

Pushback: Democracies delegitimising a free press

The beginnings of tampering with an open society

“Freedom of Information. Three harmless words. I look at those words as I write them, and feel like shaking my head till it drops off my shoulders. You idiot. You naïve, foolish, irresponsible nincompoop...”

- **Tony Blair, A Journey (2010)**

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Introduction

Denmark is one of the most open, corruption free and liberal societies any journalist could wish to operate in.

Although not perfect - and with sporadic historical exceptions to the principle of press freedom, Denmark is in general a place where freedom of expression and the freedom of the press is constitutionally safeguarded. A country where journalists live without fear of being arrested, threatened on their lives or risk bodily harm from authorities.

A spot on the globe in which journalists have for the most part enjoyed a continuously expanding degree of openness and wide reaching means by which to hold power accountable.

In short: As close to a model democracy for a free press as you can get.

But cracks have begun appearing in the model. Media outlets as well as politicians find themselves in stormy waters with dwindling trust levels in Denmark as in other Western democracies.¹

Whilst democratically elected politicians will defend; often in superlative terms; the principle of a free press; things are beginning to slide backwards in practice.

As I will show in the following, journalists in Denmark are coming under attack from elected officials. The constitutional and traditional safeguarding of the press as a fundamental player in the democratic process in Denmark is being threatened by a number of high profile politicians. Legislation is being proposed, passed and implemented; often breaking with longstanding tradition and resulting in more difficult circumstances for the press when it tries to access or oversee government through eg. Freedom Of Information (FOI). And the overall legitimacy of journalists is being picked apart by segments of the political elite from different sides of the chamber.

In short, there seems to be a pushback occurring against the former order of the day. Certain democratic freedoms of the press are under pressure, and politicians, as I will demonstrate, are beginning to flesh out what some experts see as baby steps on a path towards undoing the power of the fourth estate; echoing in practice what one former member of Barack Obama's administration in 2011 put in to words as 'too much of a good thing'.² At the same time, politicians are enabling themselves in becoming stronger and more powerful in their own political communication. And these new, strengthened muscles aren't seldom being flexed to delegitimise journalists and media outlets.

This paper is an attempt to map and catalogue some of the tremors and rumblings being cast off from this backslide.

Methodology

I will investigate how democratically elected officials in Denmark (and other traditionally liberal, Western societies) are increasingly undermining the playing field of the press whilst at the same time attacking journalists for doing their jobs with higher frequency. This process breaks with longstanding traditions and ideals of press freedom in countries like Denmark. I will study the extent of and means by which political regimes in Western countries increasingly attempt to impair journalists from holding governments and elected officials accountable. To accomplish this, I will establish a taxonomy of the mechanisms and dynamics at play from a democratically legitimised political establishment which functions in an ever more professionalised as well as mediated and mediatised arena³. And I will discuss briefly some of the implications of this process which seem to constitute a pushback against the highly mediatised circumstances under which politics and political communications function today; the paradigm in which 'political actors mainly [are] governed by media logic'

¹ Annual trustworthiness report, Radius 2018:

<https://radiuscph.dk/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Trov%C3%A6rdighedsanalyse-2018-af-Radius.pdf>

² Orszag, Peter: 'Too Much of a Good Thing' - New Republic, 2011:

<https://newrepublic.com/article/94940/peter-orszag-democracy>

³ Strömbäck, Jesper: Four Phases of Mediatization: An Analysis of the Mediatization of Politics, 2008:

http://solo.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=TN_sage_s10_1177_1940161208319097&context=PC&vid=SOLO&search_scope=primo_central_eld&tab=local&lang=en_US

and where politics arrive at a 'breakdown of the distinction between periods when political actors are in their campaign mode and when they are in their governing mode'⁴ towards a lesser degree of this governance/ domination of news and media logic.⁵

For this project, I will be looking at the period from 2001 until present day. The reason for this choice is *partly* to limit the scope of the research to a time period defined by a strong focus on political communication where press advisers and dedicated communications staffs have become the norm and internalised in Danish politics as well as other liberal democracies, *partly* to examine the consequences for media and journalists of a period defined by a strong focus on national security legislation and patriotism since the 9/11 attacks and the following events.

Historical context

Since the end of the Second World War, journalists in Denmark and other Western European democracies have generally enjoyed expanding freedoms, rights and privileges in their pursuit of holding governments and elected officials accountable.

From a global perspective, Denmark is among the majority of countries that have long-established FOI legislations (fig. 1) as well as being in the minority of countries which Reporters Without Borders categorize as having a large degree of press freedom.(fig 2.)⁶ The right to oversee power holders and gain access to governmental documents in Denmark stems in part from the 1970 introduction of FOI legislation. This bill was very loosely based on the Swedish *Tryckfrihetsförordningen (Printing Freedom Regulation)* from 1766. Despite being less than 50 years old, Danish FOI legislation is on a global scale among the most veteran mechanisms safeguarding public insight into governmental documents. The 1970 legislation was overhauled in 1985, opening up public access even further. Even though these freedoms and possibilities for journalistic oversight were not ideal from day 1, they have served as a high benchmark throughout the past decades.

Figure 1: - Map of the expanse of FOI legislation (2017)⁷

National Laws and Regulations on the Right to Information



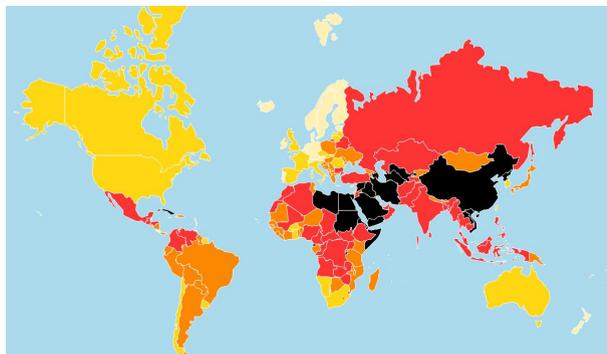
⁴ Four Phases of Mediatization, p. 240

⁵ Four Phases of Mediatization, p. 241

⁶ Reporters Without Borders: <https://rsf.org/en/denmark>

⁷ Article 19 (NGO working for FOI legislation): <https://www.article19.org/where-we-work/>

Figure 2: Map of press freedom index (RsF 2018)



However the expansion of the principle of openness was hampered with the introduction of the 2014 revision of the law.

At this point, let me stress the fact that journalists in Denmark need not fear for their lives or their physical safety or that of their families and loved ones. Conditions in other parts of the world, even other parts of Europe, are much more severe.

However, when you take out the looking glass and zoom in on these recent developments in an otherwise predominantly pristine democracy, things get tinted with a murky shade. This, I will explain in the following taxonomy.

Taxonomy of mechanisms

To assess as accurately as possible the means of and extent by which Danish journalists are being obstructed in doing their job, I have compiled in the following a taxonomy of the rise of institutional mechanisms aimed at inhibiting the press in Denmark.

1. Curbing the press through formal legislation

a. The loss of Freedom Of Information (FOI) privileges in Denmark

In 1985, Denmark got its first overhaul of the FOI law from 1970, *Offentlighedsloven*, extending liberal rights to information to not only journalists, but citizens at large (with certain privileges to media organisations).⁸

The FOI legislation encompassed not only the right to oversee spending and budgetary details from public authorities, but also the right of access to documents sent between separate public authorities such as ministries, agencies as well as regional and local authorities.

Exemptions included areas of national security, the regard to foreign state actors and individual privacy as well as, quite paradoxically, the economy of parliament and MP's themselves.

⁸ Offentlighedsloven 1985 (Danish): <https://www.retsinformation.dk/Forms/R0710.aspx?id=59474>

In 2002, prime minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen established a commission charged with drafting a new FOI law to substitute the existing legislation. Politicians, media lawyers, professors and media outlet representatives worked for eight years (!) debating, deliberating and discussing the need for a revised or revamped law.

In 2010, the draft was published. This prompted an immediate backlash from the media industry and journalism advocates, as the revamped legislation draft included significantly more extensive exemptions than the existing law.

Specifically, two provisions in the new draft came under fire: **Firstly**, the exemption of documents which⁹:

‘...are exchanged at a time where there is specific reason to presume that a minister has or will have the need for advice and assistance, between:

- A governmental department and its subsequent authorities
- Different ministries’

It was argued extensively that this provision effectively creates a catch-all situation which can be used to withhold more or less any document which has been, is or could at some point be used for legislative work by a ministry or minister.

And politicians themselves didn’t hold back in legitimising this legislative step as a way to keep nose journalists at bay and create ‘peace and quiet’ for themselves:

When the draft legislation was first published in 2010, then minister of justice Lars Barfoed (conservative), suggested - I’m not exactly sure how to feel about this rationale - that the exemption from access to ministerial service documents would secure more creativity in legislative proceedings.

‘The limitations will give rise to more creativity in the decision making processes. Thereby, they will in the end lead to more reasonable decisions than if all documents that are in circulations during such proceedings, should be subject to freedom of information (...) It should be so, that you can freely share thoughts; also in writing. I think this makes good sense and will result in better political decisions which have uncovered the nooks and crannies.’¹⁰

- Lars Barfoed, 2010

This logic was repeated by the subsequent minister of justice, Morten Bødskov (social democrat) who was responsible for passing the law in parliament in 2013. Pressed on the fact that the new law would expand the exemptions currently existing for strictly internal documents within ministry departments to also include correspondence between isolated ministerial authorities, Bødskov replied:

⁹ Offentlighedsloven 2013, §24 (Danish):

<https://www.retsinformation.dk/Forms/R0710.aspx?id=152299>

¹⁰ Interview with the Danish Union of Journalists magazine ‘Journalisten’ 2010 (Danish):

<https://journalisten.dk/lars-barfoed-mindre-abenhed-kreativitetens-skyld>

'In my mind it is quite natural that there exists a confidential space where ministers can be advised by their civil servants'¹¹
Morten Bødskov, 2013

The motivation of being free from the oversight of journalists and the public at large was even included in the official considerations during the committee stage of the bill. Here, it was noted that the exemption would ensure that public authorities could:

*'in a free and formless matter make their considerations and accomplish the preparation without dealing with the pressure which a potential publicising of purely internal considerations can amount to.'*¹²

Secondly, the FOI legislation sectorised off minister's calendars and that of their civil servants. However, probably the most controversial provision in the new law (§27) opened the possibility of exempting from FOI documents:

*'produced and exchanged between ministers and members of parliament in connection with cases on legislation or similar political process.'*¹³

This provision broke with decades of unidirectional openness tradition in Danish FOI legislation and practice. It potentially cordoned off any sensitive document on legislative proceedings exchanged not only (as mentioned above) within one departmental cylinder (*ministry <> same ministry's agency*), but between separate public bodies (*ministry <> different ministry / one ministry's agency <> different ministry etc., etc.*).

This legislative provision results in an extensive reduction of the opportunities offered to journalists in overseeing government proceedings and holding to account democratically elected officials in Denmark.

The changes to FOI legislation were heavily criticised by journalist organisations, media outlets and not least the Danish Ombudsman, Ombudsmanden.

On several occasions, minister of justice Morten Bødskov defended the bill by stating that the expanded provisions for exemptions would be used 'restrictively' by authorities, thereby repeating what the official bill considerations included.

However, in a fairly sensational opinion letter, ombudsman Jørgen Steen Sørensen made the unprecedented move of attacking legislation that had recently been passed by parliament.

'It is simultaneously mentioned in the law travaux that this provision should be 'interpreted and used restrictively', and that in cases of doubt 'weight should be applied to the regard for

¹¹ Interview with Danish news agency, Ritzau, 2013 (Danish):

<https://www.fyens.dk/indland/Boedskov-erkender-at-ny-lov-vil-skiule-dagpengetal/artikel/2280259>

¹² Written response to parliament, minister of justice Morten Bødskov, 2013 (Danish):

<https://www.ft.dk/samling/20121/lovforslag/L144/spm/7/svar/1045852/1238325/index.htm>

¹³ Offentlighedsloven 2013, §27 (Danish):

<https://www.retsinformation.dk/Forms/R0710.aspx?id=152299>

whether the internal and political decision making process encourages the exemption of said documents or information from the right to FOI'.

However, this passage leaves multiple questions as to when something is a 'case of doubt'. As a rule, it will be quite clear whether a document has been exchanged in a situation where it 'serves a minister' or not.

And if the answer is yes, the new law ensures that there is no right to FOI. As of such, there is no 'case of doubt'. One may therefore ask oneself whether the aforementioned passages is more magic formula than reality.¹⁴

However, according to public interest professor Oluf Jørgensen, from the Danish School of Media and Journalism, this is not the case.

Jørgensen had a seat on the commission charged with drafting the new FOI law between 2002 - 2010.

In an interview with The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism he states that the central administration in Denmark had, from the beginning, a strong wish to formalise exemptions helping them keep certain documents and cases under cover.

'The old law was better on several aspects. With the new law, the entire central administration is effectively converted to one internal unit. Law experts now view 'real' internal documents as those drafted and written within one authority versus 'internal documents sent between different government agencies.

However, this is merely the formalization of a culture, long established in certain ministries - most notably the Ministry of Justice. Before, things were often exempted under the catch-all provision of 'other specific public interests'.

This was a very creative and often borderline illegal way of keeping things covered up. So the culture is old. But now it is written solidly into the law.

QUESTION: But if the culture is old, would it then be reasonable to assume that limitations to freedom of information haven't gone further downhill under the new law?

No. Now you have a whole ballpark of exemptions. And you have to remember that not every civil servant dealing with FOI requests has always had a restrictive view on what should be public. You might very well have had a minority in certain departments or agencies who could find provisions for releasing documents. But with the new law, it has become increasingly easy for the majority to simply point to the formalised exemptions, thereby amplifying the exemption culture.'

- Oluf Jørgensen 2018¹⁵

¹⁴ Opinion letter, Politiken 2014, (Danish):

<https://politiken.dk/debat/kroniken/art5473325/Myndighederne-skal-holdes-fast-p%C3%A5-%C3%A5bened>

¹⁵ Interview with Oluf Jørgensen, 2018

b. The current situation of FOI legislation in Denmark - examples of stories that would have been left in the dark

Since the enactment of the current FOI legislation in 2014, the options for journalists to gain insight into government proceedings has - as demonstrated - been substantially hampered. There are several examples of major news stories from around the time the FOI legislation was passed in 2013 which prompted a debate about the limitations included in the new law.

- 1) At my newspaper, Ekstra Bladet, a story published in March 2013, before the new law was passed or put into practice, showed via FOI requests how then minister of labour, Mette Frederiksen of the Danish Social Democracy, had withheld information about the number of people who would be affected by cuts to the Danish unemployment benefits program.¹⁶

Later on, minister of justice, Morten Bødskov, acknowledged that the documents would not have been released to Ekstra Bladet under the draft legislation which was at the time going through the justice committee in parliament.¹⁷

- 2) The new FOI law would also have made impossible the disclosure of meetings between the permanent secretary of the tax ministry and the head of the local tax authority in Copenhagen about the highly politicized and sensitive topic of the tax returns of former social democratic prime minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt's husband, Stephen Kinnock. The fact that Stephen Kinnock did not pay Danish income taxes was the major scoop of the 2011 election campaign; and the revelation of possible political interference in the case - and the timing of the tax return story - by three tax minister's from the preceding conservative-liberal government, would have been inconceivable without the opportunity to file for FOI in the permanent secretary of the Taxation Ministry's calendar.
- 3) Also, the revelation of former Farum mayor Peter Brixtofte's serious misuse of public funds and several instances of corruption in the municipality of Farum would have been impossible to kickstart without the use/help of FOI in calendars etc. This fact was also acknowledged by Morten Bødskov in 2013.¹⁸

We can't prove a negative, so it is impossible to say which important stories the Danish public has missed out on since the enactment of the FOI law on January 1st 2014. The simple reason being that journalists can't legally obtain the documents by merely requesting them. Instead, editors and journalists are forced to make use of the more laborious and arbitrary process of dealing with whistleblowers or relying on help from anonymous government sources. Whilst all well and entirely within the toolbox of traditional investigative journalism, this process relies on the cooperation and risk taking by a third party.

¹⁶ 'Mette hid acute fiasco', Ekstra Bladet 2013, (Danish):

<https://ekstrabladet.dk/nyheder/politik/dansktopolitik/article4737731.ece>

¹⁷ 'No insight into benefits number with new FOI law', Journalisten 2013 (Danish):

<https://journalisten.dk/ingen-indsigt-i-dagpengetal-med-ny-offentlighedslov>

¹⁸ 'New FOI law will end revelation of scandals', Jyllands-Posten 2013, (Danish):

<https://jyllands-posten.dk/politik/article5438065.ece/>

However, interestingly, the public has since caught a glimpse of the manner in which the central administration deals with FOI requests and rights to information on a more general level.

During the summer of 2018 a series of leaked audio files from internal staff meetings held by Sophus Garfiel, the permanent secretary of state for the Ministry of Internal Affairs, found their way to Danish newspapers.

During the meeting on how to deal with FOI requests, Garfiel said amongst other things:

'If you are very concerned that something shouldn't become public, well, then we must organise our work in a manner so that there isn't public insight into it.'

- Sophus Garfiel, 2018¹⁹

In a later audio file, Sophus Garfiel also lamented the act of leaking information to the press, falsely claiming that such an act was illegal.²⁰

Garfiel also argued for an internal whistleblower mechanism within the Ministry of Interior Affairs rather than accepting the need for whistleblowing as a last resort for civil servants. Whilst internal whistleblower platforms can definitely help an organisation become aware of potential misconduct, they do not offer sufficient public insight into events that might otherwise be of public interest.

This claim is backed up by research conducted into the subject of whistleblowers by post-doc Philip Di Salvo who gave a fellows' seminar on the topic in November 2018²¹:

'Internal whistleblowing can play a major part in helping uncover organisational problems - but it simultaneously poses a risk to actual change being made as the claims by nature stay internally in an organisation, potentially being kept under cover. This is also backed up by [Terry Dworkin's and Melissa Baucus](#)' research on the differences between internal and external whistleblowing.'

The evident backsliding of openness in regards to what can be accessed by journalists in terms of public documents and the potential alternatives in pursuing access to information is something that has been widely studied by Reuters Institute Senior Research Fellow Julie Posetti who has conducted extensive research at the intersection of journalism, digital media, and freedom of expression from a global perspective.

During a fellow's seminar and subsequent interview for this paper, Julie Posetti, stressed the fact that journalism in what is otherwise thought of as liberal Western democracies has come under intense legal and political scrutiny:

'We have lived through a period where Western journalism had a period of comparative innocuous calm. But this is coming to an end, it seems (...) In my native Australia we have recently seen the government criminalizing reporting on affairs of offshore asylum seekers.'

¹⁹ 'Organise work so we avoid public insight', Politiken 2018 (Danish):

<https://politiken.dk/indland/politik/art6539886/Tilrettel%C3%A6g-arbejdet-s%C3%A5-vi-undg%C3%A5r-offentlighed>

²⁰ 'Listen to secret recording: New leak from scandal hit Ministry', Ekstra Bladet 2018 (Danish):

<https://ekstrabladet.dk/nyheder/politik/danskpolitik/lyt-til-hemmelig-optagelse-ny-laekage-fra-skandalen-omt-ministerium/7178218>

²¹ Di Salvo, Philip: Fellows' Seminar November 14 2018, RISJ

*Because it is so politically fraught they have applied anti-terrorism and state security laws to clamp down on investigative journalism.*²²

c. The current situation of FOI legislation in Denmark - From culture to law

To substantiate the claims made by former FOI law commission member Oluf Jørgensen and the examples listed above of stories that wouldn't 'make it' under the current FOI legislation, I have conducted a data analysis of complaints and verdicts by the Danish Ombudsman, Jørgen Steen Jørgensen, and his staff.

From the data it can be concluded that approximately 50-80 complaints are filed about FOI exemptions on a yearly basis.

Although the claim by former justice minister Morten Bødskov in 2013 was that the exemption provisions in the new FOI legislation should be used restrictively, the bulk of the complaints by journalists are regarding exactly these provisions.

An estimate of how the request-complaint ratio has evolved over time is difficult to establish, as no central database of the FOI requests filed by Danish journalists is kept. However, a rough estimate of the number of FOI requests sent to national (not local) authorities can be drawn from a survey conducted by the Danish Union of Journalists in 2018.

During the first three months of 2016, 407 requests were sent to Danish ministries. Extrapolated to a full year, that leaves us with 1628 requests of which 80 resulted in complaints by journalists.

That is complaint ratio of approximately 5 percent of all verdicts from Danish ministries. When the Ombudsman finds just reason to criticise Danish authorities for their compliance with FOI legislation, it is frequently for breaches that occur in the most central government authorities.

In an interview conducted with Jørgen Steen Jørgensen, the Ombudsman points to specifically the central Ministry of Justice and the politically contentious Ministry of Refugees and Immigration.

'It is important to emphasize that the complaints we receive do not necessarily reflect which authorities are doing good or bad in the field. Eg. it is reasonable to assume that the very nature of the cases treated by certain authorities may affect the extent to which they are complained about.

Having said that, there have been many complaints about the Ministry of Justice. Many complaints have focused on case processing time which we have dealt with in several self-initiated studies.

Currently, we have a great deal of attention in relation to case processing times in the Immigration and Integration Ministry. I refer to my news about the processing time in the Ministry of Justice and the Immigration and Integration Ministry'.

- Ombudsman Jørgen Steen Jørgensen²³

²² Posetti, Julie: Fellows' Seminar October 2018, RISJ + Interview December 2018

²³ Interview with Ombudsman Jørgen Steen Jørgensen, November 2018.

2. Shift in the power balance

The media landscape in Denmark has - as is the case in many other countries - been subject to amazing levels of change during the past 20 years.

From monopolisation of Danish Radio in 1988 through the introduction of internet media in the 1990s to implementation of media savvy special advisors and comms departments in Danish politics around the turn of the millenium. Not to mention the rise of social media.

In the following I will attempt to outline how an ever growing mass of communication workers has coincided with notable implementations of party political media outlets and politically orchestrated attempts at delegitimisation of Danish legacy media.

My research does not answer conclusively whether these coinciding trends are exacerbated by one another - or whether they are unrelated developments.

However, I do find it noteworthy that several of the media infrastructures created by political parties/governmental authorities give precedence to contributions of press delegitimising character.

a. Watch dogs of the press are dwindling - Guard dogs of the establishment are multiplying

As in most western countries, during the past 10-20 years the business of journalism in Denmark has seen unprecedented levels of change and reductions in the number of active journalists.

An estimate compiled in 2013 by former media researcher at the Danish School of Media and Journalism, Erik Nordahl Svendsen, shows that between 2007 and 2012 13 % of journalism positions vanished from Danish media employers.²⁴

This trend has continued through to 2018. Most recently, the Danish public broadcaster, Danish Radio, has initiated a politically mandated 20 % reduction in size to be fully implemented in 2021. Already, 87 journalists and editors have been fired, amounting to approximately 10 pct. % the editorial at Danish Radio. Other layoffs, closures of outlets and restrictive hiring has led to journalists and editors effectively being outnumbered by communications workers, inherently charged with communicating on behalf of their corporation, party or organisation.

During approximately the same timeframe, the 'army' of party political spin doctors, press officials, paid and unpaid communication interns, official government communications advisors etc., has risen by 25 % according to an assessment by the Ministry of Interior Affairs in February 2018 of the hiring of the communications staff between 2010 and 2018. This skewed numerical balance bears with it the risk of diminishing openness in society at large, and at the same time poses risks for a free press, says public interest professor Oluf Jørgensen, from the Danish School of Media and Journalism:

²⁴ Column, Danish Journalism Association membership magazine, Journalisten 2013: <https://journalisten.dk/vagthundene-doer>

*'Fewer journalists to oversee government naturally poses the risk that some stories won't see the light of day or end up being impaired by the large numbers of staff that seem to be specifically charged with stopping critical news about the government.'*²⁵

In and of itself there is nothing sinister about the acquiring of communications staff in an otherwise open democracy to help government agencies and politicians get their message across to citizens and the electorate.

However, increasingly (as I will show in the following), this strengthened communications 'muscle' in the political establishment is being put to use not only for amiable means of enlightenment of the public on governmental and political issues, but also frequently to de-legitimise the actions and structures of the free press.

Whilst traditional (and upstart) media have struggled financially during the past decade, the situation for the political parties in Denmark in particular has been completely different. Funded primarily by tax allocations based on their share of the vote, the financial stability of large parties has remained intact. Contrastingly, media organisations have struggled as a consequence of the general decline in print circulation, ad revenue streams and difficulties in discovering successful business cases online.

Moreover, the political parties represented in parliament decided unanimously in 2016 to increase the party support by 52 million DKK (approx. £6.2 million) for the parliamentary groups on a yearly basis.

According to answers from the parliamentary parties, the extra self-granted donations have been used to hire extra staff to support MP's as well as to hire communications staff and comms executives.²⁶

Of the nine parties represented in the Danish parliament, five have answered that funds have been allocated directly to hiring communications and press officers. All but one party are allocating funds to hire new staff on a general level - and job openings often mention the need for press related work, even when the position isn't press or communications related. As an example, the current government party Venstre; one of the parties which has not explicitly stated that they have hired comms workers; have opened positions 10 times during 2018, according to the archive of Danish job database, Jobindex. Of these 10 positions, six mention the ability to work on press/communications assignments or are directly labelled as SoMe positions, media positions etc.²⁷

²⁵ Interview with Oluf Jørgensen, 2018.

²⁶ '52 million extra to the parties: This is how they are spent', Altinget 2018: <https://www.altinget.dk/artikel/158119-ekstra-52-millioner-til-partierne-saadan-bliver-de-brugt>

²⁷ Jobindex, december 2018:

<https://www.jobindex.dk/jobsoegning/virksomhed/25040/venstre?jobage=archive&maxdate=20181210 &mindate=20180101>

During the past few years, several political parties in Denmark have established new outlets of party media. Historically, the Danish media landscape consisted of a party press structure on a regional basis from the industrialization until the 1970's and 1980's during which most major towns and cities had multiple newspapers aligned with party political observances and readerships.

However, since 2012 a new era of national, digital party political media outlets have begun appearing on the stage, coinciding with the hastily growing party and government press offices.

Interestingly, these new party outlets often adopt a critical or outright attacking style and tone towards traditional media and journalists, as I will show in the following:

b. Case studies

To view one level of impact of this enlarged and strengthened body of service to the political parties and government agencies, I will attempt in the following to surmise how political parties and power holders in general are utilising their acquired communications muscles to criticise, attack and de-legitimise actions and structures of the traditional media.

CASE 1:

In October 2017, Piopio.dk, a website launched by leading members of the Danish Social Democracy in 2012, published an opinion piece by Trine Bramsen, the justice spokesperson for the Danish Social Democracy.

In the column titled '*The Danish press cultivates outrage rather than fact*', Trine Bramsen launched a general attack on the press, in particular the political journalists she encountered in her work as a prominent MP for the party.

Whilst acknowledging the importance of having a free press, Bramsen attempted to de-legitimise political journalism in the Danish parliament:

'But in the six years I have been in parliament, my words of praise on the Danish press have taken big hits. Unfortunately, I increasingly observe parts of the Danish press as very aggressive. Their primary aim is to create outrage - not enlightenment. Angles on stories are chosen from their clickbait-worthiness - not from objective information. And central points, analyses, thoughts or explanations are left out'.²⁸

The highly critical opinion piece was based primarily on Trine Bramsens experience with radio station 24Syv which had aired a story about the cost of a planned police academy, which contained an error. The story was corrected by the radio station prior to the publishing of the opinion piece on Pio.

²⁸ 'The Danish press cultivates outrage rather than fact', Netavisen Pio, 2017:

<https://piopio.dk/dansk-presse-dyrker-forargelse-fremfor-fakta>

CASE 2:

In December 2018, newly journalist-turned-chief press officer from Danish green party Alternativet described journalists as 'bad eggs', attacking them for attempting to get background quotes from party members.

'QUESTION: What would you rather forget from 2018?

The worst thing about going from journalism to communication has been to experience one's journalist colleagues from the other side. It is rather grim when the 'bloodhound barks' and all facts and perspective disappears. When a bloodlust takes over the media coverage and nobody gets any wiser.

Specifically, we experienced it during the case about our culture mayor in Copenhagen [criticised for fiddling with his resumé and for expenses incurred in outfitting his office - stepped down in October 2018] (...) I was close and it really wasn't pretty. For instance, we noticed that members of our party were contacted by an editor and offered anonymity so they could speak more openly. It has suprised me how bad the bad eggs are in reality.²⁹

CASE 3:

When the news website, Ditoverblik.dk, in 2018, it was born with a so-called 'editorial committee' controlled by the right-wing Danish People's Party's (DPP) well established and strong communications director, Søren Søndergaard.

Nevertheless, Ditoverblik.dk and several other newly established party political news outlets claim independence from their party links:

'Well it is independent in its content because the editor is not from DPP. He is hired by me and for DPP money and we have an editorial committee who will regularly say to him: That was good and that was fine. And if there are omissions, by which I mean stories which I have seen and found interesting but which haven't found their way (to be published) - then I will ask him: Why not?

QUESTION: As far as I remember, the communist Pravda also had an editorial committee. Aren't you doing what authoritative regimes around the world are doing - something you normally criticise?

Actually, I believe I know a lot about the USSR, but I didn't know that. Then rather, we should call it an editorial group...³⁰

CASE 4:

²⁹ 'Nasty to see the bloodhound bark', Journalisten 2018 (Danish):

<https://journalisten.dk/aa-pressechef-om-2018-grimt-opleve-naar-blodhunden-glammer>

³⁰ Article, Politiken 2018 (Danish): <https://apps.infomedia.dk/mediemarkiv/link?articles=e6db0c14>

In January 2019, party secretary for the Danish Social Democracy, Jan Juul Christensen, sent out an email which can be described as one of the most aggressive approaches yet from a Danish political party towards the free press.

In the email which was sent to all approx. 40.000 members of the party (Denmark's largest by membership) under the headline 'Current news without spin', Jan Juul offers a stark warning against the press at large which he accuses of having a strong conservative slant which results in lack of coverage of the perceived problems and shortcomings of the current conservative-liberal government:

'Unfortunately, this does not surface all that often in the stories we read and hear in Danish media (...) This is mainly due to the fact that most media outlets in Denmark are fundamentally conservative in their essence. They wish to promote the same agenda of less welfare in favour of more tax cuts. Therefore, many stories are forgotten and ignored'.

Further on, Jan Juul recommends party members to not use the traditional media and instead keep themselves informed through the website Piopio.dk, which I covered earlier in this paper as being launched by leading members of The Social Democracy.

'I would recommend everyone to sign up for Pio's free newsletter. The web paper Pio delivers journalism, commentary and analysis of a very high standard. We need media that offer resistance to the right wing, which develop new visions and are founded in an explicit set of values. Therefore, Pio is the obvious place to stay informed.'³¹

c. Politicians sharpening rhetoric against the press

In addition to the taxonomy of different mechanisms outlined in the previous chapters, Danish politicians themselves are also frequently adopting a more critical approach towards the press. I will briefly give a couple of examples of this trend in the following.

Particularly since the election of president Donald Trump in America, the otherwise quite amiable climate between politicians and media professionals including show hosts, editors and journalists on social media has soured.

With frequent discussions erupting between journalism professionals and politicians on social media and through new formats:

EXAMPLE 1:

In April 2018 prime minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen accused my paper, Ekstra Bladet, of disinformation for publishing a story about his surprising appearance as counsel for his wife (who since lost her job) at a serious disciplinary meeting with her employer, a prestigious Copenhagen school.

³¹ Article, Berlingske 2019 (Danish): 'The Social Democracy in a historic attack on Danish media' - <https://www.berlingske.dk/politik/socialdemokratiet-i-historisk-angreb-paa-danske-medier-vi-gaar-i-retning>



Lars Løkke Rasmussen
@larsloekke

Følger

Svarer @j_oostergaard

Mine gode venner på Ekstrabladet overrasker til stadighed med historier om min familie og mig. Anede ikke, at min kone er blevet fyret...
#FakeNews #dkpol

00.07 - 24. apr. 2018

Lars Løkke Rasmussen was unhappy with the fact that Ekstra Bladet reported his wife had been fired and tweeted using the hashtag #FakeNews.

'My good friends at Ekstra Bladet keep surprising with stories about my family and med. I had no idea my wife had been fired... #FakeNews.'³²

EXAMPLE 2:

In January 2018, the acting shadow chancellor of the Danish Social Democratic party, Henrik Sass Larsen, gave a fairly sensational interview; not so much in the fact that he attacked the press for being too confrontational and not letting politicians speak out. The surprising part was primarily the fact that the interview was paid for and published on Facebook by The Social Democratic party themselves who had hired a former news host from public broadcaster Danish Radio.

In the interview, Henrik Sass Larsen was free more or less uninterrupted to accuse the Danish press of being a problem for the enlightenment of the electorate:

'But look what has happened to the media. There is a lot of distancing from people away from the media, they don't see it, because all political journalism has become enormously confrontational and enormously heated all of it.'³³

Conclusion

There is no denying that Denmark is still an exceedingly safe, fair and generally uncorrupted country to practice as a journalist.

If anything, my time as journalist fellow at the Reuters Institute has reminded me of the stark difference in circumstances felt by journalists from country to country, continent to continent. However, as my research has shown, things are gradually but noticeably beginning to slide backwards in the otherwise benign settings of the Danish democracy.

The same democratically elected politicians who in cheerful dinner toasts will pay tribute to the principles of freedom of expression and press, have simultaneously initiated a process which now runs counter to the Danish tradition of information freedom. Promoting an 'exemption culture' as mentioned by professor Oluf Jørgensen from The Danish School of Media and Journalism.

³² Lars Løkke Rasmussen on Twitter:

<https://twitter.com/larsloekke/status/988539930619064320?lang=da>

³³ Article, Ekstra Bladet 2018 (Danish): 'Sass attacks the press - in interview paid for by The Social Democrats' -

<https://ekstrabladet.dk/nyheder/politik/dansktopolitik/sass-angriber-pressen-i-interview-betalt-af-socialdemokratiet/6987325>

Concurrently, political parties are gaining strength in numbers when it comes to communications staffers, which now outnumber 'traditional' political journalists. Whilst this in itself is not a problem, my research has shown that the same political parties are now frequently aiming their attention and new found strength in communications at delegitimising traditional media outlets and journalists.

Political parties are increasingly questioning the privilege of prerogative of the press as the fourth estate, traditionally charged with keeping power in check.

This line of critical questioning of the legacy press is happening on social media, through newly established party political media outlets and even via party financed interviews made out to look like traditional interviews.

As research fellow at RISJ Julie Posetti points out, we seem to be coming to the end of a period of comparative calm for journalism in the West.

The political establishment in a number of countries, including, I claim on the basis of my findings, Denmark, seem to have lost patience with some fundamental dynamics of the media and are now beginning to push back against the highly mediatised circumstances under which politics and political communications function today; resulting in something that may be described as a showdown with the paradigm in which 'political actors mainly [are] governed by media logic'.

As a journalist, my hope is that the opposition between press and politics, which I firmly believe any free and open society should possess to a large degree, does not descend into trench warfare.

After having devoted months of research into this subject, I firmly believe, however, that the role of any future political or investigative reporter should still be to question power relentlessly and to fight for as many means and tools for insight into the political process as possible. To borrow somewhat from a term coined by a wise American newspaper: We need to make sure that we do our bit to fight off any threat to the light over democracy so that it does not die in darkness.