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# RAISING AN ALTERNATIVE VOICE

## ASSESSING THE ROLE AND VALUE OF THE GLOBAL ALTERNATIVE NEWS AGENCY INTER PRESS SERVICE

STIJN JOYE

### Abstract

Inter Press Service (IPS) is widely considered to be distinctly different from the conventional news agency.

Research on this alternative news agency has mainly focused on the IPS news to underwrite this statement, but much less attention has been paid to the broader production context. Drawing on the findings of twenty-six semi-structured in-depth interviews, this article explores the value and role of IPS in the digital news market of the 21st century as perceived by staff members, stakeholders and independent scholars. In general, interviewees argue that IPS and its news copy are a useful and necessary addition to mainstream news media, as well as a crucial source of information and a partner for the global civil society. However, the study also indicates that IPS will need to face a number of professional, organisational and financial challenges if the news agency aspires to continue its unique role of sensitising the public and bridging the information gap between North and South.

Stijn Joye is researcher in Centre for Cinema and Media Studies and Center for Journalism Studies at Ghent University; e-mail: [Stijn.Joye@UGent.be](mailto:Stijn.Joye@UGent.be)

In his seminal *Culture Inc.: The Corporate Takeover of Public Expression*, the late Herbert Schiller (1989) stated that there has never been an equal exchange of ideas and information in the global news environment. One frequently criticised element of this is the existence of an information gap between what is commonly referred to as North and South, or the developed and underdeveloped/developing world, respectively. Over the years, several initiatives have been taken to address this gap and to present an alternative to dominant, mainly Western news providers. This article reflects on one such alternative voice, Inter Press Service (IPS), that has been supplying “a service of independent news focusing on the developing world” (Boyd-Barrett 2008, 61) for over four decades now. While academic research on IPS has mainly focused on the characteristic news copy to assess the agency’s role within the international news market, much less attention has been given to the broader production context of such alternative news content. Drawing upon the results of a qualitative research project, this article reflects on the actual and future roles of IPS as a global alternative news agency.<sup>1</sup> At the heart of this research project is the belief that news actors such as IPS hold a valuable liberating potential as they play “an important part in maintaining the flow of ideas and information upon which choices are made” (Manning 2001, 1).

After a short review of the literature on international news and news agencies, we go into the role of IPS as a news agency working within a global news context. The main part of the article presents the results of a study involving twenty-six semi-structured in-depth interviews with IPS staff members, stakeholders and scholars working in the field of international news agencies and development communication.

## International News Agencies: Control, Critique and Public Role

The field of international communication has generated a rich body of critical research on international news dissemination and news agencies. In its attempt to unravel power relations and explore structural and symbolic inequalities, international news agency research has provided evidence for the transnational patterns of blind spots and overrepresented regions along with a distorted representation of the developing world (see Cottle and Rai 2008). One of the key results is that for Western news media, countries of the developing world are low on the level of newsworthiness, given the fact that most attention is devoted to events occurring in neighbouring countries or the Western hemisphere, or to events related to the home country (Stevenson and Cole 1980; Reeves 1993; Kamalipour 2002). In addition, when covered by Western news media, the developing world is mainly reflected to the rest of the world in terms of dominant news values of negativity and unexpectedness with a focus on violence, conflict, natural disasters, or on politics and elite actors (Giffard 1998a; Rauch 2003; Rantanen and Boyd-Barrett 2004; Harrison 2006). This biased focus results in “an inadequate, negative, and stereotypical portrayal” of developing nations (Rampal 2002, 111), what may lead to negative perceptions by the (Western) public (Golan 2008, 42). On a structural level, research has identified several latent and manifest imbalances which are deeply rooted in a historical, political and economic logic (Boyd-Barrett 1980; Graubart 1989; Mowlana 1993; Rantanen and Boyd-Barrett 2004; Boyd-Barrett 2008) and which have resulted

in an unequal information exchange in the global news environment (Schiller 1989). Powerful (Western) news agencies such as (Thomson) Reuters (UK), Associated Press (AP, USA) and to a lesser extent Agence France Press (AFP, France), have a *de facto* monopoly on the international news flow, allowing them to set the world's news agenda. Global news is accordingly framed by the prevailing social, political and economic orientations of the West (Giffard 1998a).

This world information order has been the subject of much debate, especially during the 1970s when the concept of a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) was introduced on the UNESCO-fora by the group of non-aligned countries. This call of the developing world was embedded in the growing demand for a new international economic order (NIEO) and more self-reliance by the newly independent states. The debates addressed issues of information dependency and "were important as they explicitly tied the information imbalances and consequent negative coverage of the developing world with the activities of major international (Western) news agencies" (Tomanić Trivundža 2006, 23). Consequently, dependency theory and critical studies of (media) imperialism informed the discussions on the international arena of UNESCO (Ayish 2005, 15-17). In 1980, these debates cumulated in the publication of the seminal MacBride Report. Amongst others, the report proposed a number of recommendations to address the imbalanced news flows such as state-backed Third World news purveyors and the funding of news agencies in the South (MacBride 1980; Splichal 1984). Following its publication, the report was heavily criticised in the West and finally resulted in the UNESCO-supported International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC), albeit no major changes in the balance of (news) power were achieved (Hannerz 2004; Ayish 2005). In the next decade, the NWICO debates eventually faded into insignificance under pressure on UNESCO by the USA and the UK, and a shift in the focus of debate within UNESCO to such areas as telecommunication (Thussu 2005, 50-52). The efforts of NWICO and the MacBride Report, however, stayed alive on the agenda of an emerging global civil society, arguably driven by the fact that "while the world might have changed tremendously, many issues dealing with media and communication imbalances and inequalities persist" (Biltereyst and Leye 2005, 56). Though its reception was thus particularly tumultuous and controversial, Biltereyst and Leye (2005, 55) concluded that the MacBride Report and its legacy "underscored the idea that information and communication is a vital, liberating resource for economic, social and cultural emancipation." As for the global news market, this idea was best embodied by alternative voices such as Gemini, the Non-Aligned News Agencies Pool (NANAP), PANA (Press) and IPS that were set up in the 1960s and 1970s. These initiatives had in common the goal of ensuring a greater balance in international news flows; the objective to strive for realistic representations of developing countries; as well as a continuous struggle to survive due to a lack of sufficient funding (Boyd-Barrett and Thussu 1992; Hannerz 2004, 41). In retrospect, none of these agencies really posed a serious challenge to the dominant Western news order, nor acquired significant credibility with the possible exception of Inter Press Service (Rampal 2002, 113; Boyd-Barrett 2008, 61). Over the years IPS has acquired authority and expertise as "the world's leading provider on information about global issues and the largest purveyor of news about the developing nations" (Giffard 1998b, 1). In contrast, Gemini has for some time

become part of a broader non-governmental organisation (NGO) (Thussu 2004, 57), while NANAP is now operating as the Internet-based NAM News Network, a joint project of the 114 member states of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM).

Nowadays, all news agencies, alternative as well as mainstream, face a completely different news ecology than was the case in the 1960s and 1970s when most alternative voices were founded and the desirability of a new world information order was discussed. In the past three decades forces of globalisation, commercialisation, competition, and rapid technological developments have profoundly transformed the international news market (Harrison 2006, 68). News media have entered the age of hyper-commercialism (McChesney 2004) or infotainment (Thussu 2007). Harrison (2006, 15) further notes that these changes “have affected the packaging and selling of news and arguably the nature of news reported” hinting at the rise of soft news, lifestyle and consumer journalism. In addition, most Western societies have encountered a decline in the amount and quality of foreign news reporting “especially about and from the developing world” (Thussu 2004, 47). Commenting on these developments at the end of the 1990s, former AFP-chief Moisy (1997, 79) noted that an “amazing increase in the capacity to produce and distribute news from distant lands has been met by an obvious decrease in consumption.” In other words, the contemporary news sector does not appear to be very favourable for an alternative news agency such as IPS that rarely distributes soft news and mainly focuses on development issues and distant events occurring in the developing world. When assessing these global tendencies, scholars and critics moreover refer to the democratic value of information as “news, more than any other cultural form, carries the burden of defining the world in which citizens operate” (Lewis 2006, 305). Journalism is assigned the “real and imagined power to affect systems, actions or events” (Hartley quoted in Rauch 2003, 101) and news agencies are considered to be key agents in this process since they can set the agenda for public debate by determining which issues will be distributed as well as setting the standard of content and form of news. Rauch (2003, 87-88) has argued that the “content [of a news agency] represents a strong influence on Western readers’ knowledge of and attitudes toward global events and issues.” International news is generally believed to act as a crucial mechanism of the extension of people’s horizon (Tester 2004). By consequence, the enduring global domination of a few Western agencies has been criticised for reducing the range of news topics covered (Harrison 2006, 92) and for nurturing a homogenised public discourse. It appears that “fewer major news providers are informing more people and [...] doing so from fewer sources” (Pater-son 2001, 79 and 84-89). By paying attention to non-mainstream topics, alternative news outlets such as IPS thus represent a necessary addition to mainstream media. These alternative news actors encourage a pluralism of voices in the international news exchange (Giffard 1983, 56) and are “exercising a right to communicate that is closely connected to all other fundamental human rights and is part of a broader struggle for social change” (Fenton 2006, 357). As Boyd-Barrett and Thussu (1992, 35) have illustrated, IPS has successfully managed to develop such an alternative framework for covering the world. In general, IPS strives to keep the voices and concerns of the poorest on the news agenda.

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Reflecting on the role and value of IPS implies reflecting on the issue of alternative media. Although there is no clear consensus as to what alternative media are, in this article we refer to Couldry and Curran's definition of "media production that challenges, at least implicitly, actual concentrations of media power" (2003, 7). We further draw on the work of Atton (2002, 128) who states that one characteristic of alternative media is the mobilisation of information on events that are ignored or marginalised by mainstream media. In their analysis of global media, Herman and McChesney (1997) also refer to this role of disseminating alternative analyses and visions that are generally neglected by the mass media as a key feature of alternative media. In the case of IPS, sports coverage, celebrity or lifestyle news and up-to-date business news for instance are not the agency's main concern. Instead, IPS stands for a form of "journalism and communication for global change" (IPS 2009b). This mission statement translates itself into a non-mainstream copy that stresses counter-hegemonic discourses, highlights development issues and attempts to give "a voice to the voiceless" (IPS 2009b). IPS is widely appraised for its timely and in-depth coverage of development issues, global governance, gender issues and human rights, with a focus on analysis, alternative perspectives and local voices. According to Boyd-Barrett and Thussu (1992, 35) "this indeed is an innovative focus in the world media market."

Troubled by imbalances in international news reporting, Italian journalist Roberto Savio and Argentinean student Pablo Piacentini founded IPS in 1964. The agency started as a non-profit cooperative of journalists that aspired to build an information bridge between Europe and Latin America (Boyd-Barrett and Thussu 1992, 31). In the 1970s, IPS was able to grow in the shadow of the NWICO-debates. Embodying the NWICO-ideal of a free flow and a wider and more balanced dissemination of information, IPS successfully promoted the exchange of information and news between developing countries. In the next decade, IPS aimed at improving the information flow from South to North and it established a global network of affiliates. This rapid worldwide expansion triggered a process of decentralisation that eventually led to the creation of five regional offices while the agency's headquarters remained in Rome. In 1994, IPS again changed its global organisational structure and legal status to become a non-profit, international NGO. Starting in 2000, the regional centres were incorporated and became autonomous and locally-owned entities, coordinating their activities with the others through the overarching IPS International Association (IPS 2009c). After some difficult years, a new management and editorial board were installed in 2003 and provided the forty-year-old organisation with new ideas and ambitions. Since then, a more commercially oriented IPS has consolidated itself as one of the leading news agencies on civil society and development issues, with a track record of continuous (online) growth. Today, IPS reaches an estimated 200 million readers on a daily basis and its copy is available in twenty-seven languages (IPS 2009a, 5). The IPS network consists of some 417 journalists of whom seventy percent are permanently based in southern countries. Many of the staff writing and editing for IPS in the North are from developing countries while almost all of its journalists and editors in the South are from the country or region concerned (IPS 2009c).

Although IPS is commonly associated with a daily news service, the news agency is actually just one part of the IPS International Association. Next to its activities in the news sector, IPS's global communication strategy encompasses two more activities: first, dissemination and networking aimed at creating information bridges, and secondly, capacity-building to "increase media and communication literacy and professional skills of journalists and civil society actors" (IPS 2009f). Traditionally, IPS has allocated most of its resources towards its news service activities that account for about 66% of its total costs. In general, IPS is operating with a budget of some five million Euro and has three main sources of income: grants from donors, revenues from news sales and income from projects (IPS 2009d, 12 and 22). Income from the market is, however, not sufficient to be commercially viable, hence leading to a major dependence on grants and funding from donors that generally account for around half of the annual revenue. Thussu (2004, 57) has warned alternative actors of such growing financial dependence on a small(er) number of donors as they may ultimately act more like a pressure group for Southern concerns rather than as a professional news agency.

In order to situate IPS within the global market of newsgathering and dissemination, we can further refer to a body of academic research that has explored the differences between mainstream and alternative news agencies, particularly IPS. Scholars have typically found the agency's output "more diverse than mainstream agencies in terms of number of topics covered, datelines filed, and sources used" (Rauch 2003, 88). In 1985, Ogan and Rush identified the difference in substance, geographical focus and use of sources between IPS and major Western news agencies. A decade later and after analysing the IPS and AP news coverage on the 2000 *Group of 77 Summit*, Rauch (2003) concluded that both news agencies represent the South in a strikingly different way. While AP framed the event in a significantly more negative perspective by stressing disunity, neglect and controversy at the summit, IPS emphasised the Southern nations' cooperation, achievement and common goals. In addition, unlike most news agencies IPS does not tend to overlook civil society organisations as potential news sources (Rauch 2003, 98). Analysing the debates leading up to the 2003 USA-Iraq conflict, Horvit (2006) also found that IPS presented more non-Western viewpoints, but less balanced coverage than AP, AFP and Reuters. Another important body of comparative research are the annual content analyses of IPS conducted by Anthony Giffard and his team at the University of Washington. Over the years, these analyses of IPS copy have demonstrated more support for the agency's alternative orientation. A 1993 survey, for instance, found that IPS offered significantly more stories on culture, development, the environment, human rights, and social issues than AP or Reuters, whose filings showed more emphasis on crime, the military, politics, violence, and the coups and earthquakes that regularly attract mainstream news attention. In 1998, Giffard again compared the news service of IPS *vis-à-vis* AP and Reuters. Two-thirds of IPS copy carried datelines of cities in the developing world, compared to less than fifty percent of AP and Reuters reports. In addition, the actors and sources in IPS reports were twice as likely to be from the South as the North. Similar conclusions were drawn from a 2008 study regarding the coverage of the UN Millennium Development Goals. The results showed that IPS displayed a more diverse coverage in terms of news geography, gender and actors than AP and AFP (Giffard and Van



Leuven 2008, 29-35). Reddy and Izeboud (2003, 12) concluded that the “findings [from the Giffard reports published between 1999 and 2002] confirm IPS’s unique editorial approach and its positioning as a complementary news agency to the transnational agencies.” Nonetheless, further research by Giffard (2001) and others (Varis et al. 1977; Giffard and Van Horn 1992) has identified several geographical gaps in the IPS’s coverage. Until recently, the Arab world, for instance, represented a black spot on the news map (see *infra*). As Giffard in his 2004 study correctly points out, these (content) comparisons of IPS to the major international agencies should, however, not suggest that IPS is in the same league in terms of volume and range of its coverage. IPS is, by comparison, a shoestring operation with a limited, but, clearly, defined set of news values and priorities. What the analyses do underscore is that “IPS, given adequate resources, can deliver better coverage of processes and events that are of vital interest to nations in the developing world than is available from the mainstream media. And for those in the North who want a different perspective on the news, IPS is a valuable alternative” (Giffard 2004, 29).

## A Case Study of IPS

The current study aims at supplementing these content analyses with qualitative research. In 2007, we conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with thirteen IPS staff members (journalists and management), six stakeholders (civil society partners, donors and IPS board members) and seven internationally renowned scholars with expertise regarding alternative news media, international communication and media for development.<sup>2</sup> All conversations were recorded and then transcribed. The transcripts were analysed using qualitative content analysis techniques and subsequently sorted according to three dimensions: editorial policy, organisational issues, and financial and human resources. Several respondents requested to be quoted anonymously, and as such, we will not mention names, but instead we will refer to the interviewees as displayed in Appendix 1.

In addition to these twenty-six interviews, we could also draw upon the results from a previous online survey among journalists (Joye 2006). In 2005, thirty-eight Flemish<sup>3</sup> mainstream print journalists working on topics related to foreign news and international economics were asked to evaluate the local IPS affiliate and its online daily news service. In this article, the latter study<sup>4</sup> will only be referred to for the sake of background information.

Despite diverse backgrounds and interests, our respondents displayed a high level of agreement regarding the different issues discussed during the interviews. Before addressing the three dimensions outlined above, we have asked our respondents to briefly reflect on the mission, public role and contemporary value of IPS. A common theme that emerged from this first general inquiry is that despite the current proliferation of multimedia sources, it is for Western publics very hard to find diverse and alternative views on the world news, especially news from non-Western parts of the world. Our respondents considered IPS to be the only news network of global scale that provides this kind of valuable and necessary information both systematically and by traditional means as well as by new media channels. A standard phrasing that was used by several interviewees to grasp this democratic value was “if IPS did not exist, it should have been invented.” Several respondents argued that the mission of IPS as defined in 1964 (giving a voice to the

voiceless and challenging the international information order) is even more relevant in the current age of media conglomerates, commercialisation and infotainment than it was more than four decades ago. Looking forward, “Scholar 5” believed that “there is undoubtedly a future for organisations such as IPS that can provide news from an alternative perspective as this has always been valuable and will remain so.” Our respondents thus looked upon IPS as successfully fulfilling its public role and mission by sensitising Western publics to (foreign) issues and regions that lack spectacular or commercial (news) value. In other words, the agency is assessed to be a useful, relevant and necessary addition to the mainstream news offer. According to staff members and scholars, this democratic and valuable mission statement is most visibly reflected in the news output and the overall editorial policy.

### Editorial Policy

IPS news service has received wide appraisal for its coverage that highlights development issues and seeks balanced geographic representation. Typical IPS output can be described as displaying an original point of view, presenting an alternative focus on current affairs and paying attention to background information. According to “IPS Staff 5,” a classic IPS story aspires to be “global with local flavour or local with a global slant.” Other positive aspects raised by the interviewees include the wide network of local correspondents, the geographical wide coverage and the editorial guideline to tell the story underneath the news story. This overall positive attitude towards IPS’s news copy is consistent with findings from the journalist survey (Joye 2006) and bi-annual client and users surveys conducted by IPS in 2005 and 2007. Nevertheless, this much appraised news copy is at the same time perceived as a potential weakness. Let us illustrate this remarkable paradox with some brief examples.

While according to “Scholar 4” it is precisely thanks to this “distinctly different news agenda” that IPS has managed to survive despite continuous financial constraints, “Scholar 7” and other critics such as Rauch (2003) and Giffard (1998b, 8) argue that “the kind of background news that IPS provides, while useful and important, is not particularly attractive to market-driven commercial media” and eventually leads to enduring financial constraints. When discussing the other dimensions, we will further reflect on the commercial value of IPS’s unique news agenda (see *infra*).

Other critical voices among our respondents referred to the geographical reach of the news output as a second example of this contradiction. IPS takes pride in its global network of local correspondents and stresses its wide journalistic focus on the global South. At the same time, some interviewees, including staff members and journalists, noted that certain regions have been historically neglected or not considered to be a key region in terms of allocated human resources and editorial attention. They mentioned Russia and the former USSR, certain Asian and Arabic regions, and to some extent even North America as contemporary blank spots in the IPS news map.

A third and arguably more important issue concerns the political orientation of IPS and its impact on the editorial product. Although previous research found the news copy to be both critical and balanced (cf. for instance Ogan and Rush 1985), several respondents and particularly journalists (see Joye 2006) find the overt

Southern and development focus often difficult to relate to Western journalistic values of objectivity and professionalism. Until late 2006, the corporate website stated that the content of IPS was “written and edited from the perspective of the developing world” (IPS 2006). Since its inauguration in 2003 and to its credit, the new management has taken several initiatives to deal with this dual and often conflicting image, both on organisational (see *infra*) and editorial level. Concerning the latter, the newly appointed editor-in-chief has set up a rigorous system of quality control, and since then “potentially biased stories have already been removed from the wire” according to ‘IPS Staff 5’.

A fourth remark concerning the copy involves the speed of the news service. In times when production and consumption of news is getting faster and faster, “IPS Staff 12,” for instance, regrets that IPS is “not breaking the news” and other interviewees, particularly those staff members and stakeholders working within Western media markets, commented in the same way. Unfortunately for IPS, that is the kind of service that journalists require from a news agency (Joye 2006). Manning (2001, 57) concluded that “although accuracy and authority are certainly important, it is the rapidity with which information can be distributed that secures reputation and contracts.” On the other hand, most scholars and IPS management members argued that this is precisely an essential part of IPS’s distinct profile that allows the agency to focus on the aftermath and background of events. In addition, some staff members and stakeholders overtly doubted that IPS has the financial and human resources to provide up-to-the-minute coverage of events (see *infra*).

A final comment related to the news copy and IPS’s public role touches upon technological innovations and structures of power in the digital news environment. Although information and communication technologies (ICTs) on the one hand have created new opportunities for the development of the news genre (Allan 2006) while on the other hand opening spaces for democratic engagement and contributing to a global civil society (Couldry and Curran 2003), news media have been rather slow to develop distinctive forms in response (Matheson 2004, 443). In recent years, IPS is steadily transforming itself from a text-based news wire into a multimedia actor. It has been developing a wide range of multimedia services such as a daily online news service, a weekly e-zine, podcasts, blogs and image databases along with a rapidly increasing web presence and experiments in providing content for mobile phones. These new applications complement and extend the news services for traditional media and allow IPS to attract more people with a richer flow of information. Confirming academic literature, our respondents however attributed the fast proliferation of ICTs and particularly of the Internet a dual role. On the one hand, it represents a fast and relatively cheap distribution network to bypass mainstream news reporting. On the other hand, as Rantanen and Boyd-Barrett (2004, 36) have argued, the Internet is also a source of more competition. The field of alternative media has witnessed the rise of a whole range of Internet-based initiatives developed by grassroots organisations and social movements. Our interviewees referred to Indymedia, Ourmedia.org and OhmyNews as notable examples. Emerging forms of journalism such as civic journalism and the popular blogging phenomenon were also identified as relevant alternatives to the mainstream news offer. In fact, precisely the characteristic kind of news that IPS is generally associated with, is now widely, directly and at minimal costs available on

the Internet (Giffard 2001). However, scholars have expressed concerns that with the rise of digital media, actually *new* opportunities for *old* exploitation are occurring (Harrison 2006, 37). In other words, it appears that the apparently undisturbed structures of (news) power will remain in force. Research has provided evidence for this persisting dominant role of the same major agencies in disseminating online news (Paterson 2001). According to “IPS Staff 4,” this is however “the key incentive” for IPS to continue developing its online activities and presence.

### Organisational Issues

A second topic discussed during the interviews dealt with issues regarding IPS’s organisational structure (and culture) in relation to its public role, and on the other hand (potential) partnerships with civil society actors as well as other media.

A recent landmark in the history of IPS has been the year 2003. Many staff members and stakeholders referred to 2003 as a defining year for IPS regarding its organisational structure, commercial activities and operational status. With the appointment of a new global management team and editor-in-chief and the subsequent implementation of a new editorial policy, significant progress was achieved in strengthening the news service. Regarding IPS’s public role and identity, several respondents however identified a lasting tension within the organisation. IPS has a long history of being active on two distinct fields: IPS is a professional news agency as well as a media for development player, a communication NGO. Opinions on this matter differ widely. Some perceived it to be a fundamental problem, others as a slumbering tension within the organisation, and even more people considered it to be just one of the many elements of IPS’s unique identity. This issue resonates back to earlier concerns raised by voices from inside and outside the organisation. As one respondent of our research project has formulated it: “IPS is often suspended between very different worlds which it is trying to serve all at once, but this is a balancing act IPS needs to achieve” (“IPS Staff 3”). Looking at the issue from the scholar’s outsider perspective, Rauch (2003, 90) has argued that the pro-development agenda of IPS has “cast doubt on the balance, objectivity, and accuracy of IPS coverage, which was seen by some as incompatible with the values and practices of Western journalism” and may have limited its market potential. The 2004 survey of journalists and editors also indicated a possible inconsistency between IPS’s two main roles (Joye 2006, 35) and as mentioned above, the issue was frequently brought up during the 2007 interviews. Staff members involved with editorial work rightly stressed the professional and independent nature of their work, but a large majority did admit that additional external communication would be helpful in conveying this to the general public and IPS’s clients, particularly journalists. Others, including management members and all stakeholders, emphasised the undeniable link between both identities in terms of shared ideals and public mission. They did not speak of conflicting interests but rather of a valuable synergy between IPS’s two roles. In their view, the NGO-identity differentiates IPS from other news agencies and creates opportunities to build alliances that others do not have. IPS should thus be conceived as a news agency “with something more” (“IPS Staff 13”). On the management side, the coexistence of IPS’s double identities has nevertheless been carefully monitored. As several management members have stated, it is quintessential that the journalistic independence cannot be compromised by any activity of

the NGO, but on the other hand they acknowledged the forces of synergy between the news agency and the NGO-driven component.

On another level, IPS is also tightly woven into a comprehensive network of NGOs and other civil society organisations concerned with global issues of development. Particularly through its online activities, IPS has succeeded in constructing multiple social and political relationships within the public sphere (Giffard and Van Leuven 2006). IPS currently plays an important role as a media and communication partner for various civil society organisations, likeminded donors and others. In recent years, the organisation has also been successful as a trustworthy “facilitator” (“Stakeholder 2”) or intermediary between civil society and (mainstream) media. Next to partnerships with civil society organisations, IPS has developed video and broadcast activities in cooperation with multimedia organisations such as Telesur, AMARC, RAI 24 (the international channel of Italian RAI) and Al-Jazeera with whom IPS has established some strategic agreements.

A final organisational topic deals with the marketing efforts and brand awareness of the agency. The majority of the staff members and stakeholders pointed towards the limited global visibility of IPS as an important future threat to the agency. Despite a global presence and network of local affiliates, IPS suffers from limited (brand) awareness in large parts of the world. Illustrative of this was the fact that even scholars active in the field of international communication as well as recently joined staff members were not fully aware of IPS’s global network and all of its activities. Previous research also signalled limited brand awareness within the key customer group of journalists (Joye 2006). In the past, marketing goals were too narrowly defined in terms of maintaining sales. Although almost all interviewees urged IPS to increase its marketing efforts and allocate more resources to the marketing department, at the same time they made the necessary differentiations by stressing that these increased efforts will however not result in a commercially viable and financially self-sustaining IPS. This leads us to the final dimension of the research project: the financial and human resources of IPS.

### Financial and Human Resources

In order to realise its mission and goals, each organisation must rely on sufficient financial and human resources. Related to our object of study, most alternative ventures operate on a shoestring budget and survive by the funding from Western aid agencies, NGOs and UN organisations. IPS is no exception to this rule as it mainly depends on donor grants that account for about half of its revenue (see *supra*). Related to this, “IPS Staff 3” signalled “an unequal geographic distribution of our donors.” Most donors still originate from Europe and the USA, although opportunities arise in the developing world. Given its goals and mission, IPS should be capable of getting some of the rapidly emerging countries such as China, India, South Africa and Brazil on board as new core donors, and has been successful to date with Brazil and India. Reflecting on future threats and challenges, all respondents identified the limited financial resources as the key issue to be addressed by IPS. It is urged to keep a close eye on emerging (Southern) markets to further expand and diversify its services and income sources. Some scholars, however, foresee a decrease in the sales of IPS’s news service as a growing number of media organisations cut in their expenses on foreign news coverage. In addition,

exchanges of information as part of partnerships or cooperation do not result in much financial gain while many (individual) users of IPS output use the service for free which indicates an uncharted marketing threat to the agency. One respondent, “Stakeholder 6,” aptly summarised the financial status of IPS by noticing that “IPS receives a lot of appraisal for its service but only very little financial return.” In short, our respondents argued that these enduring constraints have had and will continue to have a strong impact on the operation, staff and output of the agency. “IPS Staff 12,” for instance, explicitly referred to the previously mentioned blank spots in IPS’s global news map as a direct consequence of the limited financial and human resources.

Due to the recent growth of the organisation, IPS’s human resources are also dangerously overstretched. Many IPS staff members and journalists expressed that they are overloaded with work. Moreover, following the agency’s choice of working with a global network of local correspondents, IPS is confronted with particular challenges regarding its human resources management. Based on his experiences in the Middle East, “IPS Staff 7,” for instance, referred to the continuing difficulty of attracting skilled local journalists who can write in flawless English. Particularly in the developing world, it is hard to attract these journalists as they are over-solicited by the major Western news providers and local news organisations with international ambitions such as Al-Jazeera. Competitive salaries are a crucial factor in persuading these skilled journalists to join the global IPS network.

## Conclusion

Acknowledging that information is a decisive resource for the political and cultural action of publics around the globe (Jensen 1998, 9), this article reflected on the values and roles of a global alternative news agency as perceived by its staff members, stakeholders and independent scholars. Despite fierce competition and unfavourable contextual factors, it appears that IPS still manages to fill in a troublesome niche in the 21st century world of international news dissemination. Drawing on findings from previous studies and research presented in this article, IPS can be identified as being distinctly different from a conventional news agency, by content as well as by mission. It is perceived as being successful in challenging mainstream perceptions about the developing world and in promoting a more balanced international flow of information. The news agency and its characteristic news copy are considered a useful, relevant and necessary addition to mainstream (Western) news media as well as being a crucial source of information and partner for the global civil society.

Although we have encountered some conflicting opinions, our expert respondents from different backgrounds seem to hold a common idea about what IPS stands for. Most agreed with regard to the *unique selling proposition* of the news agency that was situated within its editorial qualities of providing the news behind the news in a refreshing, often daring, but always alternative way. This unique editorial perspective lies at the very heart of IPS and has survived several shifts in policy. However, for a significant minority of the respondents, in particular the media practitioners, IPS’s editorial quality and objectivity are at times threatened by the dual identity of IPS as a news agency as well as a development player. Other identified tensions dealt with the speed of the news service, the geographic reach of the news coverage

and its blank spots, IPS's limited financial and human resources, and the agency's transformation towards a multimedia actor. Digital media have created new ways of distributing its alternative message, but at the same time they confront IPS with additional (alternative) competition as well as old power structures.

In conclusion, we can refer to Thussu (2002, 252) who states that "an alternative to corporatised global communication is a moral imperative and a necessary democratic requirement." News media are the most vital information channels in any society and even hold the potential to act as "agents of democracy" (Allan 1999, 3-4). This article argues that a fundamental and lasting reason for the existence of IPS as such an agent of democracy lies in its contribution to challenge the status quo in global news media (online and "offline"). IPS represents a valuable alternative with the (global) potential to foster social change. By raising an alternative voice in an increasingly homogenous (news) world, Inter Press Service fulfils a unique role of sensitising the public to global inequalities and bridging the information gap between North and South.

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### Notes:

1. This article is based on a paper that was presented at the 2006 conference of the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) in Egypt where it was awarded the "IAMCR Prize in Memory of Herbert Schiller 2006".
2. Part of the research presented here was conducted for an independent evaluation of IPS, ordered by Oxfam-NOVIB in 2007 and completed by Stijn Joye (Ghent University) and Maria Pia Matta (AMARC).
3. Northern Belgium or Flanders is the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. Together with the French-speaking Wallonia, bilingual Brussels and the German-speaking region, it constitutes the federal state of Belgium.
4. For more information, see Joye 2006. In 2009, an undergraduate student of Ghent University conducted a similar evaluation of IPS Flanders. This follow-up study focused on online journalists, and its results confirmed the findings from the 2006 inquiry.

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## Appendix 1: List of Interviewees

Respondent	Country	Gender	Length of interview
IPS Staff 1	Scotland	Female	25min*
IPS Staff 2	Sri Lanka / USA	Male	30min*
IPS Staff 3	Belgium	Male	1h15min
IPS Staff 4	Uruguay	Male	1h07min
IPS Staff 5	Spain / Switzerland	Female	1h35min*
IPS Staff 6	India	Male	1h15min
IPS Staff 7	Egypt / Spain	Male	37min*
IPS Staff 8	USA	Female	40min*
IPS Staff 9	Uruguay	Male	1h45min
IPS Staff 10	Argentina	Male	40min
IPS Staff 11	Zimbabwe	Female	1h11min
IPS Staff 12	Philippines	Female	1h20min*
IPS Staff 13	Italy	Female	54min
Stakeholder 1	The Netherlands	Male	20min*
Stakeholder 2	Italy	Male	35min*
Stakeholder 3	France	Male	35min*
Stakeholder 4	Switzerland	Male	28min*
Stakeholder 5	The Netherlands	Male	20min*
Stakeholder 6	South Africa	Male	35min*
Scholar 1	UK	Male	21min
Scholar 2	UK	Male	25min
Scholar 3	The Netherlands	Male	20min
Scholar 4	UK / USA	Male	25min
Scholar 5	The Netherlands	Male	34min
Scholar 6	USA	Male	20min
Scholar 7	India / UK	Male	38min

\* This interview was conducted by telephone.

# CONSTRUCTED GLOBAL SPACE, CONSTRUCTED CITIZENSHIP

MICKY LEE

## Abstract

This article examines the relation between global space and citizenship by examining the cases of WTO meeting and Hong Kong Disneyland. Scholars assert that global space can unsettle naturalised social relations. Yet, an ambiguous and vague sense of citizenship and a neoliberal spatiotemporal frame constrain how the state, the media, and the locals interpret the meanings of space, and how citizenship is manifested in space. In the global space of the WTO meeting and the Hong Kong Disneyland, the Hong Kong Chinese identity is reinforced by demonising South Korean farmers and mainland Chinese.

Micky Lee is Assistant  
Professor of Media Studies  
at Suffolk University, Boston;  
e-mail:  
mickycheers@yahoo.com.

## Introduction

An increasingly integrated global economy has problematised space (Harvey 1989) just as the industrial revolution has problematised time. Advancement in new information and communication technologies is believed to conquer space and to accelerate economic transaction. The global financial market relies on telecommunications to survive; “just-in-time” production and outsourcing take advantages of space erosion for a 24-hour production cycle. Business executives negotiate virtually through teleconferencing and e-mail. Cable television and the Internet create a virtual space for consumers to shop and to indulge in a consumer lifestyle fantasy. Airlines, international hotel chains, global media and entertainment companies work hard to ensure world travellers never leave luxury comfort even when they are on the road.

Nevertheless, the access to space and the right to claim space is uneven. Whilst the affluent global north is not bounded by a geographical area, the global south is locked in a local area. The mobility of the global south is often questioned and scrutinised by lawmakers and the media. Laws and regulations deny the homeless, protestors and immigrants the right to space (D’Arcus 2006; Jameson 1998).

Critical scholars from cultural studies and political economy lament the increasingly privatised world dominated by transnational corporations. Public space from park to community radio, from arts and cultural venue to commercial-free Internet become more scarce. The state increasingly sees citizens as consumers who are vital to the economy. It is not surprising that Americans were urged to shop to show patriotism after the Sept 11 attack. Scholars and activists argue that citizenship will only flourish in public space, be it community media, public park or knowledge commons.

However, it is questionable if the provision of public space automatically leads to a stronger sense of citizenship. First, the concept of citizen implies universalism – that citizens have the same desires and needs. Cultural particularities are not taken into account in the undifferentiated citizen concept. As a result, gender, racial, ethnic, cultural and religious identities submerge under citizenship (Young 1990; 1994). The practice of citizenship has always excluded racial minorities, the oppressed class, and the economically disadvantaged (Roche 1994; Taylor 1994; Turner 1994; Croucher 2003; Heater 2004; Magnette 2005). Locke, Spinoza, Rousseau and Kant all believed that rationality is required for citizenship; hence, they disqualified women, minority groups, slaves and the poor as citizens.

Second, there is an assumption that citizens themselves understand their rights and obligations and that they find citizenship meaningful. The disengagement from citizenship is not merely due to a lack of education; it is a result of voluntary or forced migration, colonisation and decolonisation, oppression, marginalisation, war and state violence, privatisation of common goods, and commercialisation of the state and the media.

Third, the availability of and the access to space do not lead to citizenry if a neoliberal spatiotemporal ideology constrains citizens’ imagination of space. David Harvey argues in *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference* (1996) that a hegemonic spatiotemporal frame is a meta-narrative of postmodernity; this dominant ideology of time-space relation has to be understood through examining the

historical materialist nature of how time and space are constructed. To Harvey (1989), globalisation is a spatial problem, a “spatial fix” is thus employed to absorb excessive labor and capital.

The boundary between public space and private space is increasingly blurred. For example, the international coffee chain Starbucks has successfully created a pseudo-public space in a private space. Patrons can sit in the coffee shop without interference from the staff. The Starbucks experience probes public libraries to be more like a private operator by offering beverage service and plush sofas. The blurring of the boundary not only allows the state to gather revenue from corporate sponsorship, it also helps corporations to appear more like a public service.

Because the concept of citizenship has the potential to suppress minority interests and it may not be meaningful to all citizens, the state and corporations can exploit the term “citizen” to achieve their political economic goals. To most people living in developed countries (and arguably in developing countries), they may have difficulty to recite how their citizens rights are protected by the laws. Yet they may have little problem with reciting some recent TV advertisements. After all, being a consumer is a more tangible experience than being a citizen. Money, not a particular gender, race, or ethnicity, is all one needs to be a consumer. Values such as success, sex appeal, love, family used in advertisements resonate with consumers more than abstract concepts such as equality and democracy.

Given the above three assumptions about citizenship and space, it is desirable to examine the process of how citizenry is constructed by the state, corporation, and citizens in a local setting (Jones and Garento 2002; Lister et al. 2005). Citizenry has to be articulated and negotiated in space. The meanings of citizenship change when the meanings of space change. Specifically, this paper looks at the construction of citizenship in a constructed global space – defined here as a strategic site (usually a city) that accumulates global investment. Bauman (1998) characterises global capital as “footloose,” it flows to where profit is. A neoliberal spatiotemporal order constrains how social actors experience space and how they make meanings of it. Global space attracts both highly paid executives as well as the global underclass (Isin and Wood 1999; Sassen 2001). The influx of workers, tourists, business executives to a dynamic, fluid, ever-changing global space probes social actors to renegotiate social relations (Harvey 1989; Massey 2005).

As a global city, a Special Administrative Region of China, and a former British colony, Hong Kong provides many examples to show how the state actively builds global space to attract global capital after decolonisation. The question of the Hong Kong Chinese identity has interested scholars prior to and after the handover in 1997. Yet few have examined how the changing meanings of space relate to the construction of the Hong Kong Chinese identity. The two events that illustrate the construction of citizenship in a global space are the Sixth WTO Ministerial Conference in 2005 and the construction of the Hong Kong Disneyland. In the case of the WTO meeting, the arrival of international delegates and protestors could have probed the locals to rethink what public space means and how citizenship is created in space. However, the media interpret the meanings of space with a capitalist spatiotemporal ideology. In the case of Hong Kong Disneyland, both the state and the Disney Corporation justified the construction of the park by replacing the concept of citizen with consumer. Both instances of global space have opened

up questions of citizenship, race, and ethnicity in a local setting. Rather than confronting issues related to the Hong Kong Chinese identity, race, and ethnicity in the global economy, the local media opted to single out South Korean farmers and mainland Chinese as villains who threatened the Hong Kong economy and the Hong Kong Chinese identity.

## The Hong Kong Chinese Identity, Colonial Place, Postmodern Space

In order to attract global capital, states and cities have to develop strategies to stay competitive in the global economy. The astonishing economic development of the four Asia's little tigers is viewed as model examples that developing countries can follow to survive an economic globalisation. A locally situated analysis is needed to examine how the state has historically justified political and economic arrangements through the discourse of citizenship. The sense of citizenship that has been constructed is hardly an inclusive concept. To these days, there is no satisfactory Chinese term for the concept of Hong Kong citizens. In Chinese, "Hong Kong people" and "Hongkonger" are the two closest but unsatisfactory terms. This paper uses the term "Hong Kong Chinese" because, as will be argued below, the citizen concept is racially and ethically exclusive. Precisely because there is no Chinese term for Hong Kong citizen, the state, the media and the locals have reinvented the Hong Kong Chinese identity to fit their goals, particularly during political and economic unstable times.

When Hong Kong was annexed as a British colony in 1842, there was no "Hong Kong Chinese" – there were Chinese (as a race) and Westerners. Although most Westerners were British, the ambiguous Chinese term "sea people" was used rather than British. In the first hundred years of colonisation, Hong Kong was a fluid space. Westerners came to Hong Kong to govern, to trade, and to preach. Chinese moved across the border between Hong Kong and mainland China freely. There was no active government programme to establish Hong Kong as a home for both Westerners and Chinese.

Turner and Ngan (1995) argue that the Hong Kong Chinese identity was manufactured and imposed upon the population by the colonial government in the 1960s. It was essential to create a place, a permanent home, for Hong Kong Chinese. Students underwent a colonial education learned that Hong Kong is an "east-meets-west, international city." Hong Kong Chinese, as the locals call themselves, were described in government literature as westernised Chinese who follow Chinese traditions but enjoy western modernity.<sup>1</sup>

The "Star Ferry Riot" in the sixties was reckoned to be the incident that alarmed the colonial government that communist-backed groups may cause social unrest and may overturn colonial rules. A dramatic fare hike proposed by the Star Ferry Company ignited the locals to stage protests against an oppressive colonial regime. The state believed that the protest was supported by communist groups, so it employed violence to stop the demonstration. Soon after, in order to discourage the locals from identifying with the Chinese Communist Party, the colonial government designed a Hong Kong Chinese identity for the locals. The state and the media often use women to represent modernity (Young 2003; Rajan 2004 on the case of India). A gendered identity, the "factory girl," was hence designed: she was an economi-

cally independent, new woman who laboured to boost Hong Kong productivity. After work, she enjoyed modern and western entertainment such as catching a Cantonese film or listening to the Beatles (who were flown to Hong Kong by the colonial government).

This manufactured notion of “Hong Kong Chinese” is a race/ethnicity-based, consumer identity. Hong Kong had become a home that could not accommodate non-Chinese. Non-Chinese minorities such as South Asians were and still are treated as foreign subjects – even though some of them have lived in Hong Kong for generations. British and other western nationals were seen as the superior “Other” whilst Indians and Filipinos were treated as the inferior “Other.” By designing the Hong Kong Chinese identity, the state has successfully used race and ethnicity to reduce locals’ hostility towards the colonial government by oppressing the non-white, racial/ethnic minorities. Race is used by the state to achieve political ends (Cynthia Enloe cited in Croucher 2003; Abah and Okwori 2005).

The Hong Kong Chinese identity campaign was clearly a successful one. By the 1980s, this identity was portrayed in popular culture and government literature as a modern, westernised, English-Cantonese bilingual who lives a fast life in the hustle-bustle of the skyscraper city. This Hong Kong Chinese is unlikely to be fluent in Mandarin, nor is she knowledgeable of Chinese politics and contemporary culture (incidentally, Chinese history textbooks curiously left out any mention of the People’s Republic of China and the Chinese Communist Party). This Hong Kong Chinese is fearful of the communist regime yet she has an abstract notion of Chinese nationalism (Teo 1997). On the other hand, she is not a patriot of Britain and is indifferent to British culture and politics. The ambiguous identity is best illustrated by Hong Kong Chinese’s support of the Chinese team at Olympic but of the English football team at the World Cup. The consumer lifestyle that Hong Kong Chinese led differentiated them from mainland Chinese, who at that time still lived in a relatively closed-door Communist China. The Hong Kong Chinese identity epitomises what a postmodern identity ought to be – fragmented, hybridised, consumerist, popular culture-oriented, ever changing, and amnesic of history (Abbas 1997; Stokes and Hoover 1999).

The process of decolonisation had created a context for Hong Kong Chinese to question the permeability of Hong Kong as a home. The Beijing Massacre in 1989 and the Sino-British negotiations of the city’s future stirred up heated debate about the implications on citizenship. A tangible colonial place that had been the “home” of Hong Kong Chinese has suddenly transformed into a liminal, intangible space of uncertainty. Massey (2005) writes that place is often seen as closed and coherent; as “home” or a secure retreat. Space, on the other hand, is an open field full of possibilities but uncertainties. Beijing’s refusal to implement a democratic political system and its employment of violence on June Fourth intensified the uncertainty and fear among Hong Kong people. Since the commencement of the Sino-British negotiations in 1984, the well-to-do and the professional class hurried to emigrate to Canada, the US, Australia, and the UK for a more certain future in a place that would not dissolve into space. Although Deng Xiaoping promised “fifty years no change” after the handover, the Hong Kong homeland would gradually dissolve into her motherland China, which is made alien to Hong Kong Chinese both politically and economically.

On the British side, fearing the arrival of a few millions Hong Kong-born Chinese, the British Government ruled them to be naturalised British nationals (overseas), BN(O) in short, who have no rights to abode in the UK. BN(O) is space-bound and time-bound; it cannot be passed on to the next generation. The BN(O) status is only an indication that one is born in a British colony, it does not guarantee any citizen rights under British laws. When Hong Kong ceased to be a colony, BN(O) became a memory, an identity of the past.

In order to curb the uncertainty that Hong Kong people felt towards the dissolving homeland into space, the government teamed up with entertainers to run a “Hong Kong is my home” campaign. Canclini (2001) and Croucher (2003) both agree that citizenship is a sense of emotional belonging and it provides a sense of difference. Home is a powerful metaphor for a private, enclosed space for one to develop an emotional attachment.

A decade after Hong Kong became the Special Administrative Region (SAR) of China, the city-state government, the PRC, and the locals still attempt to determine what Hong Kong is to China, and what China is to the world. An integrated global economy has impacted nation-states of different sizes and different political systems. To examine the transformation of Hong Kong as a space governed by neoliberal economic rules, it is essential to take into account both the transforming political economic power of China and the Chinese Central government’s determination to show the world the feasibility of “one country, two systems.”

As a small city-state, Hong Kong has to re-invent its narrative for both the local and the global audience to survive the economic globalisation. Facing the rise of Shanghai as an international city, and neighbouring Shenzhen as a gigantic export processing and a special economic zone, the Hong Kong SAR government reinvents Hong Kong as an “Asia’s world city.” Abbas would call it a *déjà disparu* identity: “what is new and unique about the situation is always already gone, and we are left holding a handful of clichés, or a cluster of memories of what has never been” (Abbas 1997, 23). This newly designed identity reinforces the postmodern, hypercommercial, and capitalistic nature of colonial Hong Kong. The geographical locale that Hong Kong identifies with is Asia, a vast continent that is culturally diverse. Whilst China is a political economic entity that is confined to a nation-state boundary, Asia is an imagined region constructed by the West during the colonial era. Hong Kong’s former self, an international city is a physical meeting place for different nationals; on the other hand, Hong Kong’s present self, a world/global city, is imagined to be a boundaryless space that serves as a node for the flow of capital, personnel, technologies, culture, and ideas. The identity “Asia’s world city,” more so than the former colonial self “an east-meets-west international city,” erases cultural and political attachment to China. According to Sassen (2001), global cities connect to each other more than to their respective states. The reference points that Hong Kong chose are not China, but Shanghai, Beijing, Singapore, Taipei, and possibly Tokyo. In order to prove that Hong Kong is indeed a world city, the SAR government accommodated two visible global power—the WTO and Disney.

### The Freedom-Loving Capital

The Sixth WTO Ministerial Conference took place in Hong Kong in 2005. To both its supporters and critics, the WTO represents a global power in international trade.



The power locus of the global political economy is “foot loose,” Zygmunt Bauman (1998) calls it the “bodylessness” of power. The power is not rooted in a place, rather it flows around space. Nevertheless, neoliberal globalisation in the form of global talk requires a specific locale to manifest itself. Globalisation manifests itself in an intensely local setting; yet the contexts are the least local (Appadurai 2001). Similar to previous WTO conferences, global movements protest at the WTO meeting in Hong Kong attracted intense local and international media interest. Klein (2004) claimed that protestors take back the commons by questioning the relations between citizenship and space by occupying public place. However, most local residents experienced the WTO protest from news outlets. The media interpret what space means, and how citizenship is experienced in a global space.

Literature on the relationship between the media and social protests has provided a rich foundation upon which the media coverage of mass demonstration can be studied. Most studies assert that the media frame social protests as events of news values, and that organisational norms and practices govern the news frame (Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993). At the same time, the media utilise tactics to present themselves as objective, detached, and neutral (Gitlin 1980; Hackett 1993; Hertog and McLeod 1995). Local media coverage of the WTO protest used a lot of commonly-recognised news values<sup>2</sup>: *official sources* (Gitlin 1980; Kim 2000; Chen 2005); *elite interests* (Gitlin 1980; Hackett 1993; Small 1994; Hertog and McLeod 1995; McLeod 1995; Undrakhbuyan 2005); *violence* (Gitlin 1980; Hackett 1993; Small 1994; Martindale 1989; McLeod 1995; DeLuca and Peeples 2002; Kruse 2003); *deviance* (Gitlin 1980; Shoemaker 1984; Hackett 1993); *sensational elements* (Gitlin 1980; Hertog and McLeod 1995); and *focus on the individuals* (Gitlin 1980; Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993; Small 1994; Hertog and McLeod 1995).

Past studies tend not to examine how the media represent space. As institutions with economic motivations, the media are governed by a neoliberal spatiotemporal order. For example, evening news is broadcast at a time when the economically active population begins their leisure time in a private setting; salient news items are allocated with more time; advertising time is sold to generate revenue (Moore 2005). Not only are news items edited in a capitalistic fashion, the spatiotemporal order represented in news stories also adheres to the neoliberal economic principles.

Critical scholars agree that public streets and space are common goods: in a democratic society, citizens can participate in street protests; citizens can gather in public places for social, cultural and political purposes; citizens have the rights to feel safe in the streets. In contrast, in a consumer society, the streets are transformed into shopping and commerce zones where *flâneurs* stroll, observe, and consume. Some cities have restricted citizens' right to use public space. For example, the city of Seattle has passed a city regulation that prohibits individuals from sitting down on a sidewalk if not for emergency assistance, rallies, parades, waiting for buses, or consuming food and beverage in a street cafe (Mitchell 2003). A translation of this regulation reads: the homeless cannot sit on a sidewalk because they will bring inconvenience to the locals and the tourists. The homeless citizens' rights to space are blatantly denied in an increasingly privatised world. Assessing the urban space in Hong Kong, Cuthbert and McKinnell stated that:

*Given the nature of urban development in the context of Hong Kong, history is slowly extinguished, rights are lost, urban space becomes increasingly*

*subject to surveillance and policing, human activities become restricted and the public realm loses its clarity as a symbol of civil society* (Cuthbert and McKinnell 1997, 296).

During the meeting period, the convention venue and its surrounding area were transformed into a sacred global space. The WTO meeting site at the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre was transformed to symbolise a space where “globalisation is in process.” Broadcast news helped to construct a familiar local site into a culturally-nonspecific space that represents “global power.” The Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre is connected to a number of financial buildings in the area by pedestrian bridges, which are like arteries to the heart. In order to protect the heart of global economy, the police protected the veins as well. The vulnerability of this global space was accentuated by the police’s painstaking security efforts. Similarly, after Sept 11 attack, along with the White House, Disneyland also increased security; McDonald’s and Starbucks, symbols of economic globalisation, were sites for attack during the WTO protest in Seattle.

In a global space, the global north has the maximum access to space whilst the mobility of the global south is scrutinised and monitored. The media intensely scrutinised how protestors (in particular, South Korean farmers) moved around the city while questioning their rights to visit and to mobility. In contrast to the luxury hotels where the WTO delegates stayed at and the flashy cars that transported them to the meeting venue, the media showed the dilapidated city hostels and recreation houses where the protestors stayed at. The protestors were marginalised spatially and economically: The media pointed out that the protestors brought along cup noodles and fruit to Hong Kong. Unlike Disneyland tourists, the media did not view protesters as tourists who might benefit Hong Kong economically. The media acted like a prison guard stationed in a panopticon by continuously scrutinising the “criminals.” The media closely monitored the behaviour of South Korean protestors – from their napping and exercising in public parks, to the uniforms and national costumes that they wore during protest. On the contrary, the story assigned insignificant roles to WTO delegates; EU Commissioner Peter Mandelson occasionally acted as the talking head to remind the public that the WTO negotiations were indeed in process. The little airtime allocated to WTO delegates seemed to legitimise the activities inside the convention; hence they needed no monitoring from the media.

Space of representations made protests visible to the local and the media (Mitchell 2003). Scholars commonly reckon that the media do not report news, but construct reality and represent it as the truth. Although global movements protestors have become more savvy to use space, their actions are mediated by the media. TV news constructs protest as exotic, violent spectacle that needs to be surveyed and monitored. News stations strategically dispersed reporters to a number of public sites to provide the audience with multiple localities simultaneously. Low angle shots were commonly used to capture street protests. Insufficient knowledge of grassroots movements led journalists to interpret for the audience what the protest tactics meant. A journalist called the protest “carnival-like”; another interpreted street theatre, performance, and story-telling as entertainment and called them “music night show” and “cultural show.” The neoliberal spatio-temporal order has constrained how space is understood and used by citizens. The powerful

entertainment industry in Hong Kong has naturalised all forms of performance as consumption and has denied the political agency of the performers. In a truly public sphere, means of expression such as singing, dancing, and acting are practices through which citizens exercise their agency to probe for social change and collective action.

If the WTO delegates represent the global north and the protestors represent the global south, then where are Hong Kong people? Sassen (2001) asserted that global cities provide a space for the global underclass to form coalition. Although social relations can be reinforced in a global space, the fluidity of global space can also unsettle naturalised social relations. For example, although few Hong Kong Chinese are farmers, the working poor can identify with the harsh living condition of farmers elsewhere. Instead the media downplayed the significance of the fluidity of global space. It encouraged Hong Kong Chinese to seek home – a physical locale at times of uncertainty. Juxtaposed with what the media called a colourful march were clips of interviewed citizens who expressed their fear of violence and their desire to go home. When it is uncertain who has the right to claim space, home becomes a powerful metaphor for a sense of attachment and belonging. As discussed, the Hong Kong government told Hong Kong Chinese that Hong Kong is “our home” during times of political uncertainty.

In order to accommodate the WTO meeting, the Hong Kong government heavily restricted traffic in the downtown area. The media highlighted stories about traffic detour, suspension of public services and businesses, and the inconvenience experienced by the public; only the economically active population was seen as citizens (Dagnino 2005; Lister et al. 2005). The working public, small business owners and taxi drivers were used to represent citizens’ voice. The media did not care too much about how the economically inactive and the marginalised citizens (such as the homeless) felt about the road blocks. Filipino domestic helpers in Hong Kong gather in public space on holidays; a restricted downtown area may limit their rights to gather. However, as the media and the government have long neglected the citizen rights of this labour class of foreign national, their right to space was not deemed as an issue.

When asked how the government can help employees to commute to work, an official advised companies to implement flexible workdays for employees, and advised employees to take annual leave or telecommute from home. To the government, workers’ inconvenience should be subordinate to that of the companies and Hong Kong productivity. The Hong Kong Chief Executive and the Conference Chairman both expressed empathy for the Hong Kong people but insisted that citizens need to contribute to Hong Kong’s commitment to free trade. This illustrates Jameson’s (1998) point that the freedom of capital compromises citizens’ freedom of mobility. After the WTO meeting, the Chief Executive and various high-level officials staged a high-profile PR event for the media. The government expressed its concerns to affected businesses, and proposed to bus mainland Chinese tourists to affected areas to stimulate consumption. As will be further discussed in the next section, mainland Chinese are only granted mobility in the city if they consume.

Some citizens questioned their rights to mobility, but they tended to blame the protesters and government officials rather than the WTO delegates. This illustrates that the most powerful have the privilege to maximum mobility and enjoy a com-

mand of space. The government and the media affirm WTO delegates' legitimacy as political actors, hence their behaviours and actions were not monitored at all. Similarly, large companies could choose the sites of operation and control the flow of labour through renting office space elsewhere and through demanding employees for accommodation at the expense of employees' extra time to commute.

Whilst some Hong Kong Chinese expressed a desire to go home in the disorienting global space (Morley and Robin 1995), others were spectators in global space. In the majority of news reports, Hong Kong Chinese were represented as passive onlookers who took pictures and recorded video of the events from *outside* the protest areas. The behaviour of the onlookers was not unlike those of Disney visitors. As will be mentioned in the next section, a consumer society has trained members to be quiet citizens. Thoroughly trained as consumers, Hong Kong Chinese view protests as a spectacle like a Disney parade where onlookers can be passive participants who consume images of no depth. In line with what Baudrillard wrote about simulacra (Baudrillard 2001), Hong Kong Chinese believe that the images do not represent anything other than the images themselves. This postmodern understanding of protests epitomises how a neoliberal spatiotemporal order has masked material relations as symbolic ones.

There were few instances in which the media reported on Hong Kong Chinese who transcended naturalised social relations. A few sympathetic Hong Kong Chinese expressed pity towards the South Korean protestors. Women were used to represent the Mother whose love transcends cultural, linguistic, national, racial, and ethnic boundary: a woman was shown treating South Korean farmers to Cantonese dim sum, and she was quoted as feeling sorry for their economic deprivation. Another woman told a TV journalist that she has wept after watching the protest. In both cases, South Korean protestors were reduced to the status of children who needed to be taken care of by a Mother.

The media have largely neglected Hong Kong Chinese who participated in the protest as public citizens. The media barely mentioned there were Hong Kong citizens among the protesters but gave no exact number. A news story showed a marching local public servant who expressed concerns about the privatization of the service industry and the potential harm that it would pose to local workers. This story was not followed up. Furthermore, the media questioned the rationality of two Hong Kong citizens who joined South Korean farmers waiting to be arrested.

Global space could unsettle naturalised social relations by having the global north interacts with the global south. In the Hong Kong media coverage of the WTO meeting, the media sidetracked the relations between the WTO delegates and the protestors. It instead focused on the relations between the protestors and Hong Kong Chinese. The antagonising relation is reinforced by the difference between South Korean farmers and Hong Kong Chinese in a global space.

Social groups are pitted against one another for economic survival in the global economy. Factory owners exploit predominately women workers by threatening that their exploitative jobs will be *taken away* to another country if they do not accept the long hours and the low pay. American workers are told by politicians that overseas workers have *taken away* their jobs. African American workers gradually find their low-paying jobs have been *taken away* by Hispanic workers. The race to the bottom occurs locally, nationally, and globally. In the media coverage of the WTO

protest in Hong Kong, South Korean farmers were singled out as the group that clogged the flow of money and capital of Hong Kong, and hence the livelihood of the population. WTO delegates and other proponents of the global economy were not alleged in the media to be the powerful social actors who decide how the production, distribution and consumption of goods, wealth and resources should be allocated. The footloose global capital was not blamed for job losses. Instead, a different, alien group is said to *take away* the rights to survive from some other groups.

## Disney Citizens

*For many men and women, especially youth, the questions specific to citizenship, such as how we inform ourselves and who represents our interests, are answered more often than not through private consumption of commodities and media offerings than through the abstract rules of democracy or through participation in discredited political organizations (Canclini 2001, 5).*

The second case of global space discussed is the construction of Hong Kong Disneyland. This case is illustrative of how public money was used to build a private, global space in the name of benefitting the public. Ironically, private space such as Disneyland has become a site that resembles a public space in an increasingly privatised world. Disneyland citizens are those who consume both material goods and images. Similar to the case of WTO protest, a global space unsettles social relations. Yet the media seized the chance to reinforce the consumerist ideal of the Hong Kong Chinese identity while singling out mainland Chinese as clueless consumers.

The innocent discourse of Disney has taught consumers to be quiet citizens who question little about social relations and regulated practices. Disneyland exemplifies a neoliberal, global space. Disneyland can be built in any city in the world as long as the location can attract enough visitors. Regardless of the geographical location, Disneyland is void of any local reference. Visitors are reminded that they are in the magic kingdom. The capital that funds Disneyland is footloose. The Disney Corporation can sell its stakes in Hong Kong Disneyland and charge for management and licencing fees only. Tokyo Disneyland, for instance, is not owned by the Disney Corporation.

In order to fulfil its ambition to be the Asia's World City, the Hong Kong government used public money and exploited public trust to reach the business deal with Disney. Hong Kong Disneyland is a collaboration between the Disney Corporation and the Hong Kong Government. Disney hopes the amusement park will provide an avenue for mainland Chinese to learn to be Disney citizens/consumers before the Chinese Central Government loosens regulations on imported foreign films and television shows. The Hong Kong Government believes that the park will help to establish Hong Kong as a global city (Lo 2005). Defending the exorbitant amount to build the park, the former Chief Secretary Anson Chan said that both Disney and Hong Kong are internationally well-known brand names, hence one cannot put a price on Disney choosing Hong Kong as a partner.<sup>3</sup>

The government paid for 90 percent of the construction costs but it only owns 57 percent of the park. It also has to bear the cost of building a new railroad, public facilities (such as a fire station), and infrastructure (such as highway). At the initial stage, the government's astronomical expenditure on the construction and

infrastructure far exceeds the potential profits. The negotiation was hardly democratic; the public was not informed of the closed doors talk until the agreement was reached. To defend the question of whether the business deal is fair, the former Chief Secretary responded that Hong Kong people could assume ownership of the park. The discourse of “ownership” society asks citizens to realign themselves as stockholders in a private market in which the individual is a consumer who makes rational choices about expenditures (Miller 2007). The Financial Secretary further urged the public to focus on the economic return to the community. However, some Christian groups doubted if the working class would benefit. Furthermore, Disneyland employees are subject to some appalling working conditions: short notice of work schedule, 13-hour workday, unpaid lunch break, inadequate recess time and rest area.<sup>4</sup>

As a private space, Disneyland attempts to replicate many remnants of public space. One of the main attractions Main Street USA is modelled after the town centre of US Midwest small towns in the early 1900s. Main Street USA was imagined to be a place where citizens meet and exchange latest news. The daily parade borrows its concept from Independence Day parade where citizens practise citizenship by showing patriotism. Regardless of one’s gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, and age, visitors are treated equally and courteously by staff members. Once visitors enter the park, they are free to roam around the park without interference. In a privatised world, it is gradually difficult for citizens to walk in a roomy space that is safe, clean, and commercial-free. The identical treatment that all visitors receive may be disguised as equality in a democracy.

Disneyland is constructed as a space where there is no death, no sickness, no sadness, no terror, and no everyday worries (Wasko 2001). Disneyland management carefully plans how the park is utilised, including how visitors should occupy space, how they should flow in space, and how much time they should spend in a particular space.

Disney also controls interpretation of the park by actively rejecting any negotiated and oppositional readings of it. When the mother of this author pointed out the Saharan animals in the Adventureland are fake, the boat captain replied that they are actually real. The second time when we took the boat trip, a different captain delivered the same script, but we learned how to answer the questions correctly.

Disney’s ambition is to shape how visitors think, behave, and act in the way that the company wants them to (Giroux 2000). It wants to turn consumers into Disney citizens who have a sense of belonging to the Disney world. Not only does Disney dismiss cultural differences in meaning-making, the park management also ignores local laws by refusing two uniformed food inspectors to enter the park.<sup>5</sup> The park is constructed in a remote part of Hong Kong where space is devoid of any geographical and cultural references. Visitors at Disneyland are not supposed to believe they are in Hong Kong or China, but in the magical Disneyland. The Hong Kong Government wanted the park to reflect Chinese culture, but Disney rejected by arguing that visitors should have a genuine Disney experience (Slater 1999). Disney changed its mind only after the park failed to attract enough mainland Chinese tourists (Fowler 2008).

In order to ensure the flow of consumers to Disneyland, the Hong Kong government encourages the flow of mainland Chinese tourists to Hong Kong to consume.

The Hong Kong Government believed that Disneyland would magically lift Hong Kong out of economic recession. Encountering the declining number of tourists after 1997, the Hong Kong Government heavily lobbied the Chinese Central Government to relax tourist regulation so that more mainland Chinese could visit Hong Kong to consume. The Chinese National Tourism Administration abolished the tourist quota system in 2002 and banks were allowed to exchange foreign currency. Launched in 2003, “individual visit scheme” (the Chinese name is appropriately called “freedom walk”) allowed residents in four Guangdong cities to travel overseas without joining a tour group. As of 2006, residents of the entire Guangdong province and those of 21 cities in other provinces were permitted to travel to 81 countries (the US not being one of them). Hong Kong benefits economically: In 2005, more than half of the 23 million visitors were mainland Chinese; 2.5 million of them visited Disneyland in the first two months.<sup>6</sup> The Hong Kong government even suggested to the Chinese Central government that special Disney visa could be granted to mainland Chinese visitors.

The flow of mainland Chinese visitors has an implication on an international division of labour in a global space, which alters social relations and unsettles the meaning of Hong Kong Chinese. Locals who work in the tourist industry find themselves serving mainland Chinese who historically have been seen as a backward, uncivilised, lower class under the colonial “Hong Kong Chinese” discourse. The consumption power of mainland Chinese tourists is now comparable to, if not superior to that of tourists from other countries. If consumption power no longer differentiates Hong Kong Chinese from mainland Chinese, then what is left of this constructed identity? Similar to how the media singled out South Korean farmers as the villains who endangered the livelihood of Hong Kong Chinese during the WTO protest, Disney management and the local media singled out mainland Chinese visitors as bad citizens. In a private space, a bad citizen is someone who does not spend enough.

The management feels that mainland Chinese tourists need to modify their behaviour so that the park can run more smoothly. For example, the park found Chinese tourists spend a lot of time taking pictures, spend little money on souvenirs, and crowd at the restaurants at the same time. As the park does not understand why, unlike Americans, mainland Chinese eat lunch only during lunch hours, the management decides education is essential to change visitors’ behaviour. The remedy is to control imagination (Wasko 2001). The park issues a one-page Chinese guide instructing tourists how to enjoy Disneyland, and why it is enjoyable (Fowler and Marr 2006). The company also runs television advertisements in mainland China explicating how to enjoy Disneyland with family. The advertising executive stated that the park has to hold the hands of Chinese consumers and tell them what to expect (Marr and Fowler 2006). Both the Hong Kong Government and the park hope to familiarise mainland Chinese with Disney by having Disney characters tour major Chinese cities and by broadcasting TV programmes starring Hong Kong and mainland pop stars to introduce the theme park.<sup>7</sup>

The local media reinforce the difference between mainland Chinese and Hong Kong Chinese by highlighting the former’s ignorance of consumer lifestyle. For example, for games that require verbal explanation, visitors can queue at the Cantonese line (for Hong Kong Chinese), the Mandarin line (for mainland Chinese

and Taiwanese), or the English line (for the rest). The media advise the locals to line up at the English line if the Cantonese one is long because the Mandarin line is said to be less orderly and civilised. The local media tirelessly contrast the differences between Hong Kong Chinese and mainland Chinese. The former were portrayed as jaded, sophisticated consumers who are well-versed in the rules of consumption. The locals compared the Hong Kong park with those overseas and lamented inadequate space and choices. The mainland Chinese, on the other hand, were portrayed as clueless consumers who have little respect for civil behaviour and little regard for personal hygiene. Similar to South Korean farmers during the WTO protest, the use of space of mainland Chinese in Disneyland is scrutinised. For example, visitors are not allowed to sit on the sidewalk because this behaviour is associated with mainland Chinese.

## Returning to Space

Political economists and cultural studies theorists both argue that citizenship can only be fostered in public space. Yet, it is unknown if public space automatically creates a stronger citizenship. This paper argues that practice of citizenship has to be understood in a local setting because (1) the concept of citizenship implies universalism without taking particularities into account; (2) there is an assumption that social actors understand what citizenship means and find it meaningful; (3) a neoliberal spatiotemporal ideology governs how space is interpreted.

This paper looks at how the state, the media, and the locals interpret the meanings of space and construct citizenship during the WTO meeting and inside the Hong Kong Disneyland. Due to British colonisation and then re-unification with China, the Hong Kong Chinese identity is argued to be a vague and ambiguous form of citizenship. It is more of a racially/ethnically exclusive and consumerist identity. Precisely because of its unclear nature, the meanings of citizenship can be molded by the state, the media, the corporation, and the locals to achieve political economic purpose.

Scholars have argued that naturalised social relations can be unsettled in global space, yet global space can also solidify the interests of a particular social group. Facing the changing social relations under an integrated global economy, social groups often respond by asserting their group rights in the forms of cultural politics, ethnic identities, local communities, nationalism, and religious fundamentalism (Islin and Wood 1999; Robertson 1995; Della Porta et al. 2006). The disfranchised population often looks up to the media to learn who they are as citizens (Croucher 2003).

The cases of the WTO meeting and Hong Kong Disneyland are two illustrative but different examples to show how the state, the media and the locals reinforce the Hong Kong Chinese identity by demonising the Other – South Korean farmers in the WTO meeting and mainland Chinese in Hong Kong Disneyland. Appropriating a neoliberal spatiotemporal frame, the media believe space should facilitate a maximum flow of capital. Therefore when WTO protestors make themselves visible in public space and when mainland Chinese flout rules in Disneyland, the media highlighted how these two social groups endangered Hong Kong economy and the Hong Kong Chinese identity.

Although the cases of WTO meeting and Hong Kong Disneyland are representative of how global space is interpreted and how that interpretation is related



to the construction of citizenship, there are many cases in which the neoliberal spatiotemporal order may not apply. It is unarguable that Hong Kong is a global city, but is everywhere in Hong Kong a global space? To give an extreme example, is prison a global space? There are instances that show global space is temporarily void of global capital accumulation. For example, the very streets that WTO protestors marched on have also held a few, large-scaled mass demonstration in which Hong Kong people showed their grievances towards the bad governance during the tenure of the first Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa. In that context, was the global space no longer global because it does not accumulate capital? Did the global space return to public space?

The above questions imply that as powerful as (economic) globalisation theories and international political economy are to explain the changing nature of space and social relations, they do have their blindspots.

### Notes:

1. As someone who grew up in Hong Kong and underwent a colonial education from kindergarten to graduate school, this section was written from an interpretivist, autoethnographic perspective.
2. The television news examined come from the Chinese channels of the two Hong Kong television stations TVB and ATV. TVB, in particular, almost monopolies the local television market by owning 80 percent market share of broadcast television. Its status is unchallenged by the underdog ATV and the newcomer cable television. It is possible that TV audience watch the evening news of both stations as ATV's one starts at six and TVB's half an hour later. WTO-related news from the time period December 5, 2005-January 2, 2006 were used for the analysis
3. "Chief Secretary for Administration: Hong Kong Disneyland A Sound Investment." Hong Kong Government press release. 2 November, 1999.
4. "Transcript of press conference on HK Disneyland project." Hong Kong Government press release. November 3, 1999.
5. The daily operation of the park shows how Disney strictly controls the Disneyland image. Soon after its opening, two uniformed food inspectors who wished to investigate a reported case of food poisoning were asked to remove their caps and badges to conceal their identities. The local media later criticised the abuse of power by Disney ("Disney's hegemony incites public anger" 2005).
6. Market summary (Feb. 2006) – Mainland China. The Network for HK Tourism Partners.
7. Pop stars narrating their love for Hong Kong. Discover Hong Kong. <http://www.discoverhongkong.com/taiwan/tvprogram/index.jhtml>. Last access: June 14 2006.

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# ARGUING INTO THE DIGITAL VOID?

## ON THE POSITION OF ONLINE DEBATES IN THE LOCAL PUBLIC SPHERES OF FOUR NORWEGIAN MUNICIPALITIES

MARTE WINSVOLD

### Abstract

With the advent of the Internet, numerous online debate options have been created, giving citizens new arenas of political communication where space for expression is nearly unlimited. However, if online forums shall invigorate the public debate, the arguments published online must reach outside their initial setting. In this article, the position of newspaper-hosted online forums is studied and compared to the position of letters to the editor in the local public spheres of four Norwegian municipalities. The forums' visibility to the public and the degree to which they are paid attention to by other media and by local politicians are used as indicators of their position. Only one-tenth of the citizens regularly read the online forums, and when referred to in other media or in politics, they have an agenda-reinforcing rather than an agenda-expanding role. The greatest challenges to the online forums' position seem to be the audiences' perceptions of the quality of the discussion, along with the vast amount of contributions which makes them reader unfriendly.

Marte Winsvold is researcher in the Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research, Oslo; e-mail: [marte.winsvold@nibr.no](mailto:marte.winsvold@nibr.no).

With the advent of the Internet, numerous online debate options have been created, giving citizens new arenas of political communication where space for expression is nearly unlimited. All-inclusive participation in the public sphere has hence become a theoretical possibility. However, if online forums shall invigorate the public debate, the arguments published online must reach outside their initial setting. Few studies have been conducted about the actual reach of online debates. Does the public pay attention to them? Do they impact the political debate in other arenas? Do they reach the political agendas of elected bodies? This article's aim is to increase knowledge about the reach and impact of online debate as compared to the debate taking place in traditional media arenas of citizen participation. Such knowledge is important in understanding whether the public sphere is changing due to new arenas of communication made available by digital technology.

Three aspects are singled out as especially important to the position of a specific arena in the public sphere: its visibility to the public, the degree to which content spills over to other public arenas, and the degree to which arguments from it are channelled into the decision-making system. This article compares the position of newspaper-hosted online forums in the local public spheres of four Norwegian municipalities to the position of letters to the editor in the same municipalities' local newspapers. The analysis is based on data collected in a population survey, a survey of politicians, and in interviews with local politicians and journalists in the four municipalities.

## What Determines the Position of an Arena in the Public Sphere?

"The public sphere" is a contested concept, and scholars with different theoretical perspectives have focused on different features as being constitutive. Common to most perspectives however, is the presence of an audience (Arendt 1958; Habermas 1989; 1996; Thompson 1995; Hoff and Storgaard 1995). The "public" denotes that expressions are visible or audible to the members of a given community, and the public sphere manifests itself when something is spoken for everyone, or at least for a significant number, to hear. When we know that others have heard the same argument or opinion as we have, we know that others relate to it and potentially act on it. Public expressions thereby become real in their consequences. For a communication arena to play a role in public debate, it therefore has to reach outside its initial setting and be visible to the general public. This *visibility* is an important feature of the public sphere. However, according to Hannah Arendt (1958), being visible to a certain amount of the population is not enough; the audience also has to be representative of the population. Arendt argues that an expression gains importance from the fact that everyone perceives and interprets it from their particular position. If an expression is perceived and interpreted only by a homogeneous segment of the population, it will be critically evaluated and judged only through the limited perspective of this specific group. A plurality of perspectives is necessary for an expression to be sufficiently critically examined. Following this vein of reasoning, for a communication arena to be truly public the audience should be of a certain size and it should be heterogeneous.

Moreover, some scholars claim that for a communication arena to be public there must be reference in other public sphere arenas to the arguments and ideas occur-

ring in it. Critics of the early Habermas concept of a unitary public sphere argue that the public sphere consists of a complex network of various communication arenas or sub-spheres (Fraser 1992; Habermas 1996; Hoff and Storgaard 2005). For a communication arena to be public, it must be connected to other publicly visible communication arenas. The sub-spheres must be porous to one another, meaning that an idea, opinion or argument appearing in one sub-sphere may extend into other sub-spheres (Habermas 1996, 374). The constellation of sub-spheres will thus constitute a multi-faceted, but still coherent public sphere. If a sub-sphere is not connected to other sub-spheres, the stated arguments and points of view will not reach outside the specific setting where they occur, implying that they will be isolated from the wider public debate and hence must be regarded as private. In line with later Habermas, a second important feature of the public sphere therefore is that its communication arenas be somehow *interconnected*.

Furthermore, Habermas (1989; 1996) holds that for a communication arena to be considered as part of the public sphere, ideas and arguments emerging from the discussion in it must be channelled into political decision-making institutions and potentially influence the agendas and priorities of the politicians. Thus, for a communication arena to be part of the public sphere, what is uttered there must reach the politicians. In this article, such *channelling* of ideas and arguments is considered as a third important feature that makes an arena part of the public sphere.

In this article, the “position” of an arena in the public sphere refers to the arena’s relative importance as compared to other public arenas of communication. The position of a specific arena is assessed by the extent to which the arena is visible to the general public, the extent to which it is referred in other media, and the extent to which it is considered in political decision making. The questions asked to evaluate the position of online debates in the public sphere are therefore:

*Are the online debates visible to the citizens?* What proportion and what part of the population read the online debates, compared to those reading, watching and listening in other arenas of public debate?

*Are the online debates connected to other arenas of public debate?* Do ideas or arguments raised in online forums make their way into other media?

*Are ideas or arguments from the online debates channelled into and considered in political decision making?* Do politicians refer in internal party discussions or in council meetings to ideas or arguments occurring in these debates?

In normative descriptions of the public sphere, certain qualities are often required of the discussion taking place therein, regarding for example the rationality of arguments, the reflexivity of the dialogue or the representativeness of the participants (Habermas 1989; 1996; Dahlberg 2004; Janssen and Kies 2005). This article will not focus on such normative claims in assessing the position of the different arenas in the public sphere. Rather, its focus is on the reach of the content. However, the way in which normative expectations are met may be highly important in *explaining* the position of an arena in the public sphere. In discussing the findings, attention will therefore be drawn to the audiences’ perceptions of how a public discussion ought to be conducted.

### Comparative Study in Four Norwegian Municipalities

To explore the comparative position of online debates in the public sphere I will draw on data gathered in four Norwegian municipalities: Drammen, Tromsø,

Stavanger and Førde. These municipalities were chosen because they all had local newspapers with debate forums attached to their online editions. The municipalities also had other arenas of public debate, such as local radio and television, with which the online debates might compete. It turned out, however, that letters to the editor in the local newspapers were the most important among the traditional arenas of public debate. The position of the online forums will therefore mainly be compared to the position of the letters.

The municipalities varied in size from Førde with about ten thousand inhabitants, to Drammen and Tromsø with nearly sixty thousand each, and Stavanger with a little over a hundred thousand inhabitants. The municipalities are situated in different parts of Norway: Førde and Stavanger in the west, Tromsø in the north and Drammen in the east. They were not representative of the totality of Norwegian municipalities, but as they differed in size and geographical location, findings consistent across them may indicate tendencies that are more general. In terms of ICT infrastructure and availability, these municipalities, as well as the rest of Norway resembled other Scandinavian countries in that Internet access was high – 80 percent in 2005 according to TNS Gallup. The high Internet access could enhance the political importance of online debate forums. However, unlike the local press in many other European countries, the local press in Norway has had a remarkably strong and lasting position, which could hamper the position of new arenas of debate such as the online forums. So far, the local press has not seemed to lose readership to Internet publishing to any substantial degree, as has been the case with the national press (Høst 2005; Vaage 2008).

The forums analysed were hosted by the online editions of the four leading local newspapers in the municipalities: *Stavanger Aftenblad* ([www.Aftenbladet.no](http://www.Aftenbladet.no)) in Stavanger, *Drammens Tidende* ([www.dt.no](http://www.dt.no)) in Drammen, *Nordlys* ([www.nordlys.no](http://www.nordlys.no)) in Tromsø and *Firda* ([www.firda.no](http://www.firda.no)) in Førde. The discussions were organised differently in the different forums. In *dt.no* and *firda.no*, the discussions were pre-organised in broad categories like “politics” and “culture,” but the participants decided the specific subject matter for discussion. In *nordlys.no*, the web editor structured the debate according to questions decided on by the editorial board, whereas the discussion in *aftenbladet.no* was related to articles published in the newspaper’s online version. In all forums, local political issues were discussed to an extensive degree.<sup>a</sup> Two of the forums were much used. In *dt.no*, there were approximately 100 new postings daily, in *aftenbladet.no* 200. In *nordlys.no* postings averaged only five daily, whereas in *firda.no* postings averaged only five weekly.

There were at least two good reasons to choose the newspaper-hosted online forums over other types of local online forums, for the study. First, there were no other local online forums in the four municipalities with any substantial activity or to which the politicians or the public paid particular attention. When choosing the newspaper-hosted online forums, I hence chose the online forums that probably had the most prominent position among local online forums in the respective local public spheres. Second, these forums were situated outside the formal governmental structure. Of the few studies conducted on the position of online forums, most have in fact focused on forums hosted by governmental bodies (see e.g. Coleman 2004; Hoff and Storgaard 2005). However, the fact that they are government initiated violates the ideal that civil society must generate a dialogue that reaches political elites without being sanctioned by them (Brandenburg 2006). Like government-



initiated forums, newspaper-hosted forums do not truly belong to civil society, as media institutions also may exert censoring power. Still, their publicly stated aim was that they should encourage free debate among citizens, and this locates them closer to the ideal of a free and undistorted arena of civic public debate, as they are designed for the purpose of debate, not for the purpose of providing political authorities with input on specific and already established political issues.

The public sphere position of online forums is compared to the position of letters to the editor in the printed versions of the newspapers. All four newspapers published letters to the editor in their printed versions and allocated approximately equal space to such letters. The letters in the papers had no clear organisational principle: Letters on the same subjects were sometimes presented together, but this was not always so.

To assess the visibility of the two types of forums, a survey questionnaire was mailed in October 2005 to a randomly selected sample of 3,600 inhabitants in the four municipalities. The response rate was only 35 percent, varying slightly between the municipalities. Compared to data gathered in an official national survey with a response rate of 69 percent (Saglie and Bjørklund 2005), the bias of the present sample does not however appear to be very large. Analysis of the data indicates that the most politically active part of the population is overrepresented in the survey. Furthermore, respondents under 30 years old are underrepresented, and thus the data are weighted for age in proportion to the age distribution in the population. The reported frequencies must in any case be interpreted with caution, as they may overestimate the overall local political activity. Interpreting results from multivariate analysis is less problematic since political activity and several other socio-demographic biases in the sample are then controlled.

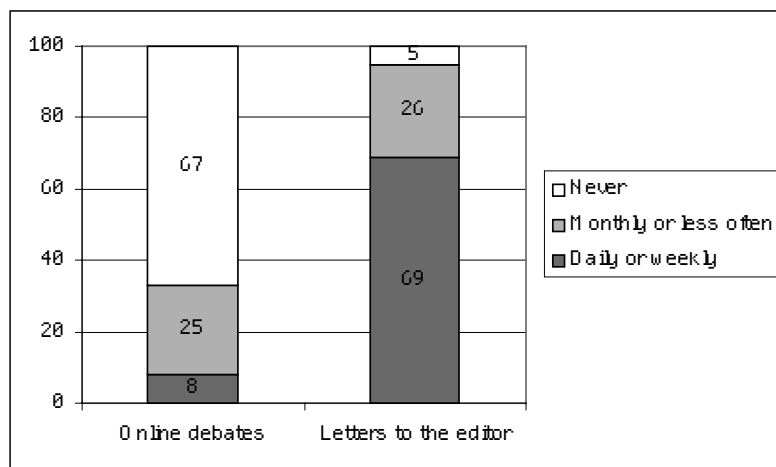
To assess the interconnectedness and the channelling function of the two arenas, interviews with 12 newspaper journalists and 23 local politicians were conducted in 2004 and 2005.<sup>1</sup> As for the politicians, to correct the bias that might result from a limited sample, a survey questionnaire covering many of the same questions was sent to all (186) elected representatives in the four case municipalities in April 2005; 100 (54 percent) politicians responded. There is no indication of the nature of the bias in this sample, but these results must also be analysed with caution. As for the journalists, those responsible for covering local politics were interviewed, as were web editors and political editors. Newspaper journalists were chosen over radio and television journalists because the local newspapers attracted the largest audience – more than 90 percent of citizens read the local newspapers at least once weekly. In addition, the newspaper journalists had a more clearly local focus than the TV and radio journalists, who had a more regional focus.

As discussed above, the limited representativity of the survey sample and of the interviewees reduces the generalisability of the study. Moreover, the study is carried out in four localised municipalities that are not representative of Norwegian municipalities and even less representative of local communities in other parts of Europe or the rest of the world. As the findings are contingent on the contexts of these specific online forums, they have hence limited validity in other contexts. To assess the generalisability of the findings, similar studies would have to be carried out in other contexts. Still, the study can hopefully tell us something more general about the mechanisms and processes at play in public spheres where new arenas emerge while old arenas are still present.

## Visibility – Do the Debates Reach the Public?

To evaluate the position of online forums in the local public sphere we first need to establish their public visibility. According to the definition applied, the visibility of an arena consists of two aspects – the size of the audience and its heterogeneity. A survey among citizens in the four municipalities showed the extent to which the local population read what was published in the two forums. As figure 1 shows, online debates were not especially visible to citizens, compared to the debates taking place in the newspapers' letters to the editor.

Figure 1: Proportion of Population in Four Municipalities Reading Online Debates and Letters to the Editor<sup>3</sup> (N = 1275)



Although nearly a third of citizens stated that they occasionally visited the newspaper's online forum, less than a tenth did so weekly or more often. By comparison, two-thirds regularly read the letters to the editor in the newspaper's print edition. The letters were hence visible to a far larger part of the public than were the online forums. From the few other studies conducted on online debate audiences, audiences of approximately this size seem to be the norm: During the presidential campaign in 2008 in the U.S., for example, nearly twenty percent of the adult population had read someone else's commenting on the campaign on online newsgroups, websites or blogs (Smith 2009).

As for the second aspect of visibility, however, analysis of the survey data showed that the online audience was more heterogeneous than was the letter audience. The online forum audience, (with some exceptions), was biased in the same way as the general Internet audience (Wellman et al. 2001; Norris 2004; Karakaya Polat 2005; Di Gennaro and Dutton 2006): Those reading the postings of the online forums were younger, more politically active, more male, and had higher income than the average citizen. However, the letter audience was in some respects even more biased than the online audience. The results, displayed in table 1, from a linear regression analysis, show the controlled effects of individual characteristics on online and offline readership.

Table 1: Readership of the Newspaper's Online Forum and Reader's Letters in the Newspaper's Print Edition<sup>4</sup> (Bivariate Correlation and Linear Regression)

	Online Forums		Letters to the Editor	
	Pearson Correlation	Beta (Standardized coefficient)	Pearson Correlation	Beta (Standardized coefficient)
Political activity index	0,228*	0,233*	0,253*	0,194*
Gender	0,141*	0,127*	0,096*	-0,038
Income	0,107*	0,067*	0,109*	0,187*
Age	-0,001	-0,068*	0,396*	0,409*
Education	-0,012	-0,068*	-0,064*	-0,053
Tromsø (dummy)	-0,46	-0,106*	0,048	0,017
Fårde (dummy)	-0,14	-0,080*	-0,020	-0,035
Stavanger (dummy)	0,003	-0,070	-0,076*	-0,090*
Drammen (reference)	.	.	.	.
Adjusted R square		0,078		0,234
N	1036		1077	

\* Significant at a 0,05 level

Clearly correlated to both online and print readership was the overall political activity of the respondents. An activity index was constructed based on eight questions concerning offline political activity. The analysis showed that the most politically active citizens were most inclined to read the online debates. That the online forums were most visible to the most politically active meant that the segment of the population absorbing arguments and ideas from this arena was the same that participated in other political arenas in the municipalities and thereby could take online arguments and ideas with them to other arenas, enhancing their reach. This may imply that the position of the online arenas was somewhat stronger than the proportion reading them indicated. The same goes for the letters, as the politically active were most inclined to read them as well. The effect of political activity was strong for both forums and contributed to making both audiences less heterogeneous than the ideal demands. The emergence of online forums hence seems to have reinforced the tendency of this group's overrepresentation in the public sphere. This finding mirrors findings from other studies, showing that those who are the most politically active offline also are the most politically active online (Smith 2009; Torpe 2005).

Gender correlated with online readership as expected, but the gender gap was larger than expected: Whereas thirteen percent of men stated that they visited the online forums regularly, only four percent of women did so. Although the gender gap in overall Internet use has decreased in Scandinavia during the last ten years (Tobiasson 2005), these forums still seemed to attract a predominantly male audience. Assuming male and female readers have different perspectives, the discussions in the online forums were mostly interpreted from a male point of view. There was also a statistically significant gap between male and female print readership, but the difference here was far less. In other words, the advent of online forums had made the public sphere audience more lopsidedly male.

Income positively correlated with both types of readership, indicating that high income spurred readership. However, income meant comparatively less to online than to offline readership.

Age did not correlate with online debate readership in the same way as it has been shown to correlate with general Internet use: Although the beta coefficient of the regression analysis shows that younger people were somewhat more inclined than elder people to visit online debates, the effect of age was weak, and at the bivariate level it was not even statistically significant. This finding is contrary to the findings from the earlier mentioned survey conducted among American adults (Smith 2009), which find that those under 30 years old are significantly overrepresented among the online debate audience. Concerning readers of the letters to the editor, the effect of age was striking, but with an opposite sign: Elder people were much more inclined to read letters than were younger people, and age was the variable that most strongly predicted letter readership.

Earlier research has shown that the Internet audience has higher education than the average citizen (Norris 2004; Karakaya Polat 2005; Di Gennaro and Dutton 2006), but this did neither apply to the online nor to the letter audience: Those with lower education were more inclined to read the online forums as well as the letters, than were those with higher education. Research on TV audiences shows that the same applies to TV debates; their audience is less educated than audiences of political TV programs with other formats (Brenna 2007). It hence seems like the debate format appeals to the less educated segments of the population, both offline and online.

According to the definition of visibility applied in this study, two aspects affect the visibility of an arena in the public sphere, namely the size and the composition of the audience. Regarding the first aspect, demanding that the content of the arena be read by a significant proportion of the concerned population, the letters were clearly more visible than the online forums. As for the second aspect this demands that the audience be heterogeneous, which means that background characteristics should as little as possible affect the tendency to read the different forums. The size of the adjusted  $R^2$  tells how much of the variance in readership can be explained by the background variables included in the regression model. From the adjusted  $R^2$  of the two models, we see that the totality of the applied background variables explains less of the online than the offline readership. This means that the online audience was less biased and more heterogeneous than the offline audience regarding the control variables, and that the online audience to a greater extent, were visible in the sense “heterogeneous.” The two forums’ positions regarding visibility were hence ambiguous. The letters were visible to more of the population, whereas the online forums were visible to a more heterogeneous sample of the population.

### Interconnectedness – Do the Debates Reach other Media?

If the online forums are to be connected to other public sphere arenas, ideas or arguments occurring in them need to be referred to in those arenas. To assess the interconnectedness of online forums with other communication spaces, twelve journalists in the newspapers hosting the online forums were asked whether they picked up ideas from the online debates or referred to arguments from them in their newspaper articles. Although their attitudes towards the online forums var-

ied from positive to outright hostile, their referring practices scarcely varied: All of them visited the forums regularly, but they claimed that they rarely or never referred to arguments or ideas appearing there. When they did, it was mostly as “curiosity” (Journalist 12) or “to show that a specific subject matter attracted the public’s attention” (J. 6). None of the journalists thought that the forums gave them new ideas or introduced new subjects of which they had not previously thought. Rather, the journalists would sporadically monitor the contributions to confirm that they themselves had indeed captured all relevant arguments and views, but they rarely thought that they learned something new from this monitoring.

Still, the attitudes towards the forums differed considerably across the newspapers. The journalists in *Drammens Tidende*, for example, had low esteem for the online forums, and among other things described them as “a whining post with low credibility” (J. 1). The attitudes of the journalists in *Firda* were the most positive. “The online debate is interesting as a source of new ideas, and what we see now is only the beginning,” a *Firda* journalist stated (J. 6). However, as we saw, they *all* claimed that they rarely or never referred to arguments or ideas appearing online; furthermore, all journalists regarded the online debate as of little importance when it came to agenda setting: “The agenda is set by politicians, pressure groups and media. The role of the online debate is merely to get the temperature up” (J. 10), one journalist said. Journalists from all newspapers agreed that although arguments from the online forums were occasionally channelled into the newspapers, new subjects appearing online that widened the media’s agenda never were. All journalists pointed to the letters to the editor when asked how citizens normally contributed to the media’s agenda. They all reported that they picked up ideas from the letters and published articles on the subjects – either by responding to the letters or by interviewing the letter writers for ordinary newspaper articles.

The journalists gave several reasons why they chose to refer to letters and not to online forums. Many of them attributed their lack of attention to online forums to the quality of the forums’ content. The online content was for example described as “fast and unfounded nonsense” (J. 4). Their attitude towards the quality was however ambiguous. On one hand, the superficial or flimsy style was cited as a reason for not paying attention to the contributions. On the other hand, they stressed the importance of such arenas’ having open access and low demands as to the form and style of arguments. In this line of reasoning, the debates were described as for example “to the point, inclusive and alive” (J. 7), and they were deemed as necessary democratic channels.

The journalists moreover considered the online participants as slightly more representative of the population than writers of letters to the editor; as one journalist said, “My impression is that those who write letters to the editor are well-off men, while the variation is larger among those who write online concerning income, education and social status. You find both the school drop-outs and the masters students” (J. 1). Online discussions were considered as “a call from the heart of the people” (J. 7). That the online contributors were perceived as representative did not, however, make the journalists pay more attention to these forums.

Moreover, that the forums lacked editing was perceived as a problem by the print journalists. They argued that the lack of editing made the forums hard to read and hard to extract the essence from. In *aftenbladet.no*, for example, there could be

as many as 200 new postings daily. Not all were related to the subject under which heading they were posted, a lot of them veered off the subject, and they were not always responses to the previous postings (Skogerbø and Winsvold 2008). In sum, the online forums were considered reader unfriendly, and this gave them less impact with the print journalists as a source of arguments or new ideas. From the perspective of the journalists it was considered both time and frustration saving to interview a sample of citizens about their opinions instead of struggling through the vast amount of online postings, many of which were seen as nonsense. The online forums were neither valued as sources, as were the letters, nor acknowledged as independent arenas in the public sphere. Overall, the forums were considered as tolerable, but unnecessary noise, to which the journalists had to pay some attention because their own newspaper hosted them, but with which they could have done without.

The online forums were not entirely unconnected to the journalist-driven debate that took place in the newspaper, but the letters were far more referred to and therefore far more connected to the media debate. The dominant actors in the media world, in charge of the media agenda, had hence not altered their practice much due to this new arena.

The few studies that exist on digital media's agenda-setting effect mostly point in the same direction. In their study of the agenda-building role of social media Lariscy et al (2009) found very little use of social media among American business journalists. Lee (2007) found in his study from the U.S. presidential election of 2004, that the blog agenda was similar to that of mainstream media, whereas Sewetser et al (2008) found in their study of the same election that the correlation between the blog and the media agenda occurred because the media transferred their agenda to the blogs. However, from their study of the interplay between online postings and traditional offline media coverage in China, Zhou and Moy (2007), found the opposite: In China online postings played an important role in transforming local events into national media issues. Moreover, online posting exerted a significant frame-building impact on offline media in the early stages of coverage. The varying impact of online communication arenas on the mass media agenda indicates that their importance is highly contingent on the context.

### Channelling – Do the Debates Reach the Political Agenda?

If arguments or ideas from online forums shall be channelled into the political agenda, politicians need to read and refer to them in arenas where political agendas are decided. The politician survey showed that half of the politicians (50 percent) had visited the online forums and read contributions posted there, although fewer (37 percent) did so regularly. Still, a higher percentage of politicians than of ordinary citizens read online debates. The interviews revealed, however, that the ways in which politicians monitored the forums did not necessarily give this arena an independent agenda-setting role. Some politicians selectively and purposefully read contributions in the online forums that were related to issues they were responsible for in the Municipal Council. They thus systematically gathered information about a few specific topics of concern to them. Especially those responsible for politics on children and youth used the online forums because they believed them to be the "youths' channel" (Politician 18). Other politicians reported reading online contribu-

tions on subjects that were substantially covered in the media. Used by politicians in these ways, online forums did not contribute to setting new issues on the agenda, as politicians searched out information on issues that were already on it.

The forums' policy regarding anonymity seemed to impact the way politicians used them and hence their position in the local public sphere. Several politicians said that they ignored anonymous postings, and conversely, signed articles attracted politicians' attention. In *aftenbladet.no* in Stavanger, where participants had to give their real names, several politicians stated that they studied the forum to "see who is writing" (P. 19). That it was interesting for them to see who was partaking in the online forums indicated furthermore that these politicians did not feel sure about these forums' position in the local political debate; if important stakeholders participated, they had to be paid attention to, if not, they could be ignored. Therefore, for these Stavanger politicians the online forums' position was not clearly defined, but was rather fluid and dependent on how they were used and by whom.

It would be a stronger indication of channelling if the postings were explicitly referred to in agenda-setting forums than if they were merely read. According to the politician survey, one-third of politicians (34 percent) stated that they had used arguments from the online debates in political discussions, although only 17 percent had done so more than once. Interviews showed that the nature of this usage did not widen the political agenda, but rather confirmed it. Most politicians that referred to online debates did so concerning issues that were already on the political agenda and that were to be discussed in Municipal Council meetings. They used arguments or opinions occurring in the forums to support their own opinions, to prove that they were "backed by ordinary people" (P. 21) or to show what "most people mean" (P. 27). Moreover, politicians used the online debates as a kind of polling instrument, to measure the importance of issues on the political agenda. The online debates gave an indication of how important an issue was to citizens: "On the net, it is measurable how many are interested in a specific subject. You can very quickly gauge whether an issue is deemed uninteresting or fabulously interesting" (P. 16), one politician stated. Only two of the 23 interviewed politicians reported that they had actually picked up new issues from the forums, which they then had discussed in their political party and thereafter brought to the Council agenda.

All politicians named the newspaper as the most important public arena in influencing the political agenda. They considered both editorial coverage and letters to the editor to be important mainly because of their *high* visibility, but felt editorial coverage was more important than letters to the editor. Accordingly, the online debates were regarded as unimportant because of their *low* visibility. Still, a certain agenda-setting value was ascribed to the online forums, mainly because "such things spread [...] and the press may cover it" (P. 20). The press was even here indirectly important as it guaranteed the dissemination of opinions. The attitudes of the interviewed politicians concerning the newspapers' greater importance were reflected in the survey: Only 4 percent of politicians fully agreed that it was important for them to keep an eye on the online debates, compared to 38 percent who agreed it was important for them to keep an eye on the letters to the editor.

Although they referred to the online debates as reflecting the opinions of ordinary citizens, when asked directly, most politicians did not consider such opinions to be representative of the *majority's* opinions, and many thereby justified ignoring

the arguments and issues occurring in the online debates. The politicians believed that few people participated, and many also thought that a special kind of people expressed themselves in these forums: “It is the cantankerous or quarrelsome who like to vent their opinions” (P. 33); “people with strong and simple answers to difficult questions” (P. 14); “with much time to spend” (P. 20). Moreover, several politicians thought that people’s online utterances were not representative of their *true* attitudes. “Only when you are discontented, furious, or against something, you go online to demonstrate your opinion,” one politician said (P. 15). These politicians held, hence, that they did not need to consider what occurred in these forums because people did not necessarily mean what they said. They were just venting frustration, and when they were done, they resumed their *real* and more moderate opinions. These politicians regarded the opinions stated online as invalid because of the argumentation style. Related to this, the participants’ motivation was also questioned and deemed as insincere and even destructive: “The participants enter some predefined roles. Some shall always provoke, some shall always be mad” (P. 33), one politician said. Others thought the contributors participated most for fun without expecting to be taken seriously. The attitude of many politicians was that these were illegitimate motivations, and that the participants should have endeavoured instead to discuss issues of concern in a constructive, serious manner.

Politicians, like journalists, perceived the fact that everyone could express themselves in these forums as reason for both paying and not paying attention to them. The online debates were regarded as reflecting the people’s voice, but simultaneously much content was perceived as unfounded opinions, lacking the filtering and refining of the mass media’s editing process. So, for both journalists and politicians, the open access, which should ensure plurality in the public debate by allowing more people to take part, simultaneously decreased the forums’ status. Some politicians even explicitly mentioned the perceived lower status of the online contributors to explain why, for example, letters were taken more seriously: “[In the letters] people with a little more weight are published” (P. 31). The restricted access to the newspaper, favouring those with a respected position in the local community, hence elevated the letters’ status.

Politicians regarded the quality of the online arguments as generally low but, like the journalists, they did not necessarily look upon this as negative. They described the style as direct, to the point, a discussion with “strong, sharply pointed and concise expressions” (P. 25). The spontaneous form and fast response were also regarded as positive. At the same time, the contributions’ low quality was cited as a reason for not paying attention to opinions expressed in the online debates: “It is full of personal attacks, ill-founded and unserious. It is too easy to participate. People just say “no,” but you don’t know why” (P. 14), one politician said. The discussion was frequently compared to the discussion that takes place in toilet stall graffiti.

So, like the journalists, the politicians read the online forums mainly to check if they had captured all relevant arguments pertaining to issues already on the political agenda. When they referred to the online forums they did so, for the most part, to show that they had citizens’ support. Only to a very modest extent new arguments and ideas from the online forums reached the political agenda; mostly the forums were used by politicians in an agenda-confirming rather than in an agenda-expanding way. As a source of public opinion, letters to the editor



were deemed much more important, primarily due to their larger visibility, but also due to their being edited, filtered and therefore seemingly quality-assured by the newspaper.

Only to a minor degree therefore, can the advent of online forums be said to have changed the public sphere regarding citizens' access to the political agenda, in these municipalities. Still, politicians were aware of the forums, they monitored them and were ready to pay more attention to them should it prove necessary. This result is in line with what Torpe (2005) found when assessing the general impact of a Danish municipal online forum.

Moreover, the politicians' surveying practice showed that they acknowledged that the online forums were, although perhaps not important arenas in the public sphere, at least independent sources of public opinion. The channelling of online content was direct, not indirect via the media, as the politicians surveyed these forums to a greater extent than the media referred to them. To some extent, therefore, this arena represented a new channel through which public opinion could reach the political agenda without being filtered by the media.

## Conclusion

The position of online debates in the local public sphere proved to be modest compared to the position of long-established public arenas such as letters to the editor in newspapers. Online debates were visible to a far smaller proportion of the population than were the letters. Still, the online audience was more heterogeneous than the letter audience, as the online content reached a more diverse sample of the population. Online forums were rarely referred to in other media and arguments, and ideas appearing in them only occasionally entered the political agenda. When they were referred to, the references concerned mainly arguments about issues already on the media agenda or the politicians' agenda, rarely new ideas or perspectives. The referring practice hence had an agenda-confirming rather than an agenda-expanding function.

Compared to the position of the letters to the editor which was the main other arena where citizens could participate in the local public debate, the position of online forums hence seemed to be of less importance. All in all, in the four municipalities studied, the public sphere had not changed considerably due to these new outlets of expression. Although they were to some extent read by the citizens, occasionally referred to by the newspapers and laxly monitored by the politicians, all three audience groups still paid considerably more attention to the traditional media arenas which they were used to.

The novelty of online debates is one obvious explanation for their lacking impact. Yet another explanation of the online forums' modest position may be the way in which normative claims of public dialogue were met in the debates. Politicians and journalists seemed to expect that the debate should meet certain minimum standards regarding quality, pluralism and sincerity. These expectations guided both the interpretation of the content and the extent to which the online debates were actually read and arguments expressed in them actually referred to or taken into account. Both the perceived low quality of arguments and the presumed bias of the participants were repeatedly cited by politicians and journalists as reasons for not paying attention to the online debates. Moreover, the participant's motivations

were deemed to be dubious. A widespread belief among politicians and journalists was that the participants did not have serious intentions, but rather participated for fun or because they liked a good fight.

Regardless of where it was published, both journalists and politicians seemed to have an ambiguous attitude towards content produced by ordinary citizens. On one hand they depended on it, as the public debate should appear to be representative of the citizens' concerns and of their different perspectives. In this vein of reasoning they used both letters and online forums as information sources. On the other hand, neither journalists nor politicians acknowledged that citizens had an agenda-setting role in the public debate, at least not a prominent one. For them, agenda setting was something that came out of the editing or filtering process which they undertook; the citizens' role was only to provide the raw material of opinions and concerns. The online forums' greatest challenger was therefore not one of the traditional media arenas, but rather the way political agenda setting was conceived of by those with agenda-setting power.

Another major challenge to the position of online communication arenas was the huge volume of contributions resulting from their inclusiveness. In the pre-Internet era, the public debate took place in very few media arenas, to which only a minority of citizens had access as participants. A result of this restricted public sphere was that nearly all citizens could be audience to the same debates. In a situation with full access for everyone to speak, the volume of utterances becomes too large for such a shared space of communication, and the public sphere will inevitably be more fragmented. This shows that different participatory values are at odds in the expectations of digital communication in the public sphere. An all-inclusive open public sphere, as might be realised online, perhaps can only be realised at the expense of a shared public sphere, that is, a public sphere which is visible to a significant and heterogeneous sample of citizens. The potential for democratic gain made possible by the online public sphere, may therefore also involve a loss, as extremely wide participation precludes visibility. Such fragmentation of audiences is less of a loss if the different public sphere fragments are interconnected and content spills over from one arena to another. The present analysis has shown, however, that this was only to a minor extent the case with the online forums. They represented therefore a movement towards a more fragmented public sphere. However, one may question whether the ideal of one shared public sphere, formulated with reference to an historic epoch where neither mass media, nor Internet existed, is still relevant in today's communication landscape. This study shows that as a description, the Habermasian ideal does not account for the modern public spheres of the case municipalities in a precise way. However, although the actual description of existing public spheres deviates from the ideal, the ideal itself may still be normatively relevant. In order to assess the normative relevance of this ideal, one has to consider the implications of a more fragmented public sphere. What will we lose and what will we gain if a shared public sphere is replaced by loosely connected sub-sphere? What should be the function of the public sphere in modern society? Questions such as these should be addressed in order to revise the normative basis of the theory of the public sphere.

This study gives some indications of the position of one particular form of online communication in the public spheres of four local communities. Obviously, it does

not tell the whole story about Internet and the public sphere. First, as described in the data section, the case communities have certain characteristics that affect the way the online forums are used and perceived by the audience. Second, both in these municipalities and elsewhere, Internet adds to the public sphere through more than merely online debates. The huge volume of information and opinions published on governmental websites, in online papers, blogs etc., probably affect both opinion formation and agenda setting. This study gives an example of how a new digital communication arena has been received and fitted into the existing landscape of local communication arenas, and how the audience perceives and deals with the tension between the traditional and the new communication arenas. To establish knowledge about how online forums or other digital communication arenas affect the public sphere in other contexts, further studies are needed. Further studies are also needed to understand the reasons for the relative importance of different digital and non-digital communication arenas, in an increasingly rich and complex communication landscape. New arenas emerge and vanish with high speed, and what may, at one point, look like the future of political communication may soon turn out to be obsolete.

## Notes:

1. The percentage of postings addressing local political issues varied from 20 percent in dt.no to 68 percent in nordlys.no during the period January-April 2005.
2. The interviews were conducted in Drammens Tidende (DT) (October 2004; journalists 1 to 4); Firda (October 2005; journalists 5 – 6); Stavanger Aftenblad (SA) (April 2005; journalists 7 – 9); and Nordlys (December 2004; journalists 10 – 12). Seven politicians were interviewed in Stavanger (April 2005; politicians 13 – 19), four in Tromsø (December 2004; 20 – 23); five in Firda (October 2005; 25 – 29), and six in Drammen (October 2004; 30 – 35).
3. The questions posed were: How often do you visit the online forum of your local newspaper? How often do you read the reader's letters of your local newspaper: daily, weekly, monthly, less often, never?
4. The municipalities were included as dummy variables, and the municipality of Drammen was excluded from the analysis, thereby representing the reference value. Age is a continuous variable. Education and income are ordinal variables, whereas gender is a dummy, coded man=0, woman=1. Political activity is a continuous index ranging from 0 to 8, where low value indicates low political activity. The variables in the index were based on the following yes/no questions: Have you during the last four years: 1) Voted in the municipal election? 2) Participated in a protest meeting or demonstration concerning local issues? 3) Contacted local politicians about a local issue? 4) Contacted the municipal administration about a local issue? 5) Contacted the media about a local issue? 6) Signed a petition about a local issue? 7) Called a radio or television program about a local issue? 8) Written a letter to the editor?

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# VOX POPULI OR VOX MEDIA?

## OPINION POLLS AND THE SWEDISH MEDIA, 1998-2006

JESPER STRÖMBÄCK

### Abstract

While the histories of opinion polling and the news media have been closely intertwined ever since the invention of polling, the question as to whether the media's reporting on opinion polls should be considered as detrimental or beneficial from a democratic perspective is still open and contested. The purpose of this paper is thus to investigate the publication of opinion polls in the Swedish media during the last three election campaigns, with a focus on how the media used opinion polls and whether or not the media, at the end of the day, mainly used opinion polls to give voice to the people – or to the media and the journalists themselves. Among other things, the results suggest that more often than not, polls serve as *vox media* rather than *vox populi*.

Jesper Strömbäck is Professor at Media and Communication in Mid Sweden University, Sundsvall; e-mail: [Jesper.Stromback@miun.se](mailto:Jesper.Stromback@miun.se).

## Introduction

The histories of opinion polling and the media have been closely intertwined ever since the invention of polling. Whether the media's reporting on opinion polls should be considered as detrimental or beneficial from a democratic point of view is, however, open to debate (Glasser and Salmon 1995). As always there are both critics and defenders. With regard to the defenders, they argue that the publication of opinion polls send a symbolic message that the opinions of "everyone" matters (Lavrakas and Traugott 2000), that it empowers the media to serve as independent watchdogs of those in power and to speak on behalf of the public (Gollin 1980; Ladd 1980), and that it raises the public's interest in political campaigns (Iyengar et al. 2004). With regard to the critics, some are critical of opinion polls *per se* or argue that they mainly serve the interests of political and media elites (Bourdieu 1979), whereas others focus their criticism on the frequency to which polls are published (Patterson 1993), how they are reported (Bishop 2005; Bogart 2000), the use of causal explanations in interpreting polls (Bauman and Lavrakas 2000) or how this kind of reporting spurs the framing of politics as a horse race (Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Patterson 2005). On a theoretical level, the relationship between public opinion as such and as measured by opinion polls has also been questioned (Salmon and Glasser 1995; Herbst 1995; 1998; Lewis 1999; Splichal 1997; 2008). One of the consequences of the rise of opinion polling is that public opinion as measured by polls has become equated with public opinion *per se*, and that other purveyors and representations of public opinion – such as parliaments, political parties, interests groups and partisan media – have lost legitimacy as or even disappeared from our understanding of public opinion. It has shifted our understanding of public opinion, and hence the role of public opinion in democratic societies.

The focus of this article is however not the larger theoretical debate about public opinion and opinion polling, but rather the media coverage of opinion polls. For most people, reliant on the media for information about matters beyond their everyday experiences, the media's coverage of opinion polls help shape their understanding of public opinion, and for elite groups, both the own use and the media's coverage of opinion polls are crucial in their understanding of people's opinions and attitudes (Herbst 1998).

More specifically, the purpose of this paper is to investigate the publication of opinion polls in the Swedish news media during the 1998, 2002 and 2006 election campaigns, with a focus on how the media used opinion polls in their election news coverage and whether or not the media, at the end of the day, mainly used opinion polls in order to give voice to the people – or to the media and the journalists themselves.

### A Matter of Frequency

Once described as the "pulse of democracy" (Gallup and Rae 1940), the usage of opinion polls by the media has attracted critics as well as defenders. Notwithstanding the fact that "Public opinion continues to be one of the fuzziest terms in the social sciences" (Donsbach and Traugott 2008) and the debate regarding what opinion polls in fact measure and represent (Salmon and Glasser 1995; Splichal 1997; Lewis 1999), one line of criticism is that the media focus too much on opinion polls. Patterson (2005, 722) for example, argues that the use of opinion polls has

extended “beyond reason,” while Weimann (1990) writes about an “obsession to forecast.” Although there is no standard for evaluating when the media focus too much on opinion polls, evidence from the United States (Traugott 2005) as well as Germany (Brettschneider 1997) and other countries (Brettschneider 2008; Weimann 1990) suggests that there has been a major increase over time in the media’s coverage of opinion polls. In the U.S. case, Traugott (2005, 644) has shown an increase of about 900 percent between 1984 and 2000, while in the German case, Brettschneider (2008, 482) has shown that the number of poll reports has increased from 65 in 1980 to 651 in 2002.

In the Swedish case, evidence is more mixed. According to Petersson and Holmberg (1998, 116-117; Holmberg 2008), the frequency of articles reporting results from opinion polls peaked in the mid 1980s, after which it declined and then rebounded. Considering the time span of this particular study and trends in the media’s focus on opinion polls in other countries, the *first hypothesis* is nevertheless that there has been an increase in the number of news stories in the Swedish media that report results from opinion polls: *The number of news stories in which opinion polls were reported increased over the election campaigns 1998-2006* (H1).

## A Matter of Object and Framing

The frequency of news stories focusing on reporting on opinion polls notwithstanding, of equal interest is the main object of the polls and how the publishing of polls shape the media’s framing of politics. In theory, the media’s coverage of opinion polls can be perceived as a means to provide voters with important information on how people in general think about various matters, ranging from policy proposals to how they intend to vote on Election Day. Polls can be used to inform the people about itself on the most important issues of the day.

However, most research suggests that polls on people’s voting intention dominate the media’s poll coverage, at least during election campaigns, and that this contributes to the framing of politics as a horse race or a game rather than in terms of issues and policies (Broh 1980; Patterson 1993; Cappella and Jamieson 1997). As suggested by Rosenstiel (2005, 710), “More stories about the daily horse race shift the focus of the race. More horse race polls, in short, translate into more horse race coverage.” Patterson (2005, 718) similarly observes that “the use of polls spurs horse-race reporting – the tendency to treat elections as if they were sporting events where the paramount goal is to get across the finish line in the first place,” while Atkin and Gaudino (1984, 124) conclude that “Instead of covering the candidates’ qualifications, philosophies, or issue positions, polls have encouraged journalists to treat campaigns as horse races, with a focus on the candidates’ popularity, momentum, and size of the lead” (see also Brettschneider 1997; 2008; Farnsworth and Lichter 2007; Petersson et al. 2006). From this perspective, publishing opinion polls distracts the media from focusing on the most important issues of the day and on information that people might need when forming their opinions and voting preferences. The framing of politics as a strategic game has also attracted criticism based on evidence suggesting that such framing increases people’s political distrust and cynicism (Cappella and Jamieson 1997; de Vreese and Elenbaas 2008).

Thus, while it certainly is legitimate to publish horse race polls and frame politics as a game, an excessive focus on the horse race and horse race polls might

overshadow the issues at stake in an election, and thus contribute negatively both to people's trust in political actors and institutions (Cappella and Jamieson 1997) and their opportunities to use the media to gain information and cast enlightened votes (Rosenstiel 2005).

Also important in this context is that standard horse race polls have limits when it comes to informing the public, the media and political actors about people's thoughts, priorities, issue positions and values. Such polls "heighten journalists' attention to the candidates, rather than to the voters themselves," as noted by Patterson (2005, 720). Consequently, more often than not horse race polls might fail to give those whose opinions are polled a clear voice in political communication processes.

All polls are not equal, however, and the discussion above raises two questions. First, what was the object of the polls that were published in the Swedish media during the 1998, 2002 and 2006 election campaigns? Were the polls about party or candidate preferences, issues and issue positions, or other objects? Second, is there a correlation between the media's publication of opinion polls and the framing of politics as a game?

Based on prior research it can be expected that most published polls focused on the horse race and that there is indeed a correlation between the publication of opinion polls and the framing of politics as a game (Atkin and Gaudino 1984; Patterson 1993; 2005; Rosenstiel 2005; Farnsworth and Lichter 2007; Brettschneider 2008). Thus, the *next two hypotheses* are: (2) *Most of the published opinion polls during the election campaigns 1998-2006 were about people's party or party leader preferences* (H2); (3) *There will be a positive correlation between the publication of opinion polls and the framing of politics as a game* (H3).

## Matter of Interpretation

The notion that opinion polls contribute to the framing of politics as a game and heighten journalists' attention to the candidates rather than the voters suggests that the media's interest in polls is driven less by a concern with voters and their opinions, and more by the media's own needs. Polling can be an important newsgathering tool (Ismach 1984), and by commissioning polls, the media secure for themselves a triple role: they commission the polls; they report them, and they interpret the results (Petersson et al. 2006).

Thus, by commissioning polls the media not only make their own news (von Hoffman 1980) – they also grant themselves the privilege to define and frame the actors, events or issues being polled. This privilege can be used to gain independence from and question political power holders (Gollin 1980; Ladd 1980; Lang and Lang 1980). As noted by Lavrakas and Traugott (2000, 10), polls can aid democratic processes by "Empowering the media to serve as an independent watchdog on politicians and resisting other would-be spokespersons for the public or for so-called election mandates." They also note (2000, 4) that one of the main reasons for why journalists are attracted to polls is that these allow journalists "a quasi-objective, *proactive* role in the newsmaking process."

Thus, there appears to be a linkage between the publication of opinion polls and an interpretive journalistic style (Ismach 1984; Patterson 1993). Rosenstiel (2005, 706) consequently notes that: "more and more journalism involves synthesising that competitive material into one's own account and then adding something new



or special to it or trying to account for all that information into one interpretive or analytical frame.” The framing of politics as a game is one such frame, but if polls are attractive to journalists because they allow them a quasi-objective, proactive role, then the linkage between poll reporting and an interpretive journalistic style should extend beyond this particular framing of politics. Considering this and evidence suggesting that an interpretive journalistic style has become more common in many countries around the world (Kovach and Rosenstiel 1999; Patterson 1993; Strömbäck and Kaid 2008) the *fourth hypothesis* is: *There is a positive correlation between the publication of opinion polls and an interpretive journalistic style* (H4).

## A Matter of Methodological Information

Regardless of the object of published opinion polls, the framing of politics and the journalistic style employed in news stories on polls, from an informational perspective it is important that the publication of opinion polls is accompanied by enough methodological information for people to be able to critically assess the polls (Welch 2002). Although it can be questioned whether most news consumers understand and make use of methodological information on published polls (Traugott 2004; Wichmann 2008), it is generally accepted that the validity and value of opinion polls is dependent upon “the way in which the findings are presented and the uses to which they are put,” as stated in the ESOMAR/WAPOR *International Code of Practice for the Publication of Public Opinion Poll Results*. In many countries there are consequently restrictions on the publication of opinion polls (Spangenberg 2003; Ferguson and de Clercy 2005; Donsbach and Hartung 2008), including regulations regarding what kind of methodological information the media should include every time they publish a poll.

In Sweden there are no government regulations (Petersson and Holmberg 1998; Petersson 2008), although the recommendations made by ESOMAR/WAPOR apply to the Swedish media as well as to the media in other countries. According to ESOMAR/WAPOR, when newspapers publish poll findings they should always be accompanied by a clear statement of (a) the name of the research organisation carrying out the survey, (b) the universe effectively represented, (c) the achieved sample size and its geographical coverage, (d) the dates of fieldwork, (e) the sample method used, (f) the method by which the information was collected, and (g) the relevant questions asked. The points (a) through (d) also apply to broadcast media.

Providing their users with this kind of information is one important means through which the media can provide people with the information they need to assess the value of published polls. What matters most from this perspective is thus not whether most news consumers actually are interested enough to use the methodological information to evaluate a poll, but whether the media give their consumers enough information to be able to do so. From this perspective, it is problematic that most studies have found that the media fail when it comes to providing the methodological information that ESOMAR/WAPOR recommends that the media publish (Welch 2002; Ferguson and de Clercy 2005;). As there are no reasons to expect the Swedish media to be better at providing this kind of information than the media in other countries, the *fifth hypothesis* is: *When publishing polls during the election campaigns 1998-2006, the media most often failed to provide the methodological information recommended by organisations such as ESOMAR/WAPOR* (H5).

## A Matter of Focus

The promise of opinion polls is that they may “help bridge the gap between the people and those responsible for making decisions in their name” and that they – at least theoretically – can provide a “reliable measure of the pulse of democracy” (Gallup and Rae 1940, 14). By commissioning and covering opinion polls, the media can give voice to the people, and thus strengthen the role of the people in political communication and governing processes.

If polls have the potential to give voice to the people, this potential is nevertheless not realised automatically. It takes a well-designed poll to truly capture people’s thoughts, opinions, or attitudes, with enough variables to allow at least somewhat sophisticated analyses (Bishop 2005). It also takes a journalistic interest in and focus on the people’s response patterns, and a journalistic skill in interpreting people’s responses and how they are correlated as well as how different response patterns can be explained (Meyer and Potter 2000). Even if these requirements were fulfilled, at the end of the day people have no say with respect to what the polls should focus on. Based on this notion, it has been argued that opinion polls largely serve the interests of political and media elites rather than the interests of the people (Bourdieu 1979). Opinion polls might furthermore produce artifacts as well as facts about public opinion, creating an illusion of public opinion where none exists (Bishop 2005). Thus, while the sheer publication of opinion polls might send a “continuous symbolic message that the opinions of ‘everyone’ matters” (Lavrakas and Traugott 2000, 10), it cannot be assumed that the media give voice to the people by commissioning and publishing opinion polls.

In the context of this article, the main question then is whether the Swedish media during the election campaigns 1998–2006 mainly used opinion polls to give voice to the people – or rather as a means to serve the media’s own need for compelling news narratives and for giving voice to the news journalists themselves. When reporting polls, did the media focus on the people whose opinions were polled or on other actors in the political communication processes? More precisely, the main *research question* (Q1) is: *When the media published opinion polls during the 1998–2006 campaigns, did they mainly focus on those polled and their opinions, or on aspects related to the media themselves or to political actors and their interrelationships and quest for public support?*

## Methodology and Data

To test the hypotheses above, this study utilises a quantitative content analysis of the two national public service television news shows *Rapport* and *Aktuellt*, the most important commercial television news show *TV4 Nyheterna*, the two major national morning newspapers *Dagens Nyheter* and *Svenska Dagbladet*, and the two national newsstand tabloids *Aftonbladet* and *Expressen*.

The time period for the study was the three weeks before the 1998, 2002 and 2006 Swedish national elections. The unit of analysis is news articles (newspapers) or thematic news stories (TV). For newspapers, the selection includes all articles published on the news pages in the main section, on pages with the vignette “politics” or its equivalent, or which in headlines, lead paragraphs or photos explicitly referred to domestic political actors or institutions. Articles shorter than 10 lines are

not included. For television news, the selection includes all thematic news stories with the vignette “politics” or its equivalent, or which in words or images explicitly referred to domestic political actors or institutions. The full dataset consists of 1,022 news stories from the 1998 election, 1,154 news stories from the 2002 election, and 1,187 news stories from the 2006 election.

The coding sheet included a number of variables that will be used in this study. First, coders were instructed to code whether the news story presented results from one or several *scientific opinion polls*, that is, polls with a representative sample. Coders were instructed to code “yes” only if the presentation was rather complete. Brief references to one or several polls were not sufficient to be considered as presentations of polls. Second, if the news story presented results from at least one opinion poll, coders were instructed to code the main object of the poll. Four alternatives were available for coders: (1) vote intention or party preferences, (2) candidate or party leader preferences, (3) political issues, and (4) other. Third, if the news story presented results from at least one poll, coders were instructed to code whether the following methodological information was included in the presentation: (1) exact question wording, (2) number of respondents, (3) population, (4) margin of error or whether changes are outside of the margin of error, (5) method of collecting the survey responses, and (6) name of the organisation that sponsored the poll.

To capture the journalistic style of the news stories, coders were instructed to code whether the journalistic style was *descriptive* – told what happened in a rather straightforward style, or *interpretive* – analysed, evaluated, or explained a situation while also describing it. While all news stories contain both descriptive and interpretive elements, this variable was coded based upon the main story line or angle and whether the journalistic style *largely* was descriptive or interpretive.

The coding sheet also included several variables focusing on the framing of politics. Most importantly in this context, coders were instructed to code whether (1) an issue metaframe or a (2) game metaframe was dominant in the news stories. Briefly, “game frame” refers to news stories that frame politics in terms of a game, personality contest, strategy, or personal relationships between political actors not related to issue positions. “Issue frame” includes stories that focus on issues and issue positions. News stories in which other frames were dominant will be treated as missing.

Unfortunately, for newspaper articles, coders coded headlines, lead paragraphs, main body and last paragraph separately, while for television news stories, they were coded in their entirety. To achieve comparability between newspaper articles and television news stories, in this study the codes for the main body of the newspaper articles will be used, disregarding the coding for the headlines and the lead and final paragraphs.

To answer RQ1, this study will take a closer look at the pattern of results revealed when testing the hypotheses above. In addition, a qualitative content analysis was performed, where all news stories with polls published in the largest morning newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* and the largest tabloid *Aftonbladet* during the 2006 campaign were carefully read several times to see in what ways – or if – these media focused on those polled or on other aspects related to the media themselves or to political actors and their interrelationships and quest for public support. Thus, RQ1 will be answered by combining the results from the quantitative content analysis with a qualitative content analysis.

## Results

According to the first hypothesis, it can be expected that the number of news stories in which opinion polls were reported increased between the 1998, 2002 and 2006 election campaigns. As shown by table 1, this hypothesis receives some but not unequivocal support. Furthermore, the trend is not linear. The number of news stories with polls being reported shrank from 98 in 1998 to 88 in 2002, before increasing to 117 in 2006. There are also some differences between media types. Most polls were published in the newspapers, with television news being more restrictive. However, it should also be noted that the number of news stories with polls being reported went up in both public service television and commercial television news in 2006. In terms of percentages, the share of news stories with polls being reported has consistently been higher in commercial than in public service television news, while the differences between the tabloids and the morning newspapers have been minor. Overall, 9.5 percent of the news stories in 1998 reported results from opinion polls, while the corresponding shares in 2002 and 2006 were 7.6 and 9.9 percent respectively. In both raw numbers and share of news stories, 2002 thus appears to be an exception. Partly this can be explained by the fact that one of the tabloids, *Expressen*, in 2002 experimented with using real-time response measurements instead of polls to measure how the party leaders succeeded when being interviewed or debating on TV. If the publication of results from these experiments had been considered as polls reports, the number would have increased by seven.

Table 1: Frequency of Poll Reports in Swedish Election News, 1998-2006.

	1998	2002	2006	N
Tabloids	50	28	38	1059
Morning press	36	48	55	1441
Public service TV	7	6	14	632
Commercial TV	5	6	10	231
Sum	98	88	117	3219

Whether it should be considered “beyond reason” (Patterson 2005) that about 10 percent of all election news stories typically include the presentation of opinion poll results is an open question. Any assessment of the media’s use of opinion polls should go beyond the raw numbers, however, which leads to H2, predicting that most of the published polls during the 1998-2006 campaigns were about people’s party or party leader preferences, i.e., that most polls were so called horse race polls.

The results show that most polls indeed were about people’s party preferences or their perceptions of the party leaders and how they fared when being interviewed or facing off in debates on television, whereas polls on people’s issue stands were less common – particularly in 1998. Thus, H2 receives support. In 2002 issue polls became more common however, and continued to be rather prominent in 2006. Partly this new emphasis on issue polls can be explained by an interest in public journalism (Strömbäck 2004), which preaches that the media should focus on the is-

sues people care most about rather than the issues the parties want to stress (Merritt 1998). Two other reasons for investigating and focusing on the issues people care most about might be: first, to legitimise the media's focus on some issues instead of others, and second, to market the media as giving voice to the people.

Table 2: Focus of Opinion Polls Published in the Swedish News Media 1998-2006 (in percentages)

	1998	2002	2006
Party preferences	67.3	60.2	44.4
Candidate perceptions	20.4	15.9	21.4
Issues	7.1	19.3	24.8
Other	5.1	4.5	9.4
Sum	99.9	99.9	100
N	98	88	117

In 1998 only 7 percent of the published polls focused on issues, but in 2002 this share increased to 19 percent and in 2006 to 25 percent. At the same time the share of published polls focusing on people's party preferences or vote intention decreased from 67 percent in 1998 to 44 percent in 2006. The share of published polls focusing on people's preferences for the party leaders or their opinions on how these fared when being interviewed or facing off in televised debates decreased between 1998 and 2002, but rebounded in 2006. Hence, the increasing focus on people's issue preferences was mainly at the expense of polls on people's party preferences or vote intention. Aside from this it can be noted that the tabloids published almost all of the polls – 51 out of 59 – focusing on people's preferences for the party leaders or opinions on how they fared when being interviewed or debating on TV.

If both the polls focusing on people's party preferences and perceptions or evaluations of the party leaders are considered as horse race polls, then the share of horse race polls declined from about 88 percent in 1998 to 76 percent in 2002 and 66 percent in 2006. Thus, while horse race polls constitute a clear majority of all published polls, these results suggest that it would be misleading to assume that the media's focus on opinion polls automatically contribute the horse race reporting – at least in the Swedish case.

This leads to the third hypothesis (H3), stating that there will be a positive correlation between the publication of opinion polls and the framing of politics as a game. To test this hypothesis, separate analyses were run for newspapers and television news in each election cycle. News stories where an issue frame was dominant was coded as 1 and news stories where a game frame was dominant as 2, whereas 1=no opinion poll reported and 2=opinion poll reported. To predict the framing of politics from the publication of opinion polls, Somer's *d* was used.

The results show that there are consistent and positive correlations between whether the media published opinion polls and the framing of politics as a game rather than as issues (see Table 3). There is only one exception to this rule, related to television news during the 2002 election campaign. Out of the 12 poll reports in television news in 2002, five framed politics as issues whereas seven framed politics as a game.

Table 3: Correlation Between the News Media's Publication of Opinion Polls and the Framing of Politics as a Game (Somers' d).

	1998	2002	2006
Newspapers	.510***	.566***	.332***
TV	.538***	.257	.360**

\*\* and \*\*\* indicate that the correlations are statistically significant at the .01 and .001 level respectively.

In general, the correlations were strongest in 1998 and, for newspapers, in 2002, and weakest although still significant in 2006. This is consistent with the results above, showing a decline in horse race polls and an increase in issue polls during the last two elections and particularly in 2006. Nevertheless, the results support H3 and those who claim that the media's focus on opinion polls contribute to the framing of politics as a game rather than as issues (Broh 1980; Patterson 2005; Rosenstiel 2005; Farnsworth and Lichter 2007).

The fourth hypothesis (H4) predicted that there would be a positive correlation between the publication of opinion polls and an interpretive – as opposed to a descriptive – journalistic style. This hypothesis was not supported, however, as only one significant correlation was found: In 2006, there was a significant and positive correlation (Somers'  $d = .237$ ) between the publication of opinion polls and an interpretive journalistic style. In the other cases, neither positive nor negative significant correlations were present. The direction of the correlations was generally positive, but the correlations were not significant.

Turning to the quality of the media's reporting on opinion polls, H5 predicted that when publishing polls during the 1998-2006 election campaigns, the media most often failed to provide the methodological information recommended by organisations such as ESOMAR/WAPOR. To test this hypothesis, the presence of six types of methodological information was included, which broadly corresponds to the recommendations by ESOMAR and WAPOR and the type of methodological information that in some countries are regulated by government and in others through self-regulation (Welch 2002; Spangenberg 2003; Ferguson and de Clercy 2005). As there are fundamental differences between newspapers and television – most clearly seen in the lighter recommendations that ESOMAR/WAPOR apply to broadcast news compared to newspaper news – the presentation of the results for these two kinds of media are held separate. Table 4 shows the share of different types of methodological information that was present in the newspapers in each of the election campaigns, whereas table 5 shows the same information with respect to television news.

The results show that neither newspapers nor television news did a good job at providing the kind of methodological information that should be presented when a poll is published. On average, the newspapers published only about a third of the methodological information in 1998, and barely a majority in 2002 and 2006. Television news did an even worse job, on average publishing less than a quarter of all methodological information in all three elections. Although the recommendations directed at broadcast news typically are lighter than those directed at newspapers, it is noteworthy how seldom both newspapers and broadcast news publish essential information such as the question wording, the population and

Table 4: Percentage of Election News Stories in Newspapers and Television News Reporting Methodological Information in Poll Stories, 1998-2006.

	1998		2002		2006	
	Newspapers	Television	Newspapers	Television	Newspapers	Television
Question wording	11.6	16.7	50.0	8.3	58.1	16.7
No of respondents	66.3	8.3	80.3	16.7	86.0	12.5
Population	12.8	16.7	47.4	16.7	45.2	45.8
Changes outside the margin of error	5.8	0	42.5	0	18.3	0
Interview method	12.8	0	25	16.7	38.7	0
Organisation that sponsored the poll	83.7	50.0	89.5	75.0	81.7	58.3
Mean	32.2	15.3	55.8	22.2	54.7	22.2
N	86	12	80	12	93	24

whether changes are within or outside of the margin of error. Although both the newspapers and the broadcast news, on the aggregate at least, have improved their reporting of methodological information across these three election campaigns, the overall picture is one of failures at providing people with the kind of information they need to evaluate a published poll and its quality. In this, the Swedish media appear to be neither significantly better nor worse than the media in other countries such as the U.S. (Welch 2002), Canada (Ferguson and de Clercy 2005) or Germany (Brettschneider 1997). All in all, although the newspapers in 2002 and 2006 published a bare majority of the methodological information, H5 is largely supported by the results.

While the results do not stand out in comparison with research on published methodological information in other countries, they are still noteworthy considering that “It is in the best interest of both newspapers and polling organisations to have newspapers [and broadcast news] disclose more information about polls than they are currently doing” (Welch 2002, 112). Although not all news consumers are interested in or have knowledge enough to use methodological information on polls, for media (and polling organisations) that need to be trusted sources of information, failing at providing easily accessible but essential information might hurt their credibility.

This might be particularly true if the media want their audiences to perceive them as using polls in order to give voice to and stand on the side of the people against those in power. In such a case, a prerequisite should arguably be that the media give the same people whose voices they purport to amplify the means to assess and evaluate the polls being reported on – particularly considering how easy it is to misuse polls (Bishop 2005) and that the media, in the Swedish case, are aware of the recommendations regarding what methodological information they should publish (Mellin 2002; Strömbäck 2004).

This brings us to the main research question (RQ1) in this study: When the media published opinion polls during the 1998, 2002 and 2006 Swedish election campaigns, did they mainly focus on those polled and their opinions, or on other aspects related to the media themselves or to political actors and their interrelationships and quest for political power?

To address this question, let us first consider the pattern of results so far. While the sheer number of published polls might suggest that the media have an interest in people's opinions, the results have shown that a majority of all polls focus on people's party preferences or evaluations of how the party leaders fared in televised interviews or debates. The most common question is whom people would vote for if the election was held today, in addition to questions on "who won" debates or how people would grade the party leaders' performances in major television interviews. Although the number of issue polls has increased, they still constitute a minority. Consequently, it is logical that the publication of opinion polls is consistently and positively correlated with the framing of politics as a game. In this, the critics of how the media use polls have it right; opinion polls spur horse race reporting. In this kind of reporting, almost all of the media's focus is on the candidates and what the polls might mean for their prospects on Election Day.

The results have also shown that while there is only one significant correlation between the publication of opinion polls and an interpretive journalistic style, this correlation was positive. Although the results suggest that it cannot be claimed that the publication of opinion polls predicts an interpretive journalistic style, it does not preclude that journalists often use opinion polls for analyses and interpretations; as noted by Lavrakas and Traugott (2000, 4), polls are attractive to journalists because these allow them "a quasi-objective, *proactive* role in the newsmaking process." In this context it is important to note that about three quarters of all poll reports in 2002 and 2006 (data not available for 1998) came out of polls commissioned by the media themselves. Finally, the results have also shown that the media fail when it comes to providing people with the kind of methodological information they need to evaluate the polls and their quality.

Taken together, these results suggest that the media mainly use polls to get access to unique and new information that can be used either to evaluate and analyse the horse race or – in the case of issue polls – to legitimise why the media focus on some issues rather than other.

However, to get a thorough understanding of the media's use of opinion polls, a closer reading is essential. Therefore, a qualitative content analysis of all poll reports in *Aftonbladet* and *Dagens Nyheter* in 2006 was performed. The main purpose of this analysis was to investigate to what extent and how the media, when publishing polls, focused on the people and their opinions, as opposed to the political actors or the media themselves.

The main result of this qualitative analysis is that the people is strangely absent from almost all poll results in the investigated media. Most of the time the media only report the raw numbers or tendencies that can be found in the polls, and then either settle with this – in some, but rather few, cases also looking at differences between demographic groups or people with different party identification – or use this information to analyse the political game or to pose questions to political candidates. In fact, the only time one of these media – *Aftonbladet* – explicitly invoked "the people" when reporting a poll was after then-Prime Minister Göran Persson was interviewed on TV. The poll showed that Persson only received 3.4 on a scale from 1-5. When Persson dismissed this result, *Aftonbladet* headlined the article: "Perssons insult to the viewers." The viewers were here used as representatives for the people, and when Persson dismissed the poll result, he scoffed at the people.



Interesting to note in this context is that the poll in question was based on only 370 respondents who had watched the whole *or* parts of the interview; how many had seen the whole interview was not reported. This N is indeed very low for inferences about what the people or the viewers thought in this matter.

This example also shows how the media use poll results, when they do not just report the results without analysing or using them further: they use the polls to evaluate and pose more or less critical questions to the parties or their representatives. There is hardly anything in the coverage of these poll results that suggest a genuine interest in what the people think and why they think as they do.

The same is more or less true with respect to the media's publications of issue polls. Although the media seldom use issue polls to evaluate the parties – if an issue is not included in a referendum – they use them instead to legitimise why they focus on some issues instead of others. In both cases, the media use the polls as a tool for serving their own purposes, rather than to give voice to the people. In most cases, the media furthermore report the results without making it clear whether changes are significant or not and what questions and response alternatives were used. Even when reporting issue polls, the media seldom focus on the people and their thoughts or opinions. At best, the media present how the results differs between demographic groups, but beyond that, the people are strangely absent considering that their opinions are supposed to be the foundation of the polls being reported.

Hence, the results from both the quantitative and the qualitative content analysis suggest that the media do not use polls mainly to give voice to the people, but rather to serve the media's own needs of unique news stories and of information that can be used to inform their horse race coverage, the framing of politics as a game, and as a help when deciding on and legitimising their issue coverage. To conclude: If polls indeed are to be perceived as the pulse of democracy, the power lies with those who measure the pulse, not with those whose pulse is being measured.

## Discussion and Conclusions

The main purpose of this study was to investigate how the Swedish media during the last three election campaigns used opinion polls and whether or not the media ultimately used opinion polls in order to give voice to the people – or to the media and the journalists themselves. As hypothesised, the results suggest an – albeit not linear – increase in the number of news stories in which opinion polls were reported. Most of the polls were about either people's party preferences or their evaluations of the party leaders, i.e., how they fared when being interviewed or when they debated on television. Issue polls have become more common, but horse race polls dominate. As hypothesised, the results also show consistent support for the notion that the publication of opinion polls spurs the framing of politics as a game. However, the hypothesis that there is a correlation between the publication of opinion polls and an interpretive journalistic style was rejected. With respect to the quality of opinion poll reporting, the results show that the media largely failed in providing people with the kind of methodological information needed to assess the poll results and the quality of the polls. The only good news in this respect is that the media have improved somewhat since 1998.

Normatively, the most important question is however related to whether or not the media mainly used opinion polls to give voice to the people. Here the results

from both the quantitative and the qualitative content analysis suggests that the media seldom use opinion polls in ways that suggest a genuine interest in the people and their thoughts and opinions. Rather, the main reasons for the media's interest in opinion polls appear to be: First, to get exclusive news and unique information; second, to have information that can be used when analysing the political horse race; third, to have information that can be used when posing more or less critical questions to political actors; fourth, to have information that allow journalists a quasi-objective, proactive role in political communication processes; fifth, to send a symbolic message that the media care about ordinary people and their opinions, and sixth, to legitimise why the media focus on some rather than other issues.

Taken together, the results of this study thus show that if the media indeed use opinion polls to give voice to the people, they fail. As used by the media, opinion polls very seldom serve as *vox populi*. Rather, opinion polls serve as *vox media*. Even if we assume that opinion polls do a good job at measuring public opinion, which often is highly questionable (Bishop 2005; Zaller 1992), the media do a poor job at using opinion polls to give voice to the people.

As least this holds true with respect to the Swedish media's use of opinion polls in the last three election campaigns. Whether it also holds true in other countries and in the media's use of opinion polls between election campaigns remains to be investigated. Although most research suggests that the media in Sweden neither do a better nor a worse job than the media in other countries (for an overview, see Brettschneider 2008), there is a noticeable lack of comparative research on the media's use of opinion polls. This calls both for caution when drawing conclusions and for more comparative research in this area. Only by more comparative research, both across countries and across time, will it be possible to find generally valid knowledge regarding whether opinion polls, as covered by the media, mainly serve as *vox populi* or *vox media*.

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# THE PUBLIC OR PARTIES IN THE MEDIA?

## A STUDY OF PUBLIC, PARTY AND MEDIA ISSUE AGENDAS IN FIVE DANISH ELECTION CAMPAIGNS

DAVID NICOLAS  
HOPMANN

CHRISTIAN  
ELMELUND-  
PRÆSTEKÆR

ERIK ALBÆK

CLAES DE VREESE

### Abstract

As the media plays a central role in the way modern democracies function, it is important to study whether the media engages in a top-down or a bottom-up mode of covering election news. The article studies whether the media agenda is congruent with the parties' and the public's agendas by analysing the three agendas in five national Danish election campaigns. Theoretically, increased professionalisation of politicians' efforts to influence media coverage suggests convergence between the media and the party agendas, while increased commercialisation of the media suggests convergence between the media and the public agendas. However, since both the professionalisation of the parties and the commercialisation of the media are ongoing processes, convergence between all three agendas may be expected. Results show that the media agenda is slightly more similar to the agenda of the parties, but in general the media seems to be rather good at balancing their obligations to represent the issues of the elite on the one hand and to give voice to public concerns on the other. During the past two decades no convergence between the agendas is found, i.e. the interaction of the three different agendas is rather stable.

David Nicolas Hopmann is Assistant Professor at the Centre for Journalism, Department of Political Science, University of Southern Denmark; e-mail: dnh@sam.sdu.dk.

Christian Elmelund-Præstekær is Assistant Professor at the Centre for Journalism, Department of Political Science, University of Southern Denmark.

Erik Albæk is Professor at the Centre for Journalism, Department of Political Science, University of Southern Denmark.

Claes de Vreese is Professor at the Amsterdam School of Communications Research, University of Amsterdam, and Adjunct Professor at the Centre for Journalism, Department of Political Science, University of Southern Denmark; e-mail: C.H.deVreese@uva.nl.

While it is safe to state that modern democratic societies can hardly be imagined without some form of mass media, it is anything but given what role the media should play in a democracy (McQuail 2005; Street 2001; Strömbäck 2004). Different models of democracy call for different media roles. If one adheres to Schumpeterian competitive democracy, the media should provide, in a fair, balanced, accurate and comprehensive manner, information to the voters on “political elites, both ... what they have done, what they promise to do, and whether they have done what they promised when elected” (Strömbäck 2005, 339; see also Asp 2006). If, on the other hand, one adheres to a participatory or a deliberative model of democracy the news media is expected to “let ordinary people set the agenda” rather than “focus on the real actors – the political elites” (Strömbäck 2005, 342), i.e. the media should voice the public’s concerns in such a manner that they can be resolved politically (Hoffmann-Riem 2003).

But what in fact determines the media’s coverage of politics? The present study focuses on the issue agendas of the public, the media and the political parties in five Danish national elections to find out whether, in times of an election campaign, the media reflects the public (bottom-up coverage) or the party (top-down coverage) agenda – or both. Substantial evidence suggests that the public and the media agendas are rather similar (Dearing and Rogers 1996), while other studies have found a mixed picture with respect to the similarity of party and media agendas (Ridout and Mellen 2007). Few studies, however, investigate all three agendas at the same time (e.g., Asp 1983; Soroka 2002b). Furthermore, most studies cover a limited time period (typically one election campaign).

Inspired by this literature, the present article breaks new ground in agenda-setting analysis in two important ways by studying all three agendas in the same study and by analysing changes over time. Thus, we investigate whether the media primarily reflects the issue concerns of the public or the parties. Further, we study whether the congruence between the media agenda and the agendas of the public and the parties have changed over time.

Empirically, we draw on data covering five national elections from 1994 to 2007 in Denmark. We include three datasets covering: television news during election campaigns; several channels of party election campaign communication; and surveys of what the general public sees as the country’s most important political problems. In the following section a number of hypotheses on the similarities of the three agendas and possible convergence over time are developed. This is followed by a presentation of our case and the design and methods applied. Next, the empirical findings are reported, and the results are summarised and discussed in the final section of the paper.

## Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

Drawing on existing agenda-setting and political communication literature we put forward a number of hypotheses on the connection between the media agenda on the one hand and the public and the party agendas on the other and how this connection may have changed over time.

### Driven by Political Elites

Similar to most western democracies, the case under study, Denmark, is a representative democracy that only rarely asks its citizens to be actively involved

in political decisions (Ismayr 2003; Petersson 2000). That is, the public is asked to elect a number of parliamentarians who then decide who forms the government; referenda are only held rarely and most often in relation to European integration. Moreover, extant research has shown that the media tends to focus on the powerful stakeholders in society (Cook 2006). In their study on agenda congruence in the US Ridout and Mellen (2007, 45) hypothesise that “coverage of campaigns tends to be reactive” as journalists simply report what is happening. Taken together, the media can be expected to focus on the political elites, and thus our first hypothesis suggests “catering to the political elites”: The media agenda is similar to the agenda of the parties (H1).

However, we can also assume changes over time. Politicians have professionalised their approach toward the media and have become mediated in the sense that they increasingly adhere to a media logic when communicating to the electorate (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999; Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999; Neveu 2002; Strömbäck 2008). The increased professionalisation and mediation of political parties is empirically well documented across most of Western Europe (Farrell and Webb 2000; Norris 2002).

It is also true for Denmark: even though political advertising is prohibited on television, the campaign budgets of the Danish political parties are increasing rapidly, and the parties hire still more campaign, news media and communication experts (Elmelund-Præstekær and Hopmann 2008; Jönsson 2006). Danish parties have experienced a dramatic professionalisation since the mid-1990s, in particular after the turn of the millennium (Andersen and Pedersen 1999; Bille, Elklit and Jakobsen 1992; Jönsson 2006): in 1995 the parliament decided to almost double the annual direct public economic support for political parties, which led to an increase in the number of professionals employed by the parties. In the late 1990s, the major parties hired spin doctors, and strategic communication became an issue of interest to both academics and pundits in the 2001 election (Elmelund-Præstekær and Hopmann 2008; Jönsson and Larsen 2002; Sarup 2004). As political parties increasingly hire journalists and media experts in order to understand the logic of the news media and to set their political solutions on the media agenda, the party and the media agendas can be expected to converge over the years. In sum, we can formulate this second hypothesis as “increasingly catering to the political elites”: The media’s issue coverage is increasingly closer to the party agenda (H1a).

### Driven by Public Demand

The broadcasting media, which is the case in our study, is operating in an environment shaped by many other factors than the political system. In most European countries, broadcasting started as public service: state-owned or heavily state-regulated (Starkey 2007). As, over the years, the media markets were gradually liberalised, more and more private, commercially oriented actors emerged (Machill 1999; Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999; Pfetsch 1996).

Denmark is no different: until 1988 the public service broadcaster (Danmarks Radio, DR) enjoyed a monopoly over the airwaves. In 1986, the parliament had decided to establish a new, commercially run alternative named TV2/Danmark (Powers, Kristjansdottir and Sutton 1994). Until 2004, this channel received some public license fees but was always mainly financed by commercial advertisements.

At first, the news bulletins on commercial television (TV2) were no great success. The popularity, however, changed after only a few years. In terms of viewers, commercial television's news bulletins have been the most watched ever since the beginning of the 1990s, although the lead over the public service (DR) news bulletins is not great. In 2006, public service television implemented several changes to their news coverage, announcing that these were driven by market logic and a need to increase its audience share (Claudi, Sølund and Thorsen 2006; Holm, Svith and Kartveit 2008). Thus, the time period covered in this study saw competition between the public service and commercial news bulletins, continuously spurring a process toward finding new ways to gain an edge and increase audience shares. This process affected both the public service and commercial television news bulletins (Hjarvard 2006).

This commercialisation and increasing competition of the media may have consequences for media content. Generally speaking, "a profit-seeking model of the media suggests that campaign news is not defined by the intrinsic importance of campaign activities but by what attracts large numbers of viewers" (Ridout and Mellen 2007, 45). Increased commercialisation of the media markets and the new commercial competitors to public service broadcasting therefore lead to a "demand market, whereby the assumed wishes and desires of the public have become more decisive for what the media select and provide" (Brants and van Praag 2006, 30). In the words of Swedish scholar Djerf-Pierre (2000), televised political journalism (at least in Sweden) no longer supplies the audience with news it "needs." Instead, it provides what the public "wants."

Although it has not automatically led to an "Americanised" modus of news journalism, at least in countries with strong public service broadcasting (Blumler and Gurevitch 2001; Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999; Strömbäck 2007) – for example, the trend towards strategy and spin framed news journalism has been rather mute in most West European countries (Binderkrantz and Green-Pedersen 2009; Brants and van Praag 2006; Esser and D'Angelo 2006; Hopmann, Albæk and de Vreese 2010) – increased competition and commercialisation supposedly still have had a significant impact on some aspects of media content (Hjarvard 1999, 2006). Both major Danish broadcasters emphasise that they today, as different from earlier periods, see their role as a platform for ordinary citizens to gain public attention (Hjarvard 1999; Holm 2007; Svith 2007). For example, it is DR's goal to "define news as what is on the public agenda [and] news stories are chosen so they can create action and involvement amongst the audience" (Holm 2007, 80). In the words of TV2, the goal is to "inform the political system what is happening amongst the Danes rather than telling the Danes what is happening amongst politicians" (Hjarvard 2006, 125). To achieve such goals, both Danish broadcasters use opinion polls to guide their selection of which issues to have on their agenda (van der Brugge and Voss 2003, 132; Holm 2007, 80; de Vreese 2003). At the same time it is an explicit goal for both broadcasters to reach as many Danes as possible and not only certain groups of the population (Holm 2007; Svith 2007).

Furthermore, extant research on agenda-setting has also shown that the media has a large impact on the public agenda (McCombs and Shaw 1972; Weaver 1996; Weaver, McCombs and Shaw 2004). That is, we assume that not only does the me-



dia aim at covering issues deemed necessary by the public, the media clearly also impacts on which issues the public deems important. On this basis we formulate our second major hypothesis as “catering to the public”: The media’s issue coverage is similar to the public agenda (H2).

Since the commercialisation has *increased* in the period covered by this study (i.e., the early 1990s), we also expect that the media agenda has become more similar to the public agenda over time. Therefore, we formulate an additional, dynamic hypothesis as “increasingly catering to the public”: The media’s issue coverage is increasingly closer to the public agenda (H2a).

### Driven by Interaction

In an analysis on the media, the party and the public agendas in the US, Dalton et al. (1998, 465) suggest that agendas are a “result from the interaction of social actors; each actor is constrained by the others and by the flow of actual political events.” Rather than assuming that the media’s efforts to cater to the public or that the parties’ efforts to influence the media are dominating aspects, an interaction model assumes that all these efforts take place and shape the different agendas simultaneously (cf. Soroka 2002b). Moreover, one can also assume that not only is the media agenda similar to the party and the public agendas, but also that the party and the public agendas are congruent. Hence, we formulate this final hypothesis as an “interaction model”: All three agendas (the media, the party and the public agendas) are similar to one another (H3).

## Data and Method

To test our hypotheses, we draw on three different datasets covering five consecutive national elections from 1994 to 2007. Since television is the public’s most frequently used source of political information (Lund 2001; Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999), we begin by a content analysis of the major news bulletins on both major Danish news broadcasters, public service (DR) and commercial (TV2). The analysis covers three weeks prior to each election day, the typical length of Danish election campaigns. For each news story, the dominant issue was coded, applying 29 different issue codes.<sup>1</sup>

Second, a content analysis of the political parties’ campaign communication in the election periods studied was conducted. There is no precise guidance in the literature on how party data can be pooled, and operationalisations differ widely (Soroka 2002b, 271; Walgrave and van Aelst 2006). However, we try to gauge the party agendas in a broader manner than seen in earlier studies (cf. Ridout and Mellen 2007). The empirical material of our study includes the parties’ election manifestos, their ads and letters-to-the-editor in the five biggest national newspapers,<sup>2</sup> the parties’ televised so-called “presentation programmes” (shown on DR) and two televised party leader debates (on DR and TV2). For the “small” units of analysis (i.e., the letters-to-the-editor and the newspaper ads), one issue per item was coded – and the frequency of the issues is calculated for each channel of communication. For the “large” units of analysis (i.e., the televised programmes and the manifestos), one issue per message is coded; a “message” can consist of several sentences or just one depending on how much the speaker elaborates on a specific

point. Hence, messages are semantic entities delimited by a change of meaning of the text or speech.<sup>3</sup> Again, the total salience of each issue is computed separately for each source. Here, a coding scheme with 25 different issue codes was used.<sup>4</sup> Finally, the agendas of the five different sources are pooled in the following steps: first, for each party an agenda was calculated for each channel of communication; second, a “summary” agenda was computed for each party at each election; third, these party agendas were pooled to one aggregated party agenda for each election. To account for the fact that Danish parties have different electoral sizes we weighted the individual party agendas by parties’ share of votes in the election campaign investigated. This way we have one (weighted) party agenda for each of the five election campaigns studied.

Finally, following previous research (Asp 1983; Dalton et al. 1998; Soroka 2002b) we draw on representative survey data from the Danish Election Study to map the public agenda in the different elections. In the aftermath of each national election, a representative sample of the Danish population is asked “which problems do you think are the most important ones politicians should take care of?” Each respondent could give several answers (for more details, see Andersen 2008).<sup>5</sup> The answers given were originally grouped into nine issue categories.

As the coding of issues is different in the three datasets – and to further improve the reliability of the data – all issues were grouped in the same nine categories as used by the Danish Election Study. These categories are: employment; taxes; other economic issues; environment & agriculture; immigration; welfare; EU & foreign affairs; other or unclear issues. In addition, in both the media and the party data we find attention to non-substantive campaign issues such as the presentation of opinion polls or campaign trail stories (cf. D’Angelo, Calderone and Territola 2005; Esser and D’Angelo 2006). As this category is not used (and most likely is not relevant) in the data for the public agenda, the non-substantive issue category is excluded from the analysis.

In a first analytic step we describe the media, the party and the public agendas during the five elections studied. This is done on the basis of tables 1, 2 and 3 in the following section. Next, we turn to a test of our hypotheses. Here the relative sizes of the issue categories are compared election by election. This comparison is done by utilising an indexing method similar to several previous studies (e.g., Asp 1983, 2006; Brandenburg 2005; Ridout and Mellen 2007). The computed index values tell us how large proportions that need to be reallocated within one agenda in order to make it completely similar to another agenda. The larger the index value, the more dissimilar the two analysed agendas are. The index of dissimilarity ranges from 0 (= perfect overlap) and to +/- 100 (= no overlap).<sup>6</sup>

## Findings

Starting with investigating the media agenda and the changes within the different issue categories, we see a rather stable picture (see Table 1). Some minor changes from one election campaign to the next are found, e.g. the somewhat larger focus on foreign affairs in 2001 following the attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York City, but overall the issue attention is rather stable. If one compares the different issue categories, it is evident that the welfare issue dominates the media

agenda followed by foreign affairs. During the 1990s more attention was invested in economic and employment issues than in the 2000s, which can be explained by the economic challenges Denmark was facing at that time.

**Table 1: Media Agenda in Election Campaigns 1994-2007 (percentages of news stories)**

	1994	1998	2001	2005	2007
Employment	3	0	1	7	1
Economy	16	12	9	7	4
Taxes	2	3	2	3	6
Environment	8	14	8	10	19
Welfare	38	35	31	45	35
Immigration	4	7	13	5	7
EU & foreign affairs	25	22	32	19	20
Other	3	6	5	4	8

Note: The percentages shown are the average for both broadcasters included in the study.

Second, the party agenda is dominated by welfare issues, even more so than is the media agenda (Table 2). Also the employment and economy issue categories follow the same trend as found in the media data. The party agenda first and foremost differs from the media agenda by having a higher salience of immigration – and a lower salience of the EU and foreign affairs. The party agenda, in other words, has been more domestically oriented – with a special focus on immigration – than the media agenda has been.

**Table 2: Party Agenda in Election Campaigns 1994-2007 (percentages)**

	1994	1998	2001	2005	2007
Employment	16	4	7	9	4
Economy	21	13	2	7	7
Taxes	4	5	11	7	6
Environment	7	6	4	5	9
Welfare	33	49	46	49	34
Immigration	10	12	18	16	12
EU & foreign affairs	6	6	7	5	10
Other	4	5	5	3	18

Note: See data and method section for a detailed explanation of the computation of the party agenda.

Third, the public agenda has also been dominated by welfare issues (Table 3),<sup>7</sup> as well as immigration, which has been heavily rising through the 1990s. In accordance with the parties but in contrast to the media, the public is not very concerned with the EU and foreign affairs – this issue category is among the lowest ranked categories on the public agenda.

Table 3: Public Agenda in Election Campaigns 1994-2007 (percentages of answers by voters)

	1994	1998	2001	2005	2007
Employment	24	7	3	16	1
Economy	15	7	4	3	3
Taxes	2	5	4	5	3
Environment	8	9	3	4	7
Welfare	38	47	55	53	60
Immigration	8	14	23	13	14
EU & foreign affairs	3	5	6	3	2
Other	2	6	4	3	5

Note: Respondents could give multiple answers.

Source: Danish National Election Studies.

### Whose Agenda Do the Media Cover?

Table 4 shows similarities and dissimilarities between the media agenda, the party and the public agendas, respectively, during the election campaigns from 1994 to 2007.

The first hypothesis (H1), “Catering to the political elites,” states that the media and the party agendas are congruent. As indicated in the above description of the different agendas, we do see a substantial difference between the agendas with respect to the issue of the EU and foreign affairs: in every included election campaign the media focuses more on this issue than the parties. At the same time, the media focuses somewhat less on e.g. employment and immigration than do the political parties.

That said, looking at the overall differences, we find similarities, not dissimilarities: on average, the index of dissimilarity equals 26. That is, just a bit more than one quarter of the issue attention on one agenda has to be relocated in order to render the two agendas perfectly similar. Only a single year appears to be a minor outlier, namely the 2001 election campaign. Presumably, this difference is caused by the media’s attention to the September 11 attacks which occurred a few weeks prior to the election campaign. In sum, partial support for H1 is found, the media agenda is rather similar to the party agenda – the question remains, however, whether it is more similar to the party than to the public agenda.<sup>8</sup> We return to this question in the Discussion.

Our next hypothesis (H1a), “Increasingly catering to the political elites,” is not supported: the media and the party agendas do not converge over time. Comparing the index of dissimilarity for 1994 and 2007, we find a somewhat increasing similarity, but given the inevitable measurement error we are not confident in speaking of a substantial trend of conversion. Again the campaign of 2001 stands out, which reflects the special attention of the media in this election discussed above.

Table 4 also allows us to test our second main hypothesis (H2), “Catering to the public.” Again, we see that the media focuses more on foreign affairs and somewhat less on immigration than does the average voter. In fact, the overall figures for the agenda congruence of the media and the public are very similar to the figures comparing the media and the party agendas: on average, 30 percent of the issue attention needs to be reallocated within the one agenda to make it perfectly similar

Table 4: Congruence of Media Agenda with Party and Public Agendas in Election Campaigns 1994-2007

	Media and party agenda					Media and public agenda				
	1994	1998	2001	2005	2007	1994	1998	2001	2005	2007
Employment	-14	-3	-6	-2	-3	-21	-7	-2	-9	0
Economy	-5	-1	-6	1	-3	1	5	5	4	1
Taxes	-2	-3	-8	-4	0	0	-2	-2	-2	-2
Environment	1	8	4	5	10	0	5	5	6	12
Welfare	6	-14	-15	-4	1	0	-12	-24	-8	-25
Immigration	-5	-4	-5	-11	-5	-4	-7	-10	-8	-7
EU & foreign affairs	20	16	25	14	11	22	17	26	16	18
Other	-1	1	-1	1	-10	1	0	1	1	3
Dissimilarity	26	25	35	21	21	25	28	37	28	34

Note: The sign indicates whether an issue category is more (+) or less (-) salient on the party agenda than on the public agenda. The overall dissimilarity is computed by adding all percentage point differences (absolute values) divided by 2 (since we are dealing with two agendas, see Asp 1983, 352f).

to the other. Once again the 2001 campaign appears to be an outlier as the public agenda was not greatly concerned about foreign affairs.<sup>9</sup> In sum, our results partially support hypothesis H2: the media agenda is close to the public agenda.<sup>10</sup>

The next hypothesis (H2), “Increasingly catering to the public,” finds no empirical support. The results shown in Table 4 do not indicate a trend of increasing similarity between the media and the public agendas. Despite the increasing commercialisation of the media market we, if anything, find increasing dissimilarity over the years. Even though the commercial broadcaster, TV2, presumably is keener to cater to the public than the public service broadcaster, DR1, both follow the same pattern over the years (data not shown).

### A Result of Interactions?

The final hypothesis (H3), “Interaction model,” assumes that the media, the party and the public agendas are the results of an interaction between the actors in these three spheres. That is, it may very well be that the media is concerned with catering to the public, but at the same time follows the political elites closely. With the available data, we unfortunately cannot determine the exact causal mechanisms behind the shaping of the three agendas (cf. Soroka 2002b). Nevertheless, similar to Dalton et al. (1998) we find indications of mutual influence of the three agendas.

In every election campaign both the party and the public agendas are rather similar to the media agenda which indicates that the media does not have an autonomous agenda-setting power. The one instance with slightly larger differences, the 2001 election, was not caused by independent actions of the media but by external events.

Moreover, as shown in table 5, there is high congruence between the party and the public agenda. Given modern campaigning techniques this finding hardly comes as a surprise: “the candidates are systematically monitoring public opinion and attempting to persuade the public” (Dalton et al. 1998, 476) and therefore parties are “adjusting to their voters” (Asp 1983, 351).

Table 5: Congruence of Party and Public Agendas, Election Campaigns 1994-2007

	1994	1998	2001	2005	2007
Employment	-8	-3	4	-7	3
Economy	6	6	-2	4	4
Taxes	2	0	7	2	-2
Environment	-1	-3	1	1	2
Welfare	-5	2	-9	-4	-26
Immigration	2	-2	-5	3	-2
EU & foreign affairs	3	1	1	2	8
Other	2	-1	1	0	13
Dissimilarity	14	9	14	12	30

Note: The sign indicates whether an issue category is more (+) or less (-) salient on the party agenda than on the public agenda. The overall dissimilarity is computed by adding all percentage point differences (absolute values) divided by 2 (since we are dealing with two agendas, see Asp 1983, 352f.).

Similar to the findings presented by Asp (1983) and Dalton et al. (1998), our findings therefore indicate that the media, the party and the public agendas are shaped by mutually influencing one another. As mentioned above, we know that the media undertakes opinion polls to gauge the public's interests, and previous research has shown that the media can have an influence on the public agenda and the party agenda. In sum, we concur with Dalton et al. (1998, 476) when they state that the media does "not play the dominant agenda-setting role portrayed in some political communications literature." In other words, the media seems, on the one hand, to voice issues emphasised by the public and, on the other hand, to give a platform to the issues deemed important by the political parties, at least during election campaigns.

## Discussion

In this article we analyse the similarities and dissimilarities between the issue attention on the media, the party and the public agendas during five national election campaigns. We find that the media agenda is rather similar to both the party and the public agendas. However, the media and the party agendas are slightly more similar than are the media and the public agendas; the media caters to the political elites a little more than to the public. The differences are, however, rather small and both H1 ("Catering to the political elites") and H2 ("Catering to the public") are empirically supported. This conclusion is corroborated by the findings supporting our third and final hypothesis, which suggests that the three agendas are results of an interaction between all actors and not simply one dominant source. Besides the large similarities between the media agenda and both the party and the public agendas, we find even more overlap between the latter two.

By contrast we find no empirical support for our hypotheses on trends (H1a and H2a): the media agenda is converging with neither the party nor the public agenda in the studied period of time. In other words, with respect to issue coverage it is too simplistic to assume that increased commercialisation and competition more or less automatically leads to a "demand market" or that the professionalisation of the parties automatically enables the parties to control the media agenda.

At a more general level our results suggest that the Danish media in fact fulfils several “democratic duties” at the same time. The media has never exclusively (at least since 1994) covered the issue concerns of the parties, neither does it exclusively voice the issues seen as the most important by the general public. Rather it seems as if the Danish media has in fact succeeded in balancing a representative and a deliberative democratic ideal fairly equally in the past 13 years of election campaign coverage. Different ideals of democracy – and thus different ideals of journalism – continue to compete with one another. The balance between the two, found in our study, strikes us as a workable and reasonable pragmatic compromise.

The question remains, whether our results can be generalised to other settings: during election times political parties presumable have a larger influence on the media than in routine times. Walgrave and van Aelst (2006) list three reasons why political parties may be more successful in building the media agenda during election campaigns: first, during election campaigns political parties and their candidates “are [even more] vigorously trying to influence the public agenda” (Walgrave and van Aelst 2006, 97). Second, since the media pays more attention to politics during campaigns, “there is plenty of room for parties and candidates to get their substantial message across” (Walgrave and van Aelst 2006, 98). Finally, both the media and the parties pay more attention to fairness and balance in news coverage during election campaigns, which in turn limits the media’s power to shape the media agenda single-handedly (Walgrave and van Aelst 2006, 98). In other words, one may assume that the media is more prone to cater to the public than to the political elites in non-election times. Thus, it is relevant to study whether the results are valid in non-election times; extant research finds that major differences may exist between election campaign and routine times (Binderkrantz and Green-Pedersen 2008; Walgrave and van Aelst 2006).

Obviously, this study is far from conclusive. Future research on the subject is needed. First, in an effort to determine the exact causal mechanism shaping the different agendas research should aim at collecting public opinion data *prior* to an election campaign. Second, more detailed data would make it possible to analyse, who is following whom in the course of an election, thus treating elections as processes and not as events (e.g., Brandenburg 2002). Such an approach would also help to firmly establish causal influences from one agenda to another (cf. Soroka 2002a, 2002b). Third, since we are dealing with five time points only, it is unquestionably important to collect longitudinal data to establish more firmly whether or not the different agendas are in fact converging.

Nevertheless, our findings draw a general picture of the media, the party and the public agendas during the latest two decades, and hopefully the study can be of inspiration to future research on issue agendas.

## Notes:

1. The numbers of analysed news stories are 247, 211, 252, 253 and 218 for the election campaigns in 1994, 1998, 2001, 2005 and 2007. The reliability score for the issue coding was .81 (Krippendorff’s alpha). For more details see Hopmann et al. 2010.

2. The morning papers Politiken, Jyllands-Posten, Berlingske Tidende and the tabloids EkstraBladet and B.T.

3. The numbers of units analysed is: letters: 586; ads: 1,310; party presentation programmes: 3,873 messages; party leader debates: 2,708 messages; manifestos: 4,051 messages.

4. This measure yielded a inter-coder reliability score of .70 (Krippendorff's alpha).
5. The data covering the 2005 and 2007 elections are from surveys conducted during the election campaigns, the data covering the campaigns in 1994, 1998 and 2001 were collected after the election campaigns.
6. This index has been described as the "Duncan's index of dissimilarity" (Brandenburg 2005) and the "matching index" (Asp 1983).
7. Different from earlier, in 2007 respondents gave many unspecified answers relating to welfare rendering it difficult to decide when they gave one or more answers. Therefore, the proportion of welfare answers in 2007 may be slightly overestimated (Andersen 2009).
8. Following Asp (1983), one could suggest that it is appropriate to differentiate between media outlets according to their political stances. The reasoning behind this suggestion is that the conservative media may be closer to right-wing parties than to left-wing parties and vice-versa. Previous research has suggested that Danish public-service broadcasting has a left-wing bias and commercial broadcasting a right-wing bias (Hallin & Mancini 2004, 170; Hjarvard 1999, 71). We therefore compared whether public broadcasting and commercial broadcasting substantially differed in their coverage of the two major blocs in Danish politics: there are only minor differences between the two broadcasters (data not shown). Hence, with Asp (1983, 340) we can conclude that the "professional news criteria seem to be more important than the partisan news criteria."
9. The slightly larger difference for 2007 can most likely be explained by the overestimated public attention to welfare (60 percent), see note 7.
10. Following Soroka's (2002b) typology on which issues on the media agenda tend to influence the public agenda the most, most differences between the media and the public agendas are little surprising: on the one hand, the public experiences problems with employment and welfare service first-hand, they are obtrusive issues and thus limit the media's agenda setting power; on the other hand, even though governmental issues such as foreign affairs are not tangible and therefore unobtrusive, they are nevertheless "undramatic" for the public. Unobtrusive and sensational issues such as the environment and immigration seem to follow the same pattern on both the media and the public agenda. One could therefore argue that the media indeed seems to have a substantial agenda-setting power at least with respect to some issues. That said, the differences shown in table 4 are not large and rather stable. While we do not deny that the media is an important source of information for the public, we agree with Dalton et al. (1998) when they conclude that the media does not appear to be an autonomous actor as sometimes suggested: the small dissimilarities and rather stable similarities between the different agendas presented in this study seem to support their conclusion (cf. the following discussion).

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*MICKY LEE*

## **OBLIKOVANJE JAVNEGA PROSTORA IN DRŽAVLJANSTVA**

Članek obravnava odnos med globalnim prostorom in državljanstvom na primerih WTO in Disneylanda v Hong Kongu. Raziskovalci menijo, da globalni prostor lahko denaturalizira družbene odnose. Vendar nejasen občutek državljanstva in neoliberalni časovno-prostorski okvir omejuje državo in medije v interpretaciji pomena prostora ter manifestacijo državljanstva v prostoru. V globalnem prostoru sestanka WTO in Disneylanda v Hong Kongu je bila poudarjena hongkonško-kitajska identiteta z demoniziranejm južnokorejskih kmetov in celinske Kitajske.

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MARTE WINSVOLD

## RAZPRAVLJANJE V DIGITALNI PRAZNINI? O POLOŽAJU ONLINE RAZPRAV V LOKALNIH JAVNIH SFERAH ŠTIRIH NORVEŠKIH OBČIN

S prihodom interneta so se razvile številne možnosti za razprave online, ki so državljanom ponudile nove arene političnega komuniciranja, kjer je prostor izražanja skoraj neomejen. Toda če naj bi spletni forumi poživili javne razprave, morajo argumenti s spleta doseči spletno okolje. Članek proučuje položaj časopisnih spletnih forumov in ga primerja s položajem pisem urednikom v lokalnih javnih sferah štirih norveških mestnih občin. Kot indikatorja njihovega položaja sta uporabljena vidnost forumov in stopnja pozornosti, ki jim jo namenjajo drugi mediji in lokalni politiki. Samo ena desetina državljanov redno bere spletne forume. Ko se nanje sklicujejo drugi mediji in politiki, imajo bolj vlogo ojačitve kot pa razširitve agende. Največja izziva za spletne forume sta percepcija kakovosti med bralci in ogromno število prispevkov, ki forume dela neprijazne uporabnikom.

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JESPER STRÖMBÄCK

## VOX POPULI ALI VOX MEDIA? MNENJSKE POIZVEDBE IN ŠVEDSKI MEDIJI, 1998-2006

Zgodovini mnenjskih poizvedb in medijev se tesno prepletata vse od začetkov poizvedb, vendar na vprašanje, ali je medijsko poročanje o poizvedbah koristno ali škodljivo za demokracijo, še ni jasnega odgovora. Članek obravnava objavo mnenjskih poizvedb v švedskih medijih v času zadnjih treh volilnih kampanj s poudarkom na načinu uporabe poizvedb in na vprašanju, ali so mediji uporabljali mnenjske poizvedbe predvsem za to, da so dali glas ljudstvu ali samim sebi. Rezultati analize med drugim kažejo, da so mnenjske poizvedbe pogostejše *vox media* kot *vox populi*.

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DAVID NICOLAS HOPMANN  
CHRISTIAN ELMELUND PRÆSTEKÆR  
ERIK ALBÆK  
CLAES DE VREESE

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## JAVNOST ALI STRANKE V MEDIJIH? ŠTUDIJA JAVNIH, STRANKARSKIH IN MEDIJSKIH AGEND V PETIH DANSKIH VOLILNIH KAMPANJAH

Ko mediji igrajo središčno vlogo v delovanju moderne demokracije, je pomembno, kakšen pristop k volilnim novicam uporabljajo – od zgoraj navzdol ali od spodaj navzgor. Z analizo petih danskih volilnih kampanj članek proučuje, ali je medijska agenda (bolj) skladna z agendo javnosti ali agendo politike. Vse večja profesionalizacija vpliva politikov na medije naj bi v teoriji povečevala skladnost medijske in strankarske agende, komercializacija pa naj bi povečevala skladnost medijske agende z agendami javnosti. Ker profesionalizacija politike in komercializacija medijev potekata hkrati, bi lahko pričakovali skladnost med vsemi tremi agendami. Rezultati analize kažejo, da je medijska agenda nekoliko bolj podobna strankarskim agendam, vendar je videti, da mediji dobro usklajujejo svoje obveznosti predstavljanja strankarskih agend in glasu ljudstva. V zadnjih dveh desetletjih ni opaziti povečevanja skladnosti med tremi agendami; interakcija med njimi ostaja stabilna.



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#### Članek v revijah:

Novak, Janez. 2003. Naslov članka. *Javnost-The Public* 10 (volumen), 3 (številka), 57-76 (strani).

#### Knjiga:

Novak, Janez in Peter Kodre. 2007. *Naslov knjige: Podnaslov*. Kraj: Izdajatelj.

#### Poglavje v knjigi:

Novak, Janez. 2006. Naslov poglavja. V: P. Kodre (ur.), *Naslov knjige*, 123-145. Kraj: Izdajatelj.

#### Navajanje internetnih virov:

Novak, Janez. N.d. Global Revolution. <<http://www.javnost-thepublic.org/>> Retrieved October 1, 2006.

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#### Journal Article:

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