

Journalism After the Monopoly on Publishing Has Been Broken

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Most journalism that focuses on mass media in Norway has a business orientation. A broader media journalism with a more varied approach may make a decisive contribution to the re-definition of journalism and the role of journalists now that Internet, 'the Web', has broken established media's monopoly on the privilege to publish.

Can the press possibly compete with television, "a medium that, in a matter of speaking, lets its audience actually witness events as they happen"? The question was asked in a rhetorical vein by Norwegian editor Chr. A. R. Christensen in 1961, the year after television was introduced in Norway. Christensen was Editor-in-Chief of *Verdens Gang*, a post he held from the paper's start in 1945 until his death in 1967.¹

Among his many talents, Christensen was a shrewd media analyst, as Martin Eide writes in his biography of Christensen, published in 2006.² He went on to answer his question about the competitive strength of the press with an emphatic "Yes": Where television is clearly superior in its speed and ability to provide 'presence', the press is unsurpassed when it comes to analysis, interpretation and evaluation, Christensen declared.

A history of Norwegian journalism about the media has yet to be written, but when it is, Christensen's analyses will have a given place in it. Decisive junctures, such as when one or another new media technology appears on the scene, are probably the most interesting periods for historians looking for innovation and definitive steps in the development of journalism. The repercussions of contemporary innovations in information and communication technology ('ICT') are arguably even more radical than those of television, in terms of the impact on editors and journalists in any case. Television represented a new form of distribution, but it did not affect editors' and journalists' control over media content, the news and opinions accorded publicity. Internet, by contrast, has totally dismantled editors' monopoly privileges. The result is a dynamic development of new, Web-based genres such as blogs, 'wikis' and video on the web – all produced outside the realm of established media, primarily by individuals with no formal training in journalism, and

at least in part on the basis of totally new praxis with respect to editing and quality control.

Patterned after Business Media

There are no indications that the sudden demise of the monopoly on publishing has had any decisive impact on Norwegian journalism about the media – not yet in any case. The pattern for this kind of journalism was set some years before World Wide Web access was common. In March 1992, a Norwegian business newspaper, *Dagens Næringsliv*, launched a regular section of the paper that is tailored to appeal to readers involved in the Oslo Stock Exchange: “Etter Børs” [roughly: After the bell].³ In the sixteen years of its existence, Etter Børs has devoted several pages in each issue to the media and communication branches – media, advertising/marketing and public relations. In line with the paper’s overall profile, the focus rests primarily on financial/commercial aspects. Etter Børs may not have been the first example of journalism about the media – witness the example of Chr. A. R. Christensen – but it is generally agreed that the section has established the pattern for journalistic coverage of the media in Norway. This is true both of editorial approaches to the subject and ideas about the target readership. Etter Børs was obviously created to appeal to professionals in the media, advertising and communication, or in closely related branches. The closest competitors to Etter Børsen are the web publication *Propaganda* and the web edition of *Kampanje* (a monthly). Both share Etter Børs’s approach to the media; they are even more target group-oriented.

Up until early 2006, *Propaganda* and web-*Kampanje* were both niche media with rather modest readerships, but in response to keener competition in journalism about the media on the web they are now distributed much more widely. *Propaganda* has been integrated into NA24, a business website, whereas *Kampanje* has a distribution agreement with a rival site, E24.

An important step in the direction of greater pluralism in journalism about the media came in 2006, when Norway’s fourth-largest newspaper, *Bergens Tidende*, converted to tabloid format. At the conversion, the paper launched a daily media section, where other perspectives than business coverage dominate.

Other vehicles for journalism about the media that should be mentioned are the web editions of *Journalisten*, the organ of the Norwegian Union of Journalists, and *Dagens Medier*, published by the Publishers’ Association. Whereas *Journalisten* has expanded its editorial production on the Web successively over the years, *Dagens Medier* has increased its web production markedly only very recently. Both papers’ websites carry original journalistic coverage of mass media that is updated daily. All four titles offer continuous coverage of the media branch.

A recent project at *Journalisten* gives us some idea of the potential for innovation in Norwegian journalism on the media: In early 2007 a panel organized by the paper presented a list of “the five most important stories *not* carried by the

media” in 2006.⁴ The panel looked for events and conditions of consequence to the public that media, for one reason or another, had neglected. The list aroused considerable attention in the media and was debated at a well-attended conference in March 2007.

That economic aspects have so dominated coverage of the media may in part have to do with certain features of business news journalism in Norway. Attempts to instill the standard professional ideology of journalism among business journalists may run into more resistance than elsewhere, inasmuch as many practitioners in the specialty have backgrounds in Economics and Business Administration, not Journalism. In the publications influenced by editor and media owner Trygve Hegnar (*Kapital, Finansavisen*), for example, one often hears the opinion that it is better to hire an economist and give him/her training in journalism than to hire a graduate of a School of Journalism, the rationale being that it is easier to teach an economist to write than it is to teach a journalist Economics. May a recruitment pattern like this explain why business journalists seem to find it easier to subject other media – their colleagues – to journalistic scrutiny? It is in any case an interesting hypothesis. In extension of this reasoning: Will a steadily higher level of education among editors and journalists give rise to a more multidisciplinary understanding of what being a journalist or editor is all about?

Commentators and Talking Heads

Alongside the coverage of media from a business angle the past couple of decades have seen several other approaches. In the case of reportage, we have continuous coverage of television, especially in the non-subscribed tabloids, *VG* and *Dagbladet*. This coverage has largely focused on TV ‘personalities’ and takes place in a kind of symbiosis between the papers and the channels. It is, for that matter, a kind of journalism Chr. A. R. Christensen foresaw quite precisely in 1961, according to Martin Eide: “People love to read about what they, themselves in one way or another have been a part of. You are never more eager to read an account of a sports event than when it is a match you have seen – at the stadium or on TV – or listened to on the radio.”⁵ Television has proven to be a reliable source of “familiar faces” for Page One of the nonsubscribed tabloids. But the copy generally falls into the category of soft news (entertainment or human interest) rather than hard news coverage. Regularly appearing columns of television criticism, offered in a number of media for some years, are another format that approaches journalistic coverage of mass media. Television critics, however, are frequently criticized for not understanding the industry.

Media commentary has become an established subdivision of op-ed journalism in some papers. In Norway many regard Markus Markussen at *Dagbladet* a pioneer. Markussen, a journalist noted for his stylistic gifts, developed the format for media columns in the 1990s. Both nationally distributed tabloids,

VG and *Dagbladet*, employ media commentators, but their columns do not appear daily.

Perhaps surprisingly, no regular program of media commentary has survived on Norwegian television, despite several attempts. One fairly long-lived attempt, – *Mediemenerne* [The Critics], aired on public service channel NRK2 from 2002 to 2004 – featured a panel of commentators recruited from the press, communication professions and the research community who offered their views on various media-related issues. Their views, however, were seldom based on particularly extensive journalistic research. Today, media issues are discussed on radio and television in other formats such as moderated studio debates.

Kurér [Courier], a weekly program of “radio on radio” on national public radio, treats other media, too, from time to time. Otherwise, journalism about the media has no fixed place in NRK programming.

In our search for regular coverage of the media we should not forget that media performance can be subjected to extensive scrutiny in connection with special events or “affairs” of various kinds. In those cases the media and their modus operandi are the story itself. In Norway, “the Tønne affair” offers a classic example: Tore Tønne was Minister of Health in the first Stoltenberg Cabinet, 2000-2001. In Fall 2002, after the Stoltenberg government had resigned, he was harshly criticized in the media, and particularly *Dagbladet*, for consulting work he did for certain clients. Shortly before Christmas Tore Tønne committed suicide. This tragic turn of events elicited considerable public debate concerning the media’s role and ethics. A commission of inquiry appointed by the Norwegian Press Association (an umbrella organization of publishers, editors and journalists with a focus on ethics and integrity) concluded that the alleged impropriety of Mr. Tønne’s role as a consultant had been blown up out of proportion and that media coverage had focused excessively on the ex-minister’s person. The commission particularly criticized the editors of *Dagbladet* for not having troubled themselves to meet Mr. Tønne in person for comment in the course of their reporting about him.⁶

Ersatz Criticism? – More Diversity?

This past March and April (2007) I conducted an informal study. Over a period of three weeks I tried to make a total inventory of journalistic coverage of mass media in Norwegian media on the web, both web media and web editions of conventional media. I then published what I found on my own blog, “Undercurrent”.⁷ My intent was to register all coverage of the media viewed from other perspectives than the financial/business angle. Would I find many different angles – journalism that treat media ethics, media’s use of the language, their use of sources, use of genres, and so forth? A journalism characterized by systematics, continuity and a variety of methods?

As expected, I found embryos of these kinds of coverage, sometimes in the cultural sections, sometimes on pages devoted to politics, local news and, not

least, opinion. Surprisingly, I also found a tendency for the web media to publicize others' criticism of the media rather uncritically. Sources of different kinds were allowed to lash out at "the media" – often without any specific target – with little or no documentation. To take an example: "The media are to blame" for young girls' dreams of becoming a fashion model, wrote a researcher on sports and gender in *Bergens Tidende* (April 4, 2007). Might this kind of 'criticism' be a simple way for the media to impress the public with their broadness of mind? "Look, see how self-critical we are!" In their simplest forms such articles are not particularly good journalism. One would expect criticism of the media to be handled with as much discernment as criticism of other institutions.

Another tendency exhibited in the material is that the media readily accept media-critical contributions from external sources. In the weeks I studied there were several items in which church leaders criticized media's treatment of issues relating to the church and faith/religious beliefs. Media professionals' readiness to respond to the criticism or to participate in the discussions apparently varies, however.

This study, small as it may be, shows that Norwegian media are not totally silent on the topics of media and journalism. It is clearly possible for committed journalists to write about the media outside established media, as well. With few exceptions, however, their articles are not regular features of the paper or program line-up, as in the case of *Dagens Næringsliv*. Without continuity, it is difficult to build the competence needed to report about the media in a better, more engaging fashion.

Collegial Loyalty Comes First

Genuinely critical coverage of the media presumes that it is acceptable – if not desirable – for editors and journalists to scrutinize their professional colleagues. A recent controversial case in Norway suggests that neither the acceptance nor the will is in place today.

In February 2007 a book on the methods used by gossip magazine *Se og Hør* was published. The author was journalist Håvard Melnæs, who was an ace reporter at *Se og Hør* for some years. *Se og Hør*, one of the most widely circulated magazines in Scandinavia, had a combined average weekly circulation of 453 000 in 2006. It appears twice weekly (267 000 Tuesday issue and 186 000 weekend issue).

In his book Melnæs revealed that the magazine pays Norwegian celebrities – including leading politicians – to allow themselves to be photographed and interviewed. The magazine has perfected the practice of rewarding sources with emoluments, sums of up to tens of thousands of euros. In the more forthright version of the practice, the person is photographed and interviewed in his/her home in return for a fee and, furthermore, the privilege of having a say about the angle of the reportage and phrasing of the text. More controversial is Melnæs' revelation that *Se og Hør* also pays travel agents, airlines, banks and

credit card companies for information about celebrities' – and particularly the Royal family's – travel routes and various transactions. Melnæs' exposé has elicited several inquiries.

Assuming that Melnæs is telling the truth, the practice has been going on for years. Although the magazine's ethics have been the subject of debate on previous occasions, Melnæs' revelations surprised many a seasoned professional in the Norwegian press. In the context of an assessment of journalism about the media, the question arises: Why has none of this become public knowledge earlier? Naturally, *Se og Hør* is hardly likely to broadcast the information; still, it seems unlikely that such provocative methods could possibly be kept a secret if journalists in the magazine's surroundings had done some digging. Why didn't they? It may be that scrutiny of popular weeklies simply lacks the professional prestige attached to exposés in the realms of business, finance and politics. Still, an alternative explanation seems closer to hand: journalists try to avoid stepping on their other journalists' toes. It is considered a breach of collegial loyalty.

This may reflect an attitude among journalists on a broader plane. In an article on his experience as a readers' ombudsman at *Bergens Tidende*, Terje Angelshaug writes:

Very few people outside the editorial staff have any insight into the values that underlie newspapers' handling of important issues. Editors seldom make themselves available to the public to field critical comments or explain the journalism they produce. Critical letters-to-the-Editor are seldom answered, and when they are, the response is generally dismissive, devoid of all admission of guilt. This inability to practice self-critique is rooted, I believe, in the fact that many editors and journalists see themselves as the sole protectors of freedom of expression and, indeed, of Truth. They tend to see their critics as opposing these values.⁹

Even today, in 2007, we journalists are extremely sensitive to criticism and very secretive about our methods. If we do what we can to hinder others' insight into our own methods, it follows that we will hesitate to scrutinize others. But editors and journalists who elect not to examine and expose their colleagues' professional behavior despite there being reason to do so are actually violating their own ethical code. The code of press ethics from 2003 includes the dictum: "It is a press obligation to shed critical light on how media themselves exercise their role."¹⁰

Reflection and Cynicism

Misguided loyalties and an indiscriminate view of the press as Defender of Truth are, in other words, still with us. Both pose effective hindrances to the further development of journalism about the media, but it is my belief that their days

are numbered. Simplistic conceptions of journalists' *modus operandi* and the societal role media play have an antiquated air about them.

Media researcher Philip Schlesinger studied the BBC of the 1970s from the inside and discusses the prevailing ideology of journalism and its precepts of impartiality and objectivity – i.e., the very fundamentals of the unique position the public service broadcaster enjoys – in a critical light. BBC News' credibility was based on journalists' presentation of themselves as a neutral, professional collective that had routines to guarantee a strict separation of fact from opinion. BBC News was produced by a brotherhood of impeccably honest and impartial empiricists.¹¹ This notion presumed some form of direct contact with reality. The task of the journalist was to serve as an eye-witness who relates facts – the Truth – about the world.

Such a notion of knowledge and such a self-image are hopelessly outdated.

One scholar who shares this view is media researcher and anthropologist Georgina Born, who has studied journalism at the BBC in recent years. The BBC's journalists are well versed in critical works on the media, Born notes. Today's professionals look upon journalism as the outcome of a process of construction and interpretation. Basic to what media do is the notion that both practitioner and public realize that this is so. The media reflect on themselves. "Reflective realism" has succeeded the concept of naive empiricism, Born concludes.¹² Many points of criticism of media and publicity are common knowledge among journalists, other media professionals, and the public. This mutual awareness can sometimes give rise to a certain cynicism. It is, for example, common practice to comment on and rate various actors' media strategies in connection with major events and initiatives. Håvard Melnæs' above-mentioned book is a case in point: marketing professionals applauded the publisher's and author's publicity strategy even as the book was being launched. An ability to generate favorable opinion through effective management – or manipulation, as the case may be – of the media is generally admired. This, too, is a consequence of the new reflectiveness.

Thus, journalists have updated their epistemological self-understanding.

However they make use of it – or not – a simplistic view of the journalist as the sole Protector of Truth would not appear to have much of a future.

Bloggning – Independence and An Alternative Public Sphere

I started this essay with the statement that journalists and editors had lost their monopoly on publishing.¹³ Two ideas that underlie expectations regarding the effects of blogging on media journalism should be mentioned: First is the notion that the public, by means of their own unedited publishing can serve as a 'fifth estate', a corrective to media that do not perform their duties well enough. Blogs represent a form of publishing about media that takes place outside the auspices of the media and forms a complement to the media's journalistic coverage of the media. A second, related, but more ambitious idea

is that bloggers have the potential to be an independent editorial and political power that can compete with established media.

Up to now, blogging has been discussed on the media's terms. The question generally asked is whether a blogger has managed to attract enough attention to make an impact on public awareness and public opinion. In Norway there have been very few instances in which bloggers have been able to influence the public agenda. Bloggers have not been very good at backing each other up to enhance their influence. Nor have they been good enough at 'digging' and checking their data. Opinion pieces predominate. Also, the media would appear to feel in a strong enough position to be able to ignore bloggers.

Norwegian media have, namely, been quick to take to the web and are well established there.

This situation can change. Many new and stimulating writers have started blogging. Media that 'discover' them and manage to recruit them will have a competitive edge. The reasons that blogs have not had much influence to date are essentially factors bloggers themselves can do something about.

The record to date suggests that blogging has had an additional consequence that is at least as important as the foregoing, namely, the establishment of small, critical alternative public spheres in the form of groups of bloggers and writers who focus on a small selection of themes and follow them over time. The blog, Document.no is a case in point. (I should mention that I was involved in founding Document.no in 2003, but I have not been a part of it since August of that year.) Much of the production lies in the hands of Hans Rustad, a former journalist. The blog discusses controversial issues: e.g., immigration and integration, Islamic terrorism, the crisis of the Left, global warming. In 2006, media started paying attention to Document.no; Rustad has been rather frequently interviewed, invited to take part in studio debates, etc. The establishment of a small, alternative public sphere or 'community' has aroused media interest. Thus, it appears that bloggers' influence can develop in phases.

Journalists Can Be so Many Things

After the monopoly privileges of established media have been broken, what does being a journalist actually amount to? How does the practice of journalism differ from other forms of publicity, like blogging? For a report (cf note 13) I asked bloggers, editors and journalists to point out the similarities and differences between blogging and journalism. Editors and journalists among the respondents saw some similarities between news commentary and blogging, but bloggers went further. Bjørn Stærk, a young computer programmer who has been blogging since 2001, commented that bloggers who concern themselves with news reporting and politics not only generate opinion, but also perform a filtering function. In that sense their work resembles that of news editors. The most distinct difference between bloggers and journalists is, very simply, their status: if you are paid for your work, you are a professional journalist; if you

are not paid, you are an amateur. In time we may see a successive blurring of the distinction between amateurs and professionals when newspapers have a broader selection of writers to choose from, Stærk surmised. The best of the 'semi-pros' will be inducted into the media.

Has the emergence of blogging and other user-steered publishing caused editors and journalists to reflect on their work? There are signs that it is beginning to. Blogging and 'citizen journalism' were debated at a conference arranged by the Norwegian Editors' Association in May 2007. When the web newspaper, *ABC Nyheter* was launched in February 2007, a special section devoted to citizen journalism was a highlighted feature. There, *ABC's* readers are invited to write their own articles on subjects of their own choosing. It is too early to say whether the concept will be successful.

Bjørn Stærk's idea about a successive transition from blogging to journalism is highly plausible. Bloggers – those who focus on social issues, in any case – gather, evaluate, process and communicate current information. They do it on a volunteer basis, but that does not necessarily mean the quality is poorer. Bloggers are often specialists on the subjects they write about. One of the most positive aspects of blogging – when it is good – is its commitment to openness as an unwritten norm: openness both as regards the sources used and regarding the writer's motives. At its best, blogging can be continuous knowledge production coupled with reflection on one's own motives and role.

As I see it, it is here that blogging and journalism should meet. In a time of transition like the present, when the roles of editors and journalists are being re-defined, journalism about the media can provide vital insights, the raw material for much-needed self-reflection. But it can only happen if journalism about the media expands beyond the confines of the business angle that has dominated to date. Journalism about the media should reflect the diversity of journalism that actually exists and include web publishing in its various guises. Provided that this media journalism represents the fruit of a broad array of methods – from investigating colleagues' methods, via participant observation in the 'blogosphere', to classic journalistic research and reportage, to name but a few – journalism focusing on the media can make important contributions to a better understanding of journalism as a special form of publication that will continue to exist, even without monopoly privileges.

Chr. A. R. Christensen was Norway's foremost ideologue of the press in the postwar period. His biographer, Martin Eide, describes the crucial role Christensen played in reinstating the public sector and formulating a code of ethics for reporters and editors. Christensen argued untiringly that the only way media could develop was through a commitment to quality. A successful response to the challenge television posed could only be based on "raising the standard of journalism, the knowledgeability and judgment and ability to write of members of the press".¹⁴ Those who feel a call to be the media ideologues of the digital age can make worse choices than Christensen as their source of inspiration.

Notes

1. *Verdens Gang*, *VG*, was founded in June 1945 by the Norwegian Resistance, in which Chr. A. R. Christensen was active. Some six months before Christensen died in 1967, the paper was taken over by Schibsted, who revamped it and gave it a new profile, which marked the start of a long period of steady growth. In 1981, *VG*, now a non-subscribed tabloid, had become Norway's largest daily paper in terms of circulation, a position it has kept to the present day.
- Martin Eide, a leading Norwegian media scholar, wrote a history of *VG*, published in 1995, which is regarded as a standard work: *Blod, sverte og gledesårer* [Blood, ink and tears of joy]. Oslo: Schibsted Forlag.
2. Martin Eide (2006) *Saklighetens lidenskap* [A passion for the dispassionate]. Oslo: Aschehoug.
3. About the launching of Etter Børs: private communication to the author from Hans Hjellemo, former editor of the section.
4. See further: www.journalisten.no/id/242.
5. Eide (2006), p. 229.
6. Svein Brurås, Guri Hjeltnes & Henrik Syse (2003) *3 uker i desember: en kritisk gjennomgang av mediernes rolle i den såkalte Tønne-saken* [3 weeks in december: a critical examination of the role of mass media in the 'Tønne affair']. Oslo: Norsk Presseforbund.
7. See www.oov.no/undercurrent/archives/undercurrent_nor/medieneommediene.
8. Håvard Melnæs (2007) *En helt vanlig dag på jobben* [All in a day's work]. Oslo: Kagge.
9. Terje Angelshaug (2006) Et hull i BT-muren [A chink in the wall around *BT*], *Vox Publica*. (www.voxpublica.no/2006/11/et-hull-i-bt-muren/)
10. An English translation of the Code ('Vaer V arsom-plakaten') may be accessed at www.nj.no/English/.
11. Philip Schlesinger (1987): *Putting "Reality" Together: BBC News*. London: Sage.
12. Georgina Born, lecture at the University of Bergen, 27 April 2007.
13. I develop my observations on how blogging relates to journalism at greater length in "Under mediernes overflate" [Media: Beneath the surface] (2006). The report (in Norwegian) is accessible at www.oov.no/prosjekter/undermediernesoverflaterapport.html.
14. Eide (2006), p. 229.