

# Shallow and Static or Deep and Dynamic?

## *Studying the State of Online Journalism in Scandinavia*

MARTIN ENGBRETSSEN

### **Abstract**

The Scandinavian countries are top ranked with regard to Internet access and general interest in news reading. Are they also showing the way for journalistic development through their utilization of new media technology?

The article offers results from an empirical study of 12 major, Scandinavian news sites, examining both the journalistic content and the presentation formats of 95 online news stories. Comparisons are made between print and online versions of news stories, and between paper-based sites and TV-based sites. The study concludes that the potentials of creating a more broad-spectre, user-controlled, dynamic and dialogic form of journalism are utilized only to a very modest degree – or not at all. On the other hand, the idea of online news being mere “shovel-ware”, recycled from a sibling newspaper or collected from external news agencies, is not to be fully trusted. The article also offers a conceptual framework for description and explanation of mass media genre development, based on social semiotic theory.

**Key Words:** online journalism, news formats, genre studies, multimedia, hypertext, web design

### **Introduction**

In a European context, the Scandinavian countries are generally recognized as early adopters of digital media technology, especially in terms of common Internet access and use.<sup>1</sup> Scandinavians are also among the top ranked with regard to news reading, as measured by newspaper circulation compared to number of inhabitants.<sup>2</sup> The development of Scandinavian online journalism is therefore of interest as a possible indicator of European tendencies in this area. Has the implementation of new media technology led to enhanced journalism – so far?

The aim of this article is to describe the state of online journalism in the Scandinavian countries a decade after its birth. A close analysis of selected news stories from 12 major news sites in Norway, Sweden and Denmark constitutes the empirical foundation for the conclusions drawn. Focus lies on the ways in which the new technological affordances are reflected in the actual journalistic output. Comparisons are made between print and online versions of news stories, and between paper-based sites and TV-based sites. The findings are put into perspective and discussed in light of modern genre theory.

Although the study reveals considerable variety among the three countries examined, the picture of major Scandinavian news sites as locomotives for the development of European online journalism is not very encouraging.<sup>3</sup> The media potentials of creating a more broad-spectre, user-controlled, dynamic and dialogic form of journalism are utilized only to a very modest degree – or not at all. On the other hand, the idea of online news being mere “shovel ware”, recycled from a sibling newspaper or collected from external news agencies, is not fully to be trusted.

**News as Genre in Motion**

Modern genre theory represents an adequate approach to studying online news within the framework of relevant contextual factors. A pragmatic perspective on *genre* will focus on the interplay between semantic, formal and functional characteristics of texts and their practical uses (Miller 1984, Berge & Ledin 2001). In a media-sensitive context, one can thereby state that a particular genre is recognized by the patterns of certain sign systems (verbal, visual, audial...) used within the framework of certain media systems (interpersonal, mass and network media systems) to gain specific effects (make someone understand, agree, laugh, pay, dance...) in certain situations (newsreading, discussion, stand up comedy, shopping, concert...).

All relevant contextual factors represent different sets of possibilities and limitations for communicative operations. In social semiotic theory, technological, semiotic and social factors are regarded as *systems for meaning-making*, each representing a specific room for action for the participants in communicational events. Such rooms for action are sometimes called the *affordances* of the meaning-making system in question (Gibson 1986, Norman 2002).

When changes appear in any one of these systems, it is interesting to study how the characteristics of the genre as such change. This holds especially for genres with strong traditions and conventions with respect to social functions, as is the case with the news genres. It is impossible to isolate one specific contextual factor as the “starter” of genre changes. But it is possible to reflect on possible relations between changes that appear in parallel. For example, whether changes in textual form and content correlate with changes in technological potentials and social structures.

The model below shows how genre development is dynamically related to changes in both instrumental and social systems of affordances.

**Illustration 1.** Model Illustrating the Dynamics of Factors Influencing Genre Development



When the Internet appeared in the early nineties, it meant a profound change in the technological and semiotic affordances for any genre going online. Messages could be exchanged multidirectionally, rapidly and at a very low cost. Enormous amounts of information could be stored and made publicly accessible. Text elements could be electronically interconnected with hyperlinks. And the old barriers between static and dynamic sign systems (writing, still pictures and graphics vs. sound, animation and moving pictures) were significantly lowered.

It seems reasonable to claim that these changes in the semiotic and technological affordances bring the promise of enhanced abilities for online news to serve the social and situational functions of the genre. But are they used in such a manner?

The question – and its answer – needs to be grounded on a definition of the social and situational functions of the news. In this context, it is taken as a given that news shall provide “... a truthful, comprehensive and intelligent account of the day’s events in a context that them some meaning,” as formulated by the American Commission Freedom of the Press in 1947 (cited in Mencher 1997:624). Similarly, the news reading situation is understood as one characterized by a reader willing to use a limited amount of time to be informed about news events of interest, demanding presentation that is emotionally engaging and personally relevant – giving him or her a feeling of value for the time invested – as well as overviewable, trustworthy, understandable and meaningful (Engebretsen 2000). Using the web, he or she expects a high degree of user control and a text layout adapted to a fast, information-oriented mode of reading (Nielsen 2000).

## Method of Study

Twelve major news sites, four from each of the Scandinavian countries, have been analysed in this study. From each country the two most popular, paper-based news sites (as measured by ratings) have been selected, together with one major news site based on a national TV organization and one major news site based on a regional newspaper.<sup>4</sup> For both practical and methodological reasons, all three TV-based sites belong to major public service organizations.<sup>5</sup> The following sites are analysed in the study:

*Norway:* Verdens Gang (vg.no), Aftenposten (aftenposten.no) Norsk Rikskringkasting (NRK.no), Bergens Tidende (bergenstidende.no)

*Sweden:* Aftonbladet (aftonbladet.se), Expressen (expressen.se), Sveriges Television (SVT.se), Göteborgs-Posten (gp.se)

*Denmark:* B.T. (bt.dk), Ekstrabladet (ekstrabladet.dk), Danmarks Radio (DR.dk), Fyens Stiftstidende (fyens.dk).

The empirical material thus represents a collection of the most visited Scandinavian news sites, collected from different news site categories, but all originating in established media houses offering professional, mainstream news journalism.

From each site, eight news stories are collected, all taken from the top of the main page in the morning (at eight a.m.) or in the afternoon (at two p.m.) on four different weekdays of four different weeks.<sup>6</sup> The material consists of a total of 95 online news stories.<sup>7</sup> Each startpage has been downloaded twice, once and then again after a 6-hour interval, for registration of story updating.

For comparison between corresponding versions of news stories on print and online, all relevant newspaper copies are examined. A total of 57 corresponding stories were found.

The selected news stories are analysed using a method that combines qualitative and quantitative processes. The qualitative perspective is attended to by close reading and detailed examination of each individual story, using a system of 64 variables as the basis for analysis. The quantitative perspective is provided by using the identical registration method for a relatively great number of stories, and feeding the values into a statistics tool, allowing computerized analysis where relevant.

In the following sections, results from the study are categorized into two groups, the first focusing on newsroom strategies and priorities as reflected in news content and journalistic approach, the second focusing on presentation formats.

## **Newsroom Strategies and Priorities**

As a focus point for this group of variables, we raise the question of whether the online newsrooms use their technological potentials to offer a thorough and deep coverage of news events or whether they instead aim at a quick and superficial form of journalism.

### *How Many of the Stories are Web-only Stories?*

(The TV-based sites are not included in this part of the analysis) Of a total of 74 stories, about one fifth (14) are presented exclusively on the web. The rest is also covered on print, either the same day (32) or the next (28).<sup>8</sup>

Sweden stands out in the study as the nation with the highest degree of cross publishing. Except for one story, all the news stories published on the Swedish news sites also appear on print. For the Norwegian and Danish sites, about one fourth of the online stories are web-only stories.

### *What Kind of Journalistic Approach Characterizes the Online News Stories?*

Story length is one of many factors indicating the resources given to each individual news story. Another, related factor is how in depth the event or situation is examined. Is it merely a paragraph, a registration of a news event without going into any depth or detail; is it a story reflecting routinized journalistic processes or is it a presentation characterized by a genuine attempt to shed light on a complex issue in society? The latter is called a focus story (cf., Lund & Olsen 2004).

It appears that about 60 per cent of all 95 web stories count fewer than 500 words. Only about 20 per cent count more than 1000 words. With respect to journalistic approach, the figures indicate a similar tendency: About 15 per cent of the stories are classified as paragraphs, while slightly more, close to 20 per cent, are classified as focus stories. The majority, more than 65 per cent, are classified as routine stories (For a comparison between online and print content, see section 4.1.4.).

Looking at the different nations, Denmark stands out with respect to the practice of using short texts and a very low degree of focus stories. Nine out of 35 Danish stories are classified as paragraphs, and only one qualifies as a focus story. As many as 30 of the Danish stories count fewer than 500 words, while only one story counts more than 1000 words. On the other end of the scale, the Swedish sites count only two (out of 29) paragraphs and nine focus stories, 15 having fewer than 500 words and 9 having more than 1000 words.

### *How Many and What Kinds of Sources Are the Stories Based on?*

The number of sources that journalists refer to in their news stories is normally perceived as an indication of the quality of the journalism. It is equally interesting to ask what kinds of sources are preferred by journalists: experts or people personally involved in the incidents, officials and bureaucrats or eyewitnesses?

Out of the 95 online news stories analysed, one-third have no source or only one identifiable source. Half of the stories have three or more sources. (News bureaus and other news organizations are not counted as sources in this context.)

The Danish sites stand out clearly also in this part of the study by having the fewest sources per news story, on an average. Twenty per cent of the Danish news stories are sourceless, while 40 percent are single-source stories. Only 25 per cent have three or more sources.

It is a striking tendency that the professional, bureaucratic sources dominate the online news stories strongly. The study indicates that, when a journalist writing for the web contacts a source, there is a 70 per cent chance that the source will be a person who is professionally involved in the incident, meaning he or she is a policeman, a politician, a state official, etc. The chance that the journalist will contact a non-involved expert on the field in question, for example an academic, is only 5 per cent. Also, there are strikingly few sources who are personally – but non-professionally – involved in the incidents reported. Only 15 percent of all sources in the material belong to this group.

### *Online Content vs. Print Content*

What is the relation between online news content and the content of print versions in the corresponding newspapers? Is the content simply copied from the one to the other? Is it short and shallow on the Net and deep and thorough on paper? Are the same people writing for both channels? Does afternoon Net publishing “kill” the story for the next day newspaper? There are a great number of questions concerning the relation between content on the Net and content on print, a relation representing a critical area of strategy for the multichannelled news houses, struggling to find the right balance between cooperation and competition.

Among the 74 online stories that are produced in print-based news houses, 57 corresponding stories are found also on print. Surprisingly enough, there is no difference between the morning stories and the afternoon stories with respect to the chances of being printed – although the afternoon stories normally must wait for the next day’s print edition. However, for these stories, chances are high that they are more modest in length and size when printed the next day, and they will normally be totally rewritten. About 75 per cent of print stories in this category count fewer than 500 words (as opposed to 20 per cent of the same-day stories). Only 15 per cent count more than 1000 words (compared to 45 per cent of the same-day stories). And only 3 of the 22 next-day stories are categorized as focus stories (as opposed to 11 of the 32 same-day stories).

The study indicates that print versions on the whole go somewhat deeper into the news matter than do online versions. Only 35 per cent of all the examined print stories have fewer than 500 words, compared to 50 per cent for corresponding online versions. And the portion of short paragraphs on print is only half of that for the group of online versions (4 per cent vs. 8 per cent). Print versions also seem to be generally better sourced than online versions. While about 45 per cent of the online stories have four or more sources, the equivalent figure for the corresponding print stories is 62 per cent.

Concerning the question of cross publishing, it appears that less than 20 per cent of the examined print stories have verbal texts identical to those of the online versions. About 25 per cent have an entirely different text. For the rest, about half of the stories, the text material has been cut, extended or partly rewritten in other ways.

Examining the journalist signatures on all corresponding stories, one can see that the practice of “one journalist, two versions” is quite common, but far from universal. While half of the relevant print stories are written by the same journalists who produce the corresponding online versions, about 25 per cent are written by totally different journalists. The rest of the print stories have *partly* identical sets of signatures. (Stories produced by news bureaus are not included in this part of the analysis.)

### *Content of Paper-based Sites vs. TV-based Sites*

Online news sites associated with TV-based media houses have essentially the same technological resources at hand as do sites associated with printed newspapers. It’s all digital. But as for accessible media content and routines for news production, they have quite a different starting point. What do these differences mean to the journalistic output?

In the examined material, the 21 news stories collected from TV-based sites are on an average shorter, and they have somewhat fewer sources.

Seventy-five per cent of the TV-site stories count fewer than 500 words. The corresponding proportion for the paper-site stories is 60 per cent. On the other end of the scale: None of the TV-site stories count more than 1000 words, while close to 30 per cent of the paper-based ones do.

With regard to the number of sources referred to in the stories, the difference is very small. The TV-based sites hold an average of 3.4 sources per story, while the corresponding figure for the paper-based sites is 3.7.

The conclusion, however, that the journalistic quality of sites is generally lower than that of their cousins located in newspaper-houses, is not necessarily accurate.

With respect to story updating, close to 50 per cent of the examined TV-based stories are updated with new sub-articles within six hours. For the print-based sites, the number is only 25 per cent. (For both categories, the average number of added sub-articles per updated story is two.) And in section 4.2.7, we will see that the tendencies are quite different when it comes to the formats through which the news content is presented.

### *What Is the Origin of the Online News Content?*

To what extent do the examined news organizations produce their own news content? Is what is said about American news sites also true of Scandinavian news sites, that is, that most of the news content is copied more or less directly from the major news agencies?<sup>9</sup>

In the study, stories copied directly from news agencies are distinguished from stories that are partly rewritten locally and stories that are totally produced in the local media house.

It appears that more than 60 per cent of the stories are self-produced. A little less than 20 per cent of the stories are taken in “raw” form from the agencies, while the same share of stories are presented as a joint effort of an agency and the local newsroom.

These numbers may work as a corrective to the myth that online journalism is a trade marked by cutting-and-pasting from the major news agencies. With two-thirds of the examined online news content produced locally, the question naturally arises whether

the same material is used on print. That question will be looked into later on in the paper, when a total comparison between online and print versioning is made.

Looking for differences between the countries on this particular issue, it appears that the Danes stand out again. They have the lowest proportion of locally produced material (50 per cent) and the highest proportion of unedited agency stories (almost 30 per cent). Norwegian and Swedish sites are again rather comparable, with around 70 per cent original content, and 10-15 per cent unedited agency content.

### *To What Degree Are the Stories Updated Throughout the Day?*

One important affordance of the online news media is the possibility to update the news stories as they develop throughout the day. But time and money are often scarce, and the question is whether news editors choose to give priority to following up “old” stories at the cost of getting new and fresh stories on the top of the main page.

The analysis focuses on the development of new substance in the news stories, as indicated by the posting of new sub-articles to supplement the total story. All stories are examined twice, once and then after a 6-hour interval, and all occurrences of new sub-articles are registered.

Seventy per cent of the examined web stories were not updated with new sub-articles within the downloading interval. About 10 per cent were updated with one new article, and about 20 per cent were updated with two or more sub-articles. There is no significant difference between the three countries in this regard.

## **Presentation Formats**

In section 4, we asked whether Scandinavian online journalism is shallow or deep, compared to printed journalism. In this section, we ask whether the news sites present their content in an innovative manner, making use of the affordances of the new media technology, or in a more traditional manner, copying the formats of old media, the newspaper in particular.

While newspapers have limited space for storage and presentation of news content, online sites have almost no such limits. Their limits lie in the design, not in the storage. That means that given a fragmented, modularized structure and a good navigation system, the number of texts, photos, videos and soundtracks that can be offered to the reader of a story is almost unlimited. But to go beyond the presentation formats traditionally connected to news journalism, considerable resources and creativity are required. Do the Scandinavian news sites possess such requirements?

### *Number and Content of Photos*

How many photos are published for each story – and what kind of visual content do they convey?

Most of the online stories are equipped with still pictures – only 20 per cent of the examined stories are text-only. The largest group – around 40 per cent of the total of 95 online stories – is the one containing one-picture stories. Less than 15 per cent have four or more pictures.

Among the three countries, Norway tops the list of picture users. More than 25 per cent of the 31 examined stories have three or more pictures; only 15 per cent are pictureless. The Swedish sites come second, while only 6 per cent of the 35 Danish sto-

ries contain three or more pictures. Twenty-five per cent of the Danish stories are text-only stories. The site based on the regional newspaper *Fyens Stiftstidende* has no pictures at all among the eight top stories examined.

### *Use of Hypertext*

The web is a medium based on the database principle, which means that accessible content-resources are stored in a hidden database from which readers can retrieve content units if they wish. The usability of this database is dependent on the forming and tagging of each content unit and on the navigation system integrated into the design of the web page. Functional use of the database system on the story level means that the construction of a composite news story will be – to some degree – a cooperative process between the story producer and the individual reader.<sup>10</sup> The integration of context links (leading to archived stories on the same topic or to relevant content from external websites) is part of the affordances of hypertext technology.<sup>11</sup>

The practice of presenting complex news stories as a composition of interconnected sub-articles, growing in number throughout the day, seems to some degree to be established in the field of online news. But the variation in accomplishment and functionality is considerable.

### **Number of Story Units**

The term *story units* refers to all sub-articles forming the actual news story. This term should be distinguished (conceptually and visually) from *context units*, which contain archived material or externally published material. Video clips and photo galleries will thus be counted among the story units as long as they are part of the “fresh” news story.

About half of all online news stories in the material consist of only one story unit. A little less than 20 per cent consist of two units. Around 15 per cent consist of six units or more.

Disregarding all stories counting fewer than 500 words, it appears that only 10 per cent of the longer stories are presented as one-unit stories. As many as 70 per cent of the stories in this group consist of three or more story units. This apparently high number, however, does not necessarily indicate a particularly innovative, hypertextual style of news presentation. Comparing the print and the online versions of 57 stories, the print versions show a higher number of content units per story.

The Danish sites once again stand out as those least adapted to the media specifics concerning news presentation. Almost 70 per cent of the 35 Danish stories offer only one single story unit. In contrast, the single-unit stories amount to only about 30 per cent of the Norwegian stories and 40 per cent of the Swedish ones.

### **Links to Archived Material**

Do the newsrooms take advantage of the possibility to give online news stories meaning-making context by linking them to relevant archive material? Also on this issue, the data reveal a situation marked by variation rather than homogeneity.

On the whole, slightly more than half of the stories have no such links. Twenty-five per cent offer one archive link. On the other hand, 20 per cent have more than seven archive links.<sup>12</sup>

If we look at the different countries, we see that more than 70 per cent of Danish stories have no archive links. (This is an interesting number, due to the fact that context



linking is as relevant for shorter news stories as for longer ones.) Both the Swedish and the Norwegian sites contain about 50 per cent no-archive-link stories.

### **Links to External Sites**

Giving context to news stories is also a question of linking to externally stored information. By observation we know that this is a rare service in the Net news business – especially regarding links to other news sites. But *how* rare is it, when systematically examined?

Very rare. Only seven of the 95 examined news stories offer external links. And in five of these cases, only one link of this sort is found. Most of these stories cover the tsunami disaster in December 2004, offering a link to the Red Cross or a similar relief organization. There are no links to alternative news sites in the entire material. Five of the external-link stories are Norwegian, two are Danish (both found on the public service site of Danmarks Radio).

### *Use of Video and Sound*

The era of the broadband has started in Scandinavian offices and households, offering hardware capacity for dynamic web pages containing sound and video in addition to pictures and verbal texts.<sup>13</sup> But has this era started in the newsrooms?

Barely. Out of the 95 examined online news stories, only 14 stories contain video clips. Nine of these have only one clip. If we look at the 74 print-site stories exclusively, the number falls to eight stories that include video.

Norwegian sites represent six of the 14 stories that include video clips. Danish sites represent five, Swedish sites only three.

With respect to the use of sound clips, the situation is even less innovative. Aftonbladet.se is the only paper-based site in the material that offers sound clips – which were found in two of their news stories.

### *Do the Sites Offer User-friendly Navigation Systems?*

A user-friendly navigation system is understood, in this context, as a system demanding a minimum of clicks for the user to move from an overview-page and into the sub-article pages, and likewise to move between different sub-article pages without losing track of the macro-level of the story. A user-friendly navigation system in this genre would thus offer the reader a stable and well-sorted list of links, accessible from all sub-articles of the story.

The analysis indicates that, in the area of organizing and presenting online news content, the process of *standardizing* has not yet come very far. The situation can rather be characterized as one of confusion.

Out of the 60 stories that offer story links or context links, about 50 per cent have links both on the start page of the entire site (first-level) and on the main story page. In many cases, the two link systems are not identical. Ten per cent of the 60 stories offer links *only* on the start page – forcing the reader to return to this page for all navigation within the story.

To examine the stability of the navigation systems, only 30 stories were relevant to analyse. It was found that half of these offer a stable system – meaning that the list of accessible links remains stable on all sub-articles of the story. The other half of the sto-

ries present navigation systems that offer different lists of links on the different sub-articles of the story, presumably making it difficult for the reader to keep in mind a stable overall picture of the story. (Archive links are not included in this part of the analysis.)

### *Online News Presentation vs. Print News Presentation*

Among the issues examined under the heading of online news presentation, only the one concerning pictures is relevant for an analysis of the corresponding print versions. Both number of photos and the relative size of the article space covered by pictures are examined and compared. In this part of the analysis, only the 57 stories covered by corresponding online and print versions are included.

It appears that the print stories have a stronger focus on the visual aspects of presentation than do the online stories. Whereas more than 20 per cent of the online stories are text-only stories, the share of such stories on print is only 10 per cent. And whereas only one-fourth of the online stories have three pictures or more, this is true of half of the print stories.

Measuring the total space covered by pictures in the different news versions, we see that the picture space is larger on print than on screen in three quarters of all the cross-published stories conveying pictures (counting a total of 50 stories). Only in 15 per cent of the cases is the picture space larger online.

### *News Presentation in TV-based Sites vs. Print-based Sites*

TV organizations cannot “shovel” their traditional news content onto the Net as easily as newspaper organizations can. Does that mean that they are more willing to adapt their content to the characteristics of the new media?

The present data indicate that they are. Not much, but still noticeably. As for hypertextual presentation, the TV-based sites seem to have developed a somewhat stronger tradition for presenting the news in several short content units instead of in one or two longer ones. On average, each TV-site story contains 3.0 content units, containing text/image, sound or video. The paper-based stories have 2.3 units per story, on average.

Similarly, about 75 per cent of the TV-based stories include archive links. Only 40 per cent of the paper-based ones do the same.

Concerning the number of photos, the two categories do not show any significant differences. The paper-based sites offer 2.0 pictures per story on average, while the TV-based sites offer 1.8 pictures per story.

Turning to the field of dynamic multimedia, while only 10 per cent of the 75 print-based stories offer one or more video clips, close to 30 per cent of the 21 examined stories from TV-based sites do the same. With regard to sound clips, the figures indicate that only 3 per cent of the stories from paper-based sites and close to 35 per cent of the stories from TV-based sites include sound clips. It must be said, though, that all sound clips contain a traditional news block sent on radio earlier the same day or the day before.

## **New Technology – Weakened Journalism**

Summing up the results of the study, the data indicate that the Scandinavian online news media, on the whole, do not utilize the affordances of their own media technology to enhance journalism as we know it from the newspapers. It is well known that the potentials of quick and cost effective content distribution have given the online news media

power to challenge radio and TV with regard to immediacy in the mediation of breaking news (Spilker 2004). But the potentials of creating a more broad-spectre, user-controlled, dynamic and dialogic form of journalism are utilized only to a very modest degree – or not at all.

Regarding news content, the leading news sites in the three Scandinavian countries seem to be somewhat more shallow and superficial in their coverage of news events than are their counterparts on print, judged in terms of the length of stories and number of sources. The tendency is especially clear for those stories published in both channels on the same day. This indicates that online media's potential for offering readers in-depth coverage of important news events, making use of the storage capacity of digital databases, is far from being fully utilized. The same is true of online media's potential for story updating and for engaging readers in current debates.

The most striking difference between the promises of the media potentials and the actual practises of online news mediation lies, however, in the area of design and presentation. Whereas the media technology suggests presentation formats that include rich use of multimedia and user-oriented navigation systems, the examined sites are characterized by narrow and static design, focusing on downscaled still pictures and text presented in a traditional, linear style. Actually, the presentation formats of the online news sites are considerably less overviewable and picture-rich than are their celluloid counterparts.

On the other hand, the study indicates that the myth of online news being mere "shovelware", recycled from the sibling newspaper or collected from external news agencies, is not to be fully trusted.<sup>14</sup> Sixty per cent of the online stories examined are produced in the local media house, and 75 per cent of these are totally or partly rewritten for the Net.

Comparing the examined news sites from a national perspective, the Danish sites stand out most clearly. And related to traditional journalistic quality criteria, they stand out in a negative way. The Danish sites in the material have significantly shorter stories, containing fewer content units, fewer sources, fewer pictures and fewer multimedia elements than do the examined sites from Sweden and Norway. Comparing the latter two, it is harder to point to systematic differences in either content or presentation. However, the study reveals a tendency for Swedish sites to offer more lengthy news stories, whereas the Norwegian sites are doing better on presentational factors: They offer more pictures, more video clips and a stronger use of hypertext than do the examined sites of the neighbouring countries.

The study further indicates certain differences in news presentation between paper-based sites and TV-based sites. The news stories found on the TV-based sites are on average shorter, and they have somewhat fewer sources. On the other hand, they offer a more user-oriented and innovative presentation format, being more hypertextually granulated and offering a higher degree of multimodality. Also, they are more often updated than are their paper-based cousins.

This overall picture of the state of online news media in Scandinavia does not say much about differences among individual news sites. Going into these questions would exceed the limits of both the focus of and the space allotted to this article. But the analysis has indicated clearly that the situation is far from homogeneous. The individual news sites have apparently developed their own solutions to technical challenges and – in certain respects – their own ideals for presentation formats, indicating that the evolution of common standards and norms for online news mediation is still in its early stages.

## Searching for Explanations

Looking at the model of factors contributing to genre development presented in section two, the results seem hard to explain. The instrumental affordances of the digital media surely enable news presentation that is both deep in content, attractive and user-oriented in design and dialogic in functionality. The study reveals a different reality. With respect to the social affordances of the culture and of the news reading situation, we do not have the same accuracy of description. Still, studies indicate that web users are generally seeking easy and quick access to content that they find personally relevant – requiring overviewable, stable and understandable navigation (cf., Nilsen 2000). If we add these media-specific requests to general demands for well-balanced, informative and emotionally engaging journalism, also the socio-cultural leg of the model point towards results different from those found in the study (cf. Mencher 1997).

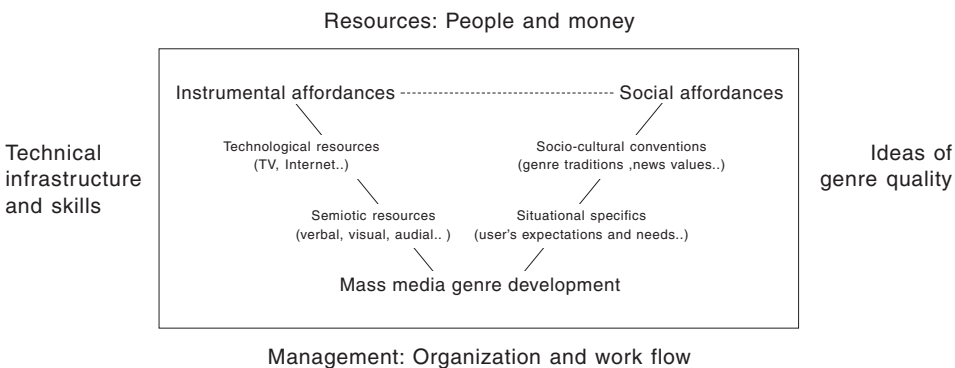
How, then, are we to explain the shortcomings of online news, as they appear on major Scandinavian news sites? And why is it that the genre of online news seems to develop differently in Denmark than in Norway and Sweden?

In his study of selected American news sites, which reveals great variation in journalistic strategies and profiles, Pablo Boczkowski concludes that there is no deterministic relation between technological potentials and the development of routines and genres (Boczkowski 2004). The editorial choices being made are largely determined by specific factors connected to local infrastructure: resources at hand, specifications of technological platforms, technical skills of staff, etc. In this period of unsettled standards concerning the exact ideas of what good online journalism is supposed to be like – deep and thorough or quick and updated – it seems reasonable to include concepts of genre quality to the list of local infrastructural issues.

Related to the model presented in section two, it seems clear that all such infrastructural factors offer strictly defined affordances of their own. These are affordances of a different kind than those originally included in the model, but have no less influence on the genre. Below is an extended version of the model explaining genre development, now more explicitly adapted to *mass media* genres by the types of infrastructural factors included.

The study presented in this article does not look into local infrastructure in detail, thus the explanatory contributions lie on the theoretical side rather than the empirical.

**Illustration 2.** *Extended Version of the Model Illustrating the Dynamics of Factors Influencing Mass Media Genre Development*



Looking for explanations for the Danish results, however, it is interesting to observe that they seem to correspond to other distinguishing features concerning the news media situation in Denmark.

As initially stated, Scandinavians are among the top ranked globally with regard to news reading. More detailed statistic material reveals, however, that the habit of daily news reading is much stronger in the populations of Norway and Sweden than it is among the Danes. In 2003, the total daily circulation per 1000 inhabitants was 529 in Norway, 408 in Sweden and only 248 in Denmark (Nordicom's Media Trends).<sup>15</sup>

One may further assume that this difference in market penetration has to do with differences concerning the popularization strategies among the Scandinavian media houses. Although a considerably smaller market, the three most popular Norwegian newspapers together have a circulation almost double that of the three most popular papers in Denmark (ibid.).<sup>16</sup> Thus, one hypothesis for further research may be that there is a link between the following three factors: a lack of successful popularization of news journalism, a low interest in news reading and a low degree of media adaptation of online news.

Regarded from the perspective of genre theory, a central issue for future development of online news concerns which of the systems of affordances – the instrumental and social ones, tending to focus on opportunities, or the infrastructural ones, focusing more strongly on limitations – will predominate in the years to come.

## Notes

1. When ITU (International Telecommunications Union) released the world's first global ICT ranking in 2003, Scandinavia topped the world in access to the Internet. [http://www.itu.int/newsarchive/press\\_releases/2003/30.html](http://www.itu.int/newsarchive/press_releases/2003/30.html)
2. Figures from the World Association of Newspapers (WAN) indicate that Norwegians are the world's most eager newspaper readers, as measured by number of newspapers sold per 1000 inhabitants. Sweden is number four on the list, published by WAN in November 2004. (The list was republished on the site of the Norwegian financial magazine Økonomisk Rapport 11.11 2004) [http://www.orapp.no/oversikt/Argang\\_2004/22707/pengepulsen/22875](http://www.orapp.no/oversikt/Argang_2004/22707/pengepulsen/22875)
3. A similar statement related to an American context, concerning nine major American news sites, can be found in the report *The State of the News Media, 2005*, conducted by the American Project for Excellence in Journalism: [http://www.stateofthenewsmedia.org/2005/narrative\\_online\\_intro.asp?cat=1&media=3](http://www.stateofthenewsmedia.org/2005/narrative_online_intro.asp?cat=1&media=3)
4. Due to technical storage problems, the site of the popular Norwegian tabloid *Dagbladet* had to be left out.
5. The site of Danmarks Radio, DR.dk, is by far the most popular news site in Denmark, independent of media basis. As for the Norwegian NRK.no and the Swedish SVT.se, these public service sites are rated more or less on an equal level with competing sites run by commercial TV companies, but lower than the most visited paper-based sites.
6. The collation of news material took place in November and December 2004 and January 2005.
7. One is missing due to technical problems.
8. Not surprisingly, the group of web stories printed on paper the next day is closely connected to the group of web stories posted in the afternoon.
9. Cf. the American report *The State of the News Media, 2005* [http://www.stateofthenewsmedia.org/2005/narrative\\_online\\_intro.asp?cat=1&media=3](http://www.stateofthenewsmedia.org/2005/narrative_online_intro.asp?cat=1&media=3)
10. On coherence in hypertextual news stories, see Engebretsen 2001a.
11. See also Manovich (2001) on database-driven story-telling as opposed to linear narrativity.
12. The high number is probably due to the use of automatic archive linking, applied by a growing number of news sites. However, it can be assumed that a long list of machine-generated archive links will often be of less value for the reader than one or two links of high relevance.
13. On multimedial news presentation, see Engebretsen 2005.
14. Based on a content analysis of nine American news sites, including the three most popular ones in the US, the conclusion in the report *The State of the News Media, 2005* states: "The content they offer on

the web, while improving in volume, timeliness and technological sophistication, remains still significantly a morgue for wire copy, second-hand material and recycled stories from the morning paper.” [http://www.stateofthenewsmedia.org/2005/narrative\\_online\\_intro.asp?cat=1&media=3](http://www.stateofthenewsmedia.org/2005/narrative_online_intro.asp?cat=1&media=3)

15. See Nordicom’s database *Media Trends*: [http://www.nordicom.gu.se/common/stat\\_xls/244\\_1040\\_Daily\\_np\\_%20circ\\_1993-2003.xls](http://www.nordicom.gu.se/common/stat_xls/244_1040_Daily_np_%20circ_1993-2003.xls)
16. See Nordicom’s database *Media Trends*: [http://www.nordicom.gu.se/common/stat\\_xls/246\\_1060\\_topten\\_dailies\\_2003.xls](http://www.nordicom.gu.se/common/stat_xls/246_1060_topten_dailies_2003.xls)

## Literature

- Berge, Kjell L. & Ledin, Per (2001) ”Perspektiv på genre”, *Rhetorica Scandinavica* 18: 4-16.
- Boczkowski, Pablo J. (2004) *Digitizing the News. Innovation in Online Newspapers*. Cambridge, Mass. : MIT Press.
- Engebreetsen, Martin (2000) *Nettavisen og brukerne. En panelstudie med fokus på nettavislesernes vaner, preferanser og medieforståelse*. Kristiansand: IJ-forlaget.
- Engebreetsen, Martin (2001a) “Hypernews and Coherence”, *Journal of Digital Information (JoDI)* Volume 1, issue 7, January 2001. <http://jodi.ecs.soton.ac.uk/Articles/v01/i07/Engebreetsen/>
- Engebreetsen, Martin (2001b) *Nyheten som hypertekst. Tekstuelle aspekter ved møtet mellom en gammel sjanger og ny teknologi*. Kristiansand: IJ-forlaget.
- Engebreetsen, Martin (2005) *Konvergens i tekst. En studie av et tekstformat som kombinerer skrift og video*. Kristiansand: Norwegian Academic Press.
- Gibson, James J. (1986) *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*. Hillsdale, N.J. : Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Lund, Anker B. & Olsen, Tim V. (2004) ”Hver egn sin egen ugeavis”, article published on the net site of Center for Journalistik og Efteruddanning (CFJE). [http://www.cfje.dk/cfje/VidBase.nsf/\(ID\)/VB00706475](http://www.cfje.dk/cfje/VidBase.nsf/(ID)/VB00706475)
- Manovich, Lev (2001) *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Mencher, Melvin (1997) *News Reporting and Writing* (Seventh Edition). Madison, Wisc.: Brown & Benchmark.
- Miller, Carol R. (1984) “Genre as Social Action” in *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 70: 151-176.
- Nielsen, Jacob (2000) *Designing Web Usability*. Indianapolis: New Riders.
- Norman, Donald A. (2002) *The Design of Everyday Things*. New York: Basic Books.
- Spilker, Hendrik, S. (2005) *Den store oppdragelsen: utviklingen av kommersielle internettjenester i Norge ca.1997-2003*. PhD thesis. Trondheim: The Norwegian University of Science and Technology.

## The State of the News Media 2004 and 2005

Reports from an annual study conducted by *the American project for excellence in Journalism*, Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. <http://www.stateofthenewsmedia.org/2005/index.asp>

---

*Martin Engebreetsen, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Agder University College, P.O. Box 422, N-4604 Kristiansand, martin.engebretsen@hia.no*