



Journalist Fellowship Paper

The representation of indigenous Sámi people in Norwegian tabloids

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Contents

Introduction	3
In brief: Sámi history and politics	4
Sámi media and its reach	8
NRK Sápmi	8
Ávvvir	8
Sámi magasiidna	9
Sáгат	9
Supplements in Southern and Lule Sámi	9
Guovdageainnu Lagasradio	9
Radio DSF	10
Nuorttanaste	10
Sámi in the wider Norwegian media picture	11
The response	15
Conclusion	16
Acknowledgments	17

Introduction

Norway is not a large country by population size: there are 5.3 million of us, and only 40,000 (0.755%) are from a national indigenous minority known as the Sámi people. I am one of them.

My mother is Sámi, and my father is an ethnic Norwegian from southern Norway, but I am not a fan of measuring people by fractions. As Geir Wulff, editor of the Sámi newspaper *Ságat*, puts it: “There are no half-Sámi. The Sámi blood is like ink in water. Everyone with Sámi blood in them is Sámi.”

That is why, when I was lucky enough to be selected for a fellowship to immerse myself in a journalistic question at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, it was, of course, the Sámi question. I wanted to investigate how much coverage Norway’s most-read tabloid media – *Verdens Gang* and *Dagbladet* – gives to the affairs of Sámi parliament, politics and identity.

To do so, I reviewed archives dating back 20 years, and then consulted with leading Sámi journalists and the head of Sámi’s parliament for their views, before putting it all to the editor of *VG* for response.

Before we get to the results, let us begin with a brief history lesson for those who do not know about the Sámi.

In brief: Sámi history and politics

The Sámi are a people who live in several nation states (Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia). Most are in Norway, but there are about 80,000 in all, with 1,771 in Russia, 7,000 in Finland, 17,000 in Sweden. Only Russia and Finland keep official records of the number.

The Sámi have their own language, including several variants – predominantly Northern Sámi, Lule Sámi, and South Sámi – depending on where they live.

Only around 30% can speak their native language, of whom only half use a Sámi written language. I am one of the 70% who cannot, and it is something I find painful. What happened to our native tongue?

For almost 100 years, the Norwegian government pursued an active assimilation policy called Norwegianization for the Sámi and Kvens.¹ The Norwegianisation policy started as early as 1850, but was ramped up from the 1870s onwards. Politicians believed it would benefit the Sámi to let go of their language, religion, and clothing style.

It is said there was not much organised resistance to assimilation – how could there have been with so much political power and coercion at play?

Many Sámi children were separated from their parents and put into boarding schools. Teachers were instructed that Sámi and Kven children should not be allowed to use their mother tongue during free time.

Ingjerd Tjelle's 2000 book [*Bortsendt og internert*](#) (“Sent away and interned”) includes interviews with former students who recall experiences of violence and sexual abuse taking place as recently as 1974.

As with other indigenous populations around the world, Sámi were subject to missionary efforts that made the religion almost disappear. Under duress, some Sámi began hiding their identity from their descendants.

Norwegianization continued until about the middle of the 20th century, but the consequences still echo today.

A turning point in Sámi cultural history came with the 1970s proposal of the Alta hydroelectric power project in the northern territory of Finnmark. Building the plant would require damming the Alta River, which would submerge the Sámi village of Máze and disrupt reindeer and salmon migration routes.

For the first time since the introduction of Norwegianisation, there was coordinated political organisation by the Sámi that caught the interests of the entire nation: activists began a hunger strike outside the Norwegian parliament, others organised sit-ins to

¹ Kven is a Norwegian national minority who emigrated to Norway from present-day Finland. National minorities in Norway are Jews, Kvens, Roma, Romani people, and forest Finns.

disrupt construction. Their protests were supported by other Norwegian interest groups, including environmental activists.²



With banners saying "Let the river live", Sámi and environmentalists demonstrated against the construction of a power plant in the Alta / Kautokeino watercourse. (Photography: Kåre M. Hansen)

Civil disobedience continued until 1982, when the Supreme Court ruled in favour of the government's plan. But the Alta resistance would yield long-term results: for the first time, Sámi rights were put on the national Norwegian agenda.



The police have cut the chain and are carrying away a Sámi protester who is taken to Alta by car. Interrogations and large fines await here. (Photography: Kåre M. Hansen)

This activism led to the creation of the Sámi Parliament in 1989 and, the following year, Norway ratified ILO Convention 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in the Independent

² Trivia: the plot of Disney's *Frozen II* movie was based on the Alta Controversy.

States.³ In 1992, Porsanger municipality, where I live, joined the administrative area for the Sámi language, which means that Sámi and Norwegian were [equal languages](#) from then on.

The Sámi Parliament (Sámediggi in Sámi) today consists of 39 representatives of 12 parties (including a breakaway from the Sámi Labour party, which is now independent).



The Sámi Parliament in Karasjok on a winter day. (Photography: Sara Márja Magga/Sámediggi).

Sámediggi elections are held at the same time as the national elections. Just over 18,000 people are listed in the Sámi Parliament's electoral roll, which has had a steady increase since 1989. Voter turnout in 2017 was 70.3%.

In 1997, during the opening of the Sámi Parliament, Norwegian [King Harald V](#) apologised for the abuses the Sámi were subjected to. “The Norwegian state is founded on the territory of two peoples: Norwegians and Sámi. Therefore, Sámi’s history is closely intertwined with Norwegian history. Today we must apologise for the injustice the Norwegian state has previously inflicted on the Sámi people through a harsh Norwegianisation policy,” he said.

In 2005, the Finnmark Act transferred land ownership of 96% of the county of Finnmark to an estate managed by a board appointed by Sámi parliament. There was vocal opposition to this act from some sectors of society, who branded it “special racism”.

³ Andresen Astri, Bjørg Evjen, Teemu Ryymin (red) (2021) Samenes historie: Fra 1751 til 2010. Oslo: Cappelen Damm Akademisk

With language lost to so many of my generation, we look to other cultural markers to celebrate our heritage. There is great pride for many in wearing the national costume, known as *kofte*.



These colourful tunics differ by region and include societal clues including marital status (the male belt has squares) and even pregnancy (the woman removes her strap).

The example pictured to the left shows a married couple from Polmak in Finnmark's Tana municipality.

The kofte is worn on important occasions like baptisms, confirmations, weddings, and Sámi national day celebrations on February 6th.

Another identity marker is the *yoik*, a folk singing style that can capture the spirit of a person, animal or region.

The *yoik* is sometimes described as a “sound painting” and comparable to traditional singing by other indigenous peoples, including some First Nations cultures in North America.

Sadly, Christian missionaries condemned the *yoik* as sinful, but it has enjoyed a resurgence in popular culture through inclusion in some Eurovision Song Contest entries and thanks to popular artists like Mari Boine.

Overall, things are improving. My youngest children, who are in their teens, have the opportunity to learn both Sámi and Kven at school.

Sámi media and its reach

The State of Norway contributes significant funds for the Sámi people to have their news and cultural channels. These include:

NRK Sápmi

The largest share of the money pot goes to NRK Sápmi, the Sámi division of the national broadcaster in Norway, NRK. NRK had a budget in 2020 of 6.4 billion Norwegian krone (NOK), which equates to £538m. Of this, NRK Sápmi receives about NOK85m (£7.2m), according to director Mona Solbakk.

Since 1976, NRK Sápmi has had its head office in Karasjok in Finnmark, where the Sámi Parliament is located. It has just over 80 employees and local offices in Tana, Kautokeino, Kåfjord, Tromsø, Harstad, Hamarøy, Bodø, Steinkjer, and Oslo.

NRK Sápmi is responsible for producing and disseminating news, current affairs, drama, and other media content for the Sámi population. Its mission is to contribute content that will strengthen Sámi culture and language, and to contribute content about Sámi culture to the broader population of Norway.

NRK Sápmi's flagship is the daily 15-minute news show, Oddasat, which is broadcast on the national network NRK in Norway, YLE in Finland, and SVT in Sweden.

Ávvir



Ávvir is a Sámi daily newspaper written in Northern Sámi. The newspaper has a website with some articles behind a paywall. It was first published on the Sámi National Day (6 February, 2007).

The newspaper is the result of a merger of the former Sámi newspapers *Min Áigi* and *Áššu*. It is the world's only Sámi-language daily newspaper. The newspaper is headquartered in Karasjok but also has local offices in Kautokeino, Alta and Tana.

The majority owners in *Ávvir* are the two Norwegian newspapers, *Finnmark Dagblad* and *Altaposten*, which own 33.5% each, while an investment company owns 11.5%. The rest of the shares are held by various Sámi organisations.

Ávvir received NOK18.7m (£1.6m) from the state budget in 2020. Circulation for *Ávvir* was 1,269 in 2020 (this equates to 7% of registered Sámi voters).⁴

⁴ The circulation figures can be found here: <https://www.medienorge.uib.no/statistikk/medium/avis/190> (seen 26 February 2020.)

Sámi magasiidna

Sámi magasiidna is a new online and weekly print magazine run by iSámi Press AS. The magazine is published 48 times a year. Editorial is presented in Northern Sámi. The outlet produces news, profiles and essays addressing issues in the High North from a Sámi and North perspective. It also includes articles from Finland.

In 2020, *Sámi magasiidna* was granted NOK2.7m (£225k) from the state budget. The majority owner, with 64.5% stake, is Jan F. Skoglund Paltto from Karasjok, while the rest of the shares are owned by Kirsti Paltto (27.5%) Raste Mihkal R. Skoglund (6%), and Toril Lisbeth Johansen (2%).

The print magazine has 1,000 subscribers and 3,000 weekly readers.

Sáгат



The largest Sámi newspaper by circulation is *Sáгат* (established in 1956), with headquarters in Lakselv in Finnmark. The newspaper employs 21 full-time employees and has district offices in Karasjok, Tana, Alta, and Evenes.

It had a circulation of 3,032 in 2019. Since October 2015, *Sáгат* has also operated an online newspaper. It is known for facilitating debate, with many contributions from readers.

There are 48 northern Norwegian municipalities that own shares in the paper, amounting to a 47% stake. Sámi cultural organisations hold 10% and the remaining 43% are held by 450 individuals.

Sáгат writes in Norwegian. This is in recognition that most Sámi no longer speak the language.

In 2020, *Sáгат* received NOK13.7m (£1.12m) from the state budget.

Supplements in Southern and Lule Sámi

Snåsningen is a local newspaper published at Snåsa in Nord-Trøndelag. *Snåsningen* is published every Wednesday. It receives NOK674k (£58k) to produce a news supplement in Southern Sámi.

The local newspaper *Nordsalten* receives NOK710k (£61k) for a news supplement in Lule Sámi.

Guovdageainnu Lagasradio

Guovdageainnu Lagasradio (GLR) was founded in 1991 as a Sámi local radio station. Today it transmits on five frequencies and online, in both Norwegian and Sámi languages. It broadcasts an hour of news and current affairs at 4pm from Monday to Thursday, with a

marathon repeat on Sundays. They describe their mission as being to reflect local news, music, sport, culture, entertainment and community affairs. It currently has two permanent employees and a small group of volunteers.

Radio DSF

Radio DSF is a Christian, bilingual (Sámi and Norwegian) local radio station owned by Norwegian Sámi Mission. They broadcast song programs, meetings and services, bible studies, children's programs, and prayer programs.

Nuorttanaste

Nuorttanaste, a North Sámi Christian magazine, is the oldest Sámi publication still in circulation. The magazine was established in 1898.

It is owned by a foundation established by the Sámi Church Council, the Norwegian Sámi Mission and Indre Finnmark church. It is published from Karasjok with 11 issues a year and has subscribers in Sweden, Finland and Norway.

Sámi in the wider Norwegian media picture

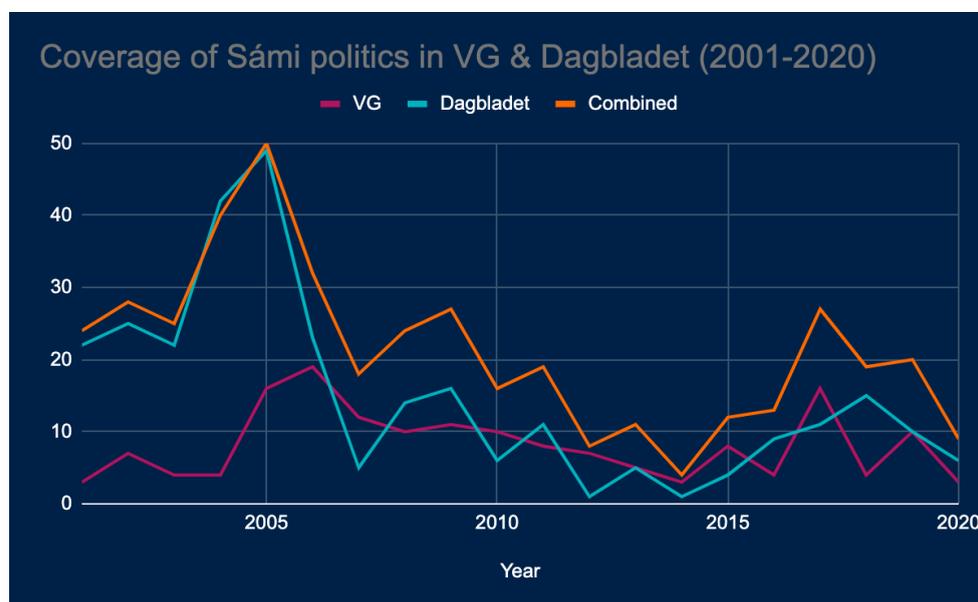
While Sámi media exists, and receives state funding, it does not reach the wider Norwegian population. For the public to remain informed and connected to Sámi issues, they must be reported by the national press.

To measure coverage, I decided to count news stories about Sámi parliament over the past 20 years. I focused my efforts on two of the nation's most-read tabloid outlets: *Verdens Gang* (VG) and *Dagbladet*.

VG is a daily newspaper headquartered in Oslo, and founded in 1945. It had the [highest single sales](#) in Norway in 2020, and the [most subscribers](#). Its website is the most-visited news site according to a report by the Media Companies' National Association (MBL), which was released in September 2020. MBL said VG drew 1.97m daily active users. Its nearest competitor was public media NRK, which has an average of 1.33m DAUs.

The next most-visited site follows *Dagbladet*, with 1.12m. *Dagbladet* is also published from Oslo, and was founded in 1869. Founded as an opposition paper, it is known for its characteristic disrespectful and bloodthirsty tone. It switched to tabloid format in 1983.

Neither tabloid includes much coverage of the Sámi Parliament. As the graph below illustrates, over the course of 20 years, *Dagbladet* had 280 articles for average annual coverage of 14 articles, and VG had 160 pieces for average annual count of eight articles.



Graph 1: Articles about Sámi parliament in VG and Dagbladet between 2001-2020

The notable peak in coverage in 2004 is due to a series of investigative reports about Sámi parliament, reviewing MPs travel expenses and interrogating financial management. The series ended on April 15, 2005, with a report that the Sámi Parliament was “slaughtered” by the Office of the Auditor General due to financial mismanagement.

How important is it that the national press cover the proceedings of the Sámi parliament? Sámi Parliament President Aili Keskitalo thinks it is “vital”. “We are part of the community in Norway, and we are in the minority in most local communities and regions and at most levels of government,” she told me. “It means that others make decisions that concern us. We, therefore, need the majority of society to have minimum knowledge – and preferably more than that – about our social conditions.”



President of the Sámi Parliament Aili Keskitalo. (Photography: Åse M.P. Pulk/Sámediggi)

It is not easy to get the attention of tabloids on substantial issues, she said. “There are often very curious issues that they pick up. These are rarely related to issues the Sámi Parliament has on the agenda.” Instead, she said, the tabloids approached parliament when they needed a response to other people’s statements (“Are you offended again?”) or when a Sámi has done something that is perceived as unusual or strange.

Does Keskitalo see any difference in how *VG* and *Dagbladet* cover Sámi issues? “I cannot say that I’ve experienced a systematic difference between the two big tabloids in Norway,”

she said. “It’s more dependent on the attention span of the individual journalists. Journalists from the north have a better network of contacts and a better overview of the Sámi community. They may therefore be able to capture or put Sámi issues in context . I believe that physical presence in the northern part of the country impacts how Sámi matters are covered.”

Skjalg Fjellheim, a former *Dagbladet* journalist and current political editor of Northern Norway's largest newspaper, *Nordlys*, sees Sámi coverage as a massive blindspot for the national press.



Political editor Skjalg Fjellheim in Nordlys. (Photography: Nordlys)

“It means that news about people, culture, and business is virtually non-existent,” he said. Coverage is instead characterised by cultural exoticism around topics like [yoik](#) [folk singing] and reindeer herding and fails to capture the diversity of Sámi interests.

“The absence of discussions of social conditions is systematic over many decades,” he told me. “It is probably related to the lack of correspondents in or near the Sámi core areas.” That missing coverage, he said, “could be an important tonic against prejudice and harassment that some Sámi still experience”.

He did make an exception for “a single luminous exception of the last decade”: VG’s coverage of the [Tysfjord](#) case. In June 2016, VG profiled 11 people – all Sámi people from Tysfjord – who had been sexually assaulted in the Læstadian church (similar to Swedish Lutherans). The coverage led to a 2017 investigation that uncovered 151 cases of abuse and 92 suspects. The victims were mostly girls aged 7 to 16 and the abuse had been ongoing for more than 70 years.

Mona Solbakk, editor and division director of NRK Sápmi, agreed that VG’s coverage of the Tysfjord case was “exceptional”.

“We at NRK Sápmi first ‘poked’ at the case several years ago. But it was VG who made the big revelations and put the issue on the national agenda,” she said. “It shows what VG – and *Dagbladet* – can do if they are interested and want to use resources.”



Editor and division director of NRK Sápmi Mona Solbakk. (Photography: NRK Sápmi)

She said national media could also learn a lot from VG’s approach to their Tysfjord coverage. “They had people on the reporting team with knowledge of Sámi culture. So they had an understanding of how the sources would react. We can all learn from that: using people with the right cultural understanding in complex cases.”

Solbakk believes national coverage of Sámi affairs is important because keeping a minority group visible can help to prevent polarisation. “I hope the national media can also take part in this job for the Sámis, and that the work is not left only to Sámi broadcasters and newspapers.”

“We need more people than NRK to delve into Sámi matters. I do not think indigenous people in Norway are visible enough in the national media.”

I interviewed Solbakk soon after Sámi National Day on February 6. “I was pleased that VG had several cases about Sámis that day,” she said. “It’s good to see! That wasn’t the case just a few years ago.”

She would however, like to see coverage from a more celebratory perspective, noting that the tabloids tended to run stories that cultivated conflict, including a particularly egregious example of a woman dressed in her [kofte](#) (traditional costume) under the headline “Oh, you’re wearing your clown clothes like that”. By contrast, coverage of Norwegian national day, May 17th, shows happy children marching, cakes and celebration. “I’d like to see February 6th in the national media as a joyful people’s day, too,” said Solbakk.

The response

Gard Steiro, editor-in-chief and director of *VG*, is not particularly surprised that my data found coverage of Sámi issues was limited – although he thought an analysis of both print and digital coverage, instead of just print, may have yielded a more positive picture.

Responding to Fjellheim's criticisms, Steiro said he agreed the media can help break down prejudices but he didn't believe a lack of coverage was increasing division. "I do not feel *VG* increases the distance between the Sámi and the Norwegian," he said. "On the contrary, I think that *VG* as a broad and popular newspaper represents a link between people in different parts of the country, between social groups and political opponents, between Norwegian-born Norwegians and minorities," he said.

VG has no specific Sámi coverage strategy, he said, but concern for covering critical issues was on the agenda. " *VG* is an editorial office that spends considerable resources on covering current news and events that affect most of our readers. It means that the coverage of Sámi cases will also vary [according to] the news picture. For example, when the Tysfjord case was pending, it affected *VG*'s coverage of the Sámi. If other issues of great public interest arise, the shares will increase," he said.

"The Tysfjord case was about countless abuses against individuals. Admittedly, it took place in a Sámi environment, but a crime of this nature and scope would have been a major issue regardless of where it had taken place."

Steiro agreed *VG* has a clear responsibility for raising groups exposed to injustice or neglect: this is outlined in [point one of their editorial principles](#). "That wording can be interpreted in many ways, but I believe that one of our tasks is to increase trust between population groups. It can be between Sámi and others, but also between different immigrant groups and other Norwegians," he said. "In that sense, I think Solbakk has a point. The visibility of the Sámi can help build these bridges."

Conclusion

I knew before starting this project that there was limited Sámi coverage in the national press. That it was quite so limited in Norway's two leading tabloids came as a surprise.

The situation is not entirely dark though: there has been much positive development of the Sámi community in recent times, and I took hope in Steiro's parting words on the topic of Sámi coverage. "We can never say that we are happy," he told me. "It will always be possible to improve our coverage – also by the Sámi."

For me, raising awareness of the existence of the Sámi is the most important thing. While we don't experience racism in the same way as other ethnic groups, a lack of representation leads to ignorance, and ignorance is often very harmful.

It is gratifying to see that more and more people recognise themselves as Sámi, and young people now wearing their *kofte* with pride.

More and more people registering on the Sámi Parliament's electoral roll is good, too. And the Sámi are often noticed [outside Norway's borders](#), even if they do not often appear in the Norwegian tabloids.

Importantly, the "Sámi awakening" is taking place in urban areas in the south, outside Inner Finnmark. This will contribute to greater national interest in the Sámi and more coverage in the national media.

NRK, in particular, is aware of its responsibility and fills up the menu in the national broadcasts with more Sámi content – even in Sámi dialects. And especially things that can appeal to younger listeners and viewers, by implementing the Sámi in, for example, programs in the crossover between music and entertainment.

And things are also happening within the heavy news surfaces: NRK journalist Anders Boine Verstad started a small revolution in February this year when he delivered his report for NRK Sport in Sámi. The social media response was ebulent, "Why doesn't NRK do this the other 364 days of the year?", [Journalisten reported](#).⁵ The response was noted and the question was sent up the broadcast management ranks.

Their response? A memo to all staff: "Sámi can be used as a reporter's language in features and reports in NRK's news and current affairs broadcasts on television, including sports news."

⁵

<https://journalisten.no/anders-boine-verstad-dagsrevyen-karoline-riise-kristiansen/anders-ba-om-a-fa-lev-ere-dagsrevyen-saken-sin-pa-Sámisk-det-startet-en-liten-sprakrevolusjon-i-nrk/453894>

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