Men med tanke på hva de har skapt, står de som suksessfamilien framfor noen. Dens evne til overlevelse er tankevekkende for alle som forsøker å forstå hva medier er og gjør for noe. Verket om dem, av deres smilende tjener Andreas Norland, er en kilde til forståelse av hvordan et familiefirma virker – i gode som i onde dager. Og av hvordan selv en liten bladlapp kan vokse til et medierike uten grenser.

(Tidligere versjon trykt i Dagbladet 23.12.2011)

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A Digital Anthology

Gripsrud, Jostein and Moe Hallvard, eds
The Digital Public Sphere: Challenges for Media Policy.
Gothenburg: Nordicom, 2010

With the emergence of the internet in the mid-1990's, we could for a while refer to the online media as «digital», distinguishing them from their older, analogue counterparts. Today however, all the significant media technologies are digital, and the media landscape continues to evolve at an ever faster pace – with counterpoints provided by rapid political, economic and cultural changes. In analysing the media in relation to democracy, we need to keep abreast of these accelerating developments, and use them to renew our normative thinking. In this regard, the theoretical tradition of the public sphere has served an important function, focusing attention on media development and performance, with democratic horizons firmly in sight. Not surprisingly, much of this literature takes as its point of departure important classic questions such as the patterns of information and range of views available through the media, as democratic resources for citizens. Other efforts have dwelt on more specifically Habermas-inspired concerns about interactive communicative rationality and deliberations. Less frequently do researchers inspired by public sphere theory engage with policy issues, a fact which makes this volume such a welcome contribution. Its explicit aim is to promote reflection and debate on policy questions, in a media landscape that is in rapid transition.

Media policy remains a somewhat self-contained specialization within the field of media and communication studies – to everyone’s detriment. Situated in the force-fields between economics, politics and technology, policy analysis addresses the ways that the media are owned, organized and financed, and the ways that they operate. Policy is shaped by the specific interests and actors involved, such as the state (and the EU), commercial media institutions, the advertising industry, media production organizations, citizens groups and other representatives of the
public interest – most of whom claim that they are in effect trying to serve «the public» and its interests. The consequences of policy can be manifested very concretely in specific elements of regulation (as well as de-regulation). As this collection demonstrates, elucidating the interests and actions of the various stakeholders, analyzing the implications of policy, and evaluating them normatively in the light of democratic horizons, are important research interventions that can deepen our understanding of key dynamics that shape the character of the mediated public sphere.

The volume derives from a symposium held in Paris in the autumn of 2008 and comprises nine chapters in addition to the editors’ Introduction. While the focus of the volume is on policy issues, the first chapter, by Slavko Splichal, offers an important conceptual foundation in regard to the notions of the public and the public sphere. This brief yet ambitious historical and linguistic probe offers a perspective that is not only significant for public sphere theory generally, but also can and should inform reflection on media policy specifically. He shows how while the concept of the public sphere has been a major theoretical advance for the analysis of media and democracy, there has also been a price to pay. The emergence of the notion of the public sphere has had the consequence of further marginalizing the analytic category of the public. That is, the sociological understanding of publics as socially contingent and situated subjects who generate public opinion fades from our view, replaced by, on the one hand, a focus on the public sphere as an arena, a communication infrastructure, and on the other by aggregate logics of the polling industry. His deployment of classic theories about the public and public opinion demonstrate the dangers that this entails for democracy, not least in the context of globalization.

The four chapters that follow comprise the section «Changes», and each take up a particular case from which to refract the issues of media policy – and to show that answers or solutions are far from obvious. In Chapter 2 Hannu Nieminen takes on the issues involved in the global redistribution of Finnish television programming via the internet by a private company. This generates tensions between legal copyright considerations, cultural democracy, and visions of a European public sphere. Still more complex, as Karl Knapskog shows in Chapter 3, are the questions that derive from the extensive audio-visual archives that European public service broadcasters have amassed – and can now be easily made technologically accessible to audiences. The absence of coherent policies in this area results in legal and political obstacles, as well practical ones. The result is an unfortunate and seemingly unnecessary delimitation of the public domain.

Chapter 4 examines the impact on the online media landscape when a major corporate actor enters the scene, in this case Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation’s purchase of the social networking site MySpace. Ole J. Mjøs analyses how in seeking profitability and the extension of its power, this traditional mega-media conglomerate has altered the character of MySpace, rendering it in part an outlet for film and television programming. This raises key policy questions about the regulation of audio-visual materials online, questions with which the European
Commission, using its recent Audiovisual Media Services Directive (2007), is still struggling. The theme of television in the online environment is carried forward and deepened by Tanja Storsul in Chapter 5, where she illuminates, in the Norwegian case, a trend that may jeopardise a central legal status of the internet model, namely its neutrality. With the increasing availability of television programming on the net, a tension begins to emerge between internet service providers and content providers: the principle of neutrality in regard to information, content and applications of the net providers becomes increasingly challenged by concerns over capacity and quality, which push for differentiation of online services.

The next four chapters make up the section «Fundamentals». Here the focus shifts to broader conceptual themes in regard to media policy. Hallvard Moe begins by examining in what ways public service policy documents render media users as audiences or publics, and to what extent they are seen as democratic participants of the digital public sphere. While he finds some positive evidence, the overall lack of an integrative democratic vision is striking. In Chapter 7, Karen Donders and Caroline Pauwels examine the European Commission’s policies towards public service in the light of criticisms that it tends to favour market mechanisms that marginalise public service ideals. Their particular concern is the transition from public service broadcasting to public service media, and they find that there are indeed grounds for optimism.

Helge Rønning in Chapter 8 offers a wide-ranging discussion on the fundamental notion of freedom of expression and how it is to be managed and nurtured in the online world. He pinpoints the various dilemmas and pitfalls, including the excesses of authoritarian control and of libertarian free-for-all. Constructive policies for democratic societies have a difficult course to chart. Sandra Braman, in the ninth and final chapter, explores the challenges to the legal frameworks that can and must support the public sphere in a time of increasing (media) globalisation. She underscores the institutional thinness here, accentuated not least by the fact that legal theory traditionally has been very tied to the nation state. Building up an analytic framework consisting of the domains of government, governance, and governability, she sketches some possible ways forward.

The authors and editors have managed to fill this somewhat brief volume to the brim; it is a very idea-rich collection. That the editors put the empirical cases first and the more theoretical chapters last I found to be a good strategy; usually the order is reversed, but here this sequence works pedagogically well. Given all the possible issues that could be discussed, some readers may feel disappointed that just their particular topic was not covered, but most will find in this collection both a good deal of useful factual information but in particular ideas that will serve as springboards for further investigation.

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