



The press: a lot but alike

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A COUNTRY OF JUST OVER 5 MILLION inhabitants, Finland stands at a world record level with her 58 dailies, 171 weeklies, and 2,500 magazines and periodicals. But Finland serves also as a textbook example of how abundancy does not automatically equal cultural richness or political pluralism. Indeed, the story of the Finnish press - not so different from other Western countries - invites a reconsideration of the conventional wisdoms concerning press freedom and the role of the media in a democratic civil society. The press statistics of 1993 recently released by FIEJ show that daily newspapers in Finland have a circulation of 512 copies per 1,000 inhabitants - the third place after Norway (608) and Japan (576). Following Finland are Sweden (490) and Switzerland (404).

In 1994 Finland can boast 26 newspapers that are literally dailies, published 7 days a week. This figure is higher than in any other Nordic country - not to speak of those countries (such as the UK) where all papers take at least one day off during the weekend. An additional 32 papers are published 6-4 times a week, classified as dailies in accordance with Unesco statistics. In Finland dailies constitute two thirds of the total newspaper circulation, the rest belonging to specialised newspapers (church, farming, etc.) and local community papers published 3-1 times a week. These non-dailies or 'weeklies' are also more numerous than in any other Nordic country.¹

In an overall picture, Finland's press is not alarmingly concentrated. Still, the single largest company (Sanoma Corporation/Erkko), with its morning paper *Helsingin Sanomat* and evening paper *Iltta-Sanomat*, occupies over 20 per cent of the total newspaper circulation in the country. This is more or less the

same as in the neighbouring Sweden with her largest company (Bonniers) and its papers *Dagens Nyheter* and *Expressen*. The four largest companies cover about half of the total newspaper circulation in Finland, which is again roughly the same as in Sweden - a level of concentration that is essentially lower than for example in Germany (Springer, etc.) or UK (Murdoch, etc.).²

Seen from another angle, the press in Finland is in fact quite concentrated: the number of communities where two or more papers are published is 8, against 37 one-paper communities. The true number of competitive newspaper towns is even smaller, as 3 out of the 8 have a Swedish-language paper next to a Finnish one, both serving distinct language communities. In other words, newspaper competition according to the liberal notion of a free marketplace of ideas is today an exception rather than the rule. Most of the some 20 economic regions in this decentralised country have one

de facto monopoly paper, typically subscribed to by three households of four.

Political pluralism is even less common than competition in general. The second newspaper was typically a party organ different from the dominant paper in the market. For example in Tampere (predominantly a working-class community with a left-wing majority in the city council) many readers of *Aamulehti* (formerly an organ of the Conservative Party, covering over 80 per cent of the households) used to subscribe to either the local Social Democratic or the local Communist daily. This is no longer possible as both of them were removed from real life to the list of dead newspapers (nearly 50 titles since World War II). What is left for political activists is a national organ of this or that party, typically published in the capital and increasingly just once a week. But such activists are relatively few and most people go along with a 'non-political' newspaper.

In the early 1970s, still almost half of the daily newspaper circulation more or less reflected the political spectrum of the country as manifested in parliamentary elections. Today most dailies declare themselves as independent or non-affiliated, while political party organs with their usually small circulation (especially on the left) are struggling to survive as dailies or move to the more modest category of political weeklies. The dominant pattern is a local monopoly with a

reduced or colourless political spectrum, still biased towards Centre-Right; in short, a mainstream press no longer nicely fitting with the philosophical ideal of a free press in democracy.

Liberal dream prolonged by state subsidies

In the late 1960s, when the first serious symptoms of press concentration surfaced and politicians became concerned with retaining pluralism (all parties motivated by selfish interest), Finland introduced a system of subsidising newspapers directly from the state budget. This intervention did not meet much opposition; it was understood as a healthy measure to protect democracy. By the early 1970s the system was well established but there was a need for a comprehensive review of public policies regarding the press and its economy, both because of continued development towards press concentration and because of the significant sums invested by the state to support the press. This task was entrusted to the Government Committee on Communication Policy.³

The Committee discovered that state subsidies to the press had reached the level of 15-20 per cent of the total economy of the sector. However, most of these subsidies consisted of hidden support in the form of reduced postal rates for newspaper delivery. This general support benefited all papers, but in practice it was the bigger and better-off papers that made the greatest use of it, channelling for example to Helsingin Sanomat alone an amount that equal to what was received by the whole press of the political left. Compared with this non-selective support, the politically flavoured selective state subsidy turned out to be quite small: the ratio of general to selective support was 7:1.

This factual discovery constituted a turning point in Finnish media policies, as it legitimated the concept of a general state subsidy and moreover provided agreed totals for the various components of the support. But the Committee went

beyond merely documenting the state of affairs: its unanimous proposal was that the relation between general and selective support should be changed to 7:3. In other words, the Committee recommended to more than double the selective support - something that would have been absolutely unrealistic before the new conceptual thinking about state subsidies was articulated, with precise figures attached to both selective and general support components.

The government went along with the Committee's recommendations, making the huge hidden subsidies through the PTT open (as a distinct chapter in state budget) and introducing a new form of selective support to the political press based on the number of MPs. But the government did not follow the whole package which the Committee had carefully designed; for example it disregarded the proposal to replace a group of party secretaries by an automatic mechanism with objective criteria for distributing the selective subsidies to second newspapers.

By the late 1980s much of the Committee's package was forgotten, as the tone of the day was determined by increasing hostility towards political subsidies, and towards politics in general. Even more fatal was the recession which drastically reduced the space left for any public spending. Nevertheless, today the state subsidy system remains alive, at a lower level than some years ago but still as a vital lifeline for a good part of the Finnish press.⁴

Had the subsidy system not offered some counterweight to market forces, gone would be at least three second newspapers which are getting over half of their revenues from the state subsidies. In general, there would be less political pluralism - even less than the limited amount that has survived to date. Although harsh realities have driven Finland quite far from the liberal ideal of a free and competitive marketplace of newspapers, the interventionist subsidy policies have helped to slow down an erosion of

this ideal. However, the real issue is not whether the state subsidies have worked and whether the Committee was a worthy cause. A more fundamental question today is whether prolonging the liberal dream should remain an objective any longer. Two decades ago, the Committee laid down that:

"it is necessary in a democratically governed country to have a number of newspapers, independent of each other in control and financing. Some of these newspapers should represent various political parties while others should be politically independent, and neither of the two types should have to operate at a disadvantage compared to the other."

This objective is by now obviously unrealistic. Should it then be declared outmoded and replaced by something else? No serious answers have been sought by either the government (including its Ministry of Transport and Communications) or the trade partners (publishers, journalists). In fact, Finland offers today a glaring example of how communication policies are pursued without openly articulating the political, social and philosophical foundations of those policies.

Press philosophies under challenge

The state subsidies to the press manifest a revision of the classic libertarian ideology. As put by Finland's then President in 1973, in a landmark contribution to national and international media policies:⁵

"The traditional Western concept of freedom, which states that the state's only obligation is to guarantee laissez-faire, has meant that society has allowed freedom of speech to be realised with the means at the disposal of each individual. In this way freedom of speech has in practice become the freedom of the well-to-do. A different juridical system would not just be content at guaranteeing freedom of action to its citizens. It could define basic rights in a positive way... For example, in Finland and the other Nordic countries the state's financial support of the press is based on the idea that economically weaker newspapers - and here it is mainly a question of party

political organs - can and should be supported by the community, so that practical inequality in freedom of speech can be reduced and public discussion - an essential part of democracy - be ensured. Similarly, a broadcasting organisation operating exclusively and under parliamentary control can be seen as a guarantee that different sections of the population would, irrespective of their wealth, have equal possibilities to have their interests transmitted by the media."

To be sure, it is an academic question whether true liberalism boils down to plain and hard economic market forces (typically represented by Conservatism), or whether its original ethos rather stands for the kind of egalitarianism which operates through a positive notion of human rights (typically represented by Social Democracy). In any case the press structure in Finland, and elsewhere in the West, has ceased to correspond to the liberal philosophy of maintaining several independent voices in competition to expose the truth and maintain democracy.

As a matter of fact, media economists have begun to voice scepticism over the typical concern of media concentration. If monopoly is indeed a natural market setting in the newspaper business and if there is not enough political will to counter concentration by legislation or by economic intervention, it might be better to admit that there is no return to the romantic past of media competition, the critical reasoning goes.⁶ Furthermore, as Peter A. Bruck notes,⁷

"European integration and a continent-wide EC market have increased the public's acceptance of strong national market leaders in the media industries in order to protect national jobs and cultural identities in an integrated market dominated by a few multinationals."

In such a situation much of the communication policy thinking, and related media research, has to take a new course. For example, attention will be brought from ownership structures to content and its reception: to the media performance

in terms of its true diversity, to the audience perception and action, etc. Still, international multimedia companies and their national strategies remain on the research and policy agenda. In general, there is a trend towards cultural and sociological approaches to the media, including more attention to consumers and citizens' human rights.

Content diversity remains the eternal issue, highlighted by sensitive cases such as the ongoing debate about entry to the European Union.⁸ The Finnish media have tried to be open in this debate, no doubt alerted by the experience of the first Danish referendum where Maastricht was rejected despite an overwhelming support for it by the media. For example, Aamulehti in Tampere has carried at times more anti-EU letters to the editor than those propagating Finland's entry to it (the editorial line of this pro-business paper being naturally for Finland's entry).

By and large, however, the Finnish journalistic media, with all its outlets and channels, offers quite a limited view to the world. As there is much less media diversity than there potentially could be, it is high time to take a fresh look at media accountability, both in terms of constitutional principles and professional or political practices. Indeed, a lot of radical questions have to be asked and innovative answers found, or else the press in Finland will soon be a sleeping beauty. ■

Footnotes

1. The data are mainly taken from Finnish Mass Media (Helsinki: Statistics Finland, 1994), the latest issue of comprehensive statistical reports on the mass media scene edited by Tuomo Sauri at the central statistical office, Statistics Finland (Unit for Culture, Media and Time Use). Another source is a textbook edited by Nordenstreng, K. and Wiio, O. Suomen joukkoviestintä (in Finnish, "The mass media in Finland", Espoo: Weilin+Göös, 1994).

2. For details, see doctoral dissertation by Jyrkiäinen, J. Sanomalehdistön keskittyminen (in Finnish,

"Concentration in Newspapers", Tampere: University of Tampere, 1994).

3. For the background, mandate and work of the Committee, see Nordenstreng, K. and Wiio, O. Roles and functions of a communication policy council in National Communication Policy Councils (Paris: Unesco Reports and Papers on Mass Communication, No. 83, 1979), pp. 18-26. An English translation of parts of the Committee's report was issued as Committee Reports 1973: 91 I and 1973: 148 II, Abridged (Helsinki: Government Printing Centre, 1974).

4. Total amount of press subsidies in 1994 is 209 million FIM. Of this, 111 mill. FIM is made up of selective subsidies, which is nearly 50 mill. FIM less than the peak of this category only three years ago. The general support through reduced postal rates has dropped from the peak of 358 mill. FIM in 1989 to 98 mill. FIM today - to almost one fourth in five years. Thus the general and selective components are today roughly of equal size, which has made the selective subsidies more central than ever. Meanwhile, the share of all state subsidies has dropped well under 10 per cent of the overall press economy.

5. Kekkonen, U. The Free Flow of Information: Towards a Reconsideration of National and International Communication Policies, in Television Traffic - A One-way Street?, (Paris: Unesco Reports and Papers on Mass Communication, No. 70, 1974), p. 44.

6. See Journal of Media Economics, Spring 1993 (Vol. 6, No. 1), particularly Bruck, P. Introduction: Current Media Economic and Policy Problems in Central Europe, pp. 3-12.

7. Ibid., p. 10.

8. Referendum on this historical question will take place on 16 October 1994, in Sweden on 13 November, and in Norway on 28 November.