

The Power of Editing

The Editorial Role in a Historical Perspective

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Editors play a key role in democratic societies. They are guarantors of freedom of expression and public opinion formation. Editors may be said to operate in a magnetic field between politics and government and the market. The Editor wields power, but is also under pressure.

How has this role evolved? How has it been cultivated and formed? What challenges and threats does it face today? What has the power of the Editor meant, and what does it mean today?

Based on a study of the evolution of the editorial role in Norway (Eide 2000), I will use the following pages to put forward ten propositions about the role of the Editor in a historical perspective. Although the propositions refer to a specifically Norwegian context, I believe they are more or less universally applicable. They say something about the professional-ideological force and historical legitimacy an editorship can maintain, and they say something about the tensions and cross-pressures that have surrounded, and continue to surround, the role.

As anyone who has read the least bit of press history is aware, histories of editors tend to be *hommages* to Great Men, moving from the embryo of greatness in the young man to the greatness of mind and grandness of thought of the adult. All recounted in the rosy glow of a firm belief in Progress, a conviction that the press and journalism itself are becoming ever better and ever more free. This kind of press history is a tale of a struggle of the Good against forces of Evil.

Contrary to mythologies of this kind we have equally mythological dystopias, based on an equally firm belief that journalism is a good way down the so-called 'slippery slope' into the abyss of commercialism. Journalism used to be better, journalists' and editors' ideals used to be higher, their motives nobler. That was before Commercialism perverted Free Expression and not-for-profit discussions of public affairs.

The only antidote to these two caricatures – the one of steady Progress, the other of successive Perversion – is balanced historical examination and analysis. Such a caveat may be called for when our aim is to understand the role of the Editor, in view of the number of testimonial banquets and editors who instinctively, as a reflex, meet even the slightest criticism with either lofty references to freedom of expression or self-congratulatory blustering. The history of the editorial role is all too important to be left to editors like these.

For, the role is truly vital, even when measured against such grand ideals as freedom of expression and democracy. The power of the Editor exists and needs to be examined. A better understanding of the role and its ramifications, both past and present, should be

enlightening, with respect to both press ideology and an understanding of how our societies function.

1.

My first proposition is that *the evolution of the editorial role is inseparable from the evolution of the public sphere*.

As public opinion emerges as a societal institution, the editor appears as an early caretaker and interpreter of the norms to govern public discourse. In Norwegian history we find seeds of such a role in the intellectual circles that coalesced around book printers in the latter half of the eighteenth century. But only with Norway's independence from Danish rule and the adoption of our own Constitution in 1814 did political opposition become possible, which in turn inspired political debate – i.e., a legitimate public sphere that provided fertile soil for the growth of the editorial role. Newspapers and printing houses were hotbeds of civic culture, where the affairs of the day were eagerly discussed. These fora attracted many different kinds of intellectuals and busy-bodies. They were intellectual debating clubs and political workshops.

In time, the notion of editors as referees and guarantors of public discourse spread. It was their responsibility to see to it that important points of view reached the public eye – even if those who formulated the views on many occasions chose to remain anonymous. The right to anonymity was an important prerequisite to the growth of the editorial role as we know it (Øy 1992, 1994). Politically conscious editors defended the right – and their sources' right – as a vital vent that allowed citizens to speak freely. As for themselves, editors gradually stepped forward, out of anonymity and into the floodlights of public discourse.

Editors assumed what they considered to be a key role in democratic society and wrote themselves into history books as brokers of public opinion. As one editor put it in 1824, they served “an authority greater than any mortal power,” namely, “public opinion”.¹

The new public sphere recognized the legitimacy, indeed, the necessity of critical views and a “Loyal Opposition”, and editors were cast in the role of guarantors of these necessities of political life. “King of the Opposition” was an epithet conferred on one leading editor in the 1840s. Another editor called his paper “The Citizen” (*Statsborgeren*). Ideally, the press should be an arena for, and an instrument in the service of, public opinion; it should provide citizens with the information they need to be able to carry out their civic duties.

With recognition of the editorial role as a kingpin of the public sphere came also criticism of editors, as when Ludvig Mariboe in 1836 lashed out at writers and editors, referring to them as “miserable wretches, charlatans, ignorant and devoid of taste, brats, barely out of school” (Husby 1943:20).

But the editorial role was to be performed with authority and pathos. Christian Friele, Editor of *Morgonbladet* between 1857 and 1893, was called the “President of Public Opinion”,² and it was said of Friele's predecessor, Adolf Bredo Stabell, that “as Editor of *Morgonbladet* he was a big power in his own right”. The people of Kristiania [later Oslo] took to the streets in March 1848 to demonstrate either their support for or opposition to “H.R.H. Stabell”, “King of the Opposition” (Seip 1974:172).

“I am the enactor of public opinion,” declares the title character in Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson's play, “The Editor” (*Redaktøren*), published in 1874. Bjørnson's model was none other than Christian Friele, a man who left no one indifferent. Loved and hated, he

was a well-known figure in the capital with his characteristic top hat, in the lining of which he often stuffed his manuscripts. He was peripatetic, always in the field. He was no 9-to-5 office man.

Friele was a man of many convictions (some of which he elevated to dogma) – sharply formulated by himself or others. It should be noted that he reigned in a period that was not conducive to moderate standpoints. It was a time of political polarization, when the struggle for parliamentary rule was at its peak. In the midst of the conflict the fundamentals of the editorial role manifested themselves, and the symbolic capital attached to it accrued.

Friele is also an eminently successful example of the kind of opinion leader who is more self-convinced than learned. He read few books in his lifetime. “The weakness of his academic background gave his arguments a tenacity that they under other circumstances would probably have lacked” (Stang 1939:71).

Combative, Conservative, Friele was able to write with certainty, partly thanks to the fact that doors closed to others were open to him. He hobnobbed with powerful men. Editor Friele was the personification of the Editor as *conspirator*.

In favourable accounts this facet of his career is described in statements like “His discretion was impeccable.” The writer of one such testimonial (in a jubilee publication) goes so far as to say: “[D]iscretion was to a large degree the key to the power and influence *Morgonbladet* wielded” (Wendelbo 1909:7).

Friele was a man with contacts. He operated in intimate interaction with actors in a variety of roles and spheres. His paper’s contributing writers were more likely to be personages outside the paper’s staff than staff members – professors, figures in the ministries, politicians, merchants and industrialists “that either wrote, dictated, or inspired the articles *Morgonbladet* carried” (Stang 1939:69).

On the one hand, Friele appears both a conniver and collaborator with powerful political and economic interests; on the other, he appears a valiant, independent man, well aware of the role he played. Among the evidence supporting this latter interpretation is his rejection of a nomination to a Royal Order: “The Editor of ‘The Royal Norwegian *Morgonbladet*’, eh? No surer way to compromise the paper and its position!”

Friele was also an editor who drew a line between polemics and reporting. Even political adversaries’ statements and positions should be reported correctly, often in the form of extensive stenographic accounts that were allowed to displace other domestic and foreign news of the day.

Nor did he allow himself to give in to the temptation to publish the many personal scandals to which he was privy. His comment: “The sexual drive is fairly evenly distributed among the parties.”

Friele’s heyday was the 1860s and 1870s. In those years he both formed and staged public debate in Norway. It was not without reason they called him “the President of Public Opinion”.

2.

My second and parallel proposition is this: The evolution of the editorial role is central to the emergence and development of a journalistic field, to the institutionalization of the Norwegian press and Norwegian journalism and to the emergence of journalism as a force in society. I submit that the definition of the editorial role largely is a matter of accrual of symbolic capital. This symbolic or cultural capital manifests itself successively in the form of rules, statutes, codes of conduct, literature, and judgments in court.

Professional organization is a central feature of this process. The editorial role played a central part in organizing members of the press, from the first associations in the late nineteenth century and, even more so, in the founding of the Norwegian Press Association in 1910.

Accumulation of cultural capital is a prerequisite to the establishment of journalism as an occupation of standing, and it is crucial to the effort to establish the independence of journalism from other social institutions and fields, such as the economy and politics. How editors go about accumulating such capital and how the symbolic capital of journalism relates to other kinds of real capital, both within journalism and in other fields, merits further study.

In early years, the nascent editorial role was linked with other fields and public roles such as authors, academics and politicians. The bonds between these fields and roles gradually relaxed, and they drifted apart in the overall process of modernity.

For many years, however, the editorial role was practised as a sideline to some other occupation. The history of the editorial role in Norway is one of enterprising individuals who found and developed a power base in diverse involvements in civic affairs. It is a history of restless, public-spirited men.

Hagbard Emanuel Berner, the first editor of *Dagbladet* (Kristiania/Oslo), was among the founders of a publishing house and a Norwegian feminist association; he was a Director of the Mortgage Bank of Norway and served as Mayor of the capital, Kristiania. Some will surely find symbolic significance in the fact that the Editor of *Dagbladet* also chaired the Norwegian Cremation Society.

The Editor's bench was no easy-chair. Editors had many platforms from which to speak. And they had a lot to say, whether they fought for "Justice, Freedom and Enlightenment" as the founder of *Statsborgeren*, Peder Soelvold's motto proclaimed in 1831, or more concrete concerns such as those the founding Editor of *Fredriksstad Blad* struggled for: "Freedom, Justice, Light, Room and Board".

In the period of transition toward the end of the nineteenth century – that is to say, at the dawn of modernity – editors assumed a position of leadership in public life. They could do this, not because they were politicians or men of letters, but simply because they were editors.

A significant expression of this 'coming of age' of the editorial role in relation to other positions in society is *the demise of the Editor-as-Man-of-Letters*. One might say that "the Great I" was supplanted by "the Great We". Editors with backgrounds in journalism replaced editors with backgrounds in the Arts. Each of the roles, the Man of Letters and the Editor, underwent a process of professionalization. But 'poetocracy', the eminence of Letters in public discourse, was to give way to the power of the professionalized Editor.

The editorial role successively established itself in the field of journalism by manifesting its independence, particularly vis-à-vis newspaper owners and government officials. Thus, for some time new and close relations prevailed between journalism and politics.

At significant junctures in Norwegian history, editors have been openly partisan and used every opportunity that came their way to promote one or another political party. Some editors drew fire for their political sympathies. Writer Helge Krog lambasted *Arbeiderbladet's* Editor, Martin Tranmæl – or "Martin Pontius Pilate Tranmæl", as Krog dubbed him – for turning the paper into "a laundry for hands dirtied in politics". The allegation came after Tranmæl had attacked Krog for his part in "the dirty and disgusting traffic that salon radicals from the upper classes, masquerading as socialists, indulge in" (Longum 1998:30f).

But if we tend to think of the editors of party papers as humble, verging on servile, ‘megaphones’ of the party line, Martin Tranmæl hardly fits the picture. As Editor of *Arbeiderbladet* from 1921 to 1949, he steered the party as much as he ever was steered by it. De facto he led the party during the critical interwar period. Tranmæl’s office was a commando central – a political power centre – in which editorial power fused with the power of state.

3.

The era of the party press ends with a process of separation – a new declaration of independence on the part of journalism. The process gained momentum particularly in the 1970s. This development has provided a new base for editorial power. An interesting question is whether these successive processes of separation have increased or decreased the power of editors in relation to other fields and power bases. It may well be a rationalization, the so-called wisdom of hindsight, that regards the Editor as having been more powerful in days gone by, in the days when truly great and courageous Editors molded public opinion and left their mark on politics and the intellectual climate. Hence, my third proposition: *Editorial power may have changed in character, but it has hardly eroded.*

Even today, the Editor is one of the principals behind the media’s staging of public discourse. The Editor is the impresario and decides what repertoire will be played on the part of the media stage that he or she controls.

The forms of representation and the logic of the media furthermore tend to have an impact on other social fields and to affect “power relationships within other fields É. This pressure affects what is done and produced there” (Bourdieu 1998:68). The editorial role exerts such influence not so much through the prerogative of editorial comment, but by virtue of the Editor’s role as protector of the logic of journalism. No modern institution or actor is untouched by the conventions and *modi operandi* of mass media, and those who control those conventions and modes wield considerable power. Editorial influence is expanding, and its logic can change power relationships and the premises for many other players in many different arenas.

When the powerful confer, not infrequently they discuss ways to relate to the media – how they can turn the logic of the media to their advantage. The relative ubiquity of media logic gives rise to a kind of medial power that we might call *logical power*, *contextual power*, or *backroom* or *collegial power*. It is a form of power more subtle, less direct than the power to set agendas or define problems.

Editorial power is manifold. It is both interesting and important, yet poorly understood.

4.

More often emphasized in this regard is the classic tension between Temple and Marketplace. In Norway the corresponding tension relating to the press has been formulated in the phrase, “Mind or Money”. The phrase goes back to a conflict between the Editor and the owners of the paper, *Verdens Gang*, in 1910. The conflict boiled down to the rhetorical question: “Shall mind or money decide what’s fit to print?”

This is the archetypal saga of the editorial role in Norwegian contexts. In the historical drama, the Editor, i.e., Mind, wins out. But the curtain has not fallen. The essential and crucial tension between economic power and Principle has not been resolved once and

for all, but still gives rise to dilemmas for modern-day custodians of the editorial role. The next ‘showdown’ between Mind and Money might have a different outcome than back in 1910.

The tensions between Temple and Marketplace, between Marketplace and Democracy, have hardly subsided in recent years. It prevails, despite the many banquet-speaker incantations about the Freedom and Independence of the media. “Anyone who has the slightest insight into the economic mechanisms that operate within the press and has the least bit of moral decency left is sickened by the fumes of all these puffed-up conceits about freedom and independence.” Such was the verdict of Helge Krog in 1939 in his Foreword to a revival of his play, “The Great We” (*Det store Vi*, 1919). Krog’s target was the growing spirit of *collegial loyalty* among the men and women of the press, the nascent ‘press corps’. This spirit – often automatic and over-zealous, at times even noxious – may also be seen as a buttress against pressures brought to bear on the editorial role. Collegiality can be problematic, the ‘down side’ of professionalization, but it is also understandable – and necessary. When any member of the press comes under fire, the corps closes ranks and forms a united front. But does it do any good?

The editorial role is under pressure – as always. The heaviest pressures have to do with Money, with owners’ preoccupation with the return on their investment. The pressure to return a profit represents the greatest challenge to the ideals attached to the editorial role today. Newspapers have always been market-oriented, but the consequences of that orientation have become much more acute. Newspapers nowadays are investments in the traditional capitalistic sense. That is to say, returns in the form of publicity and partisan sympathy no longer count; nowadays owners demand cold, hard, cash.

Thus, my fourth proposition is this: *Professionalization and the shift away from party affiliations represent a process of emancipation, but the process has been accompanied by a process of commercialization that may well thrust editorial power into a new set of chains.*

5.

My fifth proposition takes its point of departure in a recognition that we should avoid concentrating only on high ideals or only on the profit motive if we are to gain a proper understanding of the editorial role— whether past or present. My proposition is that *we must consider the public and their everyday conditions and needs* to be able to understand the history of the editorial role and the power Editors command.

Historically, we see how Editors have tried to establish a boundary vis-à-vis owners’ influence – “Mind vs. Money”, the authority of the Editor versus the power of capital. The ideal of independence is much celebrated. On the other hand, dependence on the market has been described, ideologized and interpreted as a matter of loyalty toward the readers. The press is in the service of its readers, listeners and viewers, we are told. The alliance with the public has proven a significant power base for Editors, vis-à-vis both owners and government. The ties to the public and Editors’ sensitivity to, and ability to play on, public sentiment have also given rise to fear of the power of the press.

This power is often interpreted as a perversion, as a dangerous sign of decay. We find an early Scandinavian example of this in philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, who characterized editors and journalists as custodians of the “tyranny of the vulgar” (cf. Bruhn Jensen 1996:127).

But popularly founded editorial power need not be ‘tyrannical’. There are numerous examples of Editors who have legitimately assembled a power base, based on their ability to articulate public sentiment. This sensibility has often been highly intuitive; only in modern times have Editors come to rely on opinion polls and readership statistics instead of intuition.

6.

The editorial role is played in the magnetic field between crafts and art, between rational organization and creativity, between planning and intuition.

It is necessary to distinguish between the Editor and the ‘media maker’. It is also necessary to distinguish between two different kinds of editors: the person who sees to it that the newspaper sees the light of day (Managing Editor in English parlance), and the person whose chief role is to lead and generate opinion (the Editor-in-Chief). The Managing Editor, who operates within the sphere of the newsroom more than in the public sphere, is more likely to be the real media maker. Editors who have played a major role in public arenas have generally left management of their papers to others. The abilities, to lead opinion and to manage a newspaper are two distinct talents; seldom are they united in one and the same person.

In Swedish press history, the dominant contrast has been that between the Editor and the ‘Master’, i.e., the academic. Academics have played a central role in several Swedish newspapers – *Aftonbladet*, *Dagens Nyheter*, *Expressen* – over the years. In Norway, academics have tended to operate in the immediate surroundings of Norwegian newspapers rather than as journalists and editors. Numerous academics contributed reviews and essays to Norwegian papers on a casual basis during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Their role has declined, but not disappeared, as papers have sought to broaden their appeal. Meanwhile, newspaper management has become an increasingly independent and professional occupation.

A media maker has to be a bit of a cynic. Success is measured primarily in circulation figures, but also in the recognition of one’s colleagues. (The one often leads to the other.) Modern Managing Editors have no problems with making a profit, nor are they ashamed of leaning a bit more toward the Marketplace than toward the Temple, closer to the commercial than to the intellectual pole of the journalistic field. On the contrary, they tend to look upon those among their colleagues who do service in the Temple as elitist snobs, lacking in public appeal. For their part, managers are credited with a knack for sensing the pulse of the people – and an ability to turn what they sense into a commercial success.

Somewhat generally phrased, then, the sixth proposition is: *The manager of a news medium is not necessarily the Editor-in-Chief, and vice versa.*

7.

The next proposition relates to the fact that in Norway the legitimacy of the editorial role derives more from tradition and the code developed among practitioners within the field than from laws and statutes established outside it. The law mainly has to do with criminal liability. In a sense the code of ethics and the ideals surrounding editorial practice in Norway are a response to the absence of a legal framework. The seventh proposition, then: *To date, legality has rather little bearing on the legitimacy of the editorial role.*

The symbolic capital surrounding the Editor's role was codified in 1953 with the adoption of the Editorial Code (Redaktørplakaten), where the norms and expectations attached to the editorship – which actually define the editorial role – are set out in print. Acceptance of the Code, first by newspaper publishers and then the Labour Court, conferred legitimacy on the editorial role. The claim to legitimacy has been strengthened by referring to the role of the press in democratic society and the “inviolable principle” of freedom of expression.

The Editorial Code expresses a fundamental obligation to society, to the public good. The “ideal objectives of the press” shall take precedence over all other motives.

When the Code calls for maintaining editorial independence from government and public authorities as well as independence from newspaper owners, it is in order to strengthen the Editor in his/her relation to a third party, namely, the public. The societal role of the press is conceived to be to promote a free and unprejudiced exchange of opinion and journalistic practices that maintain a distinction between facts and the paper's views and values.

It is these principles and the Code in which they are expressed that, more than any legal instrument, convey legitimacy on the editorial role.

8.

In organizational terms, the editorial role is attached primarily to daily news media. The statutes of the Association of Norwegian Editors specify that members may be recruited from media that *report news* independent of and without deference to any other organization and that “[recognize] freedom of expression and freedom of the press as the fundamentals of a democratic society”. The media must, furthermore, address the public and have a periodicity in keeping with the function of a news-reporting medium. The same passage in an earlier version of the statutes was even more explicitly newspaper-oriented: “a frequency and regularity, a circulation, and a form that are comparable to the news reporting performed by daily newspapers”. Thus, the daily press is the standard. It is from day-to-day news reporting and the political work and ideological apparatus that have grown up around news reporting that the editorial role derives its legitimacy. It has its roots in the daily press.

In relation to the ideology of “social responsibility” and freedom of expression, however, a link to the daily press may be a less-than-optimal institutional base for the editorial role. A more open interpretation of the role may be called for. Editors of news media are not the only guarantors of public debate and freedom of expression.

Historically, of course, the editorial role has been intimately bound up with the emergence of journalism in Norway. Editors are also increasingly often recruited from the ranks of journalists. And, it is primarily among members of the press – subsequently complemented by other mass media – that the ideals and ideology of journalism have been formulated and put into practice via a self-imposed responsibility to society. Contemporary discussions of editorial responsibility and new media are strongly coloured by this prehistory.

The ordinary criminal code holds perpetrator(s) and their accomplices responsible for their acts – whether the crime occurs in reality or in cyberspace. Editorial responsibility, as set out in Norwegian law, is an extra liability, whereby the editor can be punished for acts – libel, for example – committed by others, even if he or she has become aware of the content only after publication. Editorial responsibility requires Editors to be aware

of what they send to press or transmit; failure to note a libellous statement constitutes a fault in the medium's control routines, i.e., the Editor's failure to perform his/her duty. The question is, should this particular responsibility be extended to web media?

The standpoint adopted by the Association of Norwegian Editors on this issue reflects the degree to which Norwegian editors see editorial responsibility as an outgrowth of their social responsibility. The Association favour extending editorial responsibility to cover electronic media, but rejects proposals to introduce a general liability covering all activities on the Internet or other kinds of web-based information. In the Association's view, editorial responsibility should be confined to news reporting and other information relating to the happenings of the day. Simply put: Journalism gave birth to the editorial role, and 'parental' responsibilities belong to journalism.

Therefore, the Association of Norwegian Editors argue that editorial responsibility should be required only of media that provide services that are comparable to the services provided by print media and broadcasting, i.e., media that "serve the public news and information based on independent journalistic work".

It is this kind of editorial responsibility on an ideal plane that the Association consider to be its duty to maintain and defend; it is what constitutes the "guarantee of freedom of expression and the independence, impartiality and quality of the editorial product". A government commission set up to assess the implications of the convergence of the telecommunications, digital media (data processing and IT) and media sectors has proposed that personal editorial liability be extended to electronic publishing, but the commission acknowledges that the designated "responsible editor" would not always be able to control everything that appears on a web site.

It may become more difficult to argue for and maintain the editorial role in a universe characterized by the convergence and expansion of communications media that are not mass media in the conventional sense of the word. In many instances the broker role has become superfluous; we can all be our own editors. Yet it would be hasty to proclaim the death of the mediating messenger or the erosion of editorial power. Even the new information society will need a reliable editorial function – knowledge and opinion that is communicated in keeping with the ideals of the traditional editorial role.

To sum up the status of the editorial role in Norway today, an eighth proposition might be: *In the tension between past and future, the rootedness of the editorial role in journalism becomes manifest.*

9.

Painting in broad strokes, we may say that the editorial role is under pressure from owners' demands of profitability, centripetal tendencies in the management of media conglomerates, from technological developments, and overly ambitious legislators with an inadequate grasp of freedom of expression in theory and in practice. Meanwhile, news sources, too, have become more sophisticated in their relations with the media; hence the growth of consultancies specializing in information and media strategy. In short, the editorial role is under pressure from *commercialization, concentration, convergence, 'control mania', and the professionalization of news sources.*

Editors themselves tend to exaggerate these external sources of pressure, pointing to the many threats from many quarters. As a consequence, they tend to disregard the threats to the editorial role that come from within and the ways in which their own behaviour can undermine that role.

I submit that *quality of editorial production may suffer as a result of an exaggerated celebration of the editorial role*. Many an Editor today is so busy demonstrating his or her independence and integrity that the quality and content that the Editor's integrity should safeguard, becomes secondary. When independence becomes more a pose than an incitement to excellence, it is cause for thought. No proclamations of independence can disguise lacking competence or poor editorial quality in the long run.

Modern media are 'addicted' to their independence. The development of the editorial role has been a strong motor force behind this. The question today, however, is whether the euphoria attending this independence may have turned into an unreflecting cult.

For, it is much easier to surround oneself with an aura of independence than it is to practise critical and independent journalism. It is infinitely easier for the men and women of the press to develop a collective professional hubris than it is to take on the difficult task of acquiring solid knowledge. In the current phase of professionalization among journalists in Norway there is a tendency for self-satisfaction to grow faster than knowledge and insight.

That is why we often see a great deal of energy put into *demonstrating* independence, but relatively little energy devoted to acquiring a solid platform on which to build one's an independent position. That is also why we see Editors' duty to inform toned down in favour of their responsibility to stage ever more piquant, melodramatic tales of conflict. In this state of affairs it is necessary to insist that views and opinions are reported with at least a modicum of accuracy. The Editor must be held accountable, i.e., must ensure that what reaches the public is real, is true, and, ideally, he or she should share this sense of responsibility. Editors cannot reasonably have a greater responsibility for the temperature of public discourse than they have for its quality.

10.

"A newspaper is like a fortress, surrounded by people who bombard it with material. An Editor soon gets the impression that he is surrounded by people who have no greater aim in life than to see their words in print," sighed Carl Jeppesen (1858-1930) in *Social-Demokraten*. In his view, "the quality an Editor needed most was that of a surly watchdog, the ability to keep adversaries at bay. And if he should itemize the most vital skills of an Editor, it would be literacy, larceny and apology – the ability to read everything, to decide what is of value to your readers, to appropriate it with a certain elegance, and the rest of the time to apologize to yourself and the rest of the world for the anger and irritation you have caused" (Bjørnsen 1984:213).

When the basic attitudes of editors and journalists are discussed today, the ability to stave off one's adversaries is still a theme, but in a somewhat different respect than in Jeppesen's era. The abilities to read, to think and to apologize are still needed, but hardly to the extent they were in Jeppesen's day. Larceny is still a sine qua non, but to apologize "to oneself and to the world" for the anger you have caused – hardly!

Today, there is a need to convince others of one's worth – even for Editors. A *raison d'être* that is comprehensible to the public is required. Tradition is no longer reason enough in modern society, even less so in the media society. One can no longer rest on one's laurels. Conventional understandings of position and function can no longer be taken for granted. I submit that *Editors have a greater need to convince others of their value and to justify their role in times when the media's social contract is under review*.

In the kind of examination of the status of the Editor's role that we need today, it is necessary to involve the reading, viewing and listening public. Not just on a token basis, not just pro forma involvement in a sort of legitimating ritual, to show "how seriously we take our social responsibility" – as the litany goes. But real participation.

The challenge is to fill a call to readers to discuss press ethics and ideology – and, for that matter, the Editor's role – with substance. If the editorial role falls into decline, so will public discourse.

Generally speaking, we should be on our watch concerning a shift in the balance of power between economic capital and symbolic and social capital. The situation in Norway is not such that we can simply say that "Money" has taken over from the parties. The symbolic capital of the press is still great, Editors still enjoy considerable support, and the defences of editorship as an institution are strong.

Consequently, Editors still wield power. They have yet to be relegated to the museum – a metaphor used by pressman and publisher Trygve Ramberg in a debate on the role of the editor over twenty-five years ago. The scenario Ramberg sketched was, he said, only a decade or so in the future. He described the visit of a school class to the "Museum of the Press". There they came upon an odd sort of pulpet or bench-like artefact, cabowebbs dangling from it. The text read: "Editor's bench". And the guide explained: 'Here sat a man who "had amassed too much power and suffered from the delusion that he was the guarantor and chief executive of freedom of the press.' The guide then lowered his voice and motioned the children to come closer. "In the end,' the guide explained, 'his sense of self-importance was so inflated that he actually stood in the way of true freedom of expression and the circulation of vital information in society. His bench stands here in the Museum as a warning, a reminder of the dark era of personality cult in Norwegian press history.'" And Ramberg concluded his tale: The children "listened wide-eyed to the guide's every word as he described the evil-doings of the anti-democratic tyrant. 'In his own eyes,' the guide explained, 'he was convinced he would survive since no one could ever find a better replacement. As it turned out he was sadly mistaken'" (Ramberg 1976:50).

When this fictive saga did not come true, nor is it likely to, it is because of the institutional framework surrounding the Editor's role, and the complexity of media and editorial power. Perhaps it is also due to a will to redefine and renegotiate the social contract of the media and to reflect on the editorial role.

Notes

1. Ludvig Mariboe, founder of *Patrouillen*, an opposition paper, in 1824.
2. H Foss Reimer on Friele on the centenary edition of *Morgonbladet*, 1st January 1919.

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