

# Ny litteratur

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*Eli Skogerbø:*

## **Privatising the Public Interest. Conflicts and Compromises in Norwegian Media Politics 1980-1993**

*University of Oslo. Department of Media and Communication. IMK Report No. 20, Oslo 1996 (375 pp.)*

Eli Skogerbø's book *Privatising the Public Interest*, is a dr. polit. dissertation successfully defended at University of Oslo in May 1996. The dissertation contains extensive theoretical reflections and historical analyses of recent Norwegian media policy.

In her establishing shot Skogerbø contends that between 1980 and 1993 the Norwegian media landscape went through large changes – changes that have influenced political priorities especially within the Labour Party's position on the press subsidy system, public service and regulations with a shift from emphasising the so-called positive rights to a varied menu of media content to the negatively defined rights of the individual's freedom of expression and choice. At this early stage one wonders whether the changes surfaced out the blue air or if they were not the result of political decisions and processes themselves.

The focal point in the thesis is the changes especially regarding the press and local radio and television but in a broader sense also the attitudes to and arguments for and against regulation of the media and the market forces – a core issue not only in Norwegian media policy but in most European countries as well during the period.

In analysing and discussing the development three objectives are presented: to discuss how specific obligations of the media towards the public have been justified; with the background in these justifications to evaluate the development of political objectives and regulations; and finally to compare the outcoming structural results of recent Norwegian media policy and its main objectives and goals. These three objectives materialise as three tracks in the thesis.

Before embarking on the mentioned tracks Skogerbø in the first part (chapters 1 and 2) outlines the structure and logic of the thesis and discusses a series of fundamental theoretical and methodological categories and concepts.

Regarding the definitions of categories brief discussions and definitions in the first chapter on mass, media and democracy and interrelation between them are presented.

This part pre-echoes the following theoretical investigations, which therefore will be dealt with later, but one important statement needs to be emphasised at this point, namely the chosen definition of the media:

*Here, the concept is restricted to the media of public communication, that is, to the media in their capacity of being public institutions for communication and information. (p. 7)*

By choosing this point of departure the thesis places itself within the tradition of analysing and understanding the media as part of the political sphere and democratic processes and consequently primarily understands the audience as more or less rational, political citizens. By choosing this definition the analyses of the theoretical background for the policy development and the evaluation of its results when implemented risk the danger of being circular or even tautological in the sense that the merits and justifications of recent media policy are analysed within the very logic of the theoretical concepts with the same limitations – and one could add, as time goes by at least, the same blindspots regarding the societal functions of the mass media and their heterogeneous use values for the receivers or users. It thus could be argued that the adopted concept of democracy and the role of the media is to a certain extent a static or ahistoric measure and accordingly not sufficiently encompassing the dynamics and development of democracy and the various and changing needs and attitudes of people understood as both 'citizens' and 'consumers' and how they are best catered for, let alone the profound changes in the structure and rampant proliferation of the mass media during the recent decades and the possible theoretical ramifications.

Methodologically Skogerbø, in chapter 2, discusses the differences between normative and positive approaches by drawing upon *Hume* (ought and is), *Weber's* work on objectivity and *Bjørn Erik Rasch's* discussions on positive and normative analyses and positive and normative theory related to the core question of the purpose or rather *knowledge interest*. To cut this part short Skogerbø states that she consciously places values and value judgements at the centre of the analysis (and) thereby placing (herself) within the realm of a normative (evaluating), as opposed to positive (explaining) analysis.

This approach is adopted in order to fulfill the objectives of analysing the policy development and the outcome of this. Now and again it is emphasised that the thesis is delimited to analysing and evaluating the *structural* issues and not media performance, e.g. the development of journalism and programme formats or content as such. Obviously this delimitation has its problems as it excludes the possibility of substantiating the role and effect of the media and the possible merits or shortcomings of the operationalisation of media policy. That is, how it materialises as media products.

By excluding the content, the danger is that the media are left as black boxes, though it must be admitted that including content would have been quite difficult as valid and extensive data on the matter hardly exist, a fact that indicates the marginality of content and programming analyses in media research. Skogerbø, thus, is not the only one to blame.

In the first track, tracing and analysing theories of democracy, Skogerbø emphasises the liberty of expression and the liberty of the press, both understood as negatively defined rights, as two fundamental preconditions for establishing democratically organised societies. With ample critical distance she goes through the early, more or less explicitly religiously founded, writings of *Milton* and *Locke* and *Mill's* more secular or logic arguments and preoccupation with the right of the individual as opposed to both the state and the majority. The major observation at this early stage of defining democracy is the lack of distinction between the liberty of expression and the liberty of the press. The missing distinction is ascribed to the historic context, whereas later a distinction between the two becomes particularly important as the liberty of expression-position justifies regulations and obligations to secure the rights of the individual, whereas the liberty of the press-position as a consequence includes property rights and editorial autonomy.

In the following chapter (4) Skogerbø takes us through more recent theories of and reflections on democracy, communicative rights and justifications for regulations and obligations in media policy. Focus here is what Skogerbø interprets as a shift towards emphasising *the citizen and citizens' rights* (positively defined), and even more importantly that this shift is primarily observed within the political left tradition in the theoretical struggle for justifying media regulations and restrictions in order to defend citizen's or civil rights especially regarding the public service area. The very precise, detailed and critical investigation into current theories and positions includes the confrontation between *Dewey* and *Lippmann* in the United States and recent Western European works of *Garnham*, *Blumler*, *Curran* and *Keane* – and of course *Habermas*, whose *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* from 1962 has had immense impact on media studies on the European continent and recently, when translated into English, also among anglo-american scholars. Habermas' ongoing project is illustrated by including his work *Faktizität und Geltung* (1993), where his earlier, perhaps idealistic positions are modified although still emphasising the importance of the public sphere as a space for public deliberation and discourse.

With the risk to watering this very excellent chapter down too much, one observation is that the notion of the citizen is profoundly important in the described works and even more so

the distinction between people as citizens and as consumers and the attached freedom rights. Following this regulations and restrictions in the media field in order to secure the rights of people as citizens are justified. Or as stated regarding the habermasian tradition:

*Habermas provides a compelling argument for claiming that there must exist media for the public communication that have obligations towards the public, not only towards the market. Consequently there must also exist criteria on which to justify media policies that are directed at maintaining these obligations.* (p.109)

And even more operational:

*The only existing regulatory models that have endorsed citizens, that is, people in their capacity of being citizens with explicit rights to information and communications resources, are the public broadcasting and telecommunications institutions in Western Europe, that is, strictly regulated public institutions.* (p. 111)

Skogerbø points to the fact, though, that public service is a rather tricky or ill-defined term. In the concluding remarks and referring for instance to feminist criticism the latter quotation is modified in the sense that the public service broadcasting systems 'as we know them' might not be the only solution. What this solution might be is not elaborated on here, and the mentioned authors (Granham, Blumler etc.) are not of much help, as Skogerbø correctly rejects them as

*...none of them are more than suggestive when it comes to defining exactly what this need or right consists of, and even more critical, what regulations that can or should be used to secure that these rights are catered to.* (p. 120)

The fifth chapter deals with the so-called radical alternative. The chapter focuses on research conducted during the last ten years with local or community radio and television as the empirical field. From the outset the concept of participation played an important role in promoting these new media as a way to decentralise, de-monopolise and democratise the media structure.

The chapter, not surprisingly, takes us back to the early 1930s when *Brecht* suggested that sound radio given the right societal circumstances had profound democratic, emancipatory and even revolutionary potentials if given in the hands of the people and to the early 1970s when *Hans Magnus Enzensberger*, inspired by the emergence of portable video equipment and cheap radio transmitters, repeated the potentials of the electronic media in distinguishing between repressive and emancipatory media set-ups.

The advent of community radio and television understood as non-professional and non-commercial facilities paved the way for considerations on access and participation and the belief that these new outlets would turn out to be vehicles for alternative voices and points of view hitherto suppressed by the hegemony of the public service monopolies and commercial media companies.

It is a well-known fact that the development turned out slightly different than the forecasts suggested or hoped for.

Skogerbø concludes that the development led to a replacement of the radical participatory model in favour of a model of a representative communicative democracy. The empirical development where the radical alternative vanished into a marginal phenomenon among the proliferation of commercially and mainstream oriented stations is unquestionable, but hardly surprising. The major problem in this chapter is that it is limited to very few references within this specific field and that more general theories on participatory democracy are not included. It could be argued that the chosen references are not at all theories but a mixture of empirical observations and analysis and loyal or perhaps even naive hopes or dreams shared with the practitioners. It also seems to be a bit out of proportion that the primary source on the claimed theoretical shift to a representative communicative democracy model is a conference paper by *Karol Jakubowicz* in 1988.

The second track, primarily on Norwegian media policy *development* in the ten years period, is introduced by a brief chapter (six) on the international development of technology and policy with a natural emphasis on the European scene.

In describing the development towards the proliferation of internationally distributed channels one could have expected a more elaborate analysis of the powers behind this development and its market and economic logic. Even more so as it is correctly stated that this development has influenced national media policy, a formulation which comes close to being an understatement. For instance one lacks a description of the struggle between Intelsat and Eutelsat in the beginning of the 1980s and the interdependence between telecommunications policy and planning and media policy exemplified by the fact that Eutelsat in the early 1980s decided to use its communication satellite transponders for distributing television due to what was estimated to be temporary overcapacity – and in downright conflict with the delicate compromises on allocation of DBS-frequencies reached between the European countries in 1977.

If this empirical line had been followed it would have become much more clear how European Union initiatives such as the Television Directive of 1989 more or less could be described as post-festum actions primarily adapting regulations to already existing realities.

Nevertheless Skogerbø correctly observes how the political winds changed during the period in favour of liberalising and privatising the electronic media hand in hand with the issuing of an array of regulatory initiatives.

In chapter 7 the changes in Norwegian media policy are analysed centered on the press subsidy system, the introduction of local radio and television and consequently the lifting of the NRK monopoly, and finally the establishing of the second national television channel.

The objective of the chapter combined with the following chapter 8 is to identify the objectives for the press and broadcasting policies promoted by shifting governments, to map and explain the variation of the objectives and the transition of objectives and justifications for different types of regulations –

and finally to evaluate the goals and objectives in relation to the normative positions dealt with in the previous chapters.

The sources used to analyse the development are mainly official documents such as committee reports, governmental white papers and actual decisions.

The first of these, and thus setting the scene, is a 1983 report on Mass Media and media policy by a committee appointed in 1977 with the aim of describing the media landscape and the effects of the media, to forecast the development and to propose possible political initiatives. The report stresses four major functions of the media: diversity of information, enlightenment, the role as the fourth estate and finally to have an integrative effect on societal conflicts and differences. The report had little political effect though, as many of the proposals did not match the taste of the government, which in a white paper one year later stressed the importance of protecting the liberty of expression as the basic and fundamental value, thus emphasising the negative rights.

In Norway a press subsidy system was introduced in 1969 to avoid the closing of daily or weekly newspapers, especially the so-called second papers on local markets. The system was worked out primarily by representatives from the press itself, and only the Conservatives voted against the system based on the argument that subsidies would distort competition. Until the mid 80s the rationale of the system was to maintain local competition between party related newspapers. But when a revision of the system was proposed by the non-socialist government, consensus was broken as the argument now was to maintain a diversified national press structure. This reflected the fact that the subsidy system had not prevented concentration as well as relations to the parties had been loosened in favour of journalistic professionalisation.

In 1993 the shift of focus or arguments for maintaining the press subsidy system was, according to Skogerbø, further – or perhaps finally – de-ideologised. In its white paper from that year the Labour government emphasises four objectives or goals for the system: to secure high readership, to promote issuing of local newspapers where there are sufficiently large markets, secure national quality papers and competition between papers in as many localities as possible. Skogerbø observes that the original and central argument – diversity and competition in communities – is now infringed to but one objective by the same party, which earlier promoted this as *the* *raison d'être* of the subsidy system. The question is, of course, whether it is correct to say, that the policy objectives lack ideological justification, even though, admittedly, the focus has changed or has been broadened and adapted to realities. But after all, it is a political position still in favour of modifying the logic of the market, but the possible distinction between political positions and ideology does not become clear.

Whether the claimed lack of ideological justification refers to the lack of a consistent and static concept is hard to tell, but on the other hand it might be too much to expect from politicians of today, even more so as Skogerbø rightly observed certain inconsistencies in the early philosophical writings 200 years ago.

Local radio and television was introduced by the non-socialist government in the early 1980s as part of a more general media policy programme by the Conservative party. In its paper of 1980 the NRK monopoly was for the first time explicitly questioned and seen as restricting pluralism and business and technologically out of date, a fact that forced the Labour party to present a more elaborate defense for the monopoly with point of departure in a citizens' rights argument. So, whereas the conservatives positioned themselves on favouring liberalisation in order to extend freedom of choice for the consumers, the Labour Party took point of departure in the citizen perspective. Thus the political configuration emphasised the traditional dichotomy between market and consumers and regulations and citizens – a dichotomy pointed at several times in the thesis, but not sufficiently and open-mindedly scrutinised.

When proposing local radio and television a series of objectives were announced, which could hardly be rejected by other parties: after all, who could vote against decentralisation, democratisation, participation, access and liberty of expression? In Skogerbø's analysis the arguments can be seen as considerate political salesmanship, but on the other hand it was also a two-edged sword, as all arguments could later be used when the Labour party later proposed restrictions in order to avoid (in vain though) commercialisation and to secure local autonomy.

The development of local radio and television is described structured around the notion of privatisation defined as the

*...transference of responsibility from the public to the private sector regarding the regulation, financing and production of services (p. 233)*

– not to be understood as an overnight decision but a gradual development from the point of no return when local radio and television was introduced, in the first phase administratively, in the second due to a formal change in legislation – still as an experiment though, with several extensions until 1988. Skogerbø describes this phase as a field trial of the market potentials of the new media – neglecting the important fact that advertising was not allowed until the Labour party suddenly changed its position and proposed that advertising was introduced in the local media.

The tendency of privatisation was fully accomplished when the decision to establish a privately owned and solely advertising financed second national television channel was reached, although the company is, to some extent at least, considered to be a public service provider due to the obligations to deliver a universal service for both minorities and the majority. Thus, in both cases, the instruments available to regulate the broadcasting media became weaker in favour of the logic of the market including the imbedded tendency of concentration of ownership. Skogerbø writes:

*...a development that is the least desirable judged from a citizenship perspective (p. 258)*

– all through the thesis an unquestioned dogma – one wonders why. Still she maintains in the conclusion of chapter 8 that

*... the public's right to information and a diverse programme content has been toned down in favour of*

*increased emphasis on the value of liberty of expression and freedom of choice in the form of diversity of channels. (p. 258)*

And she continues:

*...all aspects of broadcasting have a private actor / (and)/ privatisation in terms of regulatory instruments is so extensive that there are few instruments left to restrict ownership, cross ownership and secure a diverse programme menu in the 'new' and redefined public service channels. (...). However, the removal of the broadcasting monopoly, in itself an opening for new voices, actors and interests to the means of communication, represents a numerical extension of freedom of choice and expression, an observation that has been used to justify further liberalisation. (p. 260f.)*

One fact mentioned, but skipped in the quotation, is the not so insignificant reality that NRK is still with us. The term "the removal of the monopoly" might thus be a bit misleading – nothing has disappeared, but more has appeared – the possible consequences for the old public service company and the future results of the generally market driven development notwithstanding, of course. One wonders if that is so bad.

In the last chapter (9) before concluding in chapter 10 the structural characteristics of the Norwegian media structure and its development are illustrated based upon different statistical data.

Regarding the press it is obvious that the subsidy system has not prevented concentration and cross-ownership. On the other hand, it could be suggested that the system has had a positive effect on maintaining a high number of papers, whereas a decrease has occurred in the other Scandinavian countries. Whereas readership has increased in Norway the opposite is the case in the other countries. One could be tempted to suggest that Norwegians like newspapers more than their neighbours and in fact that is why Norway has that many papers and not because of the subsidy system.

All in all the combination of the structural development and the watering down of the justifications for maintaining the press subsidy system may in the long run, according to Skogerbø, reduce the legitimacy of the system.

Finally regarding local radio and television. It is a well known fact that during the 80s Norwegian policy in this field was not, what would have been only logic, a both-and policy but rather a neither-nor policy – or with *Svennik Høyer's* phrase a decade of "tragedy and disaster". The disaster especially hit the commercially oriented part of the stations as also recent investigations into the fragility of station economy has proved. Although administration has been liberal and for instance allowing the Danish owned Aller to play an important and perhaps operatively controlling role on many radio stations this segment can only be described as a mere crisis.

The crisis was not complete, though. According to the data provided the total numbers of local radio stations only decreased from 458 in 1989 to 416 in 1993. And further it is concluded that diversity as defined by the type of license holders remained high as did the survival of less general stations outside

big city areas. Also among local television the picture is showing a rather stable situation.

The chapter, which is characterised by lack of more detailed statistical data and descriptions on the different types of stations as to hours of transmission, sharing of transmitters, programming profile etc., concludes that keeping local radio and television non-commercial has not been accomplished – a rather logic development since advertising was introduced in 1987. On the other hand, as already mentioned, when advertising was introduced many sceptics feared that the chips were really down and that commercialism and centralisation would hit the fan.

According to the data presented, the development turned out more differentiated. Or in other words:

*...the combination of very liberal licensing practices that aimed at obtaining quantitative, rather than qualitative, diversity, with a privatisation of the responsibilities for financing the activities, had to produce problems. In this perspective, the degree of stability and diversity that could be observed until 1993 may be regarded as more surprising than the problems. (p. 312)*

The last chapter winds up concluding that the observed theoretical convergence around citizenship and representation has shown its parallel in policy discourse and arguments, though the changes have not been dramatic.

Regarding the press policy, according to Skogerbø the objective of political diversity as a justification for the subsidy system was replaced by vaguely and pragmatically formulated objectives making it more vulnerable than if for instance a cultural diversity goal had been chosen. At this point the possible consequences of a qualitatively defined selective subsidy system are unfortunately not elaborated on.

As regards the broadcasting sector, Skogerbø maintains that basically the objectives have survived, whereas operationalisation has changed in favour of privatisation and consequently with still less possibilities for regulation and sanctions.

Skogerbø obviously is not satisfied with this development and its future prospects, and after having discussed the pros and cons related to the citizenship argument and the freedom of expression argument, she ends up by listing three different models for future regulatory systems, or more modestly put with her own words

*... sketch several alternative ways to justify public regulations in the 'information society' (p. 322),*

although the term 'information society' is neither defined nor dealt with otherwise.

The models are presented briefly: *one*: is to maintain, somehow, the existing tradition of public service institutions; *two*: install a division between commercial and non-commercial segments, and *three*: to support based on values, rights and types of media production. All three models have their weaknesses as clearly stated, and no final recommendation is provided. But as this thesis is not a policy white paper, one could not expect that anyway.

It should be emphasised that the thesis contains a lot more space time has allowed concentrating on, and that the more complex and insightful discussions contained in the work has not been given full credit. Despite the critical remarks it should be stated that the thesis has a high academic standard and successfully pursues its goals.

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