

CHAPTER 4

Perceptions of journalistic bias: Party preferences, media trust and attitudes towards immigration

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Journalists are entrusted with a key role in mediating information from the centres of power to the public, and to present issues in a fair way. This chapter takes the perspective of the citizens and explores the perceived credibility of journalists to fulfil this important role in relation to the issue of freedom of speech. We combine qualitative and quantitative analysis of survey data from 2013 and 2015 to discuss perceptions of journalistic bias among the Norwegian public. Our interest lies in the gaps between these perceptions and the professional normative ideal of journalism. We find that confidence in the impartiality of journalists is

low among the audience. Party preferences and attitudes towards immigrants and immigration, along with general trust in the media, are important indicators of perceptions of journalistic bias concerning source selection and the ability to separate personal views from professional practices. With this as a backdrop, we analyze how respondents, in their own words, define the groups they believe are ignored by the news media. In the qualitative part of the analysis, we describe how such perceptions play out among different voter groups.

Introduction

For the vast majority of the public, freedom of speech is mundane. Only a small minority among us participate in mainstream public debates, even counting social media. Still, we all fundamentally enjoy the right to freedom of speech in our everyday lives. For one thing, the freedom to make one's voice heard is not restricted to mainstream public arenas such as newspapers or other mass media, it also pertains to face to face communication at work, in class or at the mall. But freedom of speech also has another dimension which is crucial for all members of the public, including those who do not themselves regularly participate in mainstream mediated debate. This dimension is often referred to as freedom of information: The right to seek, impart, and receive information of different kinds relevant to us as members of a public. It is a dimension of freedom of speech we all meet, at least indirectly, every time we watch the news, search the web or go to a movie.

The experience of the right to freedom of speech among the public rests on citizens' assessment of the legislative boundaries drawn by public authorities concerning access to documents and proceedings. But the experience also depends on less clear-cut boundaries made by producers, editors and journalists

(see Ihlebæk and Thorseth, ch 5). Through their selection, representation and interpretation of relevant information, journalists create and redefine boundaries in the public sphere, allowing the public to engage in democratic deliberation and make informed choices. The legitimacy of this role builds on a particular set of claims about professional journalism: It must be relatively independent from partisan struggle, group interests and personal motivation; journalists should speak truth to power and work for the common good (McNair, 1998; Waisbord, 2013). We are interested in the gaps between the professional normative ideal of journalism, and the citizens' perception of journalistic bias. Do the public trust journalists to keep personal political views apart from their professional practice, and balance sources of different political leanings? And how can we understand divisions between different groups in society on these issues?

In conjunction with the British referendum to leave the EU and the 2016 US election, commentators and pundits have described politics with buzzwords such as 'post-truth' or 'post-factual', to a large extent fuelled by social media campaigns, partisan media coverage of populist political movements and candidates, and allegations of 'fake news'. Public trust in the media is reportedly at an all-time low (e.g. Gallup 2016). Such a description is, importantly, based on predominantly Anglo-American sources. Our aim in this chapter is to explore the perceived credibility of journalists to act as important safeguards for freedom of speech in a Norwegian context: a Nordic welfare state with little political polarization, high levels of institutional trust, a strong public service broadcaster, public press subsidies, and high levels of news consumption. This makes for a critical case study in how the public express confidence in the impartiality and professional independence of journalism.

The empirical analyses are based on quantitative and qualitative data from population surveys on freedom of speech, carried out in 2013 and 2015 (see chapter 1). Through the analysis, we seek to map patterns of difference among groups of citizens. To get a more nuanced understanding of where, exactly, citizens think journalists are drawing the wrong boundaries, we use open-ended data where respondents were asked to name groups they felt did not get to speak in Norwegian news media.

In what follows, we first lay out the theoretical underpinnings of our analysis – the issue of media credibility for a well-functioning culture of freedom of speech. Next, we describe the data and method, before we present the results and discuss consequences for an understanding of how those who do not actively participate in public debate assess the workings of freedom of speech in Norway.

Freedom of information and perceptions of journalistic bias as a dimension of freedom of speech

The UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights' article 19 defines freedom of expression to include the freedom 'to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers'. Freedom of information concerns the receiving end of speech. It covers not only information held by public authorities, but also, in a wider sense, news and current affairs as well as access to a varied menu of political, moral and aesthetic ideas and cultural experiences. Freedom of information is laid down for instance by the US Supreme Court (e.g. *Grisrud* 2002), and in legislation in several nations. In Norway, the Constitution's paragraph on freedom of speech includes a so-called infrastructural requirement that obliges the state to

facilitate open and enlightened public debate. This requirement encompasses the right to freedom of information.

While freedom of information covers the possibility for any citizen to access government information, intermediaries are helpful in enabling us to enjoy the fruits of such a right. Ideally, someone should spend time scrutinizing authorities to prevent corruption and misuse of power, and someone should collect, edit and present relevant information to members of the public in order for them to make decisions on whom to elect as representatives. In modern societies, journalistic media have been entrusted with this task (e.g. Keane, 1991).

To facilitate open and enlightened public debate, the media are supposed to perform in a certain way. They should allow for a plurality of voices and the representation of diverse interests. The public needs to be informed about important events, and issues should be covered from different angles. Lastly, the media is expected to undertake self-scrutiny of how they fulfil their role, and keep a distance from centres of power. As such, the choices made by journalists about what to publish, whom to use as sources, and how to present their views are central to the actual experience of freedom of information for the general public.

Trust in the media, specifically, is regarded as key to any notion of a working democracy. In the words of Stephen Coleman ‘Unless we can trust the news media to deliver common knowledge, the idea of the public – a collective entity possessing shared concerns – starts to fall apart’ (Coleman 2012, 36; also Livio and Cohen 2016). The legitimacy of the media to select, frame and forward different types of information and messages is related to general trust in the ethics and moral foundation of journalism. Journalistic norms of impartiality, neutrality, factuality and integrity are there to justify the unique

position of mass media as the interpreters, arbiters and gatekeepers of information to the public (Alexander 2006). The vital role of professional journalism within a vibrant and diverse public sphere depends on the belief in a set of norms that lifts journalism above subjectivism, personal self-interest and political motivation (Waisbord, 2013).

Facing these ideals, research within news sociology and media studies (e.g. Gans, 1980; Schudson, 2003; Tuchman, 1972) has for decades maintained that journalistic representation and selection, like every other type of interpretation of social reality, necessarily construct a picture of the world rather than mirror it. Different schools of research have focused on the impact of economic interests, political connections as well as the particular moulding force of a media logic on journalistic representations (e.g. Altheide, 2004; Berkowitz, 2009).

The great worry expressed in recent public debate by researchers and media experts over an increasing popular scepticism towards the established news media, however, indicates that these types of studies, even if they qualified the principles for new production, never fuelled a wholesale discarding of the ideals of professional journalism. Established news media, run by media professionals, are conventionally recognized as vital contributors to an open democratic debate. Wide reaching freedom of information and press laws express the general acceptance of the right of journalists to access information and powerful sources (Ackerman & Sandoval-Ballesteros, 2006). The question is if this recognition and trust in the authority of journalistic texts is diminishing.

The context for our analysis is the increased fragmentation and polarization in media use in general and news consumption specifically (e.g. Prior 2007, Ksiazek et al 2010). Coupled with a dramatic downturn in the funding of traditional journalistic

institutions, especially those based in print news (Nielsen & Kuhn, 2014), the result has been seen as a crisis in trust in journalism. Moreover, the fragmentation and polarization in media use is, in the public debate, related to the rise of protest movements and populist parties where distrust in elites and appeals to lay people are common ground (Aalberg & De Vreese, 2017). Even if these movements may belong to different parts of the ideological spectrum, the rise of movements combining distrust in elites with immigration critique and the exclusion of out-groups have come to dominate the public agenda (Sheets, Bos, & Boomgaarden, 2015). A seemingly increasing scepticism towards mainstream media coverage is related to a more general distrust in political, economic and cultural elites.

There is extensive empirical literature on trust in the media and perceived media credibility.¹ A part of this literature aims to develop comprehensive measurements to grasp how citizens assess the workings of news media in general. For instance, Kohring and Matthes (2007) define media credibility as depending on four dimensions: trust in the selectivity of topics, trust in the selectivity of facts, trust in the accuracy of depictions, and trust in journalistic assessment (Kohring and Matthes 2007, 240). More recent work has zoomed in on one single aspect to look for changes in the credibility of journalism following digitalization. Karlsson et al (2014) probed into whether new opportunities to increase transparency in the journalistic process and product in online media improved users' assessment. They

¹ As Kohring and Matthes (2007) show, contributions to the field have used terms such as 'trust' and 'credibility' interchangeably. This lack of conceptual uniformity is also illustrated in the specific wording of questions in relevant surveys. For instance, a recent Gallup survey in the US asked for respondents' 'trust and confidence' (Gallup 2016). In Norway, surveys have used different terms to capture the same idea, including 'tiltro' and 'tillit' (e.g. NMD 2016).

found almost no effect on source and message credibility. Another line of research focuses on how involvement in an issue matters for trust. Matthes and Beyer (2015), in a recent contribution that also includes data on Norway, measure the effect of cognitive and affective involvement, and find right-wing political ideology to be related to less media trust in Norway (but not in the US and France). A recent related study based on Israeli data finds trust in journalists to be positively predicted by a left-wing political orientation, and also sees a general decline in media trust (Livio and Cohen 2016; also Tsfati and Arieli 2014 for a large-scale comparative analysis).

These latter studies point to interesting country-specific differences, related, among other factors, to the media systems and their characteristics. Importantly, though, to probe the effect of involvement, such studies use specific issues or events as starting points for their analysis. This is also the case for some of the more comprehensive attempts at measuring media credibility (e.g. Kohring and Matthes 2007). Yet other efforts have been made to track differences in trust across different media outlets. For Norway, Sjøvaag and Ytre-Arne (forthcoming) find support for the assumption that people express more trust in quality newspapers than tabloid ones.

Our interest is more specific, but at the same time more general. We want to concentrate on one central aspect of perceived media credibility, and relate that not to a single, current issue, but to a general impression of the Norwegian media system's journalistic practices. We are interested in what citizens think is lacking in media coverage, in the sense of which voices get ignored. We are also interested in whether or not citizens think the selection of sources and journalists' practices more generally are coloured by their personal political leanings. And we are interested in explaining differences among citizens on these issues.

Norway: A 'critical case' media system, with a partisan history

Norway is often described as a Nordic model of society (e.g. Hilson 2008) with welfare policies aimed not only at creating a security net for those who fall, but at utilizing public support schemes to advance equal opportunities. Politically, it is a multi-party system with comparatively little polarization. Economically, the country experienced rapid growth from the 1970s due to a booming oil industry. The media system can be seen as an integral part of this welfare state. Comparatively, the Nordic region including Norway, stands out because of (1) a long history of universally available communication systems, emphasizing these as public goods; (2) the early development of and still-strong commitment to institutionalized editorial freedom of the press; (3) an extensive cultural policy for the media, and; (4) a tradition for consensual policy-making between key stakeholders (Syvertsen et al 2014). The Nordic countries tend to rank high on indexes of new media technology use, and also perform well on lists measuring editorial freedom and related concepts (Syvertsen et al 2014). In 2017, Norway still has a publicly funded public service broadcaster enjoying high user numbers, as well as a diverse press structure both locally and nationally, subsidized by VAT exemption and some direct press subsidies.

Taken together, these factors create an image of Norway as a 'critical case' for studying media credibility and perceptions of journalistic bias held against professional norms. One key historical development does, however, need to be highlighted: As argued by Hallin and Mancini (2004) in their much-quoted work on media systems, countries similar to Norway are characterized by strong institutionalized professionalism in the media and strong state intervention through positive regulatory measures, but also by a shift away from political pluralism

towards a neutral commercial press. For roughly 100 years, from when the parliamentary system was formed in the late 19th century, up until the last decades of the 20th century, the Norwegian press was a so-called party press. Political parties owned, staffed and directed newspapers (Høyer 2005, Syvertsen et al 2014 p. 53ff). As a result, each newspaper represented one political view or ideology. From the 1970s, the dominance of the party press diminished slowly (e.g. Allern and Blach-Ørsten 2011). By the end of the 1990s, a public report found only one newspaper declaring party attachment in its preamble (Syvertsen et al 2014 p. 54).

Yet, while the party press as an organizational rule is long gone, replaced by a commercially owned and professionally run press, studies have found content to follow political partisanship (e.g. Allern 2007; Allern and Blach-Ørsten 2011). Such lines of partisanship have laid the basis for assumptions of bias in the Norwegian media. This argument has in particular been forwarded by the Progress Party. The former leader of the party for many years made a point of referring to the public service broadcaster as ‘the Labour party’s national broadcaster’. Originally based in an anti-tax liberalist movement, the Progress Party has steadily transformed into a moderately populist party with growing voter appeal in the last decades of the 20th century, promoting protests against established political elites and for restrictive immigration policies. Until recently, the Progress Party was the only political party who actively profiled itself through immigration policies, and for voters critical to established levels of immigration, the party became the likely choice (Aardal & Berg, 2015).

Following the 2011 attack by a sole extreme right terrorist in Oslo and on Utøya, the extent to which mainstream media

shut out deviant voices and thereby fueled isolated echo chambers, has also been a topic of public debate (Ihlebak & Løvlie, 2013; Ustad Figenschou & Thorbjørnsrud, 2016; see also Ihlebak and Thorseth, Ch. 5). This debate, along with claims of mainstream media being biased against the political right, especially on the issue of immigration, persisted in the following years, especially as the Progress Party took office along with the Conservative party in a minority government following the 2013 election.

Existing data on how Norwegians assess the media and journalists provide a mixed bag of results. In 2016, a survey found merely 16% of respondents expressing quite low or very low confidence in journalists, while 47% claimed to have quite or very high confidence (NMD 2016). The same survey – which in different forms has been repeated since 2007 – reports a slight increase in respondents who express less or no confidence in the media in general (up from 16% in 2007, to 20% in 2016), and a corresponding slight drop in those having some or high confidence in the media in general (down from 83% in 2007, to 79% in 2016). Our own survey data from 2013 show that with regard to confidence in the media in general, a majority think that the media provide important information (56%) and that they offer a diverse debate (53%). However, considerably fewer believe that the media are able to cover an issue from different angles (38%). The degree of confidence is related to party preference; people who identify with the left have higher confidence than those on the right. A substantial minority of the respondents doubt the media's ability to critically evaluate their own role (37%) (Staksrud et al, 2014). On this basis, we find that Norway provides an interesting case for studying in detail the perceived bias of journalism.

Data and method: combining quantitative and qualitative analyses

In our analysis, we use both quantitative and qualitative data from the two population surveys on freedom of speech, carried out in 2013 and 2015. In the quantitative analysis, we rely mainly on the 2013 survey, but also add two questions from the 2015 survey. About half of the respondents in 2013 also answered the survey in 2015. In the qualitative analysis, we explore an open-ended question from the 2015 survey.

Quantitative data

The dependent variable in the quantitative analysis – *biased journalists* – is an index consisting of mean scores on two survey items, meant to describe key aspects of journalistic boundary-making: to what extent journalists (1) ‘... favour sources with similar opinions to themselves’, and (2) ‘...allow their personal political views to affect them’ (Pearson $r=0.675$). Answers were given on a 1 (disagree) – 5 (agree) scale. Don’t know answers were recorded into the value ‘3’.

The main independent variables in the quantitative analysis are *party choice*, *attitudes towards immigration and immigrants*, and *trust in the media*. *Party choice* is based on a question on which party respondents voted for in the previous national (Storting) election. In order to measure *attitudes towards immigration and immigrants* we constructed an index consisting of three survey items, of which (1) and (2) were included in the 2015 survey and (3) was included in the 2013 survey: (1) ‘Most immigrants enrich cultural life in Norway’, (2) ‘Immigration is a serious threat to our national distinctiveness’, and (3) ‘We have enough immigrants and asylum seekers in this country’. Answers were given on a 1 (disagree) – 5 (agree) scale. Don’t know answers were recorded

into the value '3'. The three items were mean-centred before creating an index consisting of mean values. On the two 2015 items there are about 50 percent missing values, meaning that about half of the respondents only have values from the third item. However, among those responding to all three items the alpha reliability score was .835, suggesting a strong correlation between responses given in 2013 and 2015.

Trust in the media relies on a single survey item: 'How much trust do you have in the following institutions (...) media'. Answers were given on a 1 (no trust) – 5 (great trust) scale. Don't know answers were recorded into the value '3'.

Additionally, in the models we control for gender (women=1), age, education (higher education=1), and immigrant background. About 25 percent of the sample consists of respondents with immigrant background, but these are not representative of the immigrant population in Norway. This variable is therefore only included in order to 'control out' the effect of this group.

Qualitative data

In the qualitative analysis, we explore an open-ended question from the 2015 survey about which groups in society respondents believe are underrepresented in news stories (The specific question wording was 'Do you think that the voices of certain groups in society are underrepresented in Norwegian news stories?'). A total of 414 respondents (21% of the full sample) gave a more or less comprehensive response. The purpose of our analysis of this material is to gain a better understanding of the results from the quantitative analysis, namely why some people are more inclined than others to believe journalists are biased. The qualitative analysis is based on a close reading of the material, where central patterns and categories were detected. These categories were then analyzed with regard to party preference.

Results: Perceptions of journalistic bias

We present our results in three steps, of which the first two are based on the quantitative data and the third step focuses on the qualitative data. First, we take a look at the answer distribution of the two survey items included in our dependent variable. Second, we estimate the net impact of our independent variables on the *biased journalists* index. Third, we explore replies to the open-ended question on which groups in society respondents believe are under-represented in terms of voices in Norwegian news media.

Quantitative data

Figure 4.1 shows the distribution of answers to respondents' perception of the two survey items: the extent to which journalists are thought to prioritize opinions that correspond with

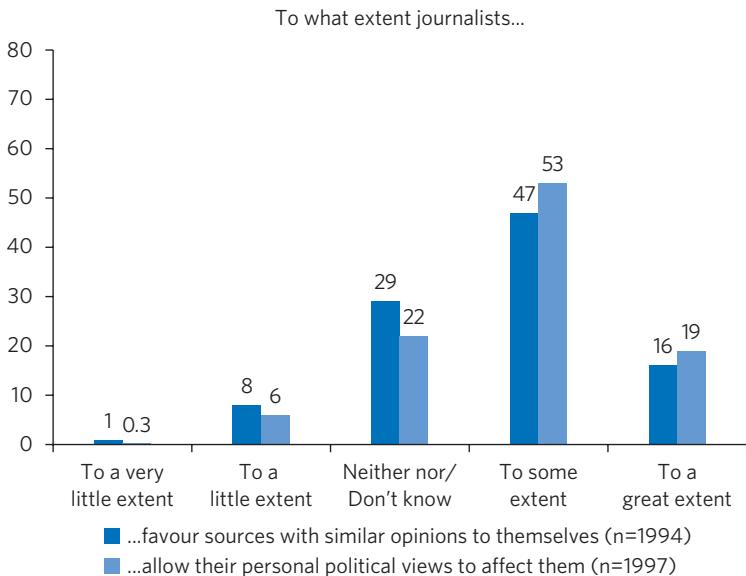


Figure 4.1. Perceptions of biased journalists. Percent.

their own views; and the extent to which respondents express discontent in journalists' separation of their own personal political opinions from the news stories they report, and the ways they go about it.

Figure 4.1 displays generally low levels of trust in journalists on both issues: A clear majority believe that sources will be favoured when they are in line with the opinions held by journalists (65% to some or a great extent), and even more clearly, the majority express a lack of trust in the journalists' ability to keep personal views distinct from their professional practices (72% to some or a great extent). It is however important to note that few respondents choose the most extreme option ('To a great extent'), rather most respondents choose the more moderate option ('To some extent'). Thus, the overall picture is not totally one-sided.

The next step in the analysis focuses on identifying characteristics of the groups that voice the most discontent. Results from three regression models are summarized in Table 4.1. The dependent variable is perceptions of journalistic bias (1=unbiased – 5=biased). Model 1 estimates the impact of party choice, model 2 adds attitudes towards immigrants and immigration, whereas model 3 adds trust in the media. Control variables are included in all three models.

Beginning with model 1 we see a tendency that the farther one goes to the right on the political spectrum, the more likely respondents are to believe that journalists are biased. Compared to Labour voters (reference category), those who voted for the centric Christian Democrats or the Liberal Party are located 0.2 points higher on the five point bias scale. The corresponding coefficients for voters of the right-wing Conservative Party and the Progress Party are 0.3 and almost 0.5. Thus, Progress Party voters are a half scale point more likely than Labour Party voters to believe that journalists are biased.

Table 4.1. Perceptions of journalistic bias. OLS regressions.

	(model 1)		(model 2)		(model 3)	
	b	se	b	se	b	se
Women	-0.138***	(0.034)	-0.122***	(0.033)	-0.096**	(0.032)
Age	-0.004***	(0.001)	-0.004***	(0.001)	-0.003**	(0.001)
Higher education	0.058†	(0.034)	0.106**	(0.035)	0.104**	(0.033)
Immigrant background	0.064	(0.042)	0.090*	(0.042)	0.066	(0.040)
Party choice (ref=Labour Party)						
Red	-0.055	(0.135)	0.051	(0.134)	0.038	(0.129)
Socialist Left Party	0.004	(0.068)	0.090	(0.068)	0.077	(0.065)
Centre Party	0.132	(0.090)	0.109	(0.089)	0.096	(0.086)
Christian Democrats	0.239*	(0.098)	0.249**	(0.096)	0.195*	(0.093)
Liberal Party	0.206*	(0.087)	0.201*	(0.086)	0.212*	(0.083)
Conservative Party	0.306***	(0.056)	0.248***	(0.056)	0.233***	(0.054)
Progress Party	0.485***	(0.063)	0.340***	(0.065)	0.272***	(0.063)
Other	0.419*	(0.168)	0.381*	(0.166)	0.415**	(0.160)
Did not vote/ unanswered	0.108*	(0.048)	0.076	(0.048)	0.053	(0.046)
Negative attitudes towards immigrants (2013+2015)			0.137***	(0.019)	0.119***	(0.018)
Trust in media					-0.231***	(0.018)
Constant	3.825	(0.068)	3.398	(0.089)	4.040	(0.100)
r2	0.054		0.078		0.146	
n	1999		1999		1999	

† $p \leq 0.1$, * $p \leq 0.05$, ** $p \leq 0.01$, *** $p \leq 0.001$.

NOTE: Immigrant background is not representative for the immigrant population in Norway.

Moving on to model 2 we see a clear tendency that negative attitudes towards immigrants and immigration is correlated with perceptions of journalistic bias. For each increase on the five point attitude scale, the bias scale increases by 0.115. In other words, those expressing the most negative attitudes towards immigrants place themselves more than 0.5 points higher on the bias scale compared to those expressing the most positive attitudes towards immigrants.

Adding this variable does not change the party coefficients for the Liberal Party or the Christian Democrats, and only reduces the coefficient for the Conservative Party by about 0.05 points. This suggests that attitudes towards immigrants are not particularly relevant for these voters' perceptions of journalistic bias. The coefficient for the Progress Party is however reduced by as much as 0.145 points, suggesting that much of the distrust in journalists remaining unbiased among Progress Party voters is explained by their negative attitudes towards immigration and immigrants.

Finally, adding trust in the media to the equation (model 3), we see that this variable is negatively correlated with perceptions of journalistic bias. This means that the more people trust the media in general, the less likely they are to believe that journalists are biased. The difference between the most and least trustful is more than a scale point on the bias scale. Adding the trust in media variable, the coefficients for the Liberal Party and the Conservative Party remain more or less unchanged, whereas the coefficient for the Christian Democrats and the Progress Party is (further) reduced. This suggests that distrust in the media is part of the explanation why these two groups of voters believe journalists are biased. In fact, in model 3 the coefficient for the Progress Party is almost down to the level of the other mentioned parties, indicating that negative attitudes towards

immigrants and distrust in the media are two important reasons why Progress Party voters have a stronger tendency than other voters to believe that journalists are biased.

In the next step of the analysis we dig deeper into this finding by exploring answers to the open-ended question about which groups in society respondents believe are underrepresented as speakers in the news media.

Qualitative data

In the open-ended question about media bias, the respondents were asked to state any groups (if any) they felt were neglected or underrepresented in Norwegian news media. Given that the question only invites respondents to think about failures, the input does not shed light on the positive aspects of people's perceptions. Instead, the material provides a rich basis for exploring the issue of (dis)content with the selections or boundary-making undertaken by journalists. Our interest lies in exploring dissimilarities among groups of citizens. Given the results from the quantitative data showing differences among voter groups, and that these differences for some voter groups are related to attitudes towards immigration and media trust, we here focus on identifying different factors brought up in the responses. We identify, illustrate and discuss factors of discontent related to a general criticism of media tabloidization, ignorance of vulnerable groups, as well as a centre vs periphery criticism. Having described these types of media critique, we then concentrate on the significant discontent with the representation of the issue of immigration, and how this is associated with a perceived bias against the political right.

Many of the respondents who answered the question expressed, in their own words, not only what type of actors they believed received too little media attention, but also which groups or

interests disproportionately dominated the news media. These answers give an idea of the level of frustration or even cynicism in parts of the public. Some briefly mentioned a group or two they felt needed more attention – ranging from religious minorities or disadvantaged groups, to age groups, specific interest groups, and even people with certain hobbies. Other respondents based their discontent on scepticism not only to the news media, but to the established elites and the democratic system as a whole.

An initial factor of discontent could be described as a general critique of media tabloidization and sensationalism. This was voiced through comments on the lack of space given to the moderate majority, the ‘Average Joe’ in the media, who do not hold extreme views and are unwilling or uninterested in making outrageous claims to instigate controversy. In an illustrative reply, this is expressed in the following way: ‘Those who do not seek attention, who are not extreme, who do not seek confrontation’². Some respondents even demonstrate an understanding of the inescapable fact of confrontation in the media, but still miss those who represent the status quo:

It’s in the media’s ‘nature’ to let the extreme speak up the most. Debates where most agree quickly turn boring! But I think the big majority feel things are pretty ok as they are, and this view is expressed too seldom in debates.

We find this aspect of media critique among voters from several parties, ranging from the far-left Red party through Labour and the Conservative party to the right-wing Progress Party, and also among those who did not state party preference. A related way of expressing similar opinions was found in comments on the lack of reasoning, or the lack of knowledgeable speakers on specific issues. Again, this can be interpreted as a discontent

2 All quotes are translated from Norwegian by the authors.

with the selection of high profile, vocal sources, at the cost of balanced, rational and reasoned input in the coverage of a given issue.

A second prominent line of critique points in the direction of vulnerable groups. We find respondents including such groups in general, but also singling out specific ones. In one instructive example, a Red party voter states: 'Weak groups such as those receiving disability benefits, those receiving social security benefits, disabled persons and the mentally ill.' For some respondents, such opinions are linked to patients in health care and their next of kin, or to recipients of specific welfare schemes. We do not know to what extent such replies are linked to the respondents' own experiences, but we do find various disadvantaged groups being mentioned by voters across the political spectrum, from the radical Red, to the political centre and to the Progress Party.

The third factor has to do with centre vs periphery, where respondents pointed to the lack of speakers from anywhere outside the most central areas of the capital city of Oslo. Antagonism between urbanised centres of power and rural areas is well known in most societies. Norway has a dispersed population, traditionally strong primary industries, and a long tradition of upholding rural development through diverse regional policies. In addition, the oil industry along with newer export industries such as salmon farming, are located off the Western coast. As such, the centre vs periphery statements should not be surprising.

For some, the criticism is of the mainstream media's Oslo-centricity. For others, the discontent is linked to a portion of the public, for instance: 'the normal part of the population who live in the countryside without public-transport facilities, and have a [household] gross income below €50 000.' In effect, this is

more a critique of the media's failure to broaden their range of sources, than it is a general criticism of the centralization of power in the capital city. We find this sort of critique across the political spectrum.

While the factors and groups mentioned so far address a perceived general tendency of source selection undertaken by journalists, one specific issue does stand out in the replies: Immigration. Immigration, then, constitutes the fourth factor of discontent. Comments on immigration do not all land on one side of the debate. Rather, it is a vehicle to express opposite forms of discontent. For some, the problem with mediated public debate in Norway is the lack of nuanced representation of immigrants. One example quote would be: 'The average Muslim, he/she who does not have extreme ideals and wishes to live a good life in peace'. On the opposite side, other respondents point to the lack of voices critical to immigration: 'Persons who are opposed to immigration. They are often/always accused of being racists'.

These two examples illustrate how the respondents are divided on the issue in accordance with party preference: By and large, those pointing to the lack of immigrant voices, or to the misrepresentation of specific immigrant groups, are found among leftist party voters. Those who express a lack of voices critical towards immigration are scattered on the political spectrum from the political centre to those who do not vote. In accordance with the findings from the quantitative analysis above, this concern however, is conspicuously expressed most often and with most frustration by Progress Party voters.

In the replies addressing the immigration debate, respondents hint at a political spectrum, and the media's bias towards the left. Beyond the specific issue of immigration, other respondents relate their criticism to the left-right spectrum of politics

explicitly. This is a fifth dimension of discontent found in the open-ended answers. These respondents relate to the parties on the right, and they feel that the right is getting too little attention. For voters from the Christian Democrats, such failures can be linked to religion too: 'Religious and political minorities. Political minorities on the right are censored much more strongly than those on the left'.

For other respondents, the issue triggers a more targeted critique of the political left. In the following illustration, the left is evoked by the colours of the previous left-centre coalition government and the right is tagged with the then-in-office Conservative-Progress Party government:

'The Norwegian media are to a large extent leftist – in other words there is a lot of positive writing/talking about the red-green side of Norwegian society, and at the same time a very clear focus on negative stuff on the blue-blue side. I observe this difference almost on a daily basis.'

In other replies, the same line of thinking is expressed more precisely as a criticism of the Labour Party: 'I would say, to put it bluntly, all people who do not vote Labour speak out all too seldom in Norwegian news media.' Whereas the former quote was attributed to a Conservative voter, the latter was written by a voter from the Progress Party. In our analysis, the subtle difference between them is illustrative: Progress Party voters offer a harsher discontent with the media, and link the problem to the Labour party, whereas Conservative voters and those in the political centre, offer more general critiques without mentioning a specific group or party.

This fifth factor of discontent with journalistic bias also triggers a more fundamental scepticism. Some of the Progress Party voters express distrust in the openness of the democratic system and the public sphere in general. This is coupled with a principled idea of

the role of journalists: the media should be impartial, and journalists should be ‘apolitical’. ‘Due to the fact that the press is by and large owned and run by the Labour press and their opinions, they should act as apolitical media and also give a voice to others who have different opinions from themselves’. Such a statement is not accurate concerning current media ownership in Norway. Still, it expresses, first, a perception of Labour bias reminiscent of the party press era, and, second, it clearly states a basic expectation of journalists’ balanced and transparent professionalism.

Importantly, we find no criticism in the material of Norwegian media blocking the voice of the political left.

To sum up, we see here traces of five different forms of discontent: (1) general criticism of media tabloidization and sensationalism, (2) a lack of attention given to speakers from vulnerable groups, (3) a centre vs periphery criticism, (4) the contested issue of immigration and, finally, (5) the perceived bias against the political right.

Discussion and conclusion

This chapter has looked at the issue of freedom of speech and boundary-making from the perspective of the citizens. With a starting point in a widespread perceived scepticism towards the media, coupled with a crisis for the business models journalism has traditionally relied on, the aim of our analysis was to explore how citizens evaluate the independence and impartiality of journalists. The case of Norway, we argued, is particularly interesting. It is a ‘critical case’ in the sense that Norway has high levels of institutional trust and a media system described as professional and with a high audience reach.

Our results show the distrust in these aspects of journalists’ boundary-making to be quite high, and to go beyond any

specific subgroup of the population. The results indicate that a large majority of the general public in Norway have little faith in the conventional journalistic claim that the news profession represents a type of disinterested or third party interpretation of current affairs.

This type of scepticism stands out as strong compared with levels of confidence in the media as a whole. Compared to the trust in other institutions, people's trust in the media is low, almost half of the respondents answering that they have no or little confidence in the media. When asked more specific questions related to diversity, the results are more positive. More than half of the respondents answer positively when they are asked if they believe that people with different opinions are allowed to speak in Norwegian media (Staksrud et al, 2014). This apparent difference in trust towards the more roughly defined 'media' versus the journalistic profession, and thereby the more narrowly defined news media, can be interpreted in different ways. In general, though, the finding might be bad news for those who wish to distinguish the traditional mainstream news media as particularly trustworthy with regard to impartiality and integrity.

Through quantitative analysis, we have pointed to different variables that help us to understand why the level of discontent is so high, and what kind of explanations might lie behind different groups. The results show that party preferences, attitudes towards immigration and trust in media are related to the perception of journalistic bias. We also identify differences among political groups, e.g. that negative attitudes towards immigrants and distrust in the media are more important reasons for Progress Party voters to believe that journalists are biased, compared to people with other party preferences. In our explorative analysis of the open-ended question about those who do not get to speak up in the Norwegian news media, we identified five different factors,

and showed how two of those – the immigration issue and the perceived bias against the political right – seem to follow the same kind of pattern found in the quantitative material.

We do not know if the comments on this issue are related to the media covering immigration differently than other issues, or are due to the political (and humanitarian) urgency of the issue. But the salience of this issue indicates that immigration engages people particularly. Furthermore, their concern over issues related to immigration seems to be related to their evaluation of media performance, as indicated in previous studies.

Our analysis confirms the impression of a widespread discontent with the way journalists handle their own political views in their professional practices: The majority of the Norwegian public have little trust in the journalists' ability to draw legitimate borders for freedom of speech when it comes to these particular issues, and this distrust is linked to political preferences and to the pertinent societal issue of immigration. In spite of the old declaration of the 'death of the party press', and almost five decades with media outlets defined as professional and nonpartisan, the audience is not convinced. Rather, a qualified guess is that people are aware of the documented leaning of journalists towards the liberal left (NMD 2016), and that they to some extent support the popular contention from right wing voices about a media bias that reflects this political position.

Such findings could be interpreted as a blow to the journalistic news media as an institution in and for the democratic public sphere. Professional journalism in Norway does not seem to be a particularly exceptional case in this way. Rather, the Norwegian media system looks to be facing similar challenges as do legacy media in other liberal countries: Low confidence in the press follows partisan cleavages and a deeper level of distrust in the democratic quality of the public sphere. Thus far, the impact of

these trends seems less grave in Norway compared to states with other media systems and political cultures. At the time of writing, the turmoil surrounding US President Donald Trump and the rise of populist parties in several European countries has pushed the issue of journalistic bias to the top of the agenda. This invites replication of our study to track developments over time, and to measure the effect of such general trends in specific societal settings. If the premise is that freedom of information and open democratic deliberation is intimately linked to widely trusted sources of information, some worry is warranted. Tendencies of polarization, group thinking and scepticism need to be taken seriously into account – and to be researched in different societies.

Still, we should be careful not to overstate the ramifications of our findings. Our study is based on data from two surveys, but does merely tap into the topic of trust in the media through one specific angle. Further work should extend the analysis of indicators of perceptions of journalistic bias by zooming in on specific media outlets, preferably linking media use to perceptions of trust.

Fundamentally, one could argue that a critical stance towards the media is key for citizens wanting to take part in the democratic process. The design of our study rests on the assumption that news in general should be impartial and adhere to established professional journalistic norms. The findings of widespread criticism could, then, also be seen as a signal of changing expectations, and a changing role for the media as channels between the public and the rulers.

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