting Commission has been criticised for processing times that are too long. Long processing times at the Broadcasting Commission make it more difficult for the broadcasters to investigate reported broadcasts. With long processing times, there is a risk that the reporting person’s experience of redress will be reduced when a broadcaster is found to be in breach of the regulations. The Swedish NAO notes that processing times have increased in recent years and that there is no really clear picture of the reason for this increase. The Broadcasting Commission needs to systematically follow up the processing procedure and produce a plan to reduce processing times.

The Broadcasting Commission’s decisions mainly follow a clear structure and decisions finding a breach of the regulations contain clarifying reasons. However, for non-breach decisions made by a chair, without a meeting of the Commission

being held, the reasons are often not given. This means that the outcome of the individual case risks being unnecessarily difficult to understand. This is less important for the broadcasters, as this type of decision rarely affects the Commission's practice. However, for the confidence of the reporting person and the public in the Broadcasting Commission and, ultimately, the public service system overall, it is important that it is also possible to understand the outcome of individual decisions.

The Swedish Broadcasting Commission publishes a so-called set of practices at irregular intervals. The broadcasters consider these to be of great value but also express some frustration that they are updated far too infrequently. It should be possible for the Broadcasting Commission to update its set of practices more frequently and in so doing better communicate to both the broadcasters and the general public what applies.

The Swedish NAO notes that the broadcasters take the Broadcasting Commission's decisions very seriously. This is reflected in the extensive work that the broadcasters put into formulating statements in ongoing review cases. The decisions have an impact on the broadcasters' publicist activities. This impact is both direct, in the form of an immediate discussion concerning a new decision, and indirect, in that the practice created by the Broadcasting Commission's decision is an important part of the broadcasters' internal training.

The Swedish NAO assesses that the Broadcasting Commission's work with the annual assessments of the broadcasters' public service reports is effective given the conditions of the assignment. There are clear procedures for how the work is to be carried out. There is also a clear division of duties between the Broadcasting Commission's office, which reviews the three public service reports, and the Commission itself, which guides the assessment work and establishes what should be in the assessments.

The Swedish NAO notes that the broadcasters put a great deal of work each year into producing public service reports which are as thorough and clear as possible. They also work to develop the reports, especially regarding the points where the Broadcasting Commission has criticised the broadcasters in previous years' assessments.

Recommendations

The Swedish NAO makes the following recommendations to the Swedish Press and Broadcasting Authority:

- Develop a plan with a clear description of goals and methods for reducing the Broadcasting Commission's processing times. The plan should be based on a systematic analysis of the factors that affect the processing times during the various phases of the processing procedure.

- Expand the reasoning behind the decisions made by a chair when a Commission meeting has not been held, in order to increase the understanding of the Commission's decisions among people making reports and the general public.
- Update the set of practices more frequently, to make it easier for public service companies to do the right thing.