

### **Norwegian media: Free, but dependent**

*How can the press be subsidized by the state, and still be free? Norway is tied with Iceland for first place on the 2007 Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Index. More newspapers are read here per capita than in any other country. Yet this free and diverse media is funded by the Norwegian government. The press is supposed to be the fourth estate of power - how can it be financially dependent on the very powers it is supposed to control?*

The Norwegian press has been subsidized since 1969. It now receives about 60 million dollars in subsidies per year, and newspapers are exempt from some taxes. Norway also has a state television and radio network, NRK. This network has no advertising, but is financed entirely through a mandatory television fee paid by every Norwegian with a television in their home.

Norwegian journalist Knut Olav Åmås says: “Nothing seems to indicate that the press funding results in a more servile press. The press sees itself as critical of power.” Åmås is the editor of the opinion section of Norway's largest newspaper, *Aftenposten*, which does not receive funding.

Marianne Rustad Carlsen, a Norwegian journalist and head of *Redaksjon1*, a political debate show on NRK, says: “I cannot remember, in all my years as a journalist – and I have worked in print newspapers, radio and television – that we have *ever* chosen not to do something because of government funding. And I have been doing this since 1979.”

All the Norwegians I have spoken to about press funding agree: The Norwegian media is free and diverse, despite government subsidies – or perhaps because of them. In fact, since the government

started subsidizing the media, Norwegian journalists have become more objective and less influenced by politicians.

Åmås calls Norway “a consensus society”. Norwegians are remarkably similar when it comes to income, lifestyle and habits - including media habits. Redaksjon1 reaches between 25 and 50% of viewers every evening, and a majority of Norwegians have watched the same Friday night shows on NRK for years. Yet Norwegians value diversity. Norway has two languages – neither of which are spoken in any other country – plus the Sami language and countless<sup>1</sup> Norwegian dialects. There are usually six to nine political parties represented in the National Assembly, ranging from conservative to socialist. In a country with just 4,5 million citizens, diversity does not come automatically. It is cultivated through laws of proportional representation, fixed quotas of airtime for the two official languages, and subsidies for newspapers with financial problems.

With a comprehensive welfare system, including student loans and scholarships for nearly all college students, Norwegians are used to accepting government money. “I think [state funding of the media] provides security for democracy, even though that can sound contradictory,” says Carlsen. She believes in the value of television without advertising, where no one can pay for airtime. Carlsen's comments exemplify the general Norwegian attitude: “big business” is more dangerous than the government. This explains the laws that regulate ownership of media businesses, and the prohibition of political

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1 “As many dialects as there are places (...) and in some places the north has a different dialect than the south”, or so Eric Papazian, associate professor at the Institute of Nordic Studies and Literature at the University of Oslo, told Norwegian newspaper Dagbladet. And yes, “places” is just as vague a word in Norwegian as it is in English. I asked a linguist about this myself, and she had no idea how many dialects there are. Nor did a dialect enthusiast I know. Yes, Norway has dialect enthusiasts. Norwegians care about their dialects and language in general. The NRK TV show “Typisk Norsk” (Typically Norwegian), a factual show about Norwegian language, was a major hit. The two written languages, Bokmål (“book language”, basically Danish but with a different pronunciation, the language that I speak) and Nynorsk (new Norwegian, an invented language based on various regional dialects) are important determinants of Norwegian politics. Yet very few people speak either one of these official languages. However, linguist Helge Sandøy believes Norwegians exaggerate the differences between regional dialects.

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advertising on all Norwegian television channels. To Norwegians, it is perfectly acceptable that the government regulate and “correct” the market, especially in a socially important sector like the media. Hans Fredrik Dahl, professor of Media Studies at the University of Oslo, describes this as “selective business support”, and says: “The newspaper sector is definitely worthy of support.”

The Norwegian government started funding the press in the 1960s, in order to maintain political and geographic diversity. The government feared an “unfair distribution” of advertising revenues – that the largest newspaper in any area would attract all advertisers and eventually drive other newspapers out of business. At this time, being objective was not part of Norwegian journalist ethics. Each paper represented one political view. There were official connections between political parties and newspapers, and journalists would have access to “their” party within the National Assembly. This so-called “party press” made local monopolies dangerous – all major parties had to be represented in all areas. Between the two world wars, small Norwegian towns might have six newspapers each. By the sixties, several small right-wing newspapers had gone out of business. When it seemed like newspapers associated with the worker's movement – often the second largest newspaper in any given area – would suffer the same fate, the Labor party government created a press funding system.

The criteria for receiving press funding are simple and automatic. Politicizing the allocation of funding would be difficult. “No politician would dare to call us and tell us what to do.” says Carlsen. The decisions are mainly based on the financial assessment of each newspaper's place in the market, although special support is given to newspapers published in the Sami language and other newspapers in the extreme north of Norway. Newspapers which do not need financial help to stay in business, like *Aftenposten*, generally do not receive it. The current subsidy rules also state that newspapers where public institutions or authorities have real control, economic responsibility or more than 49%

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ownership, are not eligible for funding.

Changes in the criteria leave more room for politics. Right after an independent committee had evaluated the subsidy system, the Labor government changed the number of newspapers a subsidized newspaper could sell per year. These changes allowed “Arbeiderbladet”, (The Workers' Magazine) to start receiving funding, although they were above the original limit.

Subsidies have not saved all local newspapers from going out of business, and many Norwegian towns now only have one newspaper. Today, most of the subsidies go to independent national newspapers who clearly state political views, but no direct connection with a political party. The press is still politically diverse, but not geographically.

Yet while there are fewer newspapers in Norway today, each one is more objective. The journalistic ideal has changed from loyal mouthpiece to neutral observer. “We no longer have a party press”, Dahl says, “for completely different reasons than because of the press funding.” What are these reasons? That is one of the most important current research questions for Norwegian media experts.

Some media experts see the distribution of political power as a possible answer to this question. After World War 2, the Labor party dominated politics and formed majority governments. Since 1965, coalitions, some of them minority governments, have made politics more complex. When different parties had to cooperate, loyal-to-party journalists were no longer allowed into closed meetings. “The journalists got their revenge by becoming neutral,” says Sverre Høy, professor of Media Studies and specialist in comparative press history at the University of Oslo. He has evaluated press funding as a member of two separate evaluation committees.

“I thought the subsidies would be a short-term solution, while Norwegian journalism matured and became more balanced.” Høyer says. But the system is still in place, although there is some political disagreement about its success. The two most right-wing parties, the Conservative Party and the Progressive Party, are against press funding, while the rest of Norway's major political parties are for it. “It's interesting how the Conservative Party's support for the press funding system has depended on the success of 'their' publications,” says Høyer. One such right-wing paper, Norges Handels- og sjøfartstidende (Norway's Trade and Shipping Times) remarketed their paper, renamed it Dagens Næringsliv (Daily Business) and started paying their shareholders. The subsidy criteria were soon changed so that paying shareholders automatically made a paper ineligible for funding.

Every party except the Progressive Party<sup>2</sup> agree on the current funding of NRK. Carlsen does not think the Progressive Party's lack of support influences her show's coverage of their politics. “We want to hear all voices, especially in a debate show.” When I visit NRK, Redaksjon1 are planning a debate between a representative of the Progressive Party and an artist, about “artist wages” – another form of government subsidy. Carlsen emphasizes that “politicians are *elected*” - if her country's voters and her show's viewers do not want a state network, they can choose to vote for the Progressive Party.

“You know how it is with government funding,” Dahl says, “The years when they threaten to cut it...” He does not bother to go on – apparently, the fate of any Norwegian politician who threatens budget cuts for media, culture or research is obvious. Perhaps Norwegians rely on the government too much. Amås says: “Norwegians confuse 'state' with 'society' and have no clear idea of a *civil* society”.

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<sup>2</sup> I explained in the previous paragraph that the two most right-wing parties are the Conservative and the Progressive party. However, being a political scientist, I should add that technically the Progressive party is neither right nor left. They are economically liberal (free market, free trade, capitalism without the state getting involved), but appeal to the same voters as the Labor party. In my opinion, they are populist more than anything else.

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Norwegian media politics are shaped by this confusion. So many people in the Norwegian media have an interest in the press funding and the tax exemption that questioning it has almost become taboo.

The current Norwegian government is a left-wing coalition, consisting of the Labour party, the Socialist Left and the Central party. By including the Central party into the “left” this coalition has a political majority. A right-wing majority, with no need to compromise with small, centralist parties like the Central party, could make press funding and newspaper tax exemption history. Although there is no “party press” any more, certain small newspapers sympathise with these small parties, who often have the power to make or break alliances. As long as “their” newspapers need funding, there will be funding.

Opinion editor Åmås complains that newspaper debates in Norway are dominated by representatives of pre-identified interests, making the debate polarized and predictable. He still describes Norwegian media as “in good condition”. Norwegians are eager for political debate, and political commentary is an increasingly important newspaper genre. Høyer jokes that half of Aftenposten's staff works for the Opinion section. “We should certainly discuss how successful the press funding has been,” says Dahl, “But it has not lead to a situation of the government controlling public opinion.”