

Federal referendum on 8 March 2026

“Swiss Broadcasting Corporation (SBC) Initiative”

Switzerland to decide on a reduction in broadcasting fees

by Michael Straumann*



Michael Straumann.
(Bild zvg)

(CH-S) A popular initiative aims to significantly reduce the compulsory contributions to the “Swiss Broadcasting Corporation” (SBC). Every Swiss household must pay these fees, regardless of whether they use its services or not. The SBC is known for its political bias. Could a significant reduction in contri-

butions motivate those responsible to strike a better balance in political and cultural issues?

In the following article, Michael Straumann examines the arguments put forward by the SBC phalanx.

In three weeks, Swiss citizens will vote on the “Halving Initiative,” which calls for a radical cut in broadcasting fees: instead of 335 francs, households would only have to pay 200 francs per year in the future – companies would be completely exempt from the fee.

Formally, the Swiss *Broadcasting Corporation* (SBC) is a private association. In practice, however, it operates like public broadcasting in Germany. Financing is mandatory: every household pays, regardless of whether it uses the service or not. The fees are collected by the company *Serafe*. Internationally, Switzerland is considered a leader in terms of the amount of device-independent broadcasting fees.¹

For years, discontent with the SBC has been growing. It is sparked by two issues: the amount of the fees and the internal functioning of the institution. Despite repeated promises to cut costs, expenses continue to grow. Since 2007, the number of employees has risen from around 6,000 to over 7,100.² In 2024 alone, operating

costs increased by 39 million Swiss francs.³ SBC Director General Susanne Wille has promised savings of 270 million Swiss francs by 2029.⁴ However, there is much to suggest that this is primarily a political manoeuvre to take the wind out of the sails of the Halving Initiative. After all, promises of reform have been part of the SBC’s repertoire for years. *Armin Walpen*, *Roger de Weck*, and *Gilles Marchand* had already announced cost-cutting measures and structural reforms.⁵ These announcements have remained just that—personnel costs continue to rise.

At the same time, criticism of the content of the broadcasting programme is mounting. For years, the SBC has been accused of political bias. Critics complain that uncomfortable topics are ignored and dissenting opinions are not objectively classified, but systematically discredited.

“Sovietisation” of reporting

There is no shortage of examples. For example, SBC remained silent for weeks about the EU sanctions against Swiss citizens *Jacques Baud* and *Nathalie Yamb*.⁶ After the shooting of US political activist *Charlie Kirk*, he was defamed as a “right-wing extremist influencer”; at the same time, SBC blamed *Donald Trump* for the social climate in the US that contributed to the murder.

The broadcaster also reported on the “Twitter Files” only after a considerable delay. Although contacts between the US authorities and *Twitter* were mentioned, possible political influence was largely ignored. In 2024, the *Independent Complaints Authority* (UBI) also reprimanded SBC for remaining silent about the publication of the German RKI protocols.⁷ “*Swissinfo*”, an SBC channel, suggested in an article that a majority of citizens were in favour of Switzerland moving closer to NATO⁸ – even though polls suggest the opposite.⁹

Like Germany, public service journalists in Switzerland have a soft spot for Green politicians. An analysis by *Weltwoche*¹⁰ shows that representatives of the Green Party are invited to the SBC domestic policy discussion forum “*Arena*”, more often than representatives of other

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parties. The SBC also unmistakably follows the zeitgeist when it comes to socio-political issues. For example, SBC stated that the audience wanted more gender-neutral language¹¹ – even though surveys do not support this assumption.¹² A similar pattern can be seen when it comes to climate issues: in an episode of the science program “Einstein”, “climate scepticism” was classified as a psychological deficit.¹³

The list could go on and on. For critics of the SBC, these are not isolated cases. Opinions beyond the red-green *Overton window*** are systematically ignored or devalued. The fact that this perception does not only come from outside is shown by a statement by *Stefan Klapproth*, the former presenter of the SBC programme “10 vor 10”. In an interview with the “*Neue Zürcher Zeitung*”, he spoke of a “kind of Sovietisation”¹⁴ that had taken hold at the SBC.

Independent reporting – only through compulsory fees?

This development provided fertile ground for the Halving Initiative. Officially, the popular initiative is entitled “Two hundred francs is enough!”¹⁵ It was launched in 2022, and the required signatures were submitted in 2023. The initiative is supported by right-wing conservative circles.

Opponents of the initiative believe that quality journalism cannot survive without fees. This argument falls short. Quality journalism existed in Switzerland long before the SBC. Even today, there is serious reporting in media companies that do not rely on mandatory fees. Economic incentives are at work there: those who disappoint their audience lose it. At the SBC, on the other hand, this pressure has been low so far. License fees were paid regardless of the acceptance or quality of the reporting. Other media companies face closure sooner or later if their customers are dissatisfied – but this corrective mechanism is largely absent in publicly funded broadcasting. This does not mean that privately funded media necessarily deliver better journalism, as a glance at today’s mainstream media landscape

**“Overton-Window” is a model that describes the framework of ideas and political measures that are considered acceptable in public opinion at a given point in time. It defines the “limits of what can be said” and shifts over time, allowing formerly radical demands to become socially acceptable, or vice versa. (Ed.)

shows. However, the incentive structure does work in this direction. This is precisely why a clear separation between state and media is essential.

SBC as a purveyor of fake news?

Another argument put forward by opponents of the initiative is that the SBC is the last bastion against fake news. However, this claim does not stand up to closer scrutiny. As the examples mentioned at the beginning show, the SBC has also been repeatedly convicted of spreading false information or at least one-sided reporting. It is therefore intellectually dishonest to blame the “evil” social media platforms alone for fake news. Fake news and propaganda are not unique to digital platforms.

It also raises the question of whether opponents would be directing such harsh criticism at social media if *Elon Musk* had not taken over Twitter and expanded the Overton window to X. Would they be just as critical if the censorship regime that was in place during the coronavirus state of emergency had remained unchanged?

Furthermore, this view is evidence of “genuine paternalism,”¹⁶ as *Giuseppe Gracia*, editor of *Schweizer Monat*, rightly points out in his column “*Advocatus Diaboli*.” Opponents of the Halving Initiative accuse citizens of lacking maturity: they do not trust them to find their way through the jungle of information on the internet on their own. Instead, they argue, there is a need for a state-accredited broadcaster that pre-sorts and classifies information and determines what is to be considered correct. It hardly needs to be mentioned that SBC’s programming is being used by fewer and fewer young people. The average age of the audience is 63¹⁷ – it is not without reason that SBC is sometimes referred to as a “senior citizens’ broadcaster.”

Ultimately, the SBC and its apologists are not concerned with defending independent and balanced journalism. Rather, they are concerned with preserving their interpretive authority – and with obtaining the financial resources necessary to defend that interpretive authority.

No “public service” without fees?

The third central argument against the Halving Initiative is that broadcasting – referred to in Switzerland as “public service” – can no longer be financed with a halving of fees. The SBC warns of drastic cuts:¹⁸ up to CHF 290 million

would have to be saved and around 900 jobs cut. *Susanne Wille*, Director General of the SBC, even speaks of an existential attack: “The initiative wants to destroy the SBC.”¹⁹

To justify this, the SBC refers to its legal mandate to provide a comprehensive range of information, culture, entertainment, and sports. “To claim that you can achieve the same with half the money is dishonest,” says Wille. *Albert Rösti*, head of the *Federal Department of the Environment, Transport, Energy and Communications*, also tried to counteract this in the run-up to the referendum campaign.²⁰ He announced that the fees would be gradually reduced to 300 francs by 2029 and that smaller companies would be exempted. But this does not answer the fundamental question: Why should citizens pay for a service they do not use themselves? And why does this require state coercion? Especially since other countries manage with a fraction of the Swiss broadcasting fees – without their broadcasting programmes being visibly worse. Against this backdrop, talk of the doom of “public service” seems clearly exaggerated.

Opponents have momentum on their side

In October, poll numbers were still in favour of the Halving Initiative.²¹ According to a survey by the polling institute *LeeWas*, 53 percent of voters would have approved the initiative at that time, while 44 percent would have rejected it.

In the meantime, the tide has turned. The first voting poll by *GFS Bern* shows:²² 52 percent are clearly or somewhat opposed to the initiative. 46 percent are in favour of reducing the annual *Serafe* fee to 200 francs per household. Two percent are still undecided.

The opponents’ campaign seems to be increasingly falling on fertile ground. It remains to be seen how the voting trend will develop over the next five weeks. It could be close. For the initiators of the Halving Initiative, this means they need to increase their efforts. If they fail in intensifying their campaign and gaining momentum, they face another defeat – as was the case with the *No Billag* initiative eight years ago.

Source: <https://www.straumedia.ch/p/der-fallige-kahlschlag>, 5 February 2026.

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(Translation “Swiss Standpoint”)

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² https://www.srgssr.ch/fileadmin/dam/timeline/PDF/PDF_Geschaeftsberichte/2007_Geschaeftsbericht_SRG_SSR.pdf und <https://www.srgssr.ch/de/wer-wir-sind/organisation/unternehmen#:~:text=Mit%20rund%207200%20Besch%C3%A4ftigten%20beziehungsweise,elektronische%20Medien%20in%20der%20Schweiz>

³ <https://www.watson.ch/schweiz/analyse/539732198-srg-kuendigt-einsparungen-an-dann-erhoeht-sie-die-zahl-ihrer-mitarbeiter>

⁴ <https://www.20min.ch/story/kosten-steigen-srg-verspricht-sparen-doch-personalbestand-erreicht-rekord-hoch-103327900>

⁵ <https://insideparadeplatz.ch/2024/12/26/srg-glaentzt-mit-leeren-versprechen-job-aus-statt-abbau/>

⁶ <https://www.freie-medienakademie.de/medien-plus/das-zensur-jahr-2026>

⁷ <https://www.tagesanzeiger.ch/rki-protokolle-srf-fuer-unterlassene-berichterstattung-geruegt-247054564194>

⁸ <https://www.swissinfo.ch/ger/aussenpolitik/eine-mehrheit-der-schweizerinnen-will-n%C3%A4her-an-die-nato-mit-klaren-einschr%C3%A4nkungen/82692308>

⁹ <https://www.news.admin.ch/news/message/attachments/86738.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://weltwoche.ch/daily/5-jahre-sandro-brotz-welche-politiker-haben-der-srf-moderator-und-sein-team-am-meisten-in-die-arena-eingeladen-gleich-vorweg-die-gruenen-belegen-platz-eins/>

¹¹ <https://www.blick.ch/politik/kehrtwende-bei-der-srf-kritik-ploetzlich-beschwerten-sich-die-zuschauer-ueber-mangelndes-gendern-id19665283.html>

¹² <https://www.20min.ch/story/nur-fuenf-prozent-der-schweizer-nutzen-den-genderstern-368159950461>

¹³ <https://www.tvinfo.de/fernsehprogramm/1731721434-einstein>

¹⁴ <https://www.nzz.ch/feuilleton/stephan-klapproth-im-gespraech-ld.1883988>

¹⁵ <https://srg-initiative.ch/>

¹⁶ <https://schweizermonat.ch/die-demokratie-braucht-keine-srg/>

¹⁷ <https://www.tagesanzeiger.ch/halbierungsinitiative-srg-im-check-das-muessen-sie-wissen-256191399841>

¹⁸ <https://www.tagesanzeiger.ch/senkung-der-tv-gebuehren-900-stellen-weg-srg-warnt-vor-job-kahlschlag-616967262396>

¹⁹ <https://www.20min.ch/story/medienpolitik-schweiz-srg-sieht-ihre-existenz-bedroht-103484071>

²⁰ <https://www.persoendlich.com/medien/nationalrat-sagt-nein-zur-srg-initiative>

²¹ <https://www.20min.ch/story/serafe-gebuehren-srg-muss-zittern-mehrheit-will-fuer-halbierungsinitiative-stimmen-103431196>

²² <https://www.blick.ch/politik/enges-rennen-um-halbierungsinitiative-retten-die-frauen-die-srg-id21644613.html>