Working paper on the quality of the European news ecology

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A few notes about where I'm coming from first of all. My research focus over the past 10-15 years has been on the structural conditions for journalism and media diversity. That includes technology and business perspectives, institutional contexts and media policy. I've conducted research on the diversity of the Norwegian media landscape, studied the network structure of the Scandinavian news industries and analysed media ownership and its concentration in the region. In the fall I'm starting up a new project that recently received funding from the Research Council of Norway on digital infrastructures and the datafication of communicative power. My main concern looking forward is therefore the effects of platformisation on the news industries, processes of capture and infrastructure control. I'm more than a little worried about the technology optimism that frames almost all aspects of digital agendas in Norwegian government policy, and I worry about what the state's reliance on digital infrastructures in its administration of power does to the principle of universalism that supports the idea of the welfare state. So this network and its activities comes at a most welcome moment for me.

Now, to your questions, which I find really relevant and thought provoking, particularly the intersection between developments in the tech industry and European ideals of pluralism. They are also challenging, because there are no easy answers to these questions.

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Question #1: How do the recent developments in digitalization, platformisation and algorithmisation serve plurality, and how do news media and journalism react to serve citizens' information needs.

The first part of this question contains three questions, concerning digitalization, platformisation and algorithmisation and how they each serve plurality. If we're talking about plurality in the democratic sense, then what we mean is usually the idea that representation is important for societal and political participation, for citizenship. A lack of representation can lead to disenfranchisement, disillusion and political fatigue. Reversely, representation also gives us not only participation, but insight into the lives of others - so this is pluralism as a democratic value. When we are talking about traditional news media, it tends to bell-curve in terms of representation. Marginal voices are largely left out of mainstream media. Here, the question of what is enough, too little or two much diversity is perhaps more pertinent to the digital realm, as too much diversity can also cause division in society, leading to a lack of a common agenda. There is certainly pluralism on the internet. The question is how and where we conduct the type of common conversation that democracies need. Fragmentation is not a word that I don't see used much in research any more, but I think we see more of that today than when the term was in vogue. In fact, the internet infrastructure faces challenges of its own. Scholars such as Dwayne Winseck has referred to the "splinternet" – countries like China and Iran making internets of their own in an effort to break free from perceived US dominance, or – motivated by the urge to control content and free speech.

As for platformisation, this is something that shifts the entire ecology of the news media system. Power as well as resources are moved upward in the system, to the global level, with great implications for local media businesses the effects of which governments have little power to regulate. It certainly reduces pluralism in concentrating social, economic and communicative power, and to an unregulated realm, out of reach of accountability. The power of platforms also creates negative competition effects, hindering innovation in dominant companies, as well as creating high barriers to entry that makes it hard for challengers in the industry to succeed. In the end, the user has less choice, and product development suffers. The logics of these platforms also work to reduce the diversity of voices. Content moderation practices and rules of engagement that try to counter the logics of virality can't reach the scale needed to regulate hate speech on social media platforms.

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Platforms continue to dodge accountability questions from politicians, signalling the extent to which Silicon Valley values and democratic values crash.

That leads to the question of algorithmisation. Every time Facebook changes its algorithms or its content priorities, it has a visible effect on the news industries. I read about this last week as I was browsing through every past edition of the Reuters Digital News Report (I was trying to identify when this shift occurred that we are talking about here – the platform and algorithm effect: it was in 2014-2015). The Report can actually see the effect on news industries monetization strategies, the last one I think being the shift to longform video, which makes short news harder to monetise.

Algorithmisation has a further potential effect on pluralism. Algorithms rely on data, which means information needs to be turned into data. Datafication processes have a language of their own, based on principles like efficiency and scalability. These are not values that necessarily go well together with pluralism. One thing is Facebook, another is what happens when algorithms replace human interaction in state-wide systems. The digitization of public services means chat bots replace case workers, and algorithms automate decision-making. When decisions about public spending are made based on big data and algorithms, the logic of those algorithms replace human evaluation. Details tend to get lost in big data. When those details are citizens, algorithimisation can be bad news for diversity and representation.

The second part of the question is how news media and journalism react to these processes to serve citizens' information needs. If we start at the end this time, as for algorithmisation, news organisations turn to AI as much as any business that seek to optimize their revenue. But while social media, insurance companies and smart cities seek efficiency, news media at least struggle with the ethical aspects of algorithms and their effects on editorial freedom. I have yet to meet an editor that is not concerned about this. And I have yet to meet an editor who whole-heartedly embraces algorithmic curation. So as of yet, the professional and institutional identity of journalism seems to serve as a protector of pluralism. So while you may get a little more sports stories in your news feed than other readers, you can't avoid actually getting the news. That is, if you read the news at all.

As for how news organisations react to platformisation, most have become more reliant on third parties to spread their news. Here, they enter a larger network of actors, where they are part of the network effect more than they are able to create or even wager

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those effects. In fact, platforms perform much of the platform effect that news organisations used to have in the past – linking audiences with advertisers. This is, of course, commercial media's business model problem. Large media organisations of course also try to re-capture this effect by becoming platforms in their own right, consolidating content, functions and services that invite further questions about the concentration of power. This can have a positive effect on pluralism, as concentration at home at least can guard against foreign take-overs, preserving national culture and identity.

As for the first process, digitalization, news media have reacted to this mostly with enthusiasm. Not local media, though. They have been slow to embrace the digital. Rasmus Kleis Nielsen has already written about how the digitalization is not over for local news industries, but lately, local newspapers are being forced into the algorithmic reality before even getting on board with the digital reality. This is a tall order for many small news organisations, who don't have skills, resources or scale to feature in the market for programmatic advertising. The fact is that for many independent local papers, the only option for survival is to merge with larger entities, lowering ownership pluralism in media systems. We see this clearly in the Scandinavian news markets, where local independents actively seek the ownership of larger corporations. Their motivation is pure survival. Without ownership concentration, these newspapers don't see a future for themselves. The digital train has left, and they have no choice but to hitch a ride with the big players.

So that was question one. As for how news media react to serve citizens' information needs, they still perform their core function of providing journalistic coverage. Lately, there is a visible return to "value", or at least talking about values, among news businesses. If their core product is no longer "attention", they at least have a unique selling position as curators of information, rhetoric in part inspired by growing concerns over fake news and disinformation.

Question #2: What are good coping strategies for news media against platformisation? Distinguish between larger and smaller (language) markets.

Alone, I don't think they have any good coping strategies against platformisation. This is a policy question as much as it is an industry question. What the news industry can do, is get politicians on board. The Nordic ministers have had this on the agenda for a while now, but little has been accomplished. It seems the route they are trying everywhere, is the tax route, which is also where the industry is most concerned. If you can't beat them, at least tax

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them, so they can contribute to uphold the system of news production that the platforms themselves are so reliant on for content. I must admit I have sort of lost track of where this issue now stands in the Scandinavian context. The problem that platformisation presents to policy is that it involves cross-sectional regulations. It does not solely belong to the Ministry of Culture (or media), nor is it only a taxation issue. It also involves questions of national sovereignty, market competition and dominance, labour issues, content issues, privacy issues and infrastructure and technology issues that span multiple policy domains. So it's no wonder it's a hard nut to crack. On their own, Ministries don't necessarily have the competencies to deal with these cross-sectional issues, and it seems it's hard to get them to work together. But the industry is nevertheless actively lobbying governments to go after the platform players.

Another coping strategy, particularly for commercial news media in smaller language markets, would be, I think, to stop attacking public service broadcasting. Commercial media need to stop blaming public broadcasters for out-crowing them. The argument here is often that public broadcasters' "free" and open news services online make it impossible for commercial news to put up paywalls or charge readers for news. Instead, they should embrace the fact that public broadcasting has a market-wide lead-in effect that probably fosters media use and thus revenue in local and national markets (again I'm citing Rasmus' research here). Public service media is not the problem for commercial business models, Facebook and Google are.

Third, why not aim for platform power yourself. While this may concentrate ownership power in national media systems, at least consolidation protects national culture and language. And to that end, produce good content that people want to watch and read. People still love local content.

Question #3: Should the concept of public service media be extended to platform communication? How to articulate the political conditions for it?

This is a difficult one. I mean is it possible to remit and regulate the platforms? Who would oversee that? Would Facebook have different remits in Bangladesh than in Norway or Austria? What kind of sanctions would be possible? The infrastructure of the platforms – the internet – is not really owned by anyone. So what kind of scarcity principle would apply? And how would the remit be overseen?

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So I'm not sure. I think I'd start at the opposite end instead. As far as I know, computer engineers don't really have "public service" as part of their professional ethos, which would make computer engineering a sort of pseudo profession according to the theory of professions. So instead of setting up a political design from above, I would suggest we first make public service part of the curriculum at engineering school – to professionalise the engineers. This way, engineers would rather change the system from within.

Question #4: What other policy responses would you suggest to maintain and expand journalism responsive to contemporary democracies, challenged by digital platforms?

Rather than journalism, I think we need to talk about news media industries in relation to this question. Because it is at the industry level that this really is disruptive, and I think we need industry wide policy responses to maintain pluralism. Rather than trying to fight the effects of platforms, I think we need to adjust to the new reality. First, we need to reassess and probably redefine what we are talking about when we talk about media markets these days. These are multi-sided, global technology markets. You are not just competing with other local media for attention. So, first of all, I think a re-think or re-write of ownership and market concentration regulations are in order. Finding out what is the appropriate size for a news company today is actually rather tricky. For some, it's to be lean and small, for others, it's to be big and diverse. I think we need to allow for some concentration in the news markets (and I'm talking about Scandinavia here), to make sure ownership stays on local (or national) hands.

Another policy change I would suggest concerns state support to media. This one I am borrowing from my colleague at OsloMet, Ragnhild Olsen, who in a forthcoming anthology argues that press support should be reconfigured from direct production support (state support that goes to the owners of newspapers) to audience support, in the form of vouchers. This would increase local community ownership to local news brands, improve media literacy, get more young people to subscribe to news, and probably also increase competition in local news markets. People have diverse tastes, and would likely use their vouchers diversely, sustaining pluralist media markets in the process, maybe even saving some newspapers from consolidating.

And finally, just don't touch public service broadcasting. Public broadcasters are owned by the people, and they are politically mandated to do good, relevant and important

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journalism. As long as public broadcasters are allowed to operate, and innovate, on the platforms where people actually go, and they are "free" to use, this is the easiest, and most practical, solution to safeguard pluralism in European media markets.

Thank you.