

From Party Press to Independent Observers?

*An Analysis of Election Campaign Coverage
Prior to the General Elections of 1981 and 2005
in Two Norwegian Newspapers*

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Abstract

The aim of the article is to shed light on the political role of the former 'party press' in general election campaigns compared with the role of modern, non-party papers in Norway. The discussion is based on a content analysis of the election coverage in two local newspapers in the elections campaigns in 1981 and 2005. The question concerning the campaign coverage of the two party papers in 1981 is if – and if so, to what extent – factors like professional journalistic values or audience and market interests served to balance a biased, partisan profile. As to 2005, the question concerning the non-party papers becomes whether, and if so, to what extent – factors like historical roots and present ideological platforms still influenced their priorities and positions.

Key Words: party press, partisanship, election coverage, independence, market interests

Introduction

The news media have long played a crucial role in political campaigns and elections – as arenas for debate and persuasion, and as tools for information and propaganda. Political messages are in most cases mediated, and election campaigns seem increasingly to follow the logic of news media (Aardal & al. 2004, Bennett & Entman 2001, Norris 1999, Eide 1991, Asp 1986).

Television has become the politicians' favoured medium in election campaigns. However, in the Nordic countries, where newspaper circulation still is very high and election coverage in the press is extensive, also the newspapers are regarded as important political arenas. The political parties know that the dailies provide far more news space for political reporting than do television newscasts.

Nordic newspapers, in contrast to public service broadcasting, have a long history of formal affiliation to political parties, in Norway continuing until as recently as the early 1990s. Today the label 'party paper' is a thing of the past: the new and favoured label is 'independent'. However, most newspapers still pay tribute to their political roots in the form of statutes defining their editorial platform in ideological terms like conservative, liberal or social democratic.

Do such historical roots – and today’s ideological labels – have any influence on modern political journalism?

The aim of this article is to shed light on the political role of the old ‘party press’ in general election campaigns compared with the role of modern, non-party papers in Norway. For analytical purposes, ‘party affiliation’ and ‘partisanship’ are regarded as concepts which are different but interlinked. Both party papers and papers without any formal party affiliation can, in various ways and with varying degrees of strength, show types of partisanship in their news reporting and views.

The empirical data are based on a content analysis of all political news stories, reports, interviews and editorial commentaries in two local Norwegian newspapers, *Adresseavisen* and *Namdalsavisa (NA)*, published in the four last weeks prior to the general elections of 1981 and 2005.¹ These two belong to the most common type of newspaper in the Nordic countries: local or regional *omnibus* papers that face only limited competition with other papers in their main distribution areas, and have a history as party papers but are today without any formal political party affiliation. They are now owned by corporations that demand relatively high profits on invested capital.

An argument for comparing the coverage of the elections of 1981 and 2005 is that in both cases the polls indicated a realistic possibility of a change of government. In the election campaign – as well as in the press – this resulted in a clear tendency to group the political parties into two ‘government coalition alternatives’. An argument for choosing as recent a year as 1981 as the starting point is the possibility to study two potentially conflicting dimensions: On one hand, the Norwegian press was still dominated by newspapers with formal party affiliation. On the other hand, professional journalistic values concerning news priorities as well as ethics had gained a relatively strong standing within the journalistic community.

The weeks covered represent the peak of the election coverage, with television debates, public discussions, political initiatives and press briefings. In this sense, then, the period is not ‘typical’ of the everyday coverage. The amount of political news and commentaries in these weeks is expanded, and the political sympathies of the press can also be more outspoken than normal. The same can be said of the interest for political news among readers.

The analytical perspective is comparative, and the main research question is this:

How did the two papers interpret and practise their role as ‘party papers’ in the election campaign of 1981, compared with their new roles as politically independent, non-party newspapers in the election campaign of 2005?

Concerning campaign coverage in the early 1980s, the general hypothesis is that as party papers *Adresseavisen* and *Namdalsavisa*² would strongly favour ‘their own’ politicians, and pay less attention to their adversaries. This means that they would function primarily as political news channels for their mother parties, less as arenas for debate, and seldom or never as independent political actors. The question then becomes if – and if so, to what extent – other factors like professional journalistic values or strategic audience and market interests served to counterbalance a biased, partisan profile.

As to 2005, the general hypothesis is that the newspapers first and foremost had to take their market interests into consideration. As profit-oriented, non-party newspapers they would now favour the parties most influential among their readership. Then the question becomes whether, and if so, to what extent – other factors like historical roots and present ideological platforms influenced their priorities and positions. Professional,

ethical values about newspapers as an arena for democratic debate must also be taken into consideration.

The Rise and Fall of the Party Press

Høyer (2005: 76) identifies a ‘party paper’ as a newspaper that is owned, staffed and directed by a political party or by political party affiliations. The social democratic press in Norway comes close to this definition. The Labour press has had strong organizational links to the mother party, and its papers were owned by the Labour Party³ and trade unions. Norway’s conservative and liberal newspapers were in periods subsidized by their parties (Danielsen 1979: 101–117), but most typically they were *owned* by politically engaged families and local shareholders. However, their owners in most cases defined their papers as affiliated to the Conservatives or the Liberals, and their editors-in-chief were party members, sometimes in leading positions. Newspapers supporting the Centre Party⁴ tended to be owned by various types of shareholders – the party, organizations in the agricultural sector and politically engaged individuals. I will here subsume all these types of formal party affiliations under the common umbrella of ‘the party press’.

After the formation of modern political parties in the last decades of the 19th and the first decades of the 20th century, most newspapers in Norway were affiliated with one political party or another. Even as late as in 1972, as many as 119 of nearly 200 registered newspapers still either formally defined themselves as party papers or had well-known party affiliations but used more general ideological expressions in their statutes, like ‘conservative’ or ‘liberal’, to characterize their status.⁵ In 1972, these two types of party press together – 119 newspapers in all – represented 74 per cent of the net circulation of the Norwegian press.⁶ Most of those papers that characterized themselves as ‘independent’ or ‘non-political’ were small, local news outlets⁷. A survey in 1974 showed that 83 per cent of the editors in the Labour press and 59 per cent of the editors in the non-socialist press held office in a political party (Høyer 2005: 80). Up to the 1980s, journalists from the national or regional press accredited to the press lobby in the Norwegian parliament, the *Storting*, would even participate in the meetings of their party’s parliamentary group (Allern 2001a: 92–94). During these years the ‘differentiation of the press’ was basically understood as partisan newspapers representing different political parties and differing ideologies.

At the same time, the strengthening of professional values in journalism made ‘independence’ the ideological buzzword of the news institution. Among journalists this was interpreted both as independence of political parties and independence of public relations firms and other types of professional news management (Ottosen 2004, Raaum 1999, Allern 1997). It had long been a recognized norm for news journalists in the party press to distinguish between ‘news’ and ‘views’. News coverage of an election should in principle be factual, and reports from the election campaigns should give a voice to various political alternatives, while the editorials and commentaries would represent the values and political voice which the newspaper itself supported. At least this was the official view and journalistic ideology.

After the first years of the 1990s there was hardly any Norwegian newspaper that defined itself as a party paper (Allern 2001a:13)⁸. Both external and internal factors brought about this change. Most political parties lost members, and some even experienced debilitating party splits. At the same time, the newspapers grew both in reader-

ship and economic strength. The introduction of state press subsidies in the 1970s secured economic support for newspapers with low revenues from advertising, making them more independent of old types of political party subsidies. Tougher competition on the newspaper market made it increasingly important for newspapers to broaden their readership base, and political partisanship could in this respect be a negative factor. During the 1970s and 1980s it became obvious that most newspapers, at least in economic terms, had little to gain from upholding a position as ‘the voice of the party’.⁹

The liberal newspapers were the first to ‘go independent’. The debate and referendum about Norway joining the European Common Market in 1972 had resulted in a split of the Liberals into two parties, both too weak to represent any political authority in relation to the comparatively large and financially independent liberal newspapers. In the years after the Second World War, the popular liberal daily *Dagbladet* had even subsidized some party organizations of the Liberals. Now this marriage had ended in divorce, and prior to the general election in 1977 the newspaper said a final adieu to the party (Simensen 1999: 64-65). In the coming two decades nearly all newspapers in Norway followed the same path.

During the 1980s the conflict between the old political role of the newspapers as party organs and their ambitions of representing a more independent position became increasingly evident. The Association of the Conservative Press was for the last time represented as a party branch at the national congress of the Conservatives in 1983, and conservative newspapers started to term themselves ‘independent conservative’. In an attempt to get subscribers from the liberal press, the Conservatives’ national news agency, *Høyres Pressebyrå*¹⁰, was renamed *Norpress* (Holand 1992a: 10, Simensen 1999: 60).

In 1993-1994 the social democratic newspapers followed the same route and were no longer defined as organs of the Labour Party. As a symbolic part of the same process, some newspapers also changed their names.¹¹ The association of social democratic newspapers, *A-pressen*, became a centralized media company and, for a short period, even a public stock company.

An interesting question is whether, and if so to what extent, such changes have influenced the political priorities and news policies of modern ‘non-party’ papers with roots in Norwegian party politics. In an anniversary publication from the Association of the Conservative Press 1892-1992, Johan E. Holand concludes that present-day newspapers with a conservative outlook still support the Conservatives in the most important questions:

Ideologically such newspapers still feel related to the Conservatives and express this. However, both in principle and in practical issues the effects of this attitude in the public debate are not quite as rigid as before (Holand 1992a: 12¹²).

These words were, however, written more than ten years ago. Could such an observation still be made today? And are there any differences between newspapers with differing political and ideological histories?

In a study of Norwegian newspapers’ attitudes to the change of government in 2000, Bjerke (2001) discusses and analyses several factors that can influence a paper’s political profile, and concludes that the paper’s political *history* still seem to play an important role. However, his analysis is limited to editorials and commentaries, and does not include news coverage.

A Study of Two Newspapers, Data and Methods

At the time of the general election campaigns in 1981, most dailies still belonged to the party press. This includes the two newspapers chosen for this case study, *Adresseavisen* and *Namdalsavisa*, two typical local/ regional newspapers formerly affiliated to a political party. An analysis of their journalistic priorities and views during election campaigns will, it is hoped, provide more general insight into how journalists in two quite different periods interpreted their journalistic and political 'mission'.

Adresseavisen, founded in 1767, is Norway's oldest newspaper. It appears six days a week in Norway's third largest city, Trondheim. *Namdalsavisa* is a local newspaper published six days a week in Namsos, a coastal town north of Trondheim. The two papers are published in Trøndelag, the middle region in Norway, historically a stronghold of the Norwegian Labour Party.

In 1981 *Adresseavisen* was owned by local shareholders and officially supported the Conservatives. The two editors-in-chief belonged to Association of the Conservative Press – an important organizational link to the Conservatives.¹³ The association was a branch of the Conservatives and elected delegates to its national congress, and their president was a permanent member of the central board of the party. One of the two editors-in-chief, Kjell E. Amdahl, was deputy president of this association in 1981 and became the president the year thereafter (Holand 1992b:62).

Namdalsavisa was in 1981 owned by a coordinating organization of the Labour Party press,¹⁴ local branches of the Labour Party and trade unions. The paper was defined as an 'organ of the Norwegian Labour Party', and regularly published articles supplied by the Labour Party's press office.¹⁵ The editor-in-chief, Rolf A. Amdal, was a party member. The normal procedure in the Labour Party press in these years was for the central board of the Labour Party to have the final say concerning the appointment of editors-in-chief (Simensen 1999: 43–48).

Since then, there have come important changes concerning ownership, media competition and party affiliation. In 1981 both papers had local competitors.¹⁶ *Adresseavisen* is now the only daily newspaper in Trondheim and the largest newspaper in the county of Sør-Trøndelag. It is owned by a public stock company with the same name. Norway's leading media corporation, Schibsted, in August 2006 owned 34.4 per cent of the shares. The statutes of the mother company underline that the aim of the company 'is to publish *Adresseavisen* as a conservative paper'.¹⁷

Namdalsavisa is today the only newspaper in the district of Namdalen in the county of Nord-Trøndelag. It is owned by one of Norway's three leading media companies, *A-pressen*.¹⁸ According to the company statutes, *A-pressen* 'builds upon the traditions and ideas of the labour movement'¹⁹. The statutes of *Namdalsavisa* confirm that the newspaper 'shall present good and independent journalism, based on the labour movement's ideas about freedom, democracy and equality'.²⁰

Data for the content analysis consist of copies or originals of all front pages, news pages, feature pages and debate pages with one or more articles or columns directly or indirectly related to the general election, during the four final weeks before the election.²¹ Because the topic under study here is news priorities and editorial opinions, letters to the editor and other debate articles written by non-journalists have not been included. The only exception is 'election reports' written by the top candidates from various political parties in *Namdalsavisa* in 1981. These reports are included because the series was planned and organized by the newspaper, and was presented as a regular part of the election coverage on its news pages.

Relevant *articles* were all coded by author. For the front page, the definition of 'article' also includes headlines (sometimes with a picture, but not any text) referring to an article on another page. For the news, feature and commentary pages 'article' is defined as any story consisting of a separate headline and a text. In a few cases where the 'headlines' clearly represented 'a story within a story' (or a short factual supplement) this text was interpreted and coded as a part of the 'main article'. *Adresseavisen* was a broadsheet in both years, while *Namdalsavisa* was a tabloid. Articles have not been weighted according to length, which represents a limitation concerning the analysis.

The dependent variables chosen can in several ways say something about the degree of partisanship in news coverage and commentaries. They include political headlines/articles on the front page, the political parties represented as 'the 'main source' in front-page stories, the political party represented as the 'main source' in news stories, the text genres of the stories, the gender of the 'main sources', and the expressions of positive/negative attitude to government alternatives in the news articles and commentaries about the elections.

Parts of the coding, like the main sources' party affiliation and their gender, are in most cases based on information that is made clear in the text. Coding of text genres is more complicated because the borderlines between different text genres are sometimes blurred. The variable concerning positive/negative attitude towards various government alternatives is in practice an attempt to provide a more qualitative reading and evaluation as the basis for quantitative data. The definitions of some of these variables and their values will be discussed later in further detail. Cramer's V has been employed as a statistical measure of the strength of correlation or dependency between two nominal, categorical variables in the contingency tables.²²

The General Election of 1981 and Its Political Background

In Norway, as in many other European countries, the political climate in the 1970s was characterized by political radicalization, not least among youth. Then, around 1980, the political and cultural climate changed in a more liberal-conservative direction. Sympathy for the Conservatives began to expand among voters outside the party's traditional stronghold in the upper middle classes and the urban areas. The polls indicated that the Labour Party government, supported in the Storting by the Socialist Left Party, could lose its majority base.

The prime minister in the Labour Party government, Odvar Nordli, decided early in 1981 to withdraw from his position, and on 4 February was succeeded by the then-Minister of the Environment, Gro Harlem Brundtland. Young and energetic, she became Norway's first female prime minister, and gave the Labour Party new hopes of remaining in power. The Conservative candidate for prime minister was Kåre Willoch, the party's leading parliamentary politician, known as a brilliant rhetorician. The two top candidates soon became known by their first names among the public (and in the press), and the duels between 'Gro and Kåre' drew large audiences.

The Labour Party felt sure of being able to count on the Socialist Left Party as a part of its parliamentary base. The situation on the 'non-socialist' side prior to the election campaign was less clear. The Conservatives primarily wanted to establish a coalition government together with the Christian People's Party and the Centre Party, but the three parties failed to reach a formal agreement. The Christian People's Party's demand for a more restrictive abortion law was one of the obstacles. If a coalition were not possi-

ble, the Conservatives would form a minority government with direct and indirect support from other non-socialist parties.

In the election campaign the Labour Party put health and welfare at the top of its political agenda, while the Conservatives' priorities were tax reductions, warnings against excessive public spending and inflation, and demands for more 'freedom' from state regulations in various sectors of society. Both parties favoured political topics where they traditionally had issue ownership.

The general election of September 1981 proved a success for the Conservatives, who got 31.8 per cent of the national vote²³ – the party's best-ever election result.²⁴ The Labour Party gained 37.2 per cent of the vote, which was better than some polls had indicated, but not enough to prevent a change of government.²⁵ The Conservatives, supported by other non-socialist parties, then formed a minority government.²⁶

1981: Two Party Papers in Action

According to the standard hypothesis about the party press, *Adresseavisen* and *Namdalsavisa* in 1981 should ideally feel a strong obligation to cover big and small events concerning the activities of their own parties, and favour their own politicians as news sources. One argument against such a strategy could be that a too heavy dose of partisan party politics in the columns would be bad for business. Each newspaper was the largest paper in its area, however still with some competition in the districts. They clearly wanted to increase their circulation and therefore would have an interest in presenting themselves as open arenas – at least in their news pages. For journalists the necessity of maintaining a separation between news and views also was a recognized value. An editorial in *Adresseavisen* just before Election Day in 1981 is a typical example of this professional ideology:

Adresseavisen has tried to cover the election campaign from many sides by giving all serious parties some space to present their views. Our own political views we have mostly presented in the editorials.²⁷

How realistic or accurate was this journalistic-political self-declaration?

During the final four weeks (24 issues) before the general election campaign, the conservative *Adresseavisen* on average presented around eight large and small articles about the general election per day, while the social democratic *Namdalsavisa* printed seven articles. One of these would generally be presented on the front page, but rarely represented the top story (six times in *Adresseavisen* and only three times in *Namdalsavisa*).

News was by far the largest basic genre in both papers, slightly more dominant in the conservative than in the social democratic paper. In the latter, editorials and other commentary were more frequent and played a more important role in the election coverage. The feature genre, representing a more personal and free literary style, was not found in either paper.²⁸

Media studies in many countries show that the *sources* cited or referred to in news stories most often represent organizations and institutional interests (Gans 1980, Ericson & al., 1989, Sahlstrand 2000, Allern 2001b). In the coverage of an election campaign, politicians from the various political parties, supplemented by political experts and officials, dominate the scene (Waldahl & Narud, 2005: 182–202). The coding in this analysis is limited to 'the main source'.²⁹ If more than one source is mentioned, 'the main

source' is defined as the source first mentioned in the headline or the lead, or first cited in the story.³⁰ Non-party sources include experts, election officials, spokespersons of interest organizations and – sometimes – members of the general public.

Table 1 indicates that both newspapers favoured politicians from their mother party. In the social democratic paper, as much as 44 per cent of the main sources belonged to the Labour Party. The second most important party source were politicians from the Centre Party; only seven per cent belonged to the Conservatives. In *Adresseavisen*, 27 per cent of the main sources were from the Conservatives, 21 per cent from Labour and 16 per cent belonged to the Christian Peoples Party.³¹ On the front page both newspapers gave the politicians from their own party even higher priority. In *Adresseavisen* about one third of the sources named in front-page articles were politicians from the Conservatives, and in *Namsdalsavisa* about fifty per cent of these sources were Labour Party politicians.

Table 1. *Party Affiliations of Main Sources in Election News Stories, Adresseavisen and Namsdalsavisa, 1981 (per cent)*

Source	Newspaper	
	<i>Adresseavisen</i> (Conservatives)	<i>Namsdalsavisa</i> (Labour Party)
Labour Party	21	44
Conservatives	27	8
Christian People's Party	16	6
Centre Party	8	12
Liberals	4	2
Socialist Left Party	4	6
Progress Party	1	1
Red Election Alliance	1	1
Non-party sources/other	19	21
All	101	101
(N)	(166)	(109)

Cramer's V= 0.364

This indicates that the conservative newspaper tried to play a somewhat less obviously partisan role in the election campaign than *Namsdalsavisa*. One reason can be that many of *Adresseavisen's* readers were social democratic voters, and it was important to keep them as subscribers. In the Namsos area, by contrast, conservative voters were in the minority among the readership of *Namsdalsavisa*.

In both *Adresseavisen* and *Namsdalsavisa* the smaller political parties, like the Liberals and the Socialist Left Party, were seldom represented as 'the main source'. The populist, right-wing Progress Party (later to become one of Norway's largest parties) and the left socialist Red Election Alliance were both more or less boycotted by *Adresseavisen*.

In the 1981 election, *the government alternatives* were the dominant central topic.

Table 2 shows the political sympathy in newspaper coverage towards the two blocs. If the main source, directly or indirectly, either supported a Labour Party government, or expressed criticism of the parties that supported a conservative or a non-socialist coalition government, the article has been coded as positive to a Labour Party govern-

ment, and vice versa for the other government alternative. This includes non-party sources (like spokespersons from interest organizations) taking a stand on the government alternatives. All editorials or commentaries have, after a qualitative reading, been coded according to the same standard. Political articles (news and commentaries) that do not take sides, have an unclear message as to the government alternatives, or where the government topic is irrelevant, have been coded in the ‘neutral’ category.

Table 2. *Political Sympathies Towards Government Alternatives, by Newspaper Type and Genre, 1981 (per cent)*

Political sympathy	News		Editorials/commentaries		All genres	
	<i>Adresseavisen</i> (Cons.)	NA (Labour)	<i>Adresseavisen</i> (Cons.)	NA (Labour)	<i>Adresseavisen</i> (Cons.)	NA (Labour)
Pro Labour government	21	54	–	98	17	68
Pro non-socialist government	46	11	92	–	52	9
Neutral/irrelevant	34	35	8	2	31	23
All	101	100	100	100	100	100
(N)	(172)	(115)	(26)	(54)	(198)	(169)

Cramers V= 0.557

In their editorials, both newspapers were outspoken about their political sympathies. *Adresseavisen* criticized the Labour Party government, and praised the election manifesto of the Conservatives.³² After favourable opinion polls for the non-socialist parties, the editors expressed their optimism concerning the chances of a change of government.³³ However, the final pre-election appeal to their voters was the ‘classic’ neutral appeal: ‘make use of your right to vote’.³⁴ In *Namdalsavisa*, editorials defended the Labour Party government and argued polemically against the Conservatives and their candidate for prime minister. At the same time the paper’s editorials often had a ‘local angle’, using examples and arguing for or against politicians from the region. Editorials in *Adresseavisen* were generally more ‘national’ in style, and regularly referred to political meetings in the capital. Local Labour Party newspapers like *Namdalsavisa* were provided with editorials from the Labour Party’s press office every day, and many newspapers make use of this service. Editor-in-chief of *Namdalsavisa*, Rolf A. Amdal, confirms that he preferred to write his own local editorials,³⁵ even supplementing them with long and more personal political commentaries under his own by-line. Altogether, the commentaries in *Namdalsavisa* gave the impression that the editor-in-chief was somewhat more engaged in the outcome of the election than were the editors of *Adresseavisen*.

In both papers, editorials and commentaries were basically partisan, which strengthens the party press hypothesis. The few commentaries that were coded as neutral/irrelevant took up other aspects, like making use of the right to vote, or more local political questions.

What then about news coverage? It was definitely more ‘balanced’ than the editorials and commentaries. In *Namdalsavisa* 54 per cent of the news articles were positive to a Labour government and/or attacked the non-socialist alternative. In *Adresseavisen* 46 per cent of the news articles were critical towards the Labour government and/or supported a non-socialist alternative. Around one third of the news stories in both pa-

pers were neutral or in this respect irrelevant. The news coverage in both newspapers was undoubtedly 'biased', favouring their own government alternative. Nor is there any reason to believe that the readers were taken by surprise, as most of them would expect such a profile in a party paper. The influence of readership orientation and market interests seems, however, slightly more apparent in *Adresseavisen's* news coverage than in that of *Namdalsavisa*.³⁶

Another dimension concerning news sources is gender. News is generally known as a masculine area and politics is no exception (Gallagher 1981, Zilliacus-Tikkanen 1997, Eide 1993, Allern 2001b). However, in Norway several political parties, with Labour in the lead, had from the late 1970s launched various initiatives aimed at increasing the representation of women in politics. At the time of the election campaign in 1981, the acting prime minister was a woman, and both Labour Party and the Conservatives had well-known female politicians among their top candidates in the two Trøndelag counties.

A gender analysis of the 'main sources' shows, not surprisingly, that the representation of women in the news stories was very low. Only 22 per cent of the named sources in *Adresseavisen* and 26 per cent of the sources in *Namdalsavisa* were women.³⁷ In this respect there was no difference between the two party papers.

The Election of 2005 and Its Political Background

Before the general election of 1997 the leader of the Labour Party, Torbjørn Jagland, declared that his government could not continue in government with a weaker parliamentary basis than it had received in the 1993 election, which was 36.9 per cent of the vote. When the election result proved to be 35.0 per cent, the Jagland government resigned. The three centrist parties in Norwegian politics – the Christian Peoples' Party, the Centre Party and the Liberals – formed a new minority government with Kjell Magne Bondevik of the Christian Peoples' Party as prime minister.

In the longer run, this minority government encountered opposition both from the Conservatives and Labour, and had to resign early in 2000. Jens Stoltenberg, who after several years of intra-party power struggles had been appointed the party's new candidate for prime minister, formed the new government. However, his attempt to 'reform' traditional social democratic policies in a more liberal and market-oriented direction met strong criticism from the trade union movement and from voters in the geographical periphery. The Labour Party government was also criticized for being unable to solve problems concerning social security, especially for elderly people. Among the attackers was the right-wing populist Progress Party, which demanded that more of Norway's considerable oil revenues should be used for health and social care. Opinion polls showed that this demand won support among the general public (Aardal & al. 2004: 16). Large groups of traditional Labour voters seemed no longer to 'recognize' their old party.

In 2001 the Labour Party got only 24.3 per cent of the vote – a catastrophe for the party often characterized as 'the eagle' among the political parties in Norway. The Conservatives, the Christian People's Party and the Liberals succeeded in forming a new centre-conservative coalition government.

Prior to the general election in 2005, the Labour Party changed its political tactics. For the first time in history, the party declared that its intention was to establish a coalition government,³⁸ its chosen partners being the Socialist Left Party and the Centre Party. Also in these parties the decision to launch a government alternative together with the Labour Party found acceptance, after years of internal debates. The new alliance was

strongly supported by the central trade union movement, LO, and by several newspapers with their roots in the labour movement. The new alliance was quickly dubbed ‘the red-green alliance’ and presented itself as a coalition defending social security and traditional welfare values.

The general election in September proved to be a close race, but ended with a slight majority in the Storting for the red-green coalition. Jens Stoltenberg could form a new three-party government. In the county of Sør-Trøndelag, *Adresseavisen*’s main circulation area, the red- green alliance together got 57.5 per cent of the vote. In Nord-Trøndelag county, it was even stronger, gaining 67.8 of the vote, and in some municipalities in *Namdalsavisa*’s circulation area up to eight out of ten votes.³⁹

2005: Two Independent Newspapers in Action

According to the general market hypothesis, both *Adresseavisen* and *Namdalsavisa* would in 2005 seek to function as arenas for different political parties and in their news reports favour the parties that were most influential among their readership. An argument against this could be that the two newspapers still had statutes expressing an ideological platform (conservative versus social democratic), and that both had a history as party papers and political roots that still influenced the choice of editors.⁴⁰

In the final four weeks before the general election in 2005, *Adresseavisen* published an average of 15.3 articles about the election each day, as against only 5.3 a day for *Namdalsavisa*. This difference can only partly be explained by the differing formats: as a tabloid *Namdalsavisa* generally gave less room to brief news items than *Adresseavisen*.

News was the dominant basic genre in both dailies. *Adresseavisen* invented in 2005 a hybrid genre they called a ‘voter panel’ – a group of ‘ordinary voters’ selected by the newspaper, with a range of occupations, views and age levels, representing ‘the voice of the people’. One format was reports about meetings organized by the newspaper between voter panellists and leading politicians. Neither investigative reporting nor the feature genre played a visible role in either of the papers.

Table 3. *Main Sources (political affiliations) in Election News Stories, by Newspaper Type, 2005 (per cent)*

Source	Newspaper	
	<i>Adresseavisen</i> (Conservatives)	<i>Namdalsavisa</i> (social democratic)
Labour Party	15	16
Conservatives	16	7
Christian People’s Party	7	12
Centre Party	7	15
Liberals	9	14
Progress Party	6	7
Socialist Left Party	9	17
Red Election Alliance	2	1
Non-party sources/other	27	8
All	100	100
(N)	(287)	(96)

Cramer’s V= 0.232

Table 3 shows the party affiliations of the main sources of news articles. In the conservative *Adresseavisen*, politicians from the Conservatives and the Labour Party were the most important sources, followed on a lower level by sources from the Liberals and the Socialist Left Party. If we relate this to the market hypothesis (representation according to the party's standing in the polls or election results), the Conservatives and the Liberals were somewhat overrepresented, while the Labour Party was underrepresented. However, the major deviation concerns the populist Progress Party, which (as predicted by the polls) emerged as the second largest party in Sør-Trøndelag, ahead of the Conservatives. Only the left socialist Red Election Alliance was in *Adresseavisen* treated as more unimportant.

These priorities in news coverage can be interpreted as a compromise between *Adresseavisen's* assessment of the parties 'market value' – an attempt to be a democratic arena for (nearly) all – and political decisions to treat the Conservatives and the Labour Party as the favoured 'main adversaries'. The paper's historical conservative roots are, however, still evident. Tellingly, the Conservatives – which in the 2005 election became only the third largest party in Sør-Trøndelag (far behind the Labour Party, behind the Progress Party and slightly ahead of the Socialist Left Party) – were still the party most frequently used as a main source (slightly ahead of the Labour Party) in the news stories of *Adresseavisen*.

Is there, in this respect, any difference between the conservative *Adresseavisen* and the social democratic *Namdalsavisa*?⁴¹ In the social democratic newspaper, the three parties of the red-green alliance – the Socialist Left Party, the Labour Party and the Centre Party – got most publicity. The last two political parties are traditionally the largest in elections in Nord-Trøndelag, which indicates a possible convergence between *Namdalsavisa's* political sympathies and its readership orientation. The considerable publicity for the Socialist Left Party, which fought hard to secure its mandate from Nord-Trøndelag county, seem to have been a more politically motivated news decision. On Election Day, the editorial in *Namdalsavisa* more or less begged its voters to ensure a new period in the Storting for the Socialist Left Party's top candidate, a politician from the *Namdalsavisa's* own local area.⁴² As in *Adresseavisen*, the Progress Party – which became the third largest party in the county in the 2005 election – was relatively seldom used as a main source in news articles.⁴³

Table 4. *Political Sympathies Towards Government Alternatives, by Newspaper Type and Genre, 2005 (per cent)*

Political sympathy	News		Editorials/commentaries		All genres	
	<i>Adresseavisen</i> (Cons.)	NA (SD)	<i>Adresseavisen</i> (Cons.)	NA (Labour)	<i>Adresseavisen</i> (Cons.)	NA (SD)
Pro Labour government	29	53	–	87	24	57
Pro non-socialist government	37	33	62	–	41	29
Neutral/Irrelevant	35	14	38	14	35	14
All	100	100	100	101	100	100
(N)	(305)	(109)	(62)	(17)	(367)	(126)

Cramer's V= 0.308

Table 4 shows political sympathies for the two government alternatives within two main genres (news and comments) in 2005. The coding follows the same principles as for Table 2 (1981).

Most editorials and commentaries in *Namdalsavisa* were positive to the red-green alternative and critical to the conservative-liberal coalition – the opposite of that found in *Adresseavisen's* editorials and commentaries. However, compared with *Namdalsavisa* the conservative newspaper had a larger share of comments more neutral in tone and more analytical in approach. A qualitative reading of the editorials in *Adresseavisen* indicates that the newspaper found it preferable to attack the red-green alternative (especially its left side), than openly embrace the Conservatives. The most main adversaries were the Socialist Left Party and the trade union movement. The financial support provided by the national trade union federation (LO) to the red-green coalition partners was described as especially problematic: ‘...LO is not a democratic institution’.⁴⁴ Unsurprisingly, an editorial in *Namdalsavisa* expressed the opposite opinion:

The conservatives have always attacked the close relationship between the Labour Party and LO. However, this is a useful relationship for both parts. Therefore, it will continue, to the delight of both the Labour Party and the members of LO, or in other words, for most people.⁴⁵

Another aspect is the newspapers’ role in 2005 as politically engaged local patriots supporting economic interests and demanding better infrastructure in their own regions. This concerns all types of priorities, from ferry lines and bridge construction, to investments in hospitals. Especially clear in its role as an agitator for ‘our region’ is *Adresseavisen*, where local patriotism at times assumes ideological dimensions. This market-oriented, geo-political orientation seems to have become at least as important as the newspaper’s conservative heritage.

In the news coverage there was in 2005 a less significant political difference between the priorities of two papers. In *Adresseavisen*, 37 per cent of the news articles were reports with sources positive to the conservative-liberal coalition, while 29 per cent were articles with sources supporting the red-green coalition. The main tendency in *Namdalsavisa* was the opposite, and with a somewhat larger difference between the coverage of the two blocs.

Finally, more than two decades after 1981, there were any changes in the newspapers’ priorities concerning the gender of their political sources? In *Adresseavisen*, 30 per cent of the main sources in 2005 were women. This result must, in a more normative perspective, be seen as a small sign of progress for a newspaper known to be highly male-dominated (Allern 2001b: 192). In *Namdalsavisa*, however, women represented only 22 per cent of the sources – less than in 1981. One contributing reason may be that all the top candidates of the parties in the red-green alliance were men.⁴⁶

Discussion and Conclusions

The basic question here has been how the two papers selected for study interpreted and practised their role as ‘party papers’ in the election campaign of 1981, compared with their new role as politically independent, non-party newspapers in the election campaign of 2005.

In the introduction two general hypotheses were formulated. Concerning 1981, the hypothesis was that as party papers *Adresseavisen* and *Namdalsavisa* would strongly

favour 'their own' politicians and pay far less attention to their adversaries. They would be primarily political news channels for their mother party, and less an arena for debate.

The content analysis of the election campaign basically strengthens this hypothesis, but with some important modifications concerning news coverage. It is a historical myth that the party papers neglected all other political sources than politicians from their mother party. The party papers were not *only* party papers. Both *Adresseavisen* and *Namdalsavisa* sought to combine their editorial partisanship with the arena role, demonstratively giving some news space to their major political adversaries. However, not all political parties were invited, and those who were did not get the same treatment. Both newspapers met local competition. Their half-hearted role as a democratic arena can be interpreted as a necessary concession both to strategic market interests and to professional norms about 'balance' in news coverage.

Concerning 2005, the standard hypothesis was that the two papers, now formally party-independent, would first and foremost take their readership and market interests into consideration regardless, of their own political ideological leanings. Having abandoned their role as news channels for their former mother parties, they would try to function as an arena for different political parties, favouring the parties most influential among their own readership.

The content analysis of the government sympathies in news and commentaries partly confirms this hypothesis – but only partly. There was of course a *stronger* association between the type of newspaper (*Adresseavisen* versus *Namdalsavisa*) and the sympathies for different government alternatives in the 1981 election campaign than in 2005. However, it is also clear that both newspapers still have very different political profiles, especially in their editorials and comments. *Namdalsavisa* was a very actively engaged supporter of the red-green alternative. The political love affair between *Adresseavisen* and the Conservatives might not have been ardent in 2005 as in 1981, but still there were some warm feelings. Nor should this come as a surprise in a newspaper defined as conservative – and where the political editor (in 2005) is a former politician from the Conservatives. At the same time it was clearly much easier, considering their readership interests, for both papers to support different coalition alternatives in 2005, than it would have been to support pure one-party government alternatives.

In both papers, the news columns were undoubtedly more 'balanced' concerning political sources in the 2005 general election than in 1981. However, they were still somewhat influenced by historical loyalties. In 2005, *Namdalsavisa* could more readily combine these two potentially conflicting roles because its readership – far more than that of *Adresseavisen* – sympathized with the newspapers' favoured government alternative. It is also interesting to note that the growth of influence for the populist Progress Party did not result in any extended coverage in the news in these two papers. On its front pages, *Adresseavisen* consistently ignored one of the Conservatives' main competitors among the voting public.

Another interesting historical aspect is the development of the amount of election coverage. In *Adresseavisen*, the number of articles increased 100 per cent in 2005 compared with 1981. One reason is that this newspaper has expanded its news coverage in most areas. However, the general election in 2005 was generally treated as a bigger news event and given higher priority than 24 years previously. 'Less party politics' does not necessarily mean less weight on politics. The creation of new genres, like the voter panel, in the news coverage can also be interpreted as an attempt to make the election

more interesting to readers. *Namdalsavisa*, which is a smaller newspaper, had less election coverage, and was also more ‘traditional’ concerning the genres that it employed.

Two patterns seem relatively constant when campaign coverage in 1981 and 2005 is compared. One is the *gender factor* in the news. In 2005 *Adresseavisen* made a little progress towards greater representation of women among its sources, whereas *Namdalsavisa* went the other way. However, the main picture is still one of male dominance in the news. In this respect the news institution seems more conservative than the political parties themselves. Why is this so? One reason can be the systematic lack of deliberate journalistic ambitions to change old patterns. Male dominance in the news is still, even in a country where 38 per cent of the members of parliament and nearly half the government ministers are women, seen as the ‘natural order’ of things.

The second common pattern is the *lack of independent, investigative journalism* in the two papers, in both election campaigns. News coverage concentrated on reports of the parties’ political initiatives, interviews with top candidates and reporting from political meetings and discussions. Of course, the political parties and their candidates must be given the opportunity to communicate with the public through the media. The political parties also have learned to accept the ‘logic’ of the news media. However, the newspapers chosen for this study proved far more important as *arenas* for the election campaigns of the largest parties, than as independent investigators that critically examined the demands, promises – and deeds – of the political parties.

Notes

1. The initiative to this study was taken by the unions of journalists and editors in the two counties of Trøndelag, who in 2006 invited me to speak about changes in political journalism at an annual media conference.
2. In 1981 the paper’s name was *Namdal Arbeiderblad* (literally: ‘Namdal Workers’ Paper’).
3. In most cases, the local branches of the Labour Party were the shareholders.
4. The party’s name from 1921 to 1958 was *Bondepartiet* (The Farmers’ Party); then it was changed to *Senterpartiet* (The Centre Party).
5. One such example is *Aftenposten*, a newspaper as loyal to the Conservatives in these years as *Arbeiderbladet*, the leading Labour Party paper in Oslo, was loyal to the Labour Party.
6. Source: *NOU 1992: 14*, statistics based on *Aviskatalogen*, a publication where the newspapers themselves defined their political affiliation.
7. *Verdens Gang* (VG) was one of the few large-circulation newspapers that in the first three decades after the Second World War did not have any party affiliation. However, both in ideological and political terms VG was opposed to the social democratic and socialist parties and supported the ‘non-socialist alternative’.
8. The only exception is *Halden Arbeiderblad*, whose statutes still (September 2006) define it as an organ of the Norwegian Labour Party. However, this sentence has for many years been a ‘sleeping paragraph’.
9. Even before the Second World War, some party papers (including the Labour press), especially when they were the only newspaper in their district, had adopted a ‘catch-all’ policy of seeking to report all news, regardless of party politics.
10. Whereas ‘Høyres Pressebyrå’ clearly indicated the party name – *Høyre* – ‘Norpress’ was a neutral designation.
11. *Arbeiderbladet* in Oslo became *Dagsavisen* (The Daily Newspaper), *Bergens Arbeiderblad* was renamed *Bergensavisen* (BA) and *Namdal Arbeiderblad* became *Namdalsavisa* (NA).
12. My translation. The text in Norwegian: ‘*Ideologisk føler disse aviser seg fortsatt knyttet til Høyre og gir uttrykk for det. Men utslagene i holdningen til både prinsipielle og praktiske saker i samfunnsdebatten er ikke så bastante som før.*’
13. *Den konservative presses forening*.
14. *Norsk Arbeiderpresse AS*
15. *Arbeidernes pressekontor*

16. In Trondheim the local competitors were the social democratic *Arbeider-Avisa* and the liberal *Nidaros* (only two issues per week). In the Namsos area the local competitor was *Nord-Trønderen og Namdalen*, which supported both the Centre Party and the Liberals.
17. Statutes (*vedtekter*) for *Adresseavisen* ASA, § 2, last revised 10 April 1997.
18. In 1995 The Norwegian Labour Party sold its shares in *A-pressen*. In 1998 the corporation was made a public stock company (Simensen 1999: 49-51), but withdrew from the stock exchange in 2003. As of August 2006, main owners in the company were the National Federation of Trade Unions (LO) and some of its branches, the tele-communications company Telenor and the independent foundation Free Speech (*Fritt Ord*).
19. The current statutes were formulated by the annual assembly of *A-pressen*, 4 June 2003.
20. This is the introductory paragraph in a declaration of 'the basic view' of *Namdalsavisa* (2005).
21. The relevant pages were researched by journalists in *Adresseavisen* and *Namdalsavisa*, who were engaged to assist in the project.
22. Cramer's V is standardized and becomes 0 if there is no statistical dependency and 1 if there is a perfect association. A Cramer's V higher than 0.3 is in the social sciences normally interpreted as indicating a relatively strong association.
23. The source of all election results in this article is Statistics Norway.
24. In the county of Sør-Trøndelag, the Conservatives got 29.3 per cent and in Nord-Trøndelag 17.8 per cent of the vote. Both results were a success compared with earlier elections.
25. In Sør-Trøndelag county, the Labour Party got 38.7 per cent of the vote, and in Nord-Trøndelag county as much as 42.7 per cent.
26. In 1983 the government became a coalition government with Centre Party and the Christian People's Party as new members.
27. *Adresseavisen*, 12 September 1981: '*Adresseavisen har forsøkt å dekke valgkampen variert ved å gi alle seriøse partier plass til å fremheve sine synspunkter. Vårt eget politiske syn har vi fortrinnsvis hevdet på lederplass*'.
28. In *Adresseavisen* 87 per cent of the articles were categorized as news, 13 per cent as editorials and commentaries. In *Namdalsavisa* news represented 68 per cent, while editorials comprised as much as 32 per cent of the articles.
29. In articles with more than one source, 'the main source' gives the best indication of how the newspaper has decided to frame the story. In 17 per cent of the articles in *Adresseavisen* and as much as 36 per cent of those in *NA*, no specific source was mentioned. These were generally brief news reports.
30. In most cases, the political affiliation of the sources is mentioned in the story. If not (perhaps because this was regarded as unnecessary because the politician in question was well known to the local audience), the politician's party affiliation has been confirmed through other and written sources.
31. Cramer's V is 0.364, which indicates a relatively strong correlation between the type of newspaper and the party affiliations of the main sources.
32. *Adresseavisen*, 19 August 1981.
33. *Adresseavisen*, 11 September 1981.
34. *Adresseavisen*, 12 September 1981.
35. Personal communication from Amdal to the author, 30 August 2006.
36. Cramer's V is as high as 0.557, which confirms the strong relationship between newspaper type and the political sympathies towards the government alternatives.
37. A Cramer's V as low as 0.120 confirms that there in this respect was a very weak association between newspaper type and source gender.
38. The only exception is the short-lived coalition government that included *all* national parties, in the first months after the end of the Second World War.
39. Source: Statistics Norway.
40. The political editor in *Adresseavisen*, Ingrid Skjøtskift, is a former politician within the Conservatives.
41. Cramer's V is 0.232, which indicates an association between the type of newspaper and the source's political affiliation – however, not strong.
42. 'Distrikts-Inge' ut av tinget? *NA*, 12 September 2006.
43. The small Red Election Alliance was represented by a single interview with its top candidate. He declared that as a full-time crab fisher, he had no time to participate in any election campaign. It is easy to understand that the election coverage in *Namdalsavisa* became limited.
44. '*LO er ikke noe demokratisk organ*', from an editorial in *Adresseavisen*, 25 August 2006.
45. Editorial in *NA*, 25 August 2006: '*Høyresida har alltid angrepet det tette forholdet mellom AP og LO. Det er imidlertid et forhold som begge parter har stor nytte av. Derfor kommer det til å fortsette, til glede både for AP og for LO's medlemmer, eller om en vil, for folk flest*'

46. A Cramer's V as low as 0.127 reminds us that the type of newspaper (conservative or social democratic) in this respect counts relatively little.

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