Terje Colbjørnsen

*Continuity in change. Case studies of digitalization and innovation in the Norwegian book industry 2008–2012*


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A WELCOME RESEARCH ON MEDIA INNOVATIONS

Terje Colbjørnsen’s dissertation provides an organizational and institutional analysis of changes in the Norwegian book industry with a particular emphasis on the role and influence of digital innovations. The case studies indicated in the title are five, all from the trade publishing of Norway’s three major publishers: (1) The online e-book store *Bokskya*; (2) a selection of books sold as downloadable apps for mobile devices; (3) the marketing of the e-book version of the trilogy *Fifty Shades of Grey*; (4) Kibano, an e-book-reader marketed by Norli Libris; and (5) digital audiobooks. Each case study is presented in a journal article, and the collection of articles is preceded with a 100-page overarching essay or ‘cover paper.’

The digitalization of the Norwegian book industry is a relevant, highly actual and significant area of research, and Colbjørnsen’s study is interesting and well argued. It presents a clear research question, it is informed by relevant theories (new institutionalism, field theory, ANT/STS, innovation theory, management and organizational theory), as well as existing research on publishing. His delimitation of the subject area and choice of empirical case studies provide a good overview of various dimensions of developments at the same time as it allows for more detailed analysis.

Colbjørnsen also has relevant and careful methodological observations and discussions of the limitations of his own research, his ability to generalize, etc. The five articles form a careful exposition of how publishers and the book market respond to the various challenges of digitalization by making use of existing institutional resources in a new environment. In general, we find his conclusion concerning ‘continuity in change’ convincing and well argued. Digitalization has not resulted in a revolution of the book or the book industry and developments are better described as an evolution and adaptation to changing contexts. These characteristics may, however, also reflect that his study concerns the
three old publishing house at a point in time in which digitalization has not been fully implemented.

When summarizing the cases, Colbjørnsen uses an analytical model consisting of five perspectives, or «facets»: Industry structure, Organizational structure, Technology, Market, and Policy and regulation. These provide a good structure for the overall argument in the cover paper and allows for both nuances and general trends to appear. Going through the five facets, Colbjørnsen makes use of an eclectic combination of theories. His argument is convincing in general, although it may be argued that his presentation in some points underestimates the problems of combining different frameworks — a criticism that is often directed to this kind of pioneering, interdisciplinary research.

Colbjørnsen has relied mainly on market reports in newspapers and journals, and to a lesser extent on interviews and document analysis. This choice is untraditional and there are instances where we find his empirical data a bit too thin to draw strong conclusions; but in general we agree that he is able to paint a convincing and broad picture of the innovation processes in the Norwegian book industry. His case study of the publishing of *Fifty Shades of Grey* is generally interesting with many important observations. However, his constructivist perspective on how the making of the bestseller was done somewhat overlooks that in the Norwegian case it was much more a ‘re-making’ of a bestseller (similar to a ‘re-launch’ of an already popular foreign tv series), in the sense that it had already gained popularity in the Anglo-Saxon world. His discussion of the bestseller’s need for cultural recognition or approval is, therefore, not quite convincing as regards the Norwegian context.

A central point in Colbjørnsen’s work is to discern between *digitization* understood as a technical change, and *digitalization* as a process of interplay between technological, institutional and market changes occurring during the digitization period. This is not an entirely original insight, but one that demonstrates its usefulness throughout the pages of this dissertation. *Continuity in Change* is a very welcome addition to research on media in general and on innovations and publishing in particular.

*Stig Hjarvard and Ann Steiner were respectively 1st and 2nd opponents at the oral defense of this doctoral thesis.*