

The power of political commentators in the age of social media

Dissertation for the degree of MPhil, Master of Philosophy
Department of Sociology

Tellef S. Raabe, University of Cambridge, 11 June 2018

Some details on digital readership statistics have been omitted from this public version due to confidentiality issues. Please contact tsr33@cam.ac.uk with any query.

Word count: 19.220

© Tellef Solbakk Raabe 2018



Acknowledgements

I wish to express my heartfelt gratitude to everyone that has contributed to this research: my supervisor, Dr Ella McPherson, for stimulating discussions; Professor Jan Fredrik Hovden (University of Bergen) for access to survey data; Dr Knut Olav Åmås (Fritt Ord) for conversations and support; Professor Hallvard Moe (UiB) and Associate Professor Jonas Ohlsson (Nordicom) for access to audience data; Eirik Winsnes (Schibsted) and Karoline Fossland (Schibsted) for access to readership statistics; Olav Hjertaker (Storyboard) for access to social media statistics; Aisha Lovise Maud Bornø for proofreading, and for her endless patience with my sociological ramblings. Thank you as well to the political editors who agreed to be interviewed for this study: Trine Eilertsen (*Aftenposten*), Hanne Skartveit (VG), Marie Simonsen (*Dagbladet*), Kjetil Alstadheim (*Dagens Næringsliv*), and Dr Frøy Gudbrandsen (*Bergens Tidende*). All the commentators and politicians who generously granted me both access and time must also be thanked. I am also grateful for being granted the Aker scholarship, without which I would not have been able to realise my academic ambitions. The Michael Width Endresens scholarship must also be thanked properly. Finally, warm thoughts are sent to Wolfson College, the sociology MPhil cohort, the Aker Scholars, and all the other friends I have made along the way.

I also wish to thank the phenomenal people that have helped me towards being granted the opportunity to undertake this MPhil at the University of Cambridge: my wife, Anna Eitrem, because nothing matters without her; my mentor, Bjørn Blindheim (Aker scholarship), because he believed in me; my previous supervisor, Professor Lars Nyre (UiB), for his scholarly critique; Rector Dag Rune Olsen (UiB), for his encouragement; Professor Jostein Gripsrud (UiB), for his interest; Dr Torgeir Nærland (UiB), for introducing me to media studies; Professor Atle Møen (UiB), for the introduction to sociology; Liv Skotheim (*Bergens Tidende*), for granting me experience within journalism; my family – you come first. Lastly, thank you for shaping me into the person I am today: United World College of the Atlantic, Stoff magasin, and the Bergen Student Society.

Abstract

This dissertation analyses the power and democratic function of political commentators writing for legacy newspapers in contemporary Norway. Although such commentators are highly visible in the public debate, this study finds that their overall readership has decreased significantly in the last decade. Commentators increasingly form and inform an elite group of writers and readers. Whilst the limited scholarly literature is predominantly critical of commentators, this study argues that the increasing fragmentation of the public sphere calls for reappraisal. Commentators, benefiting from a privileged access to elite political sources, are in a position where they may inform the electorate by interpreting, analysing, and explaining complex political processes. To fulfil this remit and thus live up to their democratic function, legacy newspapers must strive to meet new demands of accessibility and representation. By employing a mixed methods research design, this dissertation analyses Norway's fraught media landscape through the frameworks provided by Bourdieu, Habermas, Anderson and Sunstein, with the aim to analyse commentators in a new context – the age of social media.

Table of contents

Acknowledgements	p. 2
Abstract	p. 3
Table of contents	p. 4
Introduction	p. 5
Normative framework and analytical approach	p. 7
<i>Literature review and background</i>	p. 7
<i>Theoretical framework</i>	p. 17
<i>Analytical approach</i>	p. 21
Methodology	p. 28
<i>Methodological tools</i>	p. 28
<i>Measures of ensuring reliability and validity</i>	p. 34
<i>Ethical considerations</i>	p. 35
<i>Project limitations</i>	p. 35
Analysis	p. 37
<i>Statistical findings on readership</i>	p. 37
<i>Audience demographic</i>	p. 42
<i>Celebrification and hierarchies</i>	p. 45
<i>Democratic function</i>	p. 49
<i>Power</i>	p. 52
Conclusion	p. 57
Literature	p. 60
<i>Online resources</i>	p. 67

Introduction

Norwegian political commentators constitute a political priesthood, which for decades have been attributed the power to influence and lead public opinion. This small but prestigious group, which in this study is understood as the full-time editorial staff of Norway's national newspapers, write opinionated op-eds and editorials that analyses politics, policies, and scandals – distributed digitally or in print. While the journalistic genre of political commentary has attracted a great deal of attention in the Scandinavian public debate, Bengtsson (2015) and Rogstad (2015) suggest that the scholarly literature is still in a nascent phase.

Although political commentators have always enjoyed status, influence, and fame, there is reason to believe that their democratic function, and power, has changed in the last decade. The newspapers they write for are increasingly focused on building the celebrity and profile of their individual commentators, and thus resolutely promote them in advertisements, the physical front pages, and their digital counterpart. Commentators have become the flagships of their newspapers. Indeed, commentators increasingly feature in other media, analysing political events on television and radio. Most commentators, especially political editors, have also built a strong following across social media platforms. This is for good reason, as this study finds that the readership of most mainstream commentary content has decreased significantly in the last decade due to plummeting print circulation and the introduction of 'paywalls' that exclude non-subscribing audiences. Moreover, the reading of political commentary is increasingly a class marker – these are written for, and read by, liberal and liberal-conservative elites. Simultaneously, new alt-right news outlets that provide free political commentary online are rapidly expanding. The digitalisation of the media industry and rise of populist movements call for a critical reassessment of the scholarly literature on the power and democratic function of political commentators.

My theoretical framework leans heavily on Bourdieusian field theory in order to analyse how commentators exercise influence and power. Anderson's notion of imagined communities (1983), Habermas' ideals of the public sphere (1963), and Sunstein's work on democracy and social media (2017) are critically assessed to reevaluate commentators' democratic function. Although the empirical case study of Norway is unlikely to be generalisable to countries outside Scandinavia, in view of

these countries' distinctive media culture and political systems, the research attempts to improve existing theory by examining commentators from a different perspective than that which is predominant. The limited and existing literature was advanced without considering online alt-right commentary or new distribution barriers. This constitutes a new media environment, which Sunstein (2017) terms 'the age of social media'.

The methodological approach is a tripartite, mixed methods research design. It comprises a descriptive analysis of detailed readership statistics and audience surveys, as well as semi-structured in-depth interviews with nine elite politicians, five political editors, and six renowned commentators. The dissertation aims to answer the following questions:

RQ1: What is the present democratic function of Norwegian political commentators?

RQ2: How large is the readership of these commentators, and which demographic characteristics can be attributed to this audience?

RQ3: What is the power of political commentators, and has this power changed in the last decade?

The newspapers under scrutiny are Norway's five largest dailies by circulation: *Aftenposten*, *VG*, *Dagbladet*, *Dagens Næringsliv*, and *Bergens Tidende*, arguably the most important Norwegian 'legacy' newspapers. These newspapers can be broadly defined as liberal-conservative, albeit in the Norwegian political context (Knapskog 2009). Norway is a small, wealthy, consensus-oriented and homogenous country in which the Conservative party is significantly more liberal than its British counterpart (Røe Isaksen and Syse 2011). Although liberal-conservative, the newspapers in question can be compared to news outlets such as *The Guardian* or *The Washington Post*. They are anti-populist promoters of liberal ideals, and their democratic journalistic norms, embedded in the Code of Ethics of the Norwegian Press (2015), are more or less in line with the norms of the literature, as defined by Thompson (2012).

This dissertation demonstrates that Norwegian national newspaper commentators may be characterised as an elite group consisting of liberal-conservative, urban, highly educated, middle-aged, white, and ethnically Norwegian individuals with high accumulations of cultural and social capital. Although gender

balance is achieved, the homogenous nature of the group implies that minority views are excluded. In large, they propagate the perspectives of the liberal elites, who are also their audience. Still, Norwegian mainstream media commentators have an important democratic function: they inform the electorate by interpreting, analysing, and explaining complex political processes. However, they are currently not able to fulfil this promise due to the altered nature of news distribution. The recent rise of online alt-right news outlets, the spread of fake news, the fragmentation of the public sphere, and the intensified information divide increases the importance of high-quality commentary written by professionals with privileged access to political sources. Although commentators cannot be acclaimed as ideal proponents of an informed and inclusive public sphere, they form a corrective to racism, androcentrism, and right-wing populism in Norway.

Normative framework and analytical approach

Literature review and background

A plethora of institutions and individuals influence public discourse. Political parties, private corporations, interest groups, think tanks, the academy, journalists, and lobbyists are only a handful of examples. Yet another faction has come to posit an increasingly prominent position in public discussions of political affairs – namely the commentariat – consisting of political experts and news commentators (see e.g. Nimmo and Newsome 1997; Allern 2010; Bengtsson 2015). This group of individuals have also been described by names such as “columnists” (Fisher 1944), “moulders of opinion” (Bulman 1945), “opinion makers” (Rivers 1967), and “pundits” (Nimmo and Combs 1992), and these various terms are used loosely and interchangeably. I prefer the nomenclature ‘newspaper political commentators’, or simply ‘commentators’ where the context is given. This exclusive group shall be defined as the full-time editorial staff that are permanent contributors of opinionated and analytical political content to their respective newspapers, such as editorials and op-eds. The definition thus includes political editors, who write commentary in addition to managing a group of commentators, but exclude journalists that infrequently write opinionated content, as well as cultural critics, external columnists, independent bloggers, public intellectuals, social media influencers, and broadcast media commentators. The analytical scope of this dissertation is Norwegian national

political commentators of legacy newspapers with a daily print edition, 'the elite of the journalistic field', and not local and regional commentators who are primarily influential in their confined geographies (Mathisen and Morlandstø 2014). Those defined as national newspaper commentators constitute a very small group of no more than fifty individuals. Thirty of these write for the aforementioned five largest newspapers, eleven of whom have been interviewed for this study.

The literature consistently understands commentators as powerful influencers. They are considered to have significant agenda-setting power (McCombs and Shaw 1972), as well as framing power (Tewksbury and Scheufele 2009). They are also said to influence the outcome of political scandals (Thompson 2010). Rogstad (2014; 2015) argues that Norwegian commentators have become "increasingly powerful in recent years", and further posits that "there is little to indicate that commentators' powerful position has weakened – for now" (translation author's own). This supposed rise of power has been described as a means to counter the professionalisation of political communication through opinionated critique (Blumler 1997:399), and as a result of a more general journalistic turn towards an "interpretive style" (Hopmann and Strömback 2010). However, there is but one recent empirical study dealing specifically with the power of national Scandinavian commentators (Nord, Enli and Stúr 2012). This is a case study of three Scandinavian political scandals where commentators are assumed to have played a crucial role. Their methodology is described as "qualitative text analysis", without elaborating what this entails (ibid.:88). As a corrective to this lack of specificity, this dissertation will therefore return to theorise the power of commentators in the theoretical framework-section.

Although the literature argues that commentators are powerful, perceptions of their democratic function vary. This can be illustrated by Nimmo and Combs' dichotomy "democracy or punditocracy" (1992:165). This debate of commentators being either pro-democracy or pro-power is as old as the modern political commentary genre itself, exemplified by the fierce debate between Walter Lippmann (1922) and John Dewey (1927) in the 1920s (Bro 2011:443). In a review of the Scandinavian literature on political commentators, Bengtsson (2015) summaries these contrasting views. On the one hand, Bengtsson (2015:15) argues, political commentators can be regarded as an elite class that has taken possession of the public debate, reducing citizens to spectators. At the other end of the spectrum, political commentators invite their readers to reflect and be critical (ibid.).

Commentators can thus be key figures in constituting civic engagement. However, Bengtsson claims that very few political commentators in the present Scandinavian political debate embrace this role (ibid.). This critical interpretation of commentators dominates the literature and is prominent in its Scandinavian subset. Examples include Alterman (1993), who warned against the ‘punditocracy’. He argued that a class of journalists have attained a monopoly on political discussions without being formally responsible to anyone other than themselves, except their editors. Similarly, McNair (2000:79) argued that commentators have become “too powerful”, and that they are “usurping the democratically mandated authority” of politicians with their own self-appointed authority. Also Vatnøy (2010:31) criticised commentators for being partial under a cover of impartiality, and for overemphasising the ‘political game’ – politicians’ assumed cynical strategies – while neglecting political issues. These views are shared by Cappella and Hall Jamieson (1997), Kock (2011), Bengtsson (2015), and were famously supported by the rather unusual partnership of Norwegian elite politicians Audun Lysbakken (now leader of the Socialist Left party) and Torbjørn Røe Isaksen (now minister of trade and industry for the Conservative party) in their renowned article *The dictatorship of the punditocracy* (2008).

More generally, there is much literature in support of the view that the mainstream media is propagating the beliefs and opinions of the elite, contrary to journalistic norms. Media organisations are ‘manufacturing consent’ (Herman and Chomsky 1988), and “perpetuates the status quo” (McChesney 1999:3). These views have been explored in detail by scholars such as Schlesinger (1978), Tuchman (1978), and Gans (1979) in their now-classic newsroom ethnographies. The main conclusion to be drawn from these studies is that although journalists – and supposedly commentators – aspire to be independent and critical, strict professional norms nevertheless lead them to reproduce elite perspectives. By overemphasising the credibility of their sources, minority views are underrepresented. This phenomenon was conceptualised by Gandy (1982:8) as “information subsidies” and has been applied to modern journalistic contexts by scholars such as McPherson (2016). This study confirms that commentators predominantly use elite politicians and legitimised experts as sources for their writings. Moreover, Mathisen and Morlandstø (2014:101) argue that national commentators “represent the views of the capital Oslo and operate as a ‘wolf pack’

[write about the same topics]” (translation author’s own). Accordingly, there are many voices – such as those of ethnic and religious minorities, or rural representatives – that are not heard. Norwegian national commentators largely ignore regional politics and political undercurrents and might better be described as ‘parliamentary commentators’ rather than ‘political commentators’.

Another common criticism of the journalistic field is diversity and representation amongst journalists. This criticism is easily transposed to commentators, although such arguments have not yet been advanced in the Scandinavian literature. A study conducted by Thurman (2016) found that the British journalism industry is eighty-six per cent university-educated, and ninety-four per cent white. Similarly, Hovden and Esperås (2014) found that eighty-nine per cent of Norwegian journalists have attained at least a bachelor’s degree. The survey did not look at ethnicity or other forms of representation, yet the figures are likely to mirror Thurman’s. Within Norway’s five largest newspapers there are currently thirty full-time commentators: Seven in *Aftenposten*, seven in *VG*, seven in *Dagbladet*, five in *Dagens Næringsliv*, and four in *Bergens Tidende*. All of these commentators are white, and of Norwegian ethnicity. Seeing that seventeen per cent of the Norwegian population are either first- or second-generation immigrants (SSB 2018), the lack of diverse representation amongst commentators is problematic. That being said, gender representation amongst Norwegian journalists and commentators in the five largest newspapers is equal, with fifty-three per cent of both groups being female (Hovden and Esperås 2014), and three in five of the political editors are women. However, the average age of the commentators in question is forty-eight, and the youngest, Mathias Fischer (25), recently announced his resignation. Although some of the commentators come from rural backgrounds, they all live and work in Norway’s two largest cities, Oslo (East coast) and Bergen (West coast).

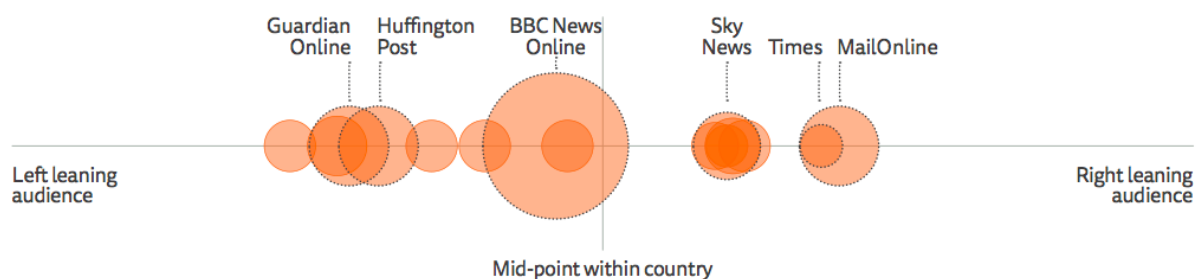
Yet another common criticism of the media industry, especially in Norway, is that journalists have a liberal (left-leaning) bias (Lichter, Rothman and Lichter 1986; VG 2018). For example, a recent study found that one in three of all Norwegian journalists vote for the Socialist Left Party or the Red Party, the two leftmost parties in Norway (Nordic Media Festival 2018). These parties collectively received only eight per cent of votes in the 2017 election (NRK 2017), indicating that journalists are significantly more ‘left-leaning’ than the general population. However, as the news editor of *Klassekampen*, Mímir Kristjánsson (2018) argues, this does not indicate

that journalists are “blood-red class warriors”. Rather, it confirms the existing assumption that journalists subscribe to liberal values. Also support for Liberal Party and the Green Party is relatively overrepresented amongst the journalistic class, while very few journalists vote for the Christian Democratic Party and the agrarian Centre Party (Nordic Media Festival 2018). Significantly, only three per cent of journalists vote for the Progress Party (ibid.) – the right-most political party in the Norwegian parliament – which attained fifteen per cent of votes in the 2017 election (NRK 2017). However, most political journalists and editors, and supposedly also commentators, vote for either the Conservative Party or the Liberal Party (Nordic Media Festival 2018). The conclusion to be drawn from this data is that a liberal hegemony exists in the Norwegian mainstream press – characterised by secularism, feminism, environmental concern, LGBTQ+ advocacy, and liberal views on asylum policies. Most political editors and commentators may be socially liberal but remain fiscally conservative.

From this, it is tenable to characterise political commentators of national legacy newspapers as white, of Norwegian ethnicity, urban, highly educated, middle-aged, anti-populist, and liberal-conservative. Although Norway’s population is small (5.3 million inhabitants as of 2018), relatively egalitarian, as well as somewhat ethnically, socio-economically, and demographically homogeneous (SSB 2018), it is problematic that commentators do not represent minority groups and views. Following Young (1961) and Eddo-Lodge (2018), I argue that an overly optimistic belief in the concept of meritocracy is an exercise in wilful ignorance. Although it is doubtful that the aforementioned news organisations view themselves as anything but progressive, they would plausibly benefit from focused efforts in promoting diversity. This would lead to a broader understanding of politics and potentially attract more readers. However, it is also crucial to note that there are no editors or commentators of national legacy newspapers that publicly express support for the right-wing Progress Party, the current third largest party in Norway (NRK 2017). The greatest divide between the Norwegian mainstream print media and its public is not its lack of ethnic diversity, but its suppression of right-wing populism. Recent research on Scandinavian audiences finds that low trust in the mainstream media is strongly associated with those having a political affiliation to the right, as well as a critical stand towards immigration (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, Levy and Kleis Nielsen 2017:83; Ohlsson 2018). Although the largest and commercially most

successful newspapers in Norway present as liberal-conservative, they are in fact representatives of the Norwegian liberal hegemony, contrary to British conservative newspapers. None of the Norwegian print newspapers are traditional tabloids, and no print newspaper express support of The Progress Party or other right-wing political currents. *VG* and *Dagbladet* are ‘prestigious tabloids’, in which gossip columns sit side-by-side with agenda-setting news of high quality (Dahl 2016). *Aftenposten* and *Bergens Tidende* are traditional broadsheets, while *Dagens Næringsliv* is a liberal business paper. The newspapers in question are better understood as similar to news outlets such as *The Guardian* or *The Washington Post*. Audience maps provided by the Newman and colleagues (2017:38) illustrates that the UK’s online audience is far more polarised than its Norwegian counterpart (Fig. 1).

AUDIENCE MAP FOR THE TOP ONLINE NEWS BRANDS – UK*



Q1F. Some people talk about ‘left’, ‘right’ and ‘centre’ to describe parties and politicians. With this in mind, where would you place yourself on the following scale? **Q5b.** Which of the following brands have you used to access news ONLINE in the last week? Please select all that apply. Base: Total sample: UK = 2112. Note: Respondents who answered don’t know to Q1F were excluded.
* Questions and methodology for this and subsequent audience maps the same using total sample in each country

AUDIENCE MAP FOR THE TOP ONLINE NEWS BRANDS – NORWAY

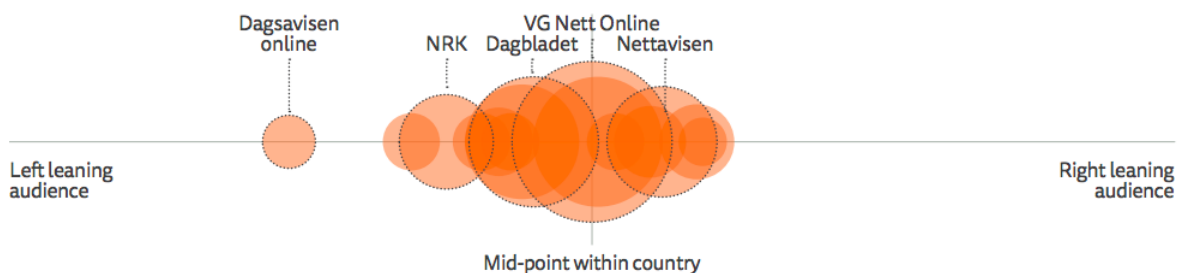


Figure 1 Online audience maps, UK and Norway (Newman et al. 2017:38).

This lack of polarisation amongst the audiences of Norwegian mainstream media may surprise someone accustomed to United Kingdom tabloids or the North-American press, but as noted by Hallin and Mancini (2004), the Scandinavian Democratic Corporatist media model is different from both the Mediterranean (Polarised Pluralist) model and the North Atlantic (Liberal) model. However, no Norwegian online alt-right news outlets were included in the recent Reuters study (Newman et al. 2017:83). It is therefore of crucial importance to assess the outreach of such new outlets. Data provided by Storyboard, a professional journalistic tool for tracking social media engagement, shows that four new online news sources that are strongly associated with The Progress Party and illegitimate right-wing political undercurrents have attracted tremendous social media engagement, defined as the sum of likes, shares, and comments across Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Pinterest and Google+ (Fig. 2*). Although this data does not equate readership, it provides a telling illustration of the visibility of alt-right content across social media.

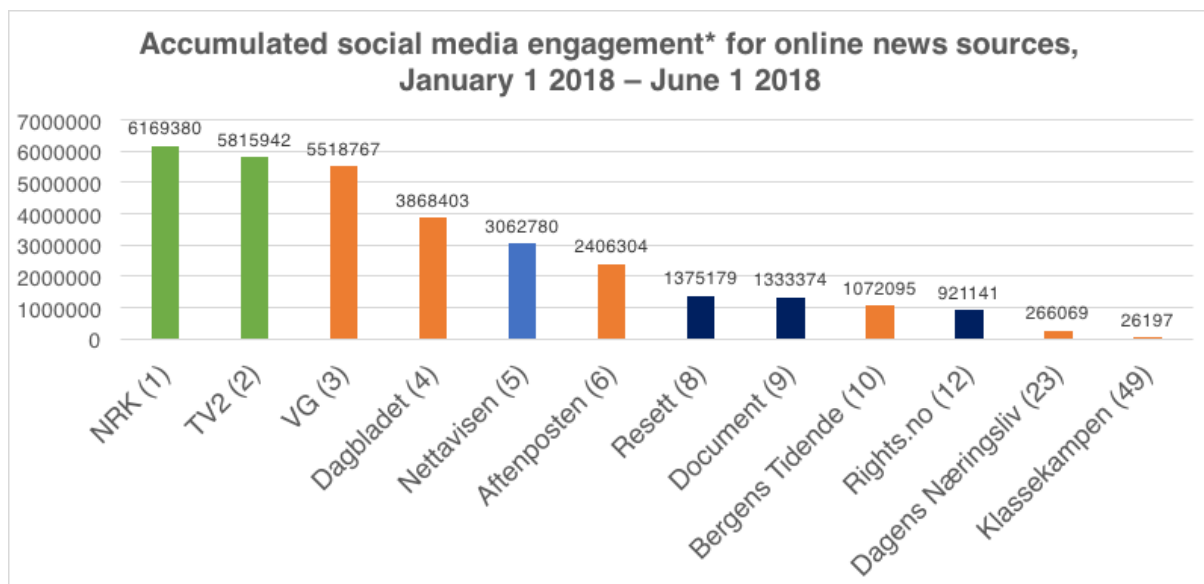


Figure 2 Social media engagement* of selected news outlets (based on Storyboard 2018).
 Legend: Green = Broadcast media; Orange = Mainstream print media; Blue = right-wing online media; Dark blue = Alt-right media.

The public broadcaster *NRK* and the commercial broadcaster *TV2* attract the most engagement across social media, while the prestigious tabloids *VG* and *Dagbladet* are placed third and fourth, respectively. *VG* provides free commentary, while *Dagbladet* recently implemented a hybrid model where some of their political content requires a subscription. *Aftenposten* also boasts a relatively prominent position in

social media, while *Bergens Tidende* and *Dagens Næringsliv* lag behind; placed as respectively the tenth and twenty-third most popular news sources across social media. However, *Klassekampen*, the political Left's national daily, recedes even further into the background of the social media landscape (Fig. 2). *Nettavisen*, on the other hand, has attained a premier position across social media platforms, in particular Facebook (Storyboard 2018). As an online-only ad-financed news outlet, *Nettavisen* is considered part of the mainstream media landscape – but it is the only 'legitimate' news source that explicitly supports The Progress Party. Storyboard statistics (2018) shows that five in ten of the most popular articles from *Nettavisen* in 2017 are critical towards immigration, or in favour of The Progress Party. While *Nettavisen*'s rising popularity and perceived trustworthiness is worth noting, the accelerating growth of online alt-right news sources is the premier agent in promoting right-wing populism in Norway. *Resett*, *Document* and *Rights (Human Rights Service)* are alt-right online news outlets mainly associated with reproof of Islam, immigration, socialism, feminism, and multiculturalism. These independent outlets, combined with *Nettavisen*, constitute a tremendous opposition to the social media presence of the five legacy newspapers of this study. Although these online-only right-wing outlets are dwarfed in terms of revenue and organisational size as compared to the legacy newspapers, they collectively attract more than a third of all social media engagement as compared to Norway's five largest newspapers (Fig. 3).

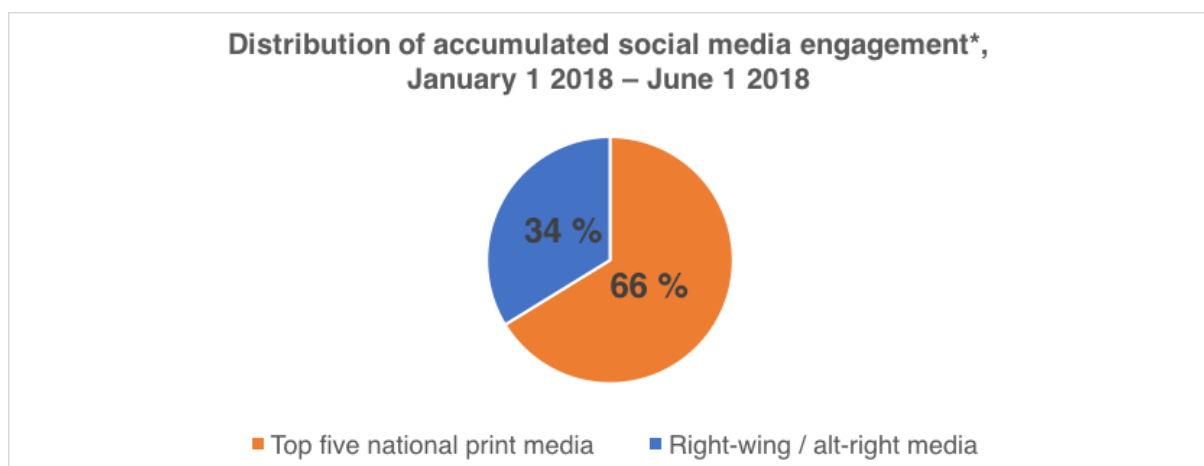


Figure 3 Distribution of engagement* (based on Storyboard 2018).

The preceding sections have demonstrated that it is of crucial importance to critique the role of political commentators, also in the Norwegian context. However, the

critical understanding of commentators in most of the Anglo-American and Scandinavian literature would benefit from a more nuanced approach. Previous critique was predominantly advanced within the context of ontological security (Giddens 1991:35), in which the mainstream media's authority was questioned on the basis of reproducing elite perspectives and failing to represent minority groups as well as left-leaning political movements. In the age of social media, the greatest underrepresentation of public opinion in the Norwegian mainstream media is right-wing populism (Nordic Media Festival 2018). It is therefore worth highlighting that the Norwegian mainstream media is widely recognised as 'well-functioning' (Schiffrin 2010; Cagé 2016; Dahl 2016; Newman et al. 2017), in line with Thompson's (2012) principle of pluralistic regulation. Fortifying this notion, Norway was rated 'the best' democratic country by The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index (2018) and is also ranked as number one in the World Press Freedom Index (RSF 2018). I therefore argue that the essential division of the Norwegian media landscape is presently one between the mainstream media and the online alt-right media. To this purpose the more positive aspects of commentary journalism should be assessed.

Although Bengtsson (2015:6-7) acknowledges that it is "common" to understand the political commentator as an "in principle impartial analyst" in Scandinavia, this is not apparent in her review. This position can, nevertheless, be identified in the writings of Scandinavian scholars such as Knapskog (2009), Bro (2011), Nord, Enli and Stúr (2012), and Rogstad (2015), who recognise positive features of commentary journalism. Allern (2010) argues that the role of political commentators has changed significantly in the past fifty years. In the 1960s, most political commentators in national and regional newspapers were leading party members. During the 1965 election campaign, their role as interpreters and agitators was on behalf of their party and its ideology (ibid.). Throughout the 1980s the party press system dissolved, and by the 1989-election most commentators of the press were formally independent (Dahl 2016). However, many maintained strong political and ideological ties (Allern 2010). This changed fundamentally throughout the 1990s and 2000s as no national legacy newspapers, and none of their commentators would swear allegiance to any one party (Norwegian Press Association 2015). Being perceived as politically independent was an overarching goal (Dahl 2016). This does not imply that commentators' do not have ideological and political convictions. However, elite commentators, the ones this study is concerned with, were elevated

to the role as “chief experts on the political horse race” throughout the 1990s and 2000s (Allern 2010).

Knapskog, Iversen and Larsen (2016) therefore argue that professional commentary is becoming increasingly important: it is “the main medium for well-informed opinions on public matters”, and “a medium for self-reflection and self-critique”, thus living up to “increased demands of accountability and transparency”. However, in the age of social media, everybody has the ability to be a potential commentator. While this has a democratic potential, its side effects present challenges, as described by Sunstein (2017) and Nagle (2017). Like the Anglo-American media landscape, the current Norwegian public debate is characterised by increasing fragmentation of information and increased prominence of alt-right conspiratory content (Fig. 2, p. 13). In an age where facts are seemingly optional, mainstream commentators strive towards meeting the professional and democratic journalistic norms. Such norms are embedded in The Code of Ethics of the Norwegian Press (2015) developed by The Norwegian Press Association, which all the legacy newspapers – but none of the alt-right publications (as of June 2018) – are members of. Moreover, The Reporters Sans Frontières index of press freedom (2018), where Norway ranks first, strongly indicates that Norwegian commentators in principle are free from political and commercial influence.

From the data collected by Hovden and Esperås (2014) in a large survey study of Norwegian journalists (N=791), one can isolate eighteen respondents that identify as ‘national commentators’. This data is in strong support of commentators’ aspiration to the professional and democratic journalistic norms of the literature. A significant majority – more than three quarters in all instances – report that journalists should ‘report things as they are’, monitor and scrutinise political leaders and businesses, be an adversary of the government, educate their audiences, and ‘promote tolerance and cultural diversity’. These sentiments are shared by my own journalistic interview subjects. Also the elite politicians of this study believe that professional commentators predominantly live up to these norms. Although most Norwegian national commentators write for liberal-conservative newspapers, they critique the present Conservative coalition. For example, all commentators of the five largest Norwegian newspapers argued that the justice minister Sylvi Listhaug of the Progress Party had to resign due to a polemic Facebook-post on immigration and terrorism in March 2018. The commentators’ normative aim was achieved on March

20 through a process Listhaug described as “a witch hunt” (Libell and Martyn-Hemphill 2018).

In the age of social media, most Norwegian mainstream commentators should be repositioned as critical and un-partisan experts that strive to adhere to strict journalistic standards. This does in no way imply that commentators are without bias, that they should be considered objective, or that they represent neither public consensus nor minority views. As demonstrated, professional norms such as source credibility and ‘text quality’ may interfere with their journalistic norms – their democratic function (McPherson 2016). The preceding findings do, however, illustrate that the commentators’ attempt to live up to the democratic journalistic norms of the literature – which also structures my normative framework. Following Nyre (2009:3), I argue that research-driven change in mass media is possible, and that there should be more of it in the future. A phenomenon such as political commentary should therefore be approached from both descriptive and evaluative angles. Through this empirical study, the first of its kind in Scandinavia, I find that commentators’ readership has decreased – and I will argue that this is problematic. The analysis chapter examines how this has happened. Why it is problematic can be understood through Habermas’ ideal of the public sphere (1962), Anderson’s notion of imagined communities (1982), as well as Sunstein’s work on democracy and social media (2017).

Theoretical framework

Habermas (1962:22-23) argued that newspapers played a crucial role in shaping public discourse in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in his influential book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962). The mass media became an important arena in which the public could discuss and identify societal problems, and through these discussions influence political action. Habermas argued that rational-critical debate in which everyone could freely participate, regardless of status, was a crucial aspect of the public sphere. Although this idealised vision of the public was “not realised in earnest”, it had, as an idea, “become institutionalized and thereby stated as an objective claim” (Habermas 1962:36). This naïve conception has been widely criticised (see e.g. Duelund 2010). Harding (1990) warns that the concepts of ‘rationality’, ‘scientific method’, and ‘truth’ in fact favour bourgeois and androcentric Westerners. Berlant (2008) more generally argues that the notion of a

'rational' public sphere can exclude important emotional aspects of public debate, and that politics in general may threaten so-called 'sentimental' values. Fraser (1990) refers to other feminist scholars such as Landes and Ryan when she persuasively argues that the bourgeois public sphere rests on "a number of significant exclusions", most notably discrimination against the working class, women, and other historically marginalised groups, such as people of colour and homosexuals (ibid.:59ff). This critique is essential and has in relation to representation amongst commentators been addressed in preceding sections. Commentators are not able to fully live up to the journalistic norms they value, due to their professional norms as well as their homogenous and elitist composition. Following Fraser (1990:61), commentators' 'objective' analyses form a type of hegemonic domination: the mainstream media are propagating the "majority ideology" to the public.

This is an uncomfortable proposition, but what if aspects of this hegemony – most notably multiculturalism, feminism, and tolerance – are positive in a liberal-democratic perspective? Fraser (1990:67) notes that repressed groups can form "subaltern counterpublics" to challenge the hegemony of the majority and argues that "the most striking example is the late-twentieth century U.S. feminist subaltern counterpublic". However, in present-day Norway, feminism is part of the hegemony (Tryggestad 2014), while 'the most striking example' of a subaltern counterpublic is that of the alt-right (Schultheis 2017; Nagle 2017). Broadly speaking, the Norwegian alt-right movement can be defined as right-wing populism rooted in anti-establishment ideals, resistance to (non-Western) immigration, criticism of Islam, and opposition of 'state-feminism' and 'Cultural-Marxism'.

In the age of social media, there is no shortage of so-called subaltern counterpublics: one might as well refer to these as 'echo chambers' (Sunstein 2017), or in more positive terms, 'intimate public spheres' (Berlant 1997). Discussions are abundant but fragmented and dispersed. Modern information technology makes it easy to raise one's voice, but it is still difficult to be heard. Gerhards and Schäfer (2009:19) found only minimal evidence to support the idea that the internet is a better communication space as compared to print media because less prominent voices end up being silenced by search engines' algorithms either way. Also Nyre (2009:3) warns that although communication has become more efficient, it has not by implication become more democratic. There is always a risk that innovations,

such as social media, may actually stall societal progress (ibid.). There is much literature to support the following argument: the internet has not offered an ideal public sphere (e.g. Sparks 2000). This is not to say that physical newspapers constitute the foundation of the public sphere – that would be a Luddite’s proposition. Rather, I argue that a crucial premise of an open and inclusive debate is information – and professional commentators, having the best sources within the political field – are in a position in which they can analyse and communicate complex political events to a broader public. When individuals are not in an informed position to decide and act autonomously, “democracy is not possible” (Meyer 2002:1). Moreover, I follow Anderson (1983:39) in that legacy newspapers – and accordingly commentators – are important bearers of our shared frame of reference, which is a crucial aspect of any democracy. The increased fragmentation of information and the decreasing prominence of newspaper commentators is a threat to deliberative democracy and the Norwegian nation state itself.

Anderson (1983:15) defines the nation as “an imagined political community”. He proposes that nationalism must be understood not by self-consciously held political ideologies, but with the large cultural systems that preceded it (ibid.:19ff). Anderson identifies two such relevant cultural systems: the religious community, and the dynastic realm (ibid.). Much like in many modern European democracies, the belief in a sovereign ruler which ties together the nation has deteriorated. Although Norway is formally a monarchy, the King has a sole ceremonial role, and he was recently stripped of his sacred status due to changes in Norway's Constitution. Moreover, shared religious convictions have vanished. Remarkably, most of the Norwegian population are secular. Only thirty-four per cent of the population report to “believe in God” (NTB 2018). Anderson (1983) persuasively argued that ‘today’, it is shared media experiences – a shared timeframe – that ties the modern nation state together. This development first flowered in Europe in the eighteenth century with the introduction of the novel and the newspaper. Anderson (1983:39) describes the newspaper as an ‘extreme form’ of the book, “a book sold on a colossal scale”, which creates an “extraordinary mass ceremony”. Newspaper readership serves as a substitute for the morning prayer because the reader knows that the same ritual is “being replicated by thousands (or millions) of others”, and it will be repeated at daily intervals throughout the year (ibid.:39). “What more vivid figure for the secular,

historically-clocked, imagined community can be envisioned?”, Anderson wrote in 1982 (*ibid.*). Transposing this, I argue that Norwegian mainstream newspapers are essential to sustain ‘the imagined community’ – and accordingly – deliberative democracy.

More than thirty years later, it is no longer so that “The newspaper reader observe exact replicas of his own paper being consumed by his subway [*sic*], barbershop, or residential neighbours” (Anderson 1983:39). Today, digital forms of journalism have grown to prominence, in Norway and elsewhere (Singer 2017:195). The digital nature of readership is not of essential importance: it is the overall individualisation of news that is challenging democracy (Sunstein 2017). Diminishing print circulation, decreasing TV and radio consumption, and new subscription models are all part of individuating our news consumption habits (Sakariassen, Hovden and Moe 2017). Åmås and colleagues (2017:9) find that mainstream media diversity – a plurality of independent newsrooms – is under threat. Although forms of news are increasingly accessible, Aalborg and colleagues (2013) find that we are moving towards increased news consumption gaps in Europe. It seems that a growing number of citizens ignore the information opportunities given to them (*ibid.*). The overall shift towards digital news consumption intensifies what Sunstein (2017:59ff) describes as the age of social media, which entails increasing political polarisation and fragmentation of information. As demonstrated, one can observe the decreasing visibility of centre-oriented mainstream news organisations and the growth of online right-wing outlets across social media in Norway (Fig. 2, p. 13). If anything, the present media climate demonstrates that there is an even greater need for distance, analysis, and expert commentary, which have become increasingly unavailable. Following Knapskog and colleagues (2016:165), “the commentary genre may be one of the keys to a renewed contract with increasingly demanding and fragmented audiences for professional journalism”. Although the era of close connections between Norwegian newspapers and political parties is over (Dahl 2016), this does not imply that newspapers should not take a stance in political issues. Rather, commentators should contribute to public debates and the formation of political ideas, and their aim is exactly to influence their audiences. Although commentators are not perfect promoters of an inclusive public sphere, they are, as of now, the best ‘shared voice’ that we have. In the Norwegian context, one may juxtapose the mainstream media with the alt-right media: ‘legacy newspapers’ versus online-

exclusive news outlets, facts versus fakery, liberal ideals versus conspiratory theories. It is a normative ideal that Norwegians' shared frame of reference is liberal – and liberal norms are propagated by the Norwegian mainstream press.

Analytical approach

I have thus far accounted for the role of political commentators in the Norwegian media landscape and argued that they have an important democratic function in contemporary society. To understand this function, it is appropriate to see commentators as belonging to a 'field'. This approach is known as 'field theory' and is strongly associated with the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1977; 1984). Bourdieu's own writings (1998; 2005) on journalistic production and audience reception have been widely criticised, for example by Hesmondhalgh (2006). It is nevertheless reasonable to see 'Bourdieuian field analysis of journalism' as something of a paradigm within journalism research (e.g. Champagne 1999, 2005; Couldry 2003; Hallin and Mancini 2004; Benson and Neveu 2005; Hovden 2008; Willig 2012). Bourdieu's vast body of works constitutes an abstract, normative, and versatile framework that can be applied to different areas of research, such as the field of journalism. Following Thompson (2010:3ff), the researcher's task is to understand the practice of the field in question, or in more technical terms, to reconstruct "the logic of the field". This 'field-approach' aims to overcome the inherent weaknesses of many, if not all, paradigms of the social sciences. Bourdieu (1984) attempted to reconcile the hitherto binarily-opposed perspectives of macro and micro: individual agency versus societal structures; constructivism versus structuralism. Bourdieu's field theory integrates these perspectives through the complex interplay of his main concepts, namely habitus, field, and capital (1992), as well as symbolic power (1991). These concepts must never be considered detached from one another and will, therefore, be defined in relation to my analysis in the following sections.

An individual's habitus is, in essence, a system of dispositions for intuitively acting, thinking and orienting themselves in the social world (Bourdieu 1984). It is a collection of mental habits and inclinations that are inscribed in our minds and bodies, according to the external life conditions of our childhood, which are subsequently modified by later experiences. This implies that one's habitus is "durable, but not eternal" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:133). Bourdieu maintained

that a person's habitus – everything from sociolect, table manners, to the way of walking – in part determines which social field one can, and perhaps more importantly wishes, to enter. Habitus is thus an important determinant of which individuals enter which field, and accordingly who enters professions such as 'kommentator' (Norwegian: writer of op-eds and editorials). Following this, habitus in part constitutes journalistic norms.

The journalistic field is one of numerous areas where actors – individuals, groups, or institutions – act and behave in a particular context where they share a set of beliefs. Fields are relatively autonomous from one another, although in practice most are subordinate to the larger fields of politics and the economy – collectively: 'the field of power' (Bourdieu 1984). Within each field, the position of each actor is a result of the interaction between (1) the specific rules of the field, (2) the agent's habitus, and (3) the types and quantities of 'capital' that these actors have at their disposal (Bourdieu 1984). A field is thus a kind of social microcosm with its own 'logic', that is, its own particular rules and structures, both formal and informal. Bourdieu (ibid.) argued that actors within each field fight an unequal battle of internal recognition, that is, recognition within the field. The battle is unequal as the actor's chance of 'success', such as rising in the ranks within a newspaper, is linked to their relative position and dispositions. These 'relative positions' are based on the accumulation of certain forms of assets – what Bourdieu calls 'capital' (Bourdieu 1986).

Bourdieu (ibid.) identified numerous forms of capital, with the most fundamental forms being economic, cultural, and social capital. Economic capital is immediately and directly convertible into monetary assets and may be institutionalised through structures such as property rights. Cultural capital can be defined as knowledge, skills and other cultural acquisitions, such as academic qualifications (ibid.). Social capital is made up of one's network, such as journalistic sources, and is predominantly used to bolster one's economic or cultural capital (ibid.). At this point in the dissertation, symbolic capital can be defined as a legitimated, recognised, and acknowledged form of capital that arises from the recognition of the other three types of capital (Bourdieu 1991). All forms of capital are convertible – and may in many cases be used as a form of currency within a field. Figure four illustrates the interplay of the various forms of capital, with the

caveat that the concepts ‘cultural capital’ and ‘symbolic capital’ are particularly complex (Bourdieu 1986).

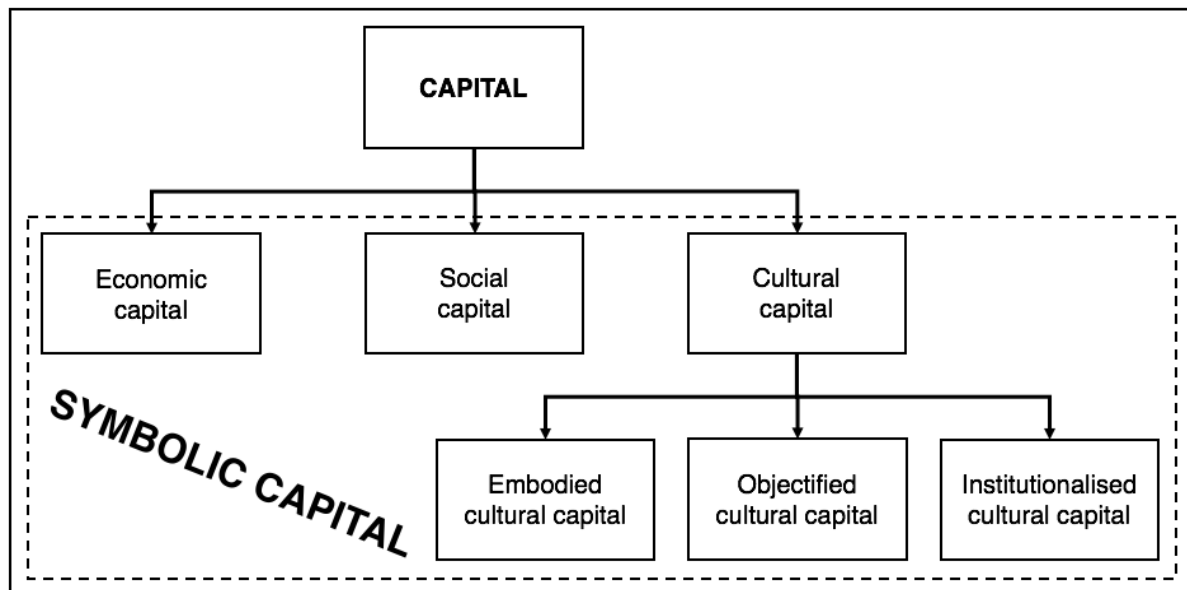


Figure 4 Bourdieu’s forms of capital (based on Bourdieu 1986).

It is clear, then, that a field is a structured space of social positions in which the positions of any individual or organisation is determined by the different kinds and quantities of capital it possesses (Thompson 1991:14). Accordingly, any action, or any form of ‘practice’ (Bourdieu 1977), is not just the product of capital and habitus alone. Rather, practice is the product of the relation between habitus and capital on the one hand, and the field – the social context – on the other. Formulated more elegantly:

$$(\text{habitus} \times \text{capital}) + \text{field} = \text{practice}$$

(based on Bourdieu 1984:101).

Collectively, these concepts, and the framework they form, constitute a powerful toolkit for analysing a variety of social phenomena, such as why some readers with a working-class background may feel alienated by the language employed by commentators with large accumulations of cultural capital, who therefore have a different habitus – manifested in a different vocabulary. This form of subconscious alienation is what Bourdieu (1992) terms ‘symbolic violence’. Social classes, and structures within fields more specifically, are thus not solely tied to economic capital.

As noted, every field is a space of power and ‘counterpower’, which can be both physical and symbolic. The struggle for ‘credibility’ or ‘trustworthiness’ within the field of journalism implies that actors defend their position whilst suppressing others. What makes a field so cohesive is that every actor involved shares assumptions regarding what, for instance, constitutes ‘high-quality journalism’. The existence of a field thus presupposes a shared ‘belief-system’. This field-specific ‘shared belief’ is what Bourdieu (2005:32) has named ‘nomos’¹. Nomos can, for example, determine what is considered newsworthiness – as this “flexible schemata” is subject to nomos (Thompson 1990:148). In Norway, nomos is formalised as the journalistic and professional norms embedded in the Norwegian Press Council’s code of ethics, which both the alt-right media and the mainstream media report to follow. However, the alt-right media refuses to be a member of the Norwegian Press Association, and accordingly the Norwegian Press Complaints Commission rejects to process public complaints regarding their writings. This entails that the alt-right media is suppressed by the mainstream media. However, while they are not considered legitimate news outlets by their field, they are consumed as such by a significant portion of the public. It is important to note that the ruling nomos of the Norwegian press (the journalistic and professional norms) are explicitly shared by the politicians of this study.

Being perceived as credible, trustworthy, and prestigious is a form of ‘symbolic capital’, which requires special attention. Because it has been referred to as “accumulated prestige or honour” (Thompson 1991:14), a common misconception is that this form of capital is similar to economic, cultural, and social capital. Symbolic capital should rather be interpreted as a legitimated and acknowledged form of capital that arises from the recognition of the other three types of capital. Examples of this would be professional titles such as political editor, or the prestige embodied in a strong brand name such as *Aftenposten*. According to Bourdieu (1996), symbolic capital is more important than economic capital when structuring power relations in fields of cultural production, such as journalism. When Bourdieu wrote that the field of cultural production is “the economic world reversed” (1993:45), he argued that accumulating economic capital is in tension with the accumulation of symbolic capital. Within the field of journalism, speculative alt-right content that is

¹ As opposed to ‘doxa’, which is taken-for-granted knowledge in a broader sense. See Bourdieu 1977:164.

read by thousands of people typically holds lower status than specialist political analyses read by an elite minority.

That said, a major weakness of Bourdieu's body of work, which becomes particularly pronounced in the age of social media, is his lack of understanding of journalistic production and reception (Hesmondhalgh 2006). For Bourdieu (1993), all fields of cultural production – including journalism – are situated within the wider fields of the economy, politics, and class relations. Bourdieu (1998; 2005) therefore argues that there are two opposing poles within the journalistic field: the autonomous, and the heteronomous. The heteronomous pole is influenced and dominated by forces external to the field, such as economic and political forces (ibid.). The autonomous pole is geared towards the specific symbolic capital unique to that field, such as 'journalistic excellence' (ibid.). Bourdieu (1993) argued that the more autonomous a field of cultural production becomes, the more it distances itself from economic principles. However, every news publication is to a certain degree dependent on its audience and is thus heteronomous by nature. In Bourdieu's (1993) line of argument, any large media organisation would be a slave of heteronomy, but within the context of Norwegian media organisations, the newspapers with the highest revenue are also considered the most trusted and prestigious publications by the public (Dahl 2016). This implies that the most heteronomous organisations, to a large degree, boast high "symbolic profit", contrary to Bourdieu's claim (1996:142). Moreover, Gans (1979) argues that autonomy does exist within news organisations but is unevenly distributed. Levels of autonomy reflect ranking in the newsroom, as Soloski's (1989) occupational ladder demonstrates. Autonomy is the prize that all journalists seek, and the highest level of autonomy rests with, for example, commentators and political editors (Schudson 2005). Their content, such as editorials, are considered crucial aspects of the newspaper's legacy. Commentators are 'allowed' to remove themselves from the heteronomous principle because they are considered the flagship of their newspaper.

Furthermore, Norwegian media organisations receive state subsidies, which, by Bourdieu's logic, would gear all their recipients towards heteronomy. However, this does not always come at the cost of autonomy, as Bourdieu suggests (2005:45). To the contrary, within the Norwegian context, several of the most authoritative voices in the journalistic field claim that in the present strained economic climate there is an increased significance of governmental subsidies, which are associated

with the promotion of media diversity (Åmås 2017). Although Bourdieu's concept of autonomy and heteronomy can explain aspects of journalism, it does not fully apply to the journalistic field. The so-called prestigious tabloids *VG* and *Dagbladet* are both autonomous and heteronomous.

Regardless of these shortcomings, the journalistic field does – similar to the political field – have the classic structure of a social field as envisioned by Bourdieu. The actors within the Norwegian journalistic field are organised according to the different quantities of capital which are at their disposal, and they adhere to an internal logic: 'the logic of the field' (Hovden 2008; Thompson 2010). Adapting and altering Thompson's (2010:5) framework, I argue that there are four key resources – forms of capital – in the Norwegian field of journalism: economic, human, social, and symbolic capital (Fig. 5). The specific symbolic capital of this field can be named journalistic capital. This is the sum of capital that collectively constitutes the prestige and status associated with newspapers, as well as individual journalists and commentators, which allows them to exert influence in the public sphere.

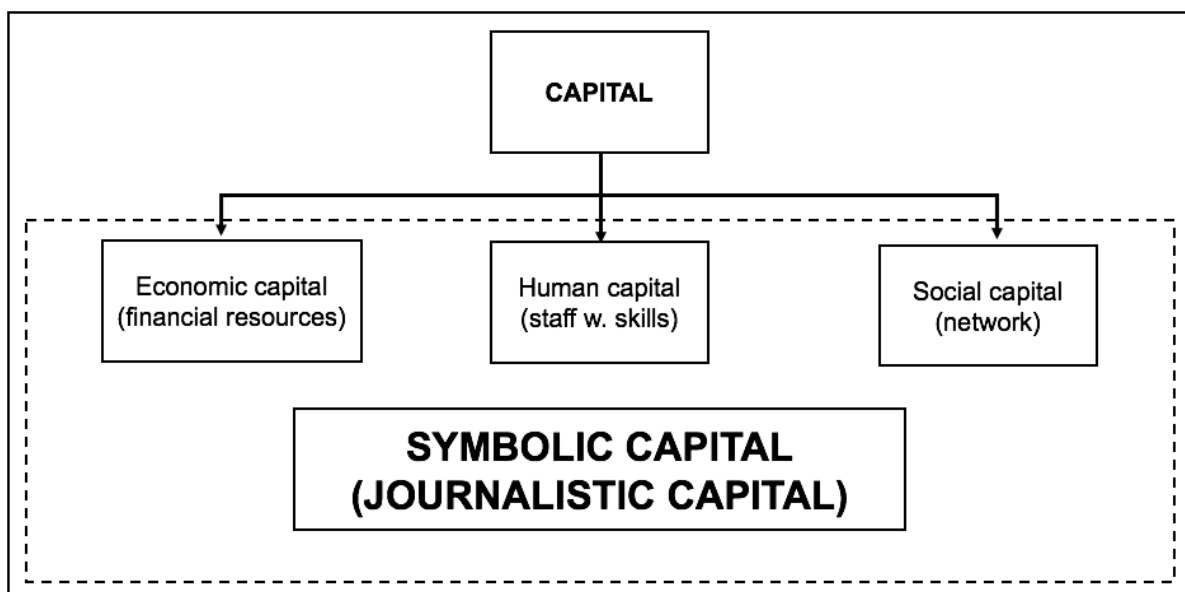


Figure 5 Forms of capital in the field of journalism in contemporary Norway (based on Bourdieu 1986; Thompson 2010).

As explained, the journalistic field is a site of struggle in which the actors fight over these forms of capital: economic capital (e.g. subscribers), human capital (e.g. commentators), and social capital (e.g. elite political sources). Collectively, these three forms of competition can ultimately be understood as a fight over journalistic

capital. The most prestigious positions within the journalistic field are occupied by the commentators and newspapers who have the highest accumulation of journalistic capital. The interactions between actors from each field must thus be understood in relation to these actors' relative positions in their respective field. The preceding sections present the view that Bourdieu's field theory holds unique promise for the subsequent analysis. That said, it must be clarified that the application of field theory in this context is primarily utilised to analyse the stratification of the field in question, without attempting to understand the reception of commentators' writings. However, this chapter has demonstrated that the terminology developed by Bourdieu's field theory is useful when describing commentators and their audiences.

When assessing the 'power' of Norwegian commentators, a precise understanding of this term is necessary. Although Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power is of primary importance, its applicability would benefit from further elucidation and support from other theories. I therefore propose that power in this specific context can be defined as the commentators' ability to set the agenda (McCombs and Shaw 1972), frame political issues (Tewksbury and Scheufele 2009), and accordingly influence their audience. This form of power is difficult to assess, in particular if one does not interview the audience of political commentary. However, readership and sharing practices of commentary content gives an indication of commentators' ability to influence their readers. Having outlined the theoretical foundation of this study, we must now turn to an elaboration of the methodology.

Methodology

The digital infrastructure of media production, dissemination, and consumption is becoming increasingly complex, and thus calls for the application of several research methods (Karlsson and Sjøvaag 2018). The methodological approach of the dissertation is therefore a tripartite mixed methods research design. First, quantitative data of print circulation, digital readership, and social media engagement was collected and analysed. Secondly, survey data on commentators and their audience as well as politicians' reported interest in political-analytical content was interpreted. Finally, twenty semi-structured in-depth interviews with elite politicians and commentators were conducted, transcribed, coded, and analysed. All these components – statistics, survey data, and interviews – are part of the study's research design (Creswell and Clark 2011). Following the pragmatist paradigm in that a research question should be of primary importance (Creswell and Clark 2011), the purpose of this study is to answer these clearly defined questions:

RQ1: What is the present democratic function of Norwegian political commentators?

RQ2: How large is the readership of these commentators, and which demographic characteristics can be attributed to this audience?

RQ3: What is the power of political commentators, and has this power changed in the last decade?

To answer these questions, I had to make important decisions with regards to my selection of newspapers and politicians. In order to critically examine the most significant agents of the mainstream media, the scope of the study is limited to the commentators of Norway's five largest daily newspapers, as measured by print circulation, digital readership, and social media following. These are *Aftenposten*, *VG*, *Dagbladet*, *Dagens Næringsliv*, and *Bergens Tidende*. These five organisations are arguably the most important Norwegian legacy newspapers and are said to employ the most influential commentators (Knapskog 2009; see Fig. 6).



Figure 6 A representative newsstand at a 7-Eleven in Oslo, March 2018. Dagens Næringsliv (DN) in the bottom right corner. Bergens Tidende is less widely circulated in Oslo.

With regards to political interview subjects, I decided to interview one elite representative from each of the nine political parties represented at Stortinget (Fig. 7). This selection does not suggest that the data provided by each individual is representative for their entire party. It is rather a pragmatic approach to ensure that perspectives across the political spectrum are considered.

International party name	Party leader	Ideology	Position	Support
Progress Party (Frp)	Siv Jensen (M. Finance)	Conservative liberalism	Right-wing	15,2%
Conservative Party (H)	Erna Solberg (PM)	Liberal conservatism	Centre-right	25,0%
Liberal Party (V)	Trine Skei Grande (M. Culture)	Social liberalism	Centre-right	4,4%
Christian Democratic Party (KrF)	Knut Arild Hareide	Social conservatism	Centre-right	4,2%
Centre Party (Sp)	Trygve Slagsvold Vedum	Agrarianism	Centre	10,3%
Green Party (MdG)	Rasmus Hansson	Green politics	Centre-left	3,2%
Labour Party (Ap)	Jonas Gahr Støre	Social democracy	Centre-left	27,4%
Socialist Left Party (SV)	Audun Lysbakken	Democratic socialism	Left-wing	6,0%
Red Party (R)	Bjørnar Moxnes	Socialism	Left-wing	2,4%

Figure 7 The political parties represented at Stortinget, support as of 2017 (NRK).
Blue = coalition, yellow = support/opposition, red = opposition.

A second component of my research design is the theoretical framework, which has already been accounted for in the preceding chapter.

Methodological tools

Concepts such as democratic function and power are not easily quantifiable, and an emphasis on qualitative methodology in this sociological enquiry is therefore unsurprising. However, it is difficult to evaluate commentators' influence without assessing their readership. This study aims to further the literature by showing a quantification of commentary readership in Norway. To my best knowledge, this has not previously been attempted in the literature of any region. I was also granted access to unique survey data which enabled me to better analyse commentators' audiences. I therefore composed a mixed methods design, defined as one that "includes at least one quantitative method (designed to collect numbers) and one qualitative method (designed to collect words), where neither type of method is inherently linked to any particular inquiry paradigm" (Greene et al. 1989, as cited by Creswell and Clark 2011). This definition differs slightly from Creswell and Clark's (2011) own, who maintain that the pragmatist paradigm is superior when conducting mixed methods research. Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003) linked pragmatism and mixed methods research by arguing that the research question should be of primary importance – more important than either the method or the philosophical paradigm that underlies it. The forced-choice dichotomy of postpositivism and constructivism, as well as the use of concepts such as 'truth' and 'reality', are all consequently abandoned (ibid.). Following Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003), a practical and applied research philosophy guided my methodology. However, I do acknowledge that an inquiry such as this study will always be a "moral, political and value-laden enterprise" (Denzin 2010). Following Nyre's notion of normative media research (2009), I recognise that my theoretical lenses are somewhat influenced by critical realism, as a combination of ontological realism and constructivist epistemology.

As noted by Creswell and Clark (2011), there are three challenges in using mixed methods. These are the question of time and resources, the question of skill, and the question of convincing others. The former challenges were overcome by collecting data at an early stage, and analysing this data using Stata and Excel; software I have previous experience with. The latter challenge refers to the fact that mixed methods is a relatively new methodology (ibid.), and some may object to the joint application of different research paradigms on philosophical grounds. The preceding sections have dealt with such criticism on the basis that the quantitative

data has a clearly defined practical significance: to assess the readership and audience of political commentary.

The research was constructed around three distinctive phases: First, I collected various quantifiable data on readership. One aspect was physical print circulation for all Norwegian newspapers, provided by Høst (2017) and Medienorge (2018). Another aspect was data on the digital readership of commentary content (editorials and op-eds) from *Aftenposten*, Norway's largest print newspaper. Access to this exclusive data was granted by Schibsted, the owner of *Aftenposten*, after signing a non-disclosure agreement (NDA). Schibsted also granted me access to *Aftenposten*'s Facebook page to investigate social media engagement, although it was not possible to restrict this data to only account for commentary content. I was unable to attain such precise statistics from other newspapers, although approximations of digital readership were provided by each of the four remaining political editors. Hence, I only had access to detailed readership statistics from one in five of Norway's largest newspapers, which are not believed to be generalisable. Nevertheless, this data provided a telling illustration of readership development for Norway's leading broadsheet, which boasts the highest brand value amongst Norwegian newspapers (Newman et al. 2017:82). The results of these data analyses were used as a crucial artefact in the qualitative interviews but also serves as important contextual information for my overarching analysis. Unfortunately, the NDA does not allow the precise readership statistics to be disclosed in this public version of the dissertation².

The second phase involved interpreting three sets of survey data collected by Professor Jan Fredrik Hovden (University of Bergen, MeCIn) and colleagues. Although parts of these sets have been used in peer-reviewed articles and official reports in the past five years, none of these publications emphasised commentators or commentary content. Hovden granted me access to the original material in order to investigate such aspects thoroughly. Detailed methodology for each of the respective studies is accessible through the original articles (citations follow). The first set of data was based on a 2010 survey (N=207, response rate 52%) of cultural orientation amongst the Norwegian political-administrative elite (Hovden and Knapskog 2013). Here, I was able to extract Norwegian politicians' reported interest

² The original dissertation included graphs and figures on digital readership of commentary content in *Aftenposten*. This public version includes non-compromising approximations.

in commentary content. The second set of data was based on a large survey of Norwegian journalists' demography and political orientation conducted in 2013 (Hovden and Esperås 2014). From this sample (N=791, response rate 36%), I was able to isolate eighteen individuals which identified as national commentators. From this, I could investigate various political and professional attitudes. Finally, I was granted access to the original sets of data from the large national media survey (N=2064, response rate 33%) conducted in November 2017, which explored the Norwegian public's usage and interest in the news media (Hovden 2018). These findings will be presented in the following chapter, but primarily serve as evidence to substantiate the qualitative findings.

The final and most important phase of the research was the qualitative investigation. By interviewing my subjects at their places of work, I not only gained insight into their points of view, but also direct access to the organisations and institutions under scrutiny. The subjective nature of the interviews is essential, seeing that the views of individuals constitute 'the logic of a field' (Thompson 2010:423). Accordingly, the partiality of the interview subjects can be relativised by assessing the context of the structure and dynamic of the field (ibid.). They are not "disembodied voices" that claim authority about their field, but rather voices from particular positions within it (ibid.). It should be noted that the respondents, most notably the commentators, frequently used terminology associated with sociology and media studies throughout the interviews. Concepts such as 'the public sphere', 'cultural capital', 'class', 'agenda-setting', 'field', and 'echo chambers', were often mentioned.

First, interview subjects from both the political field and the journalistic field were carefully selected. Seeing that political editors are both commentators and leaders of a division of commentators, it was sensible to strive towards interviewing these subjects. In the case of *Dagbladet*, the former political editor, Marie Simonsen, was chosen as chief representative. She is the longest-serving political editor in modern Norwegian press history and is recognised as the most notable commentator of *Dagbladet*. Six additional renowned commentators were selected to broaden the scope of the study. All of these journalistic respondents agreed to participate in the study. Thereafter, one representative from each of the nine political parties at Stortinget was interviewed. Interviewing elite politicians across the political spectrum as a second group of inquiry was crucial seeing that politicians are the

subject of the commentators' writings, and their reflections related to commentators' power are thus of great importance. It was the ambition of the study to interview the leader of each political party, but this was not achieved in all instances. Rather, the respondents fall into two categories: either political leadership (party leader, minister, parliamentary leader) or elite advisors (personal advisor of leader, state secretary, head of communication). The distribution between the two groups was more or less equal.

Secondly, two separate interview guides were developed: one for journalistic respondents, and one for political respondents. The primary themes – celebrification, social media, democratic function, interaction, and power – were identical for both groups, although questions were phrased differently. I also collected data on social media following for all respondents which were used as interview artefacts. A pilot interview was then conducted with Knut Olav Åmås, a former political editor of *Aftenposten* and former state secretary in the Ministry of Culture – thus having relevant experience from both the journalistic and the political field. After making slight alterations to the interview guides, I proceeded to conduct twenty semi-structured in-depth interviews with the political editors, commentators, and politicians in question. In this study, the interviews were used to access social knowledge that the commentators and politicians possessed. After an informal introduction, the respondents signed a form of consent. The interviews lasted from forty to seventy minutes and were recorded and transcribed. Through the thematic interview guide, I sought out memories and experiences that the interview subjects associated with particular networks and practices. The semi-structured form allowed flexibility in asking follow-up questions and moving back and forth between sections when it benefited the interview (Thompson 2010:423). Throughout the time I was conducting research I kept detailed field notes and frequently listened to the recorded interviews. This allowed me to notice themes that often emerged, as well as initiating preliminary analysis. The interviews provided access to the respondents' experiences and elucidated various situations related to power. Being personal accounts, the data produced should not be perceived as secondary or indirect sources of events but understood as original texts with their own distinct research history. The transcribed material, totalling more than 150.000 words, was thereafter coded according to predetermined primary and subordinate themes using the software Dedoose.

The preceding section has demonstrated that my role as researcher was to undertake a sociological exploration of commentators' power, including the interaction between the journalistic field and the political field, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. The choice of a mixed methods research design was made to contribute to what Geertz (1973) refers to as 'thick description' – describing both behaviour and context.

Measures of ensuring reliability and validity

Krumsvik (2014) argues that greater reliability can be placed on the data gathered in an interview over that gathered by a survey, as an experienced interviewer can make sure questions are comprehensible in direct conversations. Flexibility is both a strength and a weakness of the semi-structured interview, which implies that interviews may be conducted in somewhat different ways. Questions can be phrased differently, and certain topics may be given greater focus. By recording and transcribing the interviews accurately, such variations can be discovered and disclosed. The interviews in this study were conducted in Norwegian, and the transcriptions are thus incomprehensible for most international readers. The transcribed materials were therefore analysed for information relating to different themes such as celebrification, power, and democratic function. Selected quotes were translated by myself for purposes of transparency and accessibility. I have quoted interview subjects approximately verbatim, but following Thompson (2010:423), I have in certain instances taken the liberty of removing some of the idiosyncrasies of the spoken word. This was deemed appropriate given the lack of ethnolect and generally professionalised vocabulary of the interview subjects. Quotes and statements that represent the view of several interview subjects are at times generalised in the analysis (*ibid.*).

Validity refers to the credibility or believability of the research, and whether the study's conclusion is well-founded and corresponds to the real world (Kvale and Brinkmann 2015). To overcome preconceived ideas about working practices in this field, the interviews employed open-ended questions. Although only one representative from each political party was approached, questions were articulated with the intent to uncover the attitudes of the political leadership within each party, rather than individual opinions. Following Thompson (2010:423), the validity of my research does not require that every member of the fields in question accepts my

analysis as fair and accurate. However, my precautions and the data basis of analysis minimises the risk of bias.

A weakness of the research design is that the interviewees may describe themselves favourably, either the commentators as more 'powerful' or the elite politicians as less 'influenced' by commentators (Hackman and Wageman 2007). I attempted to mitigate this risk by cross-referencing the interviews, which is a form of data triangulation. It is nevertheless possible that the politicians concealed their true opinions, or that the journalistic respondents exaggerated their readership.

Ethical considerations

In accordance with the regulations of the University of Cambridge, the Ethical Approval and Risk Assessment Form for Sociological Research was filled out and approved. There were no significant hazards, although confidentiality was a concern. Anonymity was granted to the interview subjects, although it was considered appropriate to disclose the name of political editors in some instances. In the small number of cases where this occurs, it is done with their explicit consent. The political interview subjects are defined broadly as elite politicians, as to connect statements to each political party rather than the individual's position within the party (party leader, parliamentary leader, etc.). The interview subjects received a letter with information about the study prior to the interview and signed an informed consent form before the interviews commenced.

Project limitations

There are several conscious limitations introduced in order to achieve analytical focus. One such limitation is that the study focuses on Norwegian national newspaper commentators, a small group of approximately fifty individuals. It would be interesting to include broadcast commentators and external columnists in the study, but this lies beyond the scope of the research questions. Moreover, it would be interesting to investigate other metrics of commentator celebrification, such as the number of TV and radio appearances, as well as social media activity. This was considered infeasible due to the project's timescale but should be considered as an avenue for future research. The generalisability of the project would be greater if more interviews were executed, especially with a wider range of elite politicians. However, the selection of interview subjects was attuned to the research questions.

A common issue with qualitative research projects is to assume easier access to a given field than what is realistic. However, my background as a journalist in Bergens Tidende, as well as previous research experience on leadership in the Norwegian media industry (Raabe, Gjerding and Kopperstad 2017), granted me access to both data and interview subjects in the journalistic field. A letter of recommendation from Knut Olav Åmås, the director of Fritt Ord, helped me gain access to the political leadership of each of the nine political parties.

Analysis

Statistical findings on readership

It is difficult to evaluate the influence and democratic function of Norwegian national commentators without investigating their readership. However, a review of the literature shows that this is a surprising oversight. Although I was granted access to exclusive primary data, calculating overall readership is a complex task. Print circulation is not an accurate measurement, seeing as some copies may be thrown away unread, some briefly skimmed, while others may be read by several people in an office or café. Moreover, digital ‘clicks’ do not equate attentive readership, as many discontinue reading after the first couple of paragraphs. Surveys are also not an ideal measurement, as respondents may report being more avid readers of political-analytical content than what is the case. Social desirability bias, a well-known psychological concept (Edwards 1953), is also likely to influence experimental designs in which researchers monitor the readership of their subjects. With these limitations in mind, the following section will present original and predominantly unpublished statistics of readership.

Physical readership is dwindling in all Western markets (Newman et al. 2017), including Norway (Fig. 8). More than half of all physical newspaper editions have been discontinued since the 1990s. Simultaneously the Norwegian population has grown by nearly twenty per cent (Thorsnæs 2018).

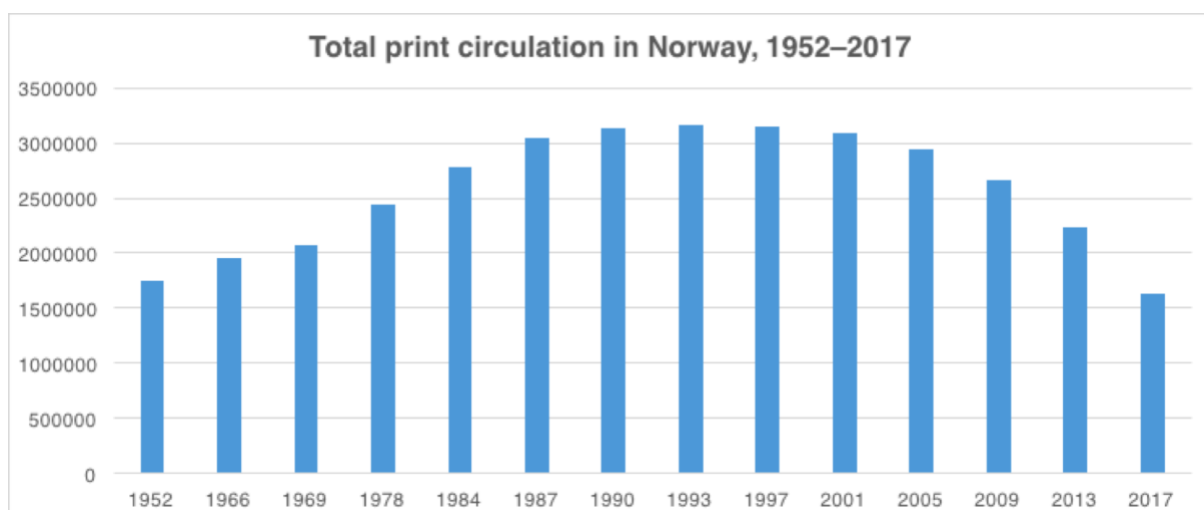


Figure 8 Based on data provided by Høst (2017) and Medienorge (2018).

Seeing that local and regional newspapers to a greater extent have maintained their print audiences (Wilberg 2018), this decline is even more pronounced for Norway's national dailies. The total print circulation of Norway's five largest legacy newspapers was well above one million copies in the period 1992 to 2002. *Dagens Næringsliv* has in the past two years refrained from reporting their print circulation (Johansen 2017), but if one assumes a modest decrease by for example fifteen per cent in 2016 and five per cent in 2017, lower than any of the four remaining newspapers, the number of daily editions for Norway's five largest newspapers have fallen short of 350.000 copies. Moreover, epapers (digital-only subscribers) have been included in the count of print circulation since 2014 (Medienorge 2018). This implies that the decrease of physical print circulation is even greater than the two-thirds reduction illustrated in the graph below.

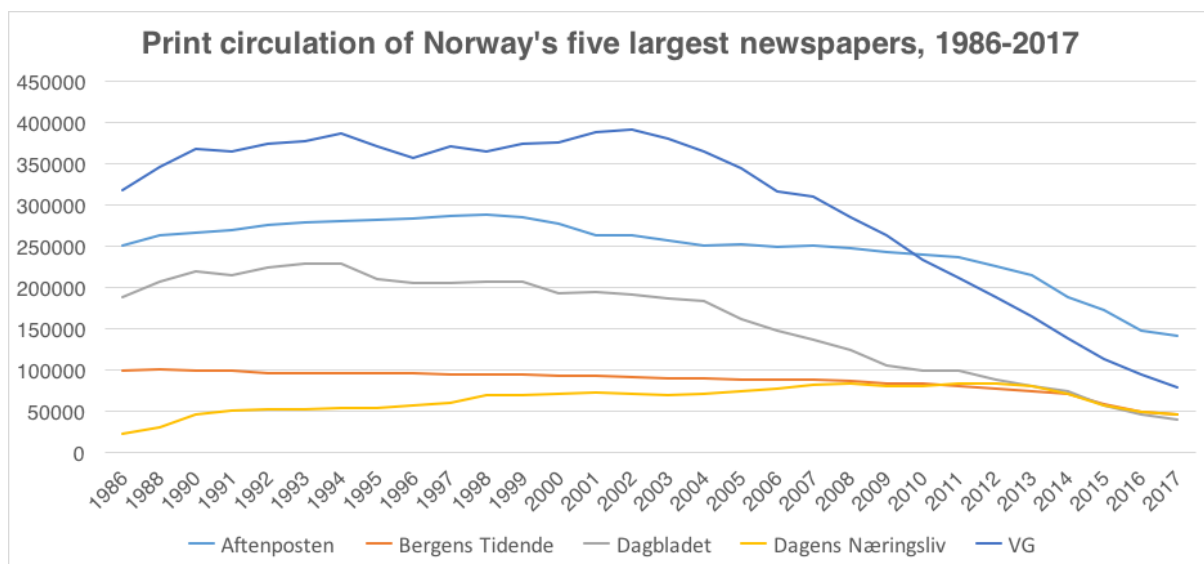


Figure 9 Based on data provided by Medienorge (2018).

Although print circulation cannot explain the actual readership of commentary content, it illustrates the exposure of such texts. Moreover, Cagé (2016:64-67) finds that physical newspapers on average are read by several people: the physical editions of *Le Monde* are on average read by six individuals, while the same figure is 6.5 for *The New York Times*. Furthermore, Cagé (ibid.) finds that readers devote more time to print copies than their digital counterparts. Digital audiences spend, on average, fewer than five minutes a day on a given news site, and less than one minute on each text. In contrast, physical readers spend twenty-five to thirty-five

minutes per day on their paper (ibid.). This indicates that physical readers would be more susceptible to commentary content. Accordingly, it is interesting to note that only four per cent of the Norwegian population report physical newspapers to be their most important source of news (Sakariassen et al. 2017:10).

Regardless of decreasing print circulation, one would assume that digital readership would be of great significance. However, the political commentary of all national print newspapers, with the important exception of VG, lies fully or partially beyond the paywall. VG's political editor explains that there are "no immediate plans to introduce payment models for commentary content", but at the same time notes that "it is something we discuss". The political editor of *Aftenposten*, on the other hand, argues that the trend of having commentary content behind the paywall is "appearing in full strength" across all Norwegian newsrooms. This prediction is in keeping with developments in *Dagbladet*, which in September 2018 introduced a 'hybrid' model in which one piece of commentary requires a subscription, while one to two texts are freely available every day. Simonsen of *Dagbladet* explains that they experimented with a 'full paywall' (subscribers only) in "a very brief period", and that there was "a certain willingness to pay for my op-eds", although also Simonsen obtained "far fewer clicks than when it was freely available". The other commentators of *Dagbladet* attracted "very few readers", and accordingly, this payment model was abandoned in favour of a free-for-all model – and now – a hybrid one.

It is evident that paywalls have a pronounced effect on the accessibility of political commentary. While Norwegians have the world's highest willingness to pay for digital news, remarkably more so than the British people, only fifteen per cent have an ongoing online news subscription (Fig. 10, p. 40). Amongst those who do not pay for online news, fifty-five per cent report that it is "highly unlikely" that they will do so in the future (Sakariassen et al. 2017). The most common explanation that these respondents provide is that they already have access to free online news (ibid.), which can refer to both the credible public broadcaster NRK, or the new alt-right outlets. The primary reason given by those who choose to subscribe is access to in-depth analyses and op-eds (ibid.).

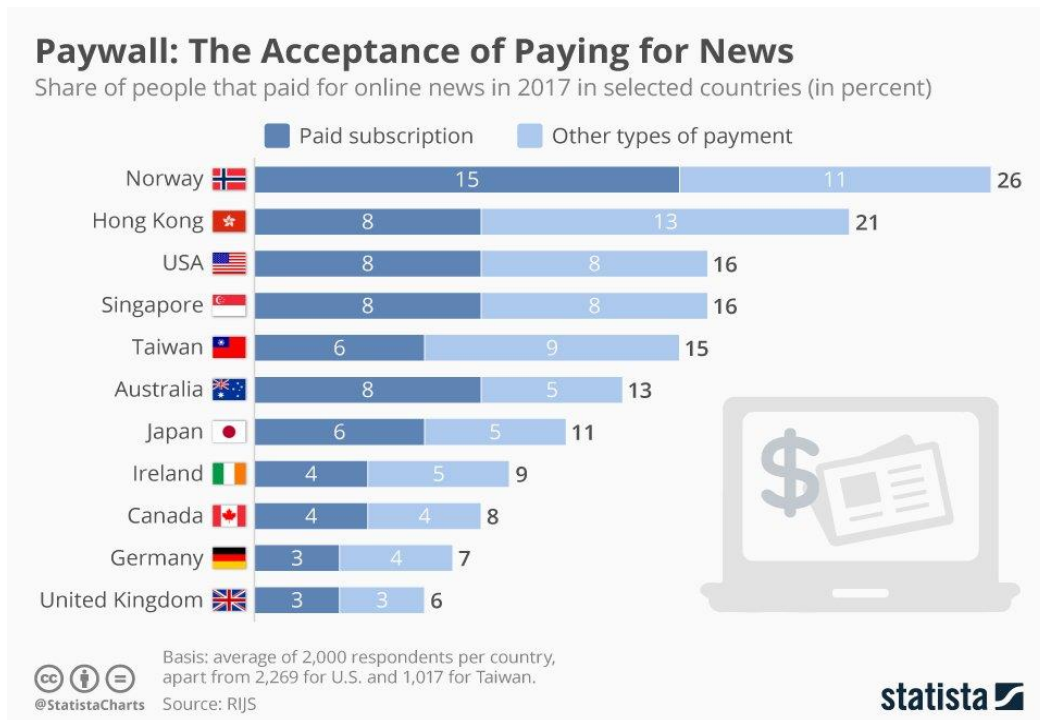


Figure 10 Willingness to pay for online news (Statista 2018, based on Newman et al. 2017)

Although attracting digital readers is still a priority for all newspapers, clicks are no longer used as the key performance indicator (KPI). One senior commentator says: “Previously, the most important factor was whether a text attracted attention, in terms of readership and clicks and so on, but now I’m much more conscious about whether the quality [of the text] is good enough”. The strategic goal of Norway’s five largest newspapers is now to convert readers into subscribers. However, this conversion very rarely manifests in the case of commentary content, according to the political editors of this study. Accordingly, commentators are read by few. I attained access to and analysed detailed digital readership statistics from Aftenposten, which I am not able to disclose in this version of the dissertation. However, I am able to state that very few comments attain more than twenty thousand clicks, and very few editorials get as many as five thousand clicks. The political editors of the remaining four newspapers report similar figures: *Dagbladet* claims that the average op-ed is read online by “ten to twenty thousand people”, *Bergens Tidende* from “two and a half to seventeen thousand”, and *Dagens Næringsliv* from “one to two thousand” times. In contrast, *VG*’s political editor claim that the average op-ed is read online from “five to a hundred thousand times”, and that they “reach a larger audience today than previously”. Although *VG* experienced the most dramatic decline of print circulation

in all of Norway (Fig. 9, p. 38), their homepage *VG.no* is the most popular online news destination in Norway, with 1.3 million unique visitors every day (Torvik 2017). Although access to detailed statistics has been unattainable, it appears that the case of *VG* is atypical (Barland 2015; Kvalheim 2016). Nevertheless, Cagé (2016:64) warns against “The Illusion of Vast Internet Audiences”: digital readers are not as attentive as their physical counterparts (Bueno 2016). More so, the four news organisations that did not provide access to detailed statistics may exaggerate their readership.

Nevertheless, commentary content is distributed across social media, most notably Facebook and Twitter, and this is a form of exposure (Chadwick 2013). Sakariassen and colleagues (2017) find that social media is considered a source of news by fifty-three per cent of the Norwegian population. However, all mainstream news organisations experience decreasing Facebook ‘reach’ – the measurement of how many individuals see posts, and Twitter has never generated significant traffic for Norwegian news outlets (Madrigal 2017; Newman et al. 2017:43; Sakariassen et al. 2017). Although the number of followers on *Aftenposten*’s Facebook page grew from approximately 250.000 to 400.000 over the course of two years (2016–2018), their reach dropped by nearly forty per cent. Regardless of a substantial growth in followers, fewer people see shared articles by news organisations on Facebook (Madrigal 2017). *VG*’s political editor reports that now, less than four per cent of their digital traffic stems from Facebook – which is said to be a “significant decrease”. This is pertinent, seeing that *VG* is the most prominent news outlet on social media amongst the five newspapers in question (Fig. 2, p. 13). The development of decreasing reach may be explained by the algorithmic changes introduced by Facebook in the summer of 2016 and in January 2018 (Zuckerberg 2018). Now, content from “friends and family”, that is, original content from private profiles, features more heavily on an individual’s Facebook newsfeed (ibid.). While content such as pictures from family holidays are spread freely, Facebook demands financial compensation for visibility from ‘pages’, such as the page of a newspaper. The attention of the general consumer and the news consumers is equally valuable for Facebook. Due to this increased competition over attention – what is described as ‘The Attention Economy’ (Bueno 2016) – the political editors and commentators interviewed for this study report that the importance of social media is decreasing. News organisations are naturally not willing to pay for digital visibility and readership

– they demand payment from consumers for the right to view their content – and my respondents acknowledge that content ‘behind the paywall’ will never go viral. Why waste valuable time spreading articles across social media if the profit in terms of readership is modest? More so, audiences across social media may not be the ones who are most willing to pay for news. Sakariassen and colleagues (2017:14) and Newman and colleagues (2017:43) find that social media news consumers are ‘disloyal’, meaning they read dispersed and free content from several news outlets. A fortiori, both available data and the editors themselves report that few readers access news through search engines, such as Google (Sakariassen et al. 2017:14). Accordingly, being a ‘primary destination’ and having a good placement on the ‘online front’ – the newspapers’ own webpage – is crucial for attracting digital readers to commentary content. If the mainstream media no longer emphasise social media due to its lack of profitability, this bolsters the position of free right-wing outlets.

From this, I postulate that political commentary from the five legacy newspapers in question have significantly less exposure today, as compared to one decade ago. In 2008, print circulation remained relatively high, and digital content was freely available to all. As the introduction of this chapter explained, it is not possible to assess readership accurately. However, a reasonable hypothesis is that also readership of such commentary content has decreased. The development of decreasing readership is to a certain extent acknowledged by the journalistic interview subjects of this study. *Aftenposten*’s political editor report that she is “conscious that our editorials are read by very few”. Who are these readers?

Audience demographic

From the national media survey (N=2064) conducted in November 2017, one finds that twenty-nine per cent of the respondents reported an interest in commentary from national newspapers (Hovden 2018). This entails that they merely ticked a box of “op-eds and editorials” amongst fourteen journalistic genres. Accordingly, this reported ‘interest’ in commentary content might not be an accurate representation of readership (Edwards 1953). ‘Interested’ respondents are unlikely to read commentary from multiple news outlets several times a week. Nevertheless, one can discern several differences amongst the ‘disinterested’ and the ‘interested’ groups. On average, the interested group were significantly older, with forty-eight per cent

being aged sixty or more, compared to thirty-six per cent of the disinterested belonging to the same age group. Moreover, the latter group was slightly less likely to have a university degree, particularly at a higher level. Fourteen per cent of the disinterested group had more than four years of higher education, while twenty per cent of the interested group reported the same. Gender differences among the disinterested group were small, while amongst the interested group, fifty-six per cent were men and forty-four per cent were women. The respondents were also asked which party they voted for in the 2017 election, and the results among the disinterested group were more or less representative of the election results (Fig. 7, p. 29). However, the group that reported an interest in political commentary were twice as likely to have voted for the Socialist Left Party or the Red Party, and half as likely to have voted for the Progress Party, as compared to the election results. The interested group did also have greater annual incomes, with fifty-seven per cent earning more than the Norwegian average of 400.000 NOK (\approx 37.000 GBP) and fifty-one per cent of the disinterested group earning the same. Thirty per cent of the interested group lives in greater Oslo, compared to twenty-three per cent of the disinterested group. The data provided by Hovden (2018) also shows that the interested group scored approximately three percentage points higher on an index of 'high' social, cultural, and economic capital. Broadly speaking, the survey data reveals that a quarter of the Norwegian population report an interest in political commentary, and that this group is more likely to be older, urban, educated, male, wealthy, and adhering to the liberal hegemony (i.e. not right-wing populism). Unsurprisingly, this latter group were also more eager news consumers overall.

These findings are supported by Jonas Ohlsson, the Director of Nordicom, who presented unpublished statistics on Swedish news consumption in a seminar at the University of Bergen on 13 April 2018. Ohlsson argues that newspaper subscriptions form a new class marker in Scandinavia. Based on logistic regression analysis, he found that the probability of a Swedish household subscribing to a newspaper in 2015 strongly correlated with social class. Upper white-collar households had a sixty-six per cent chance of subscribing, and blue-collar households a forty-four per cent chance. Different age groups are also disparate, with 20-29 year-olds having an eighteen per cent chance of subscribing to a newspaper in 2015, 30-49 year-olds having a thirty-two per cent chance, and 65-85 year-olds having an eighty-two per

cent chance. Ohlsson argues that this trend is a response to rising subscription prices: metropolitan newspapers have increased their market price by 250 per cent since the millennial turn – far higher than the inflation rate. Paying for news is thus strongly associated with high income or at the very least financial security. These recent findings are of great importance, seeing that a traditional feature of the Norwegian newspaper market has been ‘egalitarian readership’ with limited class-related differences (Dahl 2016).

Ohlsson (2018) further argued that media trust is a new form of divide in Sweden. Traditionally, left- and right-wing voters scored more or less equal in media trust. Today, trust in the media increasingly correlates with the party you support. Voters of the populist right-wing party Sweden Democrats reported the lowest trust in the media, with ninety per cent distrusting the Swedish mainstream media’s coverage of immigration. This supports the hypothesis that this audience is likely to report a disinterest in commentary content from liberal-conservative newspapers. Although the Sweden Democrats have not attained the same form of political legitimacy as the Norwegian Progress Party, it is its closest Swedish equivalent. According to Ohlsson, there are no mainstream media newspapers that support the policies of the Sweden Democrats, and similarly, there are no legacy newspapers that support The Progress Party in Norway. Political affiliation is therefore also a likely causation for the willingness to pay for news. As of now, there is no such data published in Norway. However, recent data from the United States might provide some insight: in the US, left-wing voters are almost three times as likely to pay for online news as are right-wing voters (Newman et al. 2017:35).

If only a quarter of the public report an interest in commentary content, what then about the political elite? This can be discerned from Hovden and Knapskog’s (2013) survey study of cultural orientation amongst Norwegian MPs, government, and governmental administration (N=207). Although the data is from 2010, it is interesting to note that seventy-three per cent of the respondents reported being ‘highly interested’ in commentary content, and twenty-six per cent being ‘somewhat interested’. Only one per cent of the political elite reported being ‘somewhat’ or ‘very’ disinterested in commentary content. This is in stark contrast to the seventy-one per cent of the public that reported their disinterest in such content.

The argument I would like to advance, and which I will further develop in the following sections, is that commentators form and inform an elite group of writers and

readers. They are, in large, writing for the elite – particularly the political elite – and it is probable that the stratification of interested and disinterested groups in the last decade has intensified due to declining print circulation, decreasing social media exposure of mainstream political commentary, and new digital subscription models. This information divide is reinforcing existing inequalities. However, the preceding section only took readership statistics into account. There is much evidence to support the notion that commentators are becoming increasingly visible in media outside their own organisation. “Their own organisation” includes the newspapers’ print edition, online webpage, email newsletters, and official profiles on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat (Chadwick 2013).

Celebrification and hierarchies

Commentators have for decades been considered political celebrities in Norway (Rogstad 2015). However, the nature of their fame has changed significantly in the past fifty years: they are now described as independent political experts – and have attained a “far more visible role” (Allern 2010). Although the dissolvment of the party press system explains part of this development, it is also perceived as a natural consequence of ‘celebrification’ (Driessens 2012). Celebrification – the transformation of individuals into celebrities – has intensified in the age of social media and can be separated into three interconnected processes in the case of commentators: 1) heightened personal focus within their organisation, 2) escalation of appearances in other media, and 3) increased personal exposure created by each individual commentator across social media.

First, all political editors report an increased focus on building the celebrity and profile of their individual commentators, following the international trend of newspapers such as *The Guardian*. Commentators feature on both print and digital front pages most days, with their full name and byline picture clearly visible. Occasionally, they also feature in promotions for their newspaper through advertisements such as full-page spreads and billboards. Such commercials highlight the ‘exclusivity’ of the commentators’ analyses – these are only available through subscribing to the particular newspaper. One senior commentator says: “It’s a fact that commentators have a stronger personal brand value today than twenty years ago. [...] this focus on building personal brands started carefully around the millennial turn and has since grown almost exponentially”. Several political editors

describe commentators as ‘the flagship of the newspaper’. This process of increased focus on the individual commentator is part of what Botsman (2016) describes as ‘individualisation of trust’: trust in brands and institutions is decreasing, while audiences are increasingly prone to trust identifiable individuals. As noted by the political editor of *Aftenposten*: “We know that the name of the commentator is increasingly important. The audience often look at the name of the author first”.

Secondly, commentators often participate in public debates, most notably in TV and radio programmes by the public broadcaster *NRK*, and the TV shows of the commercial broadcaster *TV2*. “To say yes to as much as possible is seen as being part of my job”, one commentator explains, while “being introverted is disqualifying”. All agree that the frequency of such appearances has increased significantly in recent years. Most commentators report participating in other media one to two times a week, while some appear as often as five times a week in certain high-activity periods. Very few of my journalistic respondents feature in other media less than every fortnight. This is perceived as mutually beneficial for both the newspapers and the broadcasters. The former attains valuable exposure for both their commentator (celebrification) and their newspaper (brand value), which bolsters the legitimacy of both actors (journalistic capital). The latter acquires specialist content without having to pay for it. Although both of Norway’s televised multi-media broadcasters employ political analysts, the commentators of this study experience that their contributions are valued by audiences and the editorial teams they interact with.

Thirdly, commentators have a strong presence on social media (Kalsnes 2016). The political editors Eilertsen (*Aftenposten*), Alstadheim (*Dagens Næringsliv*) and Skartveit (*VG*) all have more than thirty thousand followers on Twitter, which position them amongst the elite of the Norwegian ‘tweetocracy’ (Vatnøy 2016; 2017). Gudbrandsen (*Bergens Tidende*) has five thousand followers, while Simonsen (*Dagbladet*) boasts more than one hundred thousand. However, these senior commentators report that social media has become decreasingly important: they spend less time on promoting and discussing their writings, especially on Twitter. A younger commentator, on the other hand, reported that “being a commentator is much harder today than previously”. Less seasoned commentators experience that they have to utilise the opportunities offered by social media in order to reach their audience, which demands both time and energy outside regular office hours. Overall,

there are increased demands for exposure, as compared to two decades ago, in the 'print age'.

Politicians also experience that commentators have become more prominent in recent years, both in their own newspaper and in other media. These processes of celebrification are chiefly perceived as an 'enrichment of the public debate'. One left-wing politician explains that "commentators are able to draw longer raisonnements without being speculative", and they "don't have the same agenda as politicians" when participating in debates. Commentators are primarily perceived as 'honest' and 'knowledgeable' by the political interview subjects. Even if the readership of commentary content has decreased, processes of celebrification may strengthen the commentators' public position.

Nevertheless, as previously demonstrated, celebrification and status are not equally distributed within each newsroom. Although all commentators are attributed more prestige than the average journalist, they are still not perceived as being part of the upper section of the newsroom hierarchy (Soloski 1989). Each of the five newspapers employs one or two – and no more – senior commentators that have attained the same status as that of the political editors. Some of these, such as Simonsen (*Dagbladet*) and Stanghelle (*Aftenposten*) are previous political editors. These senior commentators, who are all older than forty years old, are significantly more exposed in other media, and have larger followings on social media. Through long journalistic careers they have attained a strong 'personal brand value', and accordingly they are not as concerned with promoting themselves. It is easier to turn down some of the numerous offers from broadcasters every week and expect that their content is being spread across social media regardless of their own actions. However, there are small differences between the elites of each organisation. The political editor of *Dagens Næringsliv* and *Aftenposten* are perceived as equally powerful (Åmås 2016:241ff). This notion may be illustrated through the application of Bourdieu's field theory. Inspired by Hovden (2011), I present a map that illustrates two overarching forms of stratification within the Norwegian journalistic field, similar to Bourdieu's famous maps of various fields, their actors, and distribution of cultural and economic capital therein. Whilst Bourdieu's work was based predominantly on correspondence analyses of relatively large sets of data, my map is based on analyses of qualitative research interviews and my own experience as a journalist – or to borrow a Bourdieusian term: my 'feel for the game'.

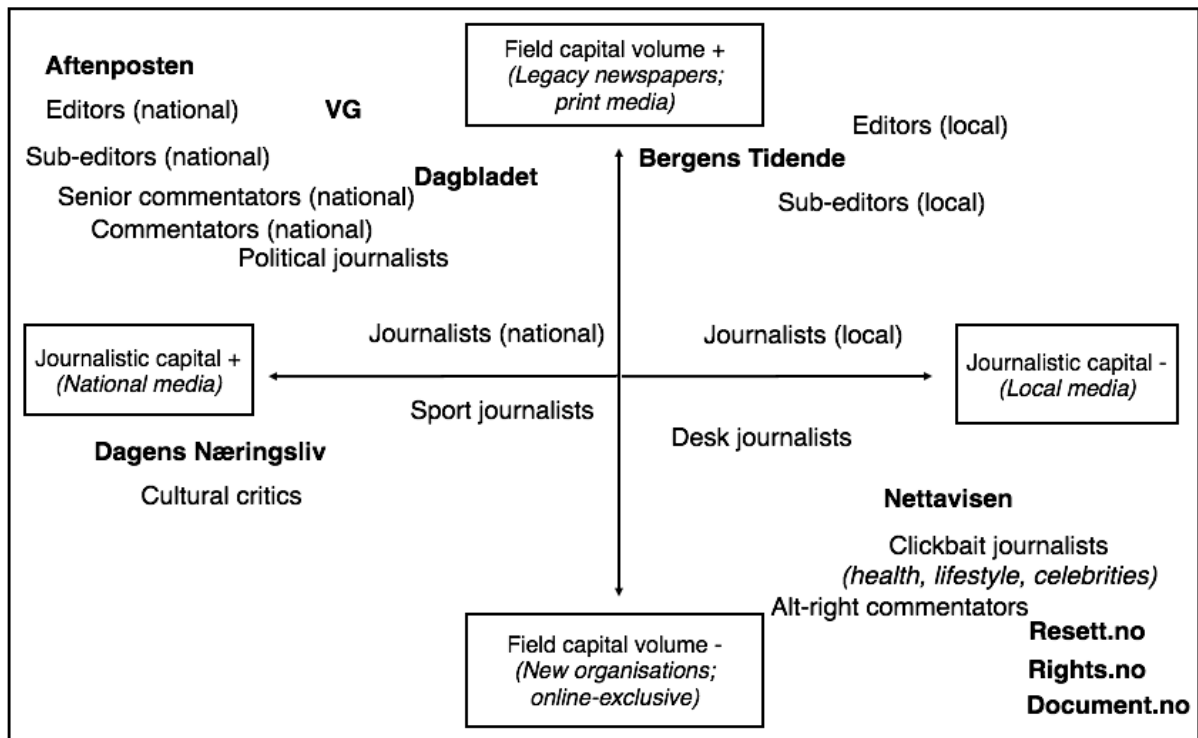


Figure 11 The field of journalism in contemporary Norway (inspired by Hovden 2011)

The first axis (top-bottom on the map) is that of field-specific capital, a sum of human, social and economic capital. This scale corresponds with both ‘legacy’ and publishing format: broadly speaking, the established print media versus online-exclusive publications. The second axis (left-right on the map) is that of journalistic (symbolic) capital, which corresponds with the division of national versus local publications. The top-left quadrant encompasses the largest national newspapers, political commentators, and editors: the elite. This quadrant is opposed to the sphere of local and regional newspapers (top-right), who have large volumes of human, social, and economic capital within their regionalised domain, but have smaller accumulations of journalistic capital, or ‘prestige’ and influence, nationally. By contrast, the bottom-left quadrant often includes younger journalists writing for smaller but prestigious newspapers such as *Dagens Næringsliv*. The bottom-right quadrant has the lowest levels of journalistic prestige and is where one finds journalists writing on topics that are farthest from the (Norwegian) professional and journalistic norms – topics such as celebrity news and alt-right content.

Following Bourdieu (1984), it is the struggles of the fields’ elites that determine the value of the different forms of capital in the field, and accordingly its

structure and dynamic. This implies that political editors and senior commentators have a privileged capacity to influence the fundamental belief-system of the journalistic field: its *nomos* (Bourdieu 2005:32). They are the ones with the agency to define who is considered a ‘good journalist’ and what is regarded as ‘good journalism’. Hence these same elites also mark the perimeters of the field by defining which actors and practices are legitimate, and which are heretical. This implies that less senior (and younger) commentators must adhere to the norms – the *nomos* – of the field to advance. Some young journalists with large followings across social media, such as Ingeborg Senneset, are occasionally allowed to write opinionated columns. However, Senneset has not been promoted to the role as commentator, perhaps due to a perceived lack of legitimacy in her writing about less prestigious topics such as mental health and vaccination.

Hovden’s (2011) research on the social backgrounds of Norwegian journalists empirically demonstrates that within this structured field, prestige and internal recognition are far from equally distributed. They vary with both journalists’ sociodemographic background and their social trajectory, that is, their career in a broad sense, including their education and non-journalistic jobs. This endows the actors with markedly unequal chances to accumulate capital in its various forms, and thereby become, for example, the bearer of a prestigious title such as ‘commentator’. This fortifies the notion of the journalistic elite being elitist.

Democratic function

The journalistic interview subjects’ view of democracy corresponds with the theoretical framework of this study. Conforming to the ideals encompassed by the inclusive public sphere (based on Habermas 1962; Fraser 1990), the political editor of VG posits that “our job is to maintain and foster the broad space in the ‘centre’ of the public sphere, where difficult issues can be discussed in an open manner”. Also following Anderson’s (1983) notion of the imagined community, Skartveit argues that “to uphold a shared public sphere is an important function” for their commentators: “we write our editorials for the common citizen”. However, she acknowledges that VG’s division of commentators “should be better at writing ‘softer’ op-eds”. Similarly, Simonsen of *Dagbladet* reports to place great value in readership: “we don’t solely write for the people working within Parliament”. Although these norms are shared by the remaining three newspapers in principle, important differences can be discerned

between the prestigious tabloids *VG* and *Dagbladet*, and the broadsheets *Aftenposten*, *Dagens Næringsliv*, and *Bergens Tidende*. As of August 2018, the former two newspapers provide free access to all their commentary content. Surprisingly, it is their ‘clickbait’ content that lies beyond the paywall; articles such as ‘Twenty signs your boss is a psychopath’ (Barland 2015; Kvalheim 2016). The latter three papers, like the remaining Norwegian national newspapers *Morgenbladet* (intellectual weekly), *Finansavisen* (finance daily), and *Klassekampen* (left-wing daily), all have their commentary beyond the paywall.

Applying Bourdieu (1993) and Schudson’s (2005) concept of autonomy and heteronomy induce an interesting paradox. *VG* and *Dagbladet*’s commentators, who supposedly would be the most autonomous seeing that their editorial strategy is to provide free commentary, are to the contrary more heteronomous. Because their content is free, these organisations place more emphasis on attracting readers who potentially can be converted into paying subscribers in order to read ‘softer’ articles. The latter three organisations, who place their commentary behind the paywall, are conversely more autonomous. Because political commentary rarely converts readers into subscribers – and because such content is seen as an essential part of a newspapers’ legacy – the political editors of these three newspapers explicitly acknowledge that they primarily write for their existing audience. This logic implies that employing a commentator with a different *nomos*, for example, a lifestyle blogger with a large following across social media, potentially could turn away existing subscribers without attracting new ones. As previously demonstrated, willingness to pay for news correlates strongly with age and income. I therefore hypothesise that paywalls and the changing nature of social media distribution direct the latter organisations toward increased elitism: they write commentary for the elites who have already chosen to pay for their product.

This fortifies Sunstein’s (2017) notion of increased fragmentation of information, increased polarisation, and accordingly a weakening of both the inclusive public sphere (Habermas 1962) and a shared frame of reference: the imagined community (Anderson 1983). Although commentators from the three broadsheets in question do not wish to be perceived as elitist, they report that assumptions of potential readership do not make a significant impact on topic selection. As noted by the political editor of *Bergens Tidende*: “boring texts are often the most important”. Moreover, most of my interview subjects, especially the senior

commentators, report that the 'quality' of the text is of primary importance. Whilst Bourdieu (1998; 2005) understood autonomy as positive in the journalistic field, my analysis demonstrates that the contrary is the case in the age of social media.

From this, it is clear that commentators inadvertently fail to live up to the democratic journalistic norms ('educating the audience') due to both the professional norms ('trustworthy quality') and the economic goals ('attracting subscribers') of the broadsheets. As explained by Alstadheim, the political editor of *Dagens Næringsliv*: "Our content is exclusive. I believe there is a willingness to pay for our [more analytical] content". However, this study demonstrates that the willingness to pay for news is low amongst the general population, and closely tied to socio-economic factors. The commentators and political editors affirm that this is problematic but rationalise its implications. Alstadheim argues: "Our commentary has only been available to paying audiences for 130 years". This explanation is valid but nevertheless fails to grasp the changing nature of the media industry. In the print age, the public's only point of entry to information was buying the newspaper, and accordingly be exposed to political commentary. In the age of social media, the barrier of entry to such exposure is much higher, as demonstrated by the statistics provided in preceding sections. Conversely, alt-right commentary is freely available online.

The journalistic and political interview subjects worry about the rise of the alt-right, an opinion in keeping with the writings of Sunstein (2017) and Nagle (2017). One commentator explains that "*Reset*, *Document*, and *Rights* are amongst the most shared news outlets every single day", an assessment confirmed by my statistical findings (Fig. 2, p. 13). The implications of this development are eloquently articulated by a young female commentator:

I'm afraid that these news outlets slowly contaminate the public sphere, that the audience's practice of reading news is changing; that they accept outrageous and nasty stuff that is not really journalism but is believe to be so. [...] A broad and diverse public sphere is of course important, but at the same time, the increased polarisation push other voices away from the debate.

This interview subject explains that writing about feminism and immigration is particularly difficult. She, as well as all the other female interview subjects, report that

they frequently receive hateful feedback and concrete threats when writing about such topics.

It has been demonstrated that commentators constitute a homogenous and elitist group, and most commentators fail to live up to their democratic potential. Certainly, mainstream newspapers should strive towards meeting increased demands of diverse representation, especially in terms of ethnicity (Eddo-Lodge 2018). However, it is predominantly the alt-right minority that is excluded from mainstream journalism, whilst liberal-conservative values are promoted. Espousing reform rather than renouncement, I argue that it is important that commentators remain powerful influencers. To bolster their position, they should strive towards reaching a larger audience. This could for example be achieved by attaining a broader understanding of politics, thus altering the field's nomos. Politics encompass every aspect of society, not only parliamentary processes. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that high-quality journalism such as political commentary is costly to produce. Nevertheless, it appears that *VG* and *Dagbladet's* financial strategy is more attuned with the journalistic norms of the literature (Thompson 2012), in which high-quality journalism is financed by other and less prestigious forms of content. The final section of this analysis will account for commentators' power, and how this power has changed in the last decade.

Power

It is difficult to accurately assess the commentators' power. However, in the recent publication *The Power Elite* (Åmås 2016:241-243), Omdal argue that the political editors of *Aftenposten* and *Dagens Næringsliv* are amongst the 250 most powerful individuals in Norway. No other journalists or commentators were included on this exclusive list. The sociological nomenclature often employed by the interview subjects of this study enables us to understand the nature of this power. One commentator said: "If you define the public sphere as a field, it is obvious that one of the most strategic and powerful positions is that of a newspaper commentator [...], and *Aftenposten* is the most important institution within this field". Commentators report that their opinions are 'legitimised' by the brand of their newspaper. "There are very few independent commentators [bloggers, influencers, social media-personas] that have enough followers to actually influence a lot of people", another commentator noted. Attaining such a following may nevertheless grant entry to the

journalistic field. Two influential Twitter personas, Morten Myksvoll and Magnus Forsberg, were in 2017 employed as part-time columnists in *Bergens Tidende* and *Dagsavisen*, respectively.

However, a more senior commentator proposed that commentators tend to exaggerate their own influence. He explained that commentators have “very little structural power and relatively little political power, but we have fairly strong framing power and agenda-setting power” (see McCombs and Shaw 1972; Tewksbury and Scheufele 2009). The interview subjects believe that they influence the topic of discussion on the public broadcasters’ daily news show, as well as the agenda of politicians. None of the commentators believed that they could change the opinions of their general readership, but a few believed that they influenced concrete political processes or party politics. That being said, commentators argued that they had significant influence in shaping the outcome of political scandals if ‘operating as a pack’, confirming findings by Nord and colleagues (2012). The recent resignation of justice minister Sylvi Listhaug due to a polemic Facebook-post on immigration and terrorism is such an example (see p. 21).

Preceding sections have demonstrated that the audience of political commentary could be broadly defined as ‘elite’. This was affirmed by a senior commentator, who argued that “commentators definitely have power in the sense that both politicians and the elite read our texts. So we have a considerable agenda-setting power in terms of the economic, cultural, political, and bureaucratic elite in Norway”. All political interview subjects reported a keen interest in political commentary – with one important exception who I will return to. The attentive readership of the elites is attributed to the perceived quality of the commentators’ analysis by both the journalistic and political interview subjects. One left-wing politician explained that “[commentators] have insights in a different and more profound way than journalists”. This ‘profound insight’ can be explained by several factors. Commentators are professional journalists that are members of large news organisations with access to all forms of capital – economic, social, cultural, and journalistic. Being full-time employees, they may dedicate their time and effort to writing thoughtful analyses, and these analyses are verified by their colleagues before publishing. Moreover, commentators report that there are increased demands for background research in the present media landscape. One commentator explains that “some people believe that within the strained media economy, commentary is a

‘cheap’ form of journalism. In fact, the exact opposite is the case”. The political editor of *Aftenposten* concurs: “The commentators’ role has changed a lot in the past fifteen years. Direct contact with sources is much more important now”.

Commentators, in particular the senior commentators and political editors, enjoy privileged access to elite sources within the political field. No other actor – in journalism or other professions – have access to the plurality of politicians within Parliament to the same extent as commentators. One commentator says that the political editors “have the prime minister on speed-dial”. Eilertsen, the political editor of *Aftenposten*, explains that she is “using every form of communication there is with politicians. I meet them, I call them or they call me, we mingle at their annual party congresses, or have lunch together in Parliament”. Also less established commentators of the five newspapers in question enjoys privileged access to elite sources: they frequently call politicians to do research for their writings, and often visit the Parliament for both formal and informal meetings. The political interview subjects of this study also report that they frequently interact with commentators in order to provide background information, or conversely to present ideas for analyses. The representative of The Christian Democratic Party felt that “there is a completely different culture in the United Kingdom – it’s almost as if the media and the politicians have some sort of enmity there. Our Parliament is very ‘open’ – commentators are walking around the hallways and knock on doors, they have direct access”. Commentators all report being autonomous from the influence of politicians. One commentator explains that “I rarely experience that they try to ‘sell’ me something, they have a good understanding of the commentator’s role. They rather try to explain why they argue this and that in a given case, for instance if a party in the opposition chose to support a legislation presented by the [Conservative] government”. Commentators and politicians alike describe the interaction as a symbiotic relationship in which the commentators attain information, and the politicians can present their perspective without being cited. One commentator explains:

I contact politicians to get the facts straight, but just as often to challenge my own views. If I for instance wonder if my arguments are reasonable, I can contact a politician that I know has different views than myself, or whose stance I am uncertain of on a particular issue. My experience is that they’re

really fond of having these background conversations where they can talk freely, and they're not supposed to 'sell' something – not deliver punchlines or worry if something they say ends up as a tabloid headline. [...] I think they feel comfortable, and I get closer to the actual decision-making processes.

However, politicians may attempt to influence commentators. The political editor of *Bergens Tidende* elaborates: "I usually never have a conversation with a politician where I think that we're just 'two ordinary people that happen to be sitting down and talking with each other'. [...] I'll always be a journalist, and the person I'm talking to is a politician, and we have different interests". Nevertheless, there is a strong bond of trust between the two groups, as politicians are granted anonymity by commentators. A representative of the Conservative coalition explains that this "implies that I can go further in being open and honest about what's going on behind the scenes". Another politician from the left-wing says that s/he always provides information in some way: "I've helped commentators who were writing op-eds that were awful for [my party]". Mutual trust is nevertheless of crucial importance. To avoid breaching this trust, Gudbrandsen (*Bergens Tidende*) report that she "articulates sentences in different ways, and [writes] with several sources to make sure that it is not apparent from where the information originates". By fostering these symbiotic relationships, commentators are equipped to fulfil their democratic function of informing the public. Through accessibility and transparency, they can potentially provide 'inside information' and 'accurate analyses'. Norwegian commentary does have a 'production problem' in its presentation, but the primary concern is one of reception. Although commentators presently and predominantly are read by elites, who are more qualified to explain complex political processes in contemporary Norway?

Supporting this analysis and affirming Hovden and Knapskog's survey findings (2013), all the political interview subjects across the political spectrum – from the Progress Party to the Red Party – reported they are 'highly interested' in political commentary, with one important exception. When politicians were asked if they had any conception of the readership of political commentary, all but one of the political interview subjects reported to not have given this question much thought. The Labour Party, on the other hand, explicitly stated that its political leadership did not prioritise reading editorials or op-eds. This interview subject, being part of the national leadership of Norway's largest party, explained that "generally,

[commentators] are ascribed far less importance within the Labour Party. We've finally realised to what little extent commentary is actually read. Very little. Very, very little." The Labour Party does not "really care about the editorial, it rarely says anything interesting", and it is "only read by a handful". Commentators are perceived as "overly focused on Oslo", and the Labour Party representative believes that if the party lets commentators "dictate [their] policies, then [they're] being fooled".

The implications of this finding are significant. Although the Labour Party does not have access to the same data material as presented in this dissertation, their assumption of overall decreasing readership is accurate. A conversation with Olav Hjertaker, the founder of the social media tracker Storyboard, further reveals that The Labour Party is the only political organisation that subscribe to his service and thus gain insight in social media engagement for all news items. They have discovered what the other parties purportedly have, as of yet, not. All other political interview subjects, given that their accounts are truthful and honest, reported that mainstream political commentary would only become 'increasingly prominent' over the course of the next decade. All the journalistic interview subjects were equally sanguine, with the exception of a single commentator. S/he stated that "the overall fragmentation of the public sphere makes newspapers in general and commentators in particular less powerful than they have been". Whether the remaining eighteen respondents were overly optimistic, or merely hiding their true opinions of the current media landscape, remains unanswered. Whilst only the view of a single respondent, this striking remark summarises the findings of this dissertation.

Conclusion

This dissertation set out to investigate the power and democratic function of political commentators in contemporary Norway. It has been demonstrated that this group are the flagships of their newspapers and that their legitimacy and visibility benefit from a public status as media celebrities. Concurrently, both mainstream newspapers and their commentators have experienced decreased public influence over the course of the past decade. The digitalisation of the news industry ensures that commentators increasingly form and inform an elite group of writers and readers: newspaper subscriptions have become a new class marker. These findings have been attained through the employment of a tripartite, mixed methods research design. The analysis of social media engagement demonstrates that online-exclusive alt-right news outlets that provide free political commentary are rapidly expanding, which constitutes a tremendous opposition to the market dominance and outreach of Norway's five largest dailies. Statistics of print circulation and digital readership illustrate that the overall visibility of political commentary from legacy newspapers has decreased in the past decade. Survey data on commentators' readership demographic shows that this audience may be understood as older, urban, educated, wealthy, as well as in support of the liberal hegemony that the Norwegian mainstream media propagate.

Both survey data on commentators and twenty semi-structured interviews affirm that commentators constitute and write for an increasingly homogenous and elitist group. However, it is predominantly the 'alt-right minority' that is excluded by the mainstream media's liberal hegemony. The application of Bourdieu's (1984) concepts of autonomy and heteronomy demonstrates that most commentators place decreasing importance on readership because their content predominantly lies behind the paywall. Although politicians respect and value political commentary, my analysis indicates that they may attribute less significance to the commentators' ability to influence their audience in the near future. However, contrary to much of the existing literature, this dissertation argues that commentators have an important democratic function and that the need for qualified political analyses that are read by a broad audience is even greater in the age of social media in order to uphold deliberative democracy. This argument is developed through the joint application of

Habermas' (1962) ideals of the public sphere, Anderson's (1983) notion of the imagined community, and Sunstein's (2017) work on social media and democracy.

Espousing reform rather than renouncement, I argue for the importance of professional commentators remaining powerful influencers. No other actors are better equipped to analyse complex political processes, in part due to their privileged access to elite sources across the political spectrum within Parliament. To enable commentators to fulfil their democratic function, mainstream newspapers must strive to meet new demands of accessibility and representation. This could, for example, be achieved by employing younger commentators with more diverse backgrounds and thus attaining a broader understanding of politics. Politics encompass every aspect of society – not only Parliamentary politics. These proposed changes would alter the journalistic field's nomos and thus influence the language employed, the sources interviewed, and the topics selected. It is crucial to acknowledge that high-quality journalism such as political commentary is costly to produce. Nevertheless, it appears that *VG* and *Dagbladet's* financial strategies are more attuned to the journalistic norms of the literature, in which high-quality journalism is financed by other and less prestigious forms of content. Mainstream newspapers need to create stronger interconnectedness between their professional and journalistic norms, and their economic goals, to reach a wider audience.

Although the findings of this dissertation are not generalisable to countries outside Scandinavia, considering these countries' distinctive media culture and political systems, the research has demonstrated that commentators of legacy newspapers in all territories must be understood in new ways in the age of social media. This argument is advanced through the joint application of Bourdieu's, Habermas', Anderson's, and Sunstein's theories. Moreover, the employment of Bourdieusian field analysis within a new media environment has contributed to a modernisation of this framework. However, there are several shortcomings of this study.

For example, it has not been investigated how commentators' writings influence the practices of other journalists. Being the elite of the journalistic field, it is likely that their analyses affect the political journalism of their colleagues. Moreover, the role of the public broadcaster *NRK* and the commercial broadcaster *TV2* has not been considered in this study. These broadcasters employ commentators that provide state-funded or commercially financed political commentary that is freely

accessible. Accordingly, their journalism is likely to influence the public. That being said, 'media diversity' – a plurality of independent newsrooms – is in the public's interest (Thompson 2012; Åmås 2017). Finally, it is of crucial importance to understand subscription models in more meticulous ways. Both their economic viability and their contribution to democratic processes must be theorised to guide the strategies of the industry and policies of the government. There are also several philosophical debates with which one could engage. For example, one may question whether democracies should be more technocratic, that is, if they should empower technological experts. Also, deliberative democracy may no longer be a feasible or relevant model in the age of social media. Whether social media platforms should regulate themselves, or be regulated in the interest of democracy, is also a crucial line of inquiry. These shortcomings serve as suggestions for further research.

This dissertation nevertheless provides an original analysis that contributes to the existing and limited literature, which may also serve as guidance for policymakers and the media industry alike.

Literature

Aalborg, T., Blekesaune, A. and Elvestad, E. (2013). Media Choice and Informed Democracy: Toward Increasing News Consumption Gaps in Europe? *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 18(3), pp. 281–303.

Allern, S. (2010). From party agitators to independent pundits: The changed historical roles of newspaper and television journalists in Norwegian election campaigns. *Northern Lights: Film and Media Studies Yearbook* 8(1), pp. 49–67.

Alterman, E. (1993). *Sound and the Fury – the making of the punditocracy*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Anderson, B. (1983 [1991]). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. London: Verso.

Barland, J. (2015). Innovation for New Revenue Streams from Digital Readers: The Case of VG+. *Journal of Media Innovations* 2(1), pp. 123–30.

Bengtsson, M. (2015). Approaches to Political Commentary in Scandinavia: A Call for Textual, Evaluating Scholarship. *Nordicom Review* 36(1), pp. 5–18.

Benson, R. and Neveu, E. (Eds.) (2005). *Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Berlant, L. (1997). *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*. London: Duke University Press.

Berlant, L. (2008). *The female complaint: The unfinished business of sentimentality in American culture*. London: Duke University Press.

Blumler, J. G. (1997). Origins of the Crisis of Communication for Citizenship. *Political Communication* 14(4), pp. 395–404.

Botsman, R. (2017). *Who can you trust?* London: Penguin Random House.

Bourdieu, P. ([1972] 1977). *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bourdieu, P. ([1977] 1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. London: Routledge.

Bourdieu, P. (1986). The Forms of Capital. In Richardson, J. G. (Ed.), *Handbook for Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (pp. 241–258). Westport, CT: Greenwood.

Bourdieu, P. ([1982] 1991). *Language and Symbolic Power*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

- Bourdieu, P. and Wacquant, L. (1992). *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bourdieu, P. ([1983] 1993). *The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bourdieu, P. ([1992] 1996). *The Rules of Art*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bourdieu, P. ([1996] 1998). *On Television and Journalism*. London: Pluto.
- Bourdieu, P. ([1995] 2005). The Political Field, the Social Science Field, and the Journalistic Field. In Benson, R. and Neveu, E. (Eds.), *Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bro, P. (2011). Licence to comment: The popularization of a political commentator. *Journalism Studies* 13(3), pp. 433–446.
- Bueno, C. C. (2016). *The Attention Economy: Labour, Time and Power in Cognitive Capitalism*. London: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Bulman, D. (1945). *Molders of Opinion*. Milwaukee, WI: Bruce Publishing.
- Cagé, J. (2016). *Saving the media: capitalism, crowdfunding, and democracy*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap / Harvard University Press.
- Cappella, J. and Jamieson, K. (1997). *Spiral of Cynicism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Chadwick, A. (2013). *The Hybrid Media System: Politics and Power*. Oxford University Press.
- Champagne, P. ([1993] 1999). The View from the Media. In Bourdieu et al., *The Weight of the World* (pp. 46-59). Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Champagne, P. ([1995] 2005). The Double Dependency: The Journalistic Field between Politics and Markets. In Benson, R. and Neveu, E. (Eds.), *Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Couldry, N. (2003). Media meta-capital: extending the range of Bourdieu's field theory. *Theory and Society*, 32(5-6), pp. 653–677.
- Creswell, J. W. and Clark, V. L. P. (2011). *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Dahl, H. F. (2016). *A History of the Norwegian Press 1660-2015*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Denzin, N. (2010). Moments, mixed methods, and paradigm dialogs. *Qualitative Inquiry* 16(1), pp. 419–427.

- Dewey, J. (1927). *The Public and Its Problems*. New York: H. Holt.
- Driessens, O. (2012). The celebritization of society and culture: Understanding the structural dynamics of celebrity culture. *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 16(6), pp. 641–657.
- Duelund, P. (2010). Jürgen Habermas, The structural transformation of the public sphere: an inquiry into a category of bourgeois society. *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 16(1), pp. 26–28.
- Eddo-Lodge, R. (2018). *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Edwards, A. (1953). The relationship between the judged desirability of a trait and the probability that the trait will be endorsed. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 37(1), pp. 90–93.
- Fisher, C. (1944). *The Columnist*. New York: Howell, Soskin.
- Fraser, N. (1990). Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy. *Social Text* 25/26, pp. 56–80.
- Gandy, O. H. (1982). *Beyond Agenda Setting: Information Subsidies and Public Policy*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Gans, H. J. (1979). *Deciding What's News. A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek and Time*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Geertz, C. (1973). Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture. In *The Interpretation of Cultures (Essays)*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gerhards, J. and Schäfer, M. S. (2010). Is the internet a better public sphere? Comparing old and new media in the USA and Germany. *New media & society* XX(X), pp. 1–18.
- Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and Self-identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Habermas, J. (1962 [2014]). *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Hackman, J. R. and Wageman, R. (2007). Asking the right questions about leadership. *American Psychologist* 62(1), pp. 43–47.
- Hallin, D. C. and Mancini, P. (2004). *Comparing Media Systems*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Harding, S. (1990). Feminism, Science, and the Anti-Enlightenment Critiques. In Nicholson, L. J. (Ed.), *Feminism / Postmodernism*. London: Routledge.

- Herman, E. S. and Chomsky, N. (1988). *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. London: Vintage Random House.
- Hesmondhalgh, D. (2006). Bourdieu, the media and cultural production. *Media, Culture & Society* (28), pp. 211–231.
- Hopmann, D. and Strömback, J. (2010). The Rise of the Media Punditocracy? Journalists and media pundits in Danish election news 1994-2007. *Media, Culture and Society* 32(6), pp. 943–960.
- Horsbøl, A. (2010). Experts in Political Communication – The construal of communication expertise in prime time television news. *Journal of Language and Politics* 9(1), pp. 22–49.
- Hovden, J. F. (2008). *Profane and Sacred* (PhD). Bergen: University of Bergen.
- Hovden, J. F. (2011). Verdsleg og heilag. [Profane and Sacred]. *Sosiologisk Årbok 2011* [Sociological Review] (1–2), pp. 81–108.
- Hovden, J. F. and Knapskog, K. (2013). Høgt og lågt i Stortinget og departementa. [High and low in the Norwegian Parliament and Government Departments. Cultural orientation and culture use in the Norwegian political-administrative elite. *Sosiologisk tidsskrift* [Journal of Sociology] 22(3), pp. 276–301.
- Hovden, J. F. and Esperås, E. N. (2014). *Worlds of Journalism, Norway 2013. Methodology, questionnaire and selected tables*. Bergen: University of Bergen.
- Hovden, J. F. (2018). *Media Use, Culture & Public Connection*. Bergen: University of Bergen.
- Høst, S. (2017). *Rapport nr. 84/2017 – Avisåret 2016*. [The annual news report 2016]. Volda: Høgskulen i Volda.
- Kalsnes, B. (2016). *The Power of Likes: Social Media Logic and Political Communication* (PhD). Oslo: University of Oslo.
- Karlsson, M. and Sjøvaag, H. (Eds.) (2018). *Rethinking Research Methods in an Age of Digital Journalism*. London: Routledge.
- Knapskog, K. (2009). Blant orakel og refleksjonsatleter [Commentator journalism as genre and strategy]. In Eide, M. (Ed.), *Journalistiske nyorienteringer* [New journalistic practices]. Oslo: Scandinavian Academic Press.
- Knapskog, K., Iversen, M. H., and Larsen, L. O. (2016). The Future of Interpretative Journalism. In Eide, M., Sjøvaag, H. and Larsen, L. O. (Eds.), *Journalism Re-Examined: Digital Challenges and Professional Reorientations*. Bristol: Intellect.
- Kock, C. (2011). *De svarer ikke* [Politicians don't answer questions]. København: Gyldendal.

Krumsvik, R. J. (2014). *Forskningsdesign og kvalitativ metode* [Research design and qualitative methods]. Bergen: Fagbokforlaget.

Kvale, S. and Brinkmann, S. (1997). *Det kvalitative forskningsintervju* [The qualitative research interview]. Oslo: Gyldendal Akademisk.

Kvalheim, N. (2016). *Kampen om publikums oppmerksomhet. Om VG, multiplattformpublisering og strategiske beslutninger* (PhD). [The Struggle over audiences' attention. The case of VG]. Bergen: University of Bergen.

Lichter, S. R., Rothman, S. and Lichter, L. (1986). *The Media Elite: America's New Power-brokers*. Bethesda, MD: Adler & Adler.

Lippmann, W. (1922). *Public Opinion*. New York: Macmillan.

Lysbakken, A. and Isaksen, T. R. (2008). Kommentariatets diktatur [The commentaries dictatorship]. *Samtiden* (1), pp. 4–15.

Mathisen, B. R. and Morlandstø, L. (2014). *Motstemme og folkeopplyser på vei mot en digital offentlighet – Kommentatorjournalistikk i regionale medier* [Commentary journalism in Norwegian regional media]. Bodø: Universitetet i Nordland.

McCombs, M. and Shaw, D. (1972). The agenda-setting function of mass media. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36(2), pp. 176–187.

McPherson, E. (2016). Source credibility as “information subsidy”: Strategies for successful NGO journalism at Mexican human rights NGOs. *Journal of Human Rights* 15(3), pp. 330–346.

Meyer, T. (2002). *Media Democracy: How the media colonize politics*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Nagle, A. (2017). *Kill All Normies: The online culture wars from Tumblr and 4Chan to the alt-right and Trump*. Winchester: Zero Books.

Newman, N., Fletcher, R., Kalogeropoulos, A., Levy, D. A. L. and Kleis Nielsen, R. (2017). *Reuters Institute Digital News Report*. Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

Nimmo, D. and Combs, J. E. (1992). *The Political Pundits*. New York, NY: Praeger Publishers.

Nimmo, D. and Newsome, C. (1997). *Political Commentators in the United States in the 20th Century*. London: Greenwood Press.

Nord, L., Enli, G. and Stúr, E. (2012). Pundits and political scandals: A study of political commentators in Norway and Sweden. In Allern, S. and Pollack, E. (Eds.), *Scandalous. The mediated construction of political scandals in four Nordic countries* (pp. 87–102). Gothenburg: Nordicom.

Nyre, L. (2009) Normative Media Research – Moving from the Ivory Tower to the Control Tower. *Nordicom Review* 30(2), pp. 3–17.

Ohlsson, J. (2018). *Newspaper subscription: A new Swedish class marker? and Trust in media: a new divide?* Findings from the National Society, Opinion, and Media Survey presented at a seminar in Bergen, 13 April 2018. Bergen: University of Bergen.

Omdal, S. E. (2016). Redaktørmaktens forfall og kunsten å spille triangel. [The downfall of the editor]. In Åmås, K. O. (Ed.), *Makteliten* [The Power Elite]. Oslo: Kagge.

Raabe, T. S., Kopperstad, I., Gjerding, C. (2017). Transcenderende ledelse [Transcendent leadership]. *Magma* 20(2), pp. 69–75.

Rivers, W. L. (1967). *The Opinionmakers*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Rogstad, I. L. (2014). Tweets that matter: Politisk kommunikasjon i et nytt medielandskap (PhD). Oslo: University of Oslo.

Rogstad, I. L. (2015). The Commenting Power: The Emergence of a Commenting Class in Norwegian Media. In Ihlen, Ø., Skogerbø, E. and Allern, S. (Eds.), *Power, Media and Politics* (pp. 105–117). Oslo: Fagbokforlaget.

Røe Isaksen, T. and Syse, H. (2011). *Konservatisme* [Conservatism]. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.

Sakariassen, H., Hovden, J. F. and Moe, H. (2017). *Bruksmønstre for digitale nyheter: Reuters Institute Digital News Report, Norge*. [Consumption patterns for digital news]. Bergen: University of Bergen.

Schiffrin, A. (2010). *Words and Money*. London: Verso.

Schlesinger, P. (1978). *Putting 'Reality' Together*. BBC News. London: Constable.

Schudson, M. (2005). Autonomy from What? In Benson, R. and Neveu, E. (Eds.), *Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field* (pp. 214–223). Cambridge: Polity Press.

Singer, J. (2017). Reinventing Journalism as an Entrepreneurial Enterprise. In Boczkowski, P. J. and Anderson, C. W. (Eds.), *Remaking the News* (pp. 195–210). Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Soloski, J. (1989). News Reporting and Professionalism: Some Constraints on the Reporting of the News. *Media, Culture & Society* 11(2), pp. 207–228.

Sparks, C. (2000). The Internet and the Global Public Sphere. In Bennett, W. and Entman, R. (Eds.), *Mediated Politics: Communication in the Future of Democracy* (pp. 75–96). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Sunstein, C. (2017). *#Republic: Divided democracy in the age of social media*. Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Tashakkori, A. and Teddlie, C. (Eds.) (2003). *Handbook of mixed methods in social and behavioural research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Tewksbury, D. and Scheufele, D. A. (2009). News framing theory and research. In Bryant, J. and Oliver, M. B. (Eds.). *Media effects: Advances in theory and research* (3rd ed., pp. 17–33). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Thompson, J. B. (1990). *Ideology and Modern Culture: Critical Social Theory in the Era of Mass Communication*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Thompson, J. B. (1991). Editor's Introduction. In Bourdieu, P. *Language and Symbolic Power* (pp. 1-31). Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Thompson, J. B. (2000). *Political Scandal. Power and Visibility in the Media Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Thompson, J. B. (2010). *Merchants of Culture: The Publishing Business in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Thompson, J. B. (2012). *Evidence of Professor John Thompson to the Leveson Inquiry*. London: United Kingdom's National Archives.
- Thurman, N. (2016). *Does British journalism have a diversity problem?* London: City University London.
- Tryggestad, T. L. (2014). State feminism going global: Norway on the United Nations Peacebuilding Commission. *Cooperation and Conflict* 49(4), pp. 464–482.
- Tuchman, G. (1978). *Making News. A Study in the Construction of Reality*. New York: Free Press.
- Vatnøy, E. (2016). Rejuvenating the public sphere – The rhetorical arenas of social media. In Kramp, L. et al. (Eds.), *Politics, Civil Society and Participation: Media and Communications in a Transforming Environment* (pp. 121–131). Bremen: Edition lumière.
- Vatnøy, E. (2017). *The Rhetoric of Networked Publics* (PhD). Bergen: University of Bergen.
- Wilberg, E. (2018). *Frømtid og forandring: En rapport om mediebedrifters utfordringer og muligheter*. [Future and transformations: A report on the media industry's challenges and opportunities]. Oslo: BI Norwegian Business School.
- Willig, I. (2012). Newsroom ethnography in a field perspective. *Journalism* 14(3), pp. 372–387.
- Young, M. (1961). *The Rise of the Meritocracy 1870–2033*. London: Pelican.

Åmås, K. O. (Ed.) (2016). *Makteliten*. [The power elite]. Oslo: Kagge.

Åmås, K. O. (Ed.) (2017). *NOU 2017:7 Det norske mediemangfoldet*. [Norwegian official report 2017:7 The Norwegian media diversity]. Oslo: The department of Culture.

Online resources

Johansen, G. S. (2017). Dagens Næringsliv dropper opplagstallene [Dagens Næringsliv won't report print circulation]. From *Journalisten*: <https://goo.gl/Y4VF2C>

Kristjánsson, M. (2018). Facebook status 05.05.2018. From *Facebook*: <https://goo.gl/kVLnfE>

Libell, H. P. and Martyn-Hemphill, R. (2018). Norway's justice minister resigns in storm over Facebook post. From *The New York Times*: <https://goo.gl/Z3zne2>

Madrigal, A. C. (2017). When the Facebook Traffic Goes Away. From *The Atlantic*: <https://goo.gl/bSD8WQ>

Schultheis, E. (2017). What Right-Wing Populists Look Like in Norway. From *The Atlantic*: <https://goo.gl/ei7GGE>

Thorsnæs, G. (2018). Norges befolkning. [Norway's population]. From *SNL*: https://snl.no/Norges_befolkning

Torvik, Y. G. (2017). Mener NRK stjeler lesere [NRK are 'stealing' readers]. From *Klassekampen*: <http://www.klassekampen.no/article/20170929/ARTICLE/170929957>

Unknown author (2018). The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index 2018. From *The Economist*: <https://infographics.economist.com/2018/DemocracyIndex/>

Unknown author (2018). Medieundersøkelsen 2018 [The Norwegian media survey 2018]. From *The Nordic Media Festival*: <https://goo.gl/xDqz3U>

Unknown author (2015). The Code of Ethics of the Norwegian Press. From *The Norwegian Press Council*: <https://goo.gl/jdxBrw>

Unknown author (2018). Opplagstall norske aviser. [Print circulation for Norwegian newspapers]. From *Medienorge*: <https://goo.gl/8GS1zE>

Unknown author (2018). Sterk økning i andel ikke-troende i Norge [Strong increase of non-religious people in Norway]. From *NTB / VG*: <https://goo.gl/qrKqUu>

Unknown author (2017). Valgresultat 2017 [Election results 2017]. From *NRK*: <https://www.nrk.no/valg/2017/resultat/>

Unknown author (2018). 2018 World Press Freedom Index. From *Reporters sans frontières*: <https://rsf.org/en/ranking>

Unknown author (2018). Leaderboards of top stories in social media. From *Storyboard*: <http://storyboard.mx/>

Unknown author (2018). 14 prosent av befolkningen har innvandrerbakgrunn [Fourteen per cent of the Norwegian population are immigrants]. From *SSB*: <https://goo.gl/zyDU6p>

Unknown author (2018). Venstrevridde journalister [Left-leaning journalists]. Editorial of *VG*: <https://www.vg.no/nyheter/meninger/i/L0GpJV/venstrevridde-journalister>

Zuckerberg, M. (2018). Bringing people closer together. From *Facebook Newsroom*: <https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2018/01/news-feed-fyi-bringing-people-closer-together/>