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# How Public Service Media Enriches Learning For and About Sweden's National Minorities

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In their most recent report, the Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities hailed the work of Sweden's public service media for the national minorities as internationally-renowned best practice of pedagogical production. They suggested that "[t]he development of educational minority programmes by the Swedish Educational Broadcasting Company is a good practice and generally speaking, Sweden's public media minority policy would be worth promoting through international and cross-border initiatives" (p. 5).

The pedagogical aspect goes often unnoticed in the official discourse on public service media and national minorities in Sweden. When addressing teaching and learning materials, the focus typically lies on textbooks produced by institutional and professional educational publishers rather than the so-called authentic texts of media that are not originally produced for learning and education. Even if it is a well-known fact that media materials are used as sources of learning in classroom teaching and non-formal didactics – not to mention self-determined learning and other forms of so-called informal learning – media texts, especially those from public service media, are less often framed as pedagogical sources (see Jaakkola & Mykkänen, 2022). Within the international area of textbook studies (see, e.g., Fuchs & Bock, 2018), there is a distinct tradition manifest in the Nordic countries of analysing mainstream textbooks in terms of their presentation of linguistic and ethnic minorities (see, e.g., Spjut, 2021) – the materials *about* national minorities. At the same time, the learning and teaching materials *in* national minority languages and *for* national minorities have received less attention.

However, there is no denying that the Swedish public service media count as the major producer of teaching and learning resources for Sweden's five national minorities – Jews, Sámi, Romani people, Sweden-Finns, and Tornedalians. The pedagogical role was made visible by a recent internal report by the Swedish Agency for Education in which the agency aimed at mapping domestic learning materials available in the national minority languages (Swedberg, 2022). As a result, the report discovered that while the materials produced in Sweden are in general very scarce, public service media plays a central role as a producer for all national minority languages. The crucial role of public service media is highlighted by the fact that traditional textbooks produced by institutionalized publishers for and in national minority languages are almost absent.

# From textbook to learning-resource analysis

Studying media output as pedagogical materials in the national minority context is especially interesting in the Nordic context, as the countries have strong traditions of media education. They also traditionally show strong state intervention in their media systems, trust in public service media and other public institutions, as well as a high degree of freedom of speech.

In contrast to the other Nordic countries, Sweden has a separate public service company focusing on educational issues, mainly on schools and adult education (*folkbildning*, the education of people). **Educational Radio** (UR, Utbildningsradion), founded in 1978 as a successor of a committee launched in the 1960s focusing on pedagogical questions regarding radio, is one of the three public service media companies. The two others are dedicated to reporting with a focus on news: one in radio (SR, Sveriges Radio), and the other in television (SVT, Sveriges Television). Following the organizational mission "education for life", Educational Radio (UR) has the governmental assignment to cater for the programming of the national minorities while also offering educational programmes for all. The programming ranges from language learning programmes to documentaries with an informative purpose, and from factual programmes to online content. UR's videos and online content are also circulated and promoted as part of the curated content on special national platforms such as MIK Sveriges kunskapsbank ("The knowledge database" of the national media literacy network, formed by 22 public authorities) and Digiteket for the library staff.

When used as sources of learning, media texts are essential pedagogical sources that deserve to be analysed in terms of their learning potential. Media texts are conceived of as authentic materials in the classroom teaching contexts, which means that they are "found material" made for learning and teaching resources, instead of materials that are originally designed for learning. The materials are generally not used as such, but need to be embedded into a context that the teachers and other pedagogues create for their learners.



Kontorshuset (Sveriges Television) vid Oxenstiernsgatan 26, Stockholm. © Holger.Ellgaard, CC BY-SA 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/bysa/4.0/>, via Wikimedia Commons

One central dimension when it comes to the relevance of the materials is taking into account the high variation of language skills among those who identify with the national minorities: the skills of the audiences can range from beginner levels to native-language proficiency. This poses requirements for all outputs, which need to be based on language-learning facilitation through subtitling, translating, and translanguaging. As the creator of a public sphere where the language can be seen and heard, and as a language revitalizer that supports individuals in reclaiming the language, public service media constitute a pedagogical source.

# **Educational Radio materials**

The report on the pedagogical materials in national minority contexts by the Swedish Agency for Education (Swedberg, 2022) identified 393 items of learning resources (see Table 1), mostly targeting learners in primary schools: 141 for Sámi (36%), 96 for Romani chib (24%), 64 for Finnish (16%), 59 for Meänkieli (15%), and 33 for Yiddish (8%). In Table 1, it can be seen that during 2007–2023, Educational Radio (UR) was by far the largest producer of educational content for all national minorities and minority languages: on average, 58 percent of the overall output was produced by the public service outlet. This material is, understandably, mostly audiovisual, consisting of videos and video series.

Language	ltems	School level	Media type	Biggest producers
Sámi <sup>1</sup>	141 (36%)	Primary school (39%), preschool (21%), upper secondary school (11%), other (26%)	Written (48%), audiovisual (23%), audio (13%), multimodal (16%)	UR (48%), Sámi School Agency (15%)
Romani chib <sup>2</sup>	96 (24%)	Primary school (43%), preschool (20%), upper secondary school (11%), other (24%)	Written (51%), audiovisual (31%), audio (17%), multimodal (1%)	UR (61%), The Swedish Agency for Education (31%)
Finnish	64 (16%)	Primary school (69%), preschool (14%), upper secondary school (11%), other (6%)	Written (42%), audiovisual (42%), audio (11%), multimodal (5%)	UR (48%), The Swedish Agency for Education (13%)
Meänkieli	59 (15%)	Primary school (42%), preschool (32%), upper secondary school (5%), other (20%)	Written (42%), audiovisual (37%), audio (14%), multimodal (7%)	UR (63%), Barents Publisher (17%)
Yiddish	33 (8%)	Primary school (36%), preschool (36%), upper secondary school (12%), other (3%)	Written (42%), audiovisual (33%), audio (18%), multimodal (6%)	UR (70%), Oiniansky Tekst (15%)
Total	393 (100%)	Primary school (45%), preschool (23%), upper secondary school (10%), other (19%)	Written (47%), audiovisual (31%), audio (14%), multimodal (8%)	Public service media (58%), public authority (31%), publisher (6%), joint effort (6%), civil society (0.3%)

<sup>1</sup> Northern, Lule, Pite, Southern, and Ume Sámi

<sup>2</sup> Arli, Kale, Kelderash, Lovari, Polish Romani, and Swedish Romani

Source: own elaboration based on Swedberg (2022)

Table 1. Learning materials in national minority languages 2007–2023 (Swedberg, 2022).

In a recent survey among Finnish teachers at Swedish primary schools (Jaakkola, 2024), it was confirmed that Finnish teachers in Sweden frequently use materials produced by Educational Radio (UR) in their teaching. Over half of the respondents (55%) said that they use a textbook on a weekly basis, yet as supply is limited in Sweden, they need to turn to the neighbouring country, Finland, to find appropriate books. The textbooks produced in Finland for second-language learners are, however, produced either for Finland-Swedes or individuals with migrant backgrounds; that is, groups living in conditions that are different from those which the Finnish learners in Sweden are living in. Textbooks produced in foreign and majority-cultural settings do not entirely match the needs of teaching a minority culture embedded in another majority culture, so teachers are inclined to complement the textbooks with programmes dedicated to second- or heritage-language learning, addressing the national minority identities and highlighting cultural issues. UR materials typically provide the teachers with the Swedish cultural context.

A pivotal function of national minority programming is that they also work as a resource for the majority society. During the recent years, the minority newsrooms of each national-minority language have tightened their collaboration with majority news desks. When an issue is covered by a national-minority journalist, a version of the story can also be produced for the majority channel. This strategic collaboration results in increased exchange of materials between minority and minority channels, and stronger visibility for national minority issues. When programmes or inserts are broadcast across different channels – both in minority-language and majority channels – programming policy contributes to making minorities visible for the majority society.

The pedagogical materials are also produced for the majority society. Schoolteachers who are not members of the minorities, but who are expected to teach about the national minorities, benefit from the pedagogical materials available which address the national minorities in an informative way. Mainstreaming minority issues is important work, contributing to the legitimatization of national minorities that are, after all, rather young political categories, as the Minority Act regulating the rights of the five national minorities in Sweden did not exist until 2009. Sweden had ratified the European Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities in 2000, which means that the very concept of "national minorities" has now existed for 25 years. Within a quarter of a century, there has been progress in terms of the status of the national minority languages, but also setbacks. The national minority languages were introduced in the school curricula as distinct historical or heritage languages in 2015 (to be distinguished from other languages covered by mother tongue tuition), and they have established their status since then, even though the number of pupils and hours of tuition have remained lower than expected (see e.g. SOU 2017: 19).

# Future prospects

The lack of pedagogical materials for national minorities and national minority languages is no piece of news – it has been identified by the national minority actors for a long time (see, e.g., Vuonokari, 2021, 2024; SOU, 2017: 19). According to the Swedish Agency for Education's report (Swedberg, 2022), the largest publishers of pedagogical textbooks show no interest in developing materials in national minority languages for the market, even if publishing activities were economically supported, as it is not considered a lucrative business. For middle-sized and small educational publishers, it is even more of a losing proposition.

The recent **report of the public service investigation committee** (SOU 2024: 34) suggested that the total output of content in national minority languages would continue to increase during the next mandate period from 2026 to 2033. The report highlighted that an important quality marker is the relevance of content, which has to be validated in close dialogue with the national minorities. The recommendations in the report are, of course, welcomed by the national minorities, who experienced that their wishes had been listened to (Paimela, 2024).

The role of public service media is, however, more powerfully questioned today in the Nordic countries than before. A public service investigative committee had the task to outline the future role of the public service in Sweden and accomplished its assignment in early 2024. The committee was historically contentious. As in neighbouring countries, popular right-wing parties are arguing that the public service entails a political bias towards the left, which is amplified by the epistemological bubbles of social media that enable increased circulation of disinformation and the formation of confirmation biases or echo chambers. Despite political debates, the committee's report (SOU, 2024: 34), currently out on a consultation round, suggests a continued broad societal assignment for the public service in Sweden – but with diminishing financial resources for the coming years.

Lately, the Swedish government has assigned 24 million Swedish crowns (2.1 million euro) to the domestic production of textbooks in national minority languages. As an outcome of a tender, a small company received the assignment to produce domestic textbooks in national minority languages. In the majority-society context, a legislative change that became valid in July 2024 outlines a strategy to ensure access to textbooks for all pupils across the country, strengthened by 658 million Swedish crowns (58 million euro) for municipalities to purchase the textbooks (Government Offices of Sweden, 2024). With 1,003 euro per pupil in 2021, Sweden has - according to the industry organization Läromedelsföretagen (2023) - indeed maintained the lowest level of municipal textbook purchases, compared with Norway (1,641 euro) and Finland (1,328 euro). These changes should strengthen the position of institutional textbooks for national minority language tuition.

The importance of public media content is strengthened by the acute needs and high hopes for language revitalization, which has been actively advanced by the Swedish government during the past years. To ensure the maintenance and revitalization of the national minority languages, the Swedish government established language centres for these languages, placed at the **Agency for Language and Folklore** (Isof). At the moment, continued funding is not secure, which means that the future of language revitalization efforts is open. Public service media has, however, been seen as a central actor in language revitalization, in public use of national minority languages, as a creator of a common public agenda for the minorities, as well as a supporter of identity work among the heterogeneous and dispersed minorities.

Significant advancements have been made in the development of pedagogical materials for national minorities in recent years; however, the tangible outcomes have yet to materialize. Language planning, as well as educational work, necessitate long-term planning and implementation work which, in turn, require a strong vision of how languages, cultures, and identities are connected.

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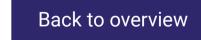
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