

NRK, Norvège

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Entretien avec Arild Erikstad

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Marie-Odile Demay >

Arild Erikstad, you are executive producer and editor at the Culture Department of NRK television, the Norwegian public broadcaster. Could you begin by telling me about your position and how long you've been working in television?

Arild Erikstad >

Currently, I serve as an executive producer and editorial moderator for the weekly show on classical music, opera, and dance events at the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK). This program airs on NRK Two, our second public channel, on Sunday evenings at 7:45 p.m. with an open-ended format. As both editor and host for this show, I create numerous introductions, conduct interviews, and develop profiles. Additionally, I hold the positions of vice-president for the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) and vice-president for the International Music + Media Centre (IMZ).

Marie-Odile Demay >

Could you elaborate on what the EBU is?

Arild Erikstad >

The EBU, established in 1950, is a union for public broadcasters in Europe. We convene to discuss our work, primarily focusing on programming and regulations. It also functions as a market for broadcasting rights, mainly in news and sports, but also encompassing culture, documentaries, music concerts, and other content.

Marie-Odile Demay >

And what about the IMZ?

Arild Erikstad >

The IMZ is a non-profit international organization based in Vienna, Austria. Since its foundation in 1961 under the auspices of UNESCO, its mission has been to promote the performing arts through audiovisual media. It serves as a global network that brings together various actors in the performing arts sector: production companies and distributors specializing in performing arts programs, as well as arts programmers from public and private broadcasters. The organization also includes representatives from record labels, opera houses, concert halls, orchestras, and dance companies. As you may know, it's a very active and dynamic organization.

Marie-Odile Demay >

Could you describe your career progression at NRK?

Arild Erikstad >

I began my career at NRK Radio in 1981 as a music producer for both radio and the Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra. In 1991, I was invited to become the head of the music department in television. Four years later, NRK asked me to join a group tasked with launching a new public cultural channel, where I was also responsible for music programming. Around 2000, when our NRK channels merged, I transitioned to the role of advisor for music programming, then became an executive producer, and for several years, I served as head of music for both radio and television.

Marie-Odile Demay >

In your opinion, how has the advent of digital media affected production in general, and arts production in particular?

Arild Erikstad >

It's challenging to pinpoint exactly how digital media has affected production and what the most significant change factors were. In many ways, change is connected to a confluence of factors. Digital technologies have certainly made work easier, with smaller cameras, lighter equipment, and new editing technologies. This has made production more intimate because, for instance, it's easier to get closer to interviewees with smaller cameras. When you have heavy lighting and camera equipment and numerous people around, it affects the interview atmosphere. I've been conducting interviews and creating profiles for thirty years, and I can attest that the entire production atmosphere is lighter when you have only one or two people on set. You can observe this when you review old clips from the archives of the 1980s and early 1990s; everyone speaks slowly and appears more artificial. This has a lot to do with the equipment. So that's one aspect.

Another significant change came with the introduction of the HD format in 16:9 aspect ratio. This really enhanced framing and affected our production methods. We tend to linger a bit longer on subjects now.

Marie-Odile Demay >

Why do you say that?

Arild Erikstad >

The picture quality is so much better than before that we don't need to compensate with editing. It's clearer, so you can use wider shots and stay on them longer, almost filming with a single camera. You don't have to compensate as much for poor picture quality. But for me, the most significant change was what I mentioned earlier: it's more like radio now, easier to build rapport and get closer to people, similar to radio production.

I think, for instance, that the format change from 4:3 to 16:9 was particularly important for ballet specials. It's more suitable for staging ballets on wide stages. Italian stages, which are typically smaller, could fit very well in a 4:3 frame.

Marie-Odile Demay >

In terms of programs for your music and performing arts show, what are you looking for?

Arild Erikstad >

We're looking for major musical events that can reach a broad audience. For instance, we recently had a huge jubilee concert with the Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra, filmed with 5,000 people in attendance in the square in front of the castle. It was very successful.

Marie-Odile Demay >

So, is it a live broadcast?

Arild Erikstad >

Yes, live events are very important to us. It's also crucial for us to broadcast from different locations in Norway, not just from the capital. If we can create an event from a small town, it adds extra value to NRK as a public service broadcaster. Before the live event, we often broadcast an introductory program, such as a documentary. It's most important for us that it's not elitist and reaches the widest possible audience. A good program for NRK can either broaden the approach to a niche subject or discuss Norwegian pop culture. It can explore more specific themes or make something interesting out of a very popular subject. There must be a way to present contemporary music, for instance, with a broader approach.

Marie-Odile Demay >

I understand what you mean. Having opera star Jonas Kaufmann talk about contemporary music would bring different audiences together.

Arild Erikstad >

Exactly. We're not addressing a specialized music audience, although we hope our programs will interest them as well. We want to reach those who are less knowledgeable in that area and broaden their horizons. One way to do this is to involve a popular artist, like the pianist Lang Lang. We can delve a little deeper into a specific subject and make our program with him more instructive than just presenting him as a superstar playing a complex piece. You can also involve the audience by asking them questions: What do you like about Lang Lang? What makes him popular, in your opinion? What do you think? These are two ways of opening a conversation with a wider audience and making culture accessible. And it produces different types of content.

We can still make programs for a more specialized audience, but above all, they must reach a wide audience. I think director Larry Weinstein, from Rhombus Media, manages to bring together both highbrow and lowbrow culture, reaching diverse audiences. He has an amazing

sense of storytelling and manages to take very niche subjects and turn them into entertaining programs for a broad audience.

Marie-Odile Demay >

I'd like to discuss live events further. My understanding is that live broadcast events might be one of the solutions to help ensure the survival of linear television. First, because live broadcasting is part of television's DNA, and second, it fulfills the public broadcaster's mandate to maintain national unity. I would say that this idea of representing live events from different parts of Norway on television might be part of this ambition. Can you expand on this political aspect?

Arild Erikstad >

Yes, our public television has a definite unification and democratization value and mandate. It must generate a feeling of togetherness around events that are unifying, even from a town or a smaller community. That's important. And even though it doesn't have to, traditional representations of our culture add value for small villages and communities.

In the past three to five years, it has become increasingly difficult to promote our programs and reach our audience with a typical concert, produced by us with our national orchestra, for instance. Unless we create a major event, supported by a strong marketing campaign, we couldn't reach our audience anymore. This is why we need to create large-scale programs around very clear events with something special to attract our audience. I think that's the main focus now with public television: live, popular cultural events. So it's both: national reach and a live, popular, special event. It's important to go beyond Oslo and show what's happening in the country. And vice versa.

So television is political in the sense that it's a democratic means to bring awareness of our country, our people, and our values. Big live broadcasts, whether from Oslo or a small community, can do that and help define Norway.

Marie-Odile Demay >

Are the ratings good for that type of live cultural programming?

Arild Erikstad >

At least better than a normal concert. The main thing is to secure a good airtime. If it's a broad event, you can get the Saturday evening or Sunday evening prime time slot. That automatically brings a bigger audience, even against other big shows on commercial television. So it's a combination of the quality of the program and strategic programming. When that happens, we usually have very good ratings, even with classical music or more serious programs.

Marie-Odile Demay >

Are you simultaneously broadcasting on the web?

Arild Erikstad >

Yes, and it's becoming increasingly popular. The audience for linear television is decreasing very rapidly, almost every month, while the use of the web player is growing. This causes all sorts of problems. We are struggling to buy the rights for both linear and web television to leave the programs available on the web for long periods. There's a clear tendency for people to watch programs when they want to watch them. And that's also a reason why these live events are so important for linear television. Like sports events, this is a case where people want to see it as it happens. But they want free access to any sort of screen, at any time, even with live broadcasts. All of our programs need to be suitable for the player. These rights were difficult to obtain a few years ago, but now they're part of normal negotiations with rights owners.

Marie-Odile Demay >

There's a multiplication of screens with the same content.

Arild Erikstad >

Yes, but the television screen is still the most important one. We find that people are adding all sorts of viewing applications – computer, tablet, telephone – to their viewing experience, without necessarily abandoning the larger television screen.

I think it's very beneficial for programming in general to be seen not only when we schedule it. Our main problem is the competition between channels for prime time because it's difficult to compete with very popular commercial programming. The web player can be the solution for people to catch up on our programs whenever they want. We can see that happening more and more.

Marie-Odile Demay >

As vice-president of EBU, you share your music programming experience with other European stations regarding the state of linear programming. Is it a generalized situation to see ratings on linear television going down and increasing on the web?

Arild Erikstad >

Yes, absolutely. And yet, NRK is doing extremely well compared to other European stations. It's still the biggest channel in Norway. But we can measure a very clear slowdown in linear television. However, it's not only public broadcasters; commercial channels also see a clear decline in their ratings. The new platforms coming in, whether very commercial like Netflix or specialized in classical music like medici.tv, are taking over and offering new ways of creating and using content. We need to adjust.

One thing we did in Norway is to abolish the public television license fee.

Marie-Odile Demay >

Can you explain that to me?

Arild Erikstad >

Up until last year, Norwegians who had a television – which means everybody – paid a yearly television license fee. You find this system in many European countries. Our government decided to stop this tax because we had to admit that people don't use their television sets anymore and instead use other devices to watch television that are not television sets *per se*: telephones, iPads, computers, smart TVs. The system had to change because of that. Now, there's a special tax that everybody has to pay, whether you have a television set or not, because everybody has to have some sort of broadcasting access, regardless of the viewing application. And in a way, it's fairer. Before, a household with four or five people was paying a single tax, which was not fair for single individuals. So now, everybody pays a license fee, a bit cheaper for everyone but generalized.

Marie-Odile Demay >

Well, that makes sense. So now the audience can see a music concert or a football match on an iPhone or on the television screen without distinction. Does it change the way you produce and have an impact on the content?

Arild Erikstad >

When we pitch programs to the channel, the programming direction now looks at how it will work on other platforms. They want to ensure that we can broadcast the same content on different screens and use some elements for marketing on social media, like small clips on Facebook. This is very much what the discussion is about now. So yes, it has a major influence. But as I say, the latest surveys show that television screens are still the most popular way of watching serious and cultural television. Television is obviously not disappearing, the main reason being the quality of sound and image. There are just new ways of watching television now, incorporating and multiplying the access to television content.

And now, we are also more specific about the channel we choose to reach different audiences. For instance, we see some major live events, for a younger audience, being broadcast only on our web player. The channel is becoming more and more specific about the means to reach the right audience. We are segmenting our approach to content and adapting to technology. This is why I'm not really worried about the future of television.