

Media ethics & the Anders Behring Breivik trial

Killer Anders Behring Breivik's testimony should be broadcast live to deter extremism, argues Anne Ardem, executive editor at Norwegian state broadcaster NRK.



Maryam Omid: The Anders Behring Breivik trial is under way. Can you start by telling me how the NRK, that's the Norwegian state broadcaster, has decided to cover the trial?

Anne Ardem: The trial is being covered widely in Norway. There was live television coverage of the opening day of the trial on Monday [16th April 2012] from the court, mainly of the formalities. The prosecutor read out what he plans to do and it was transmitted live on television by the NRK. But we turned down the sound for the Norwegian audience when there were sensitive descriptions of the wounds and the autopsies. However, I believe that this was not the case outside the Nordic countries. As the trial moves on, the coverage from the NRK is still massive with live broadcasts from a studio outside the court during the day and reporters inside the court producing stories for radio, television and the internet.

MO: So does that present a problem for you? When one media outlet decides not to broadcast something for ethical reasons but another goes ahead, in the age of the internet, does that undermine your decision?

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AA: In some ways yes. On the other hand, all Nordic countries as far as I know reached the same decision and our audience mainly watches our broadcasts. If you want to find something on the internet you will always be able to do so. So yes it's a problem but not a big one. We prefer having a clear conscience about what we broadcast. Now we're on the fourth day of the trial and we are only allowed to broadcast the killer when he walks into the courtroom and when he sits down, and when the judge opens the case. Then we will go off air from the courtroom and provide live coverage on the internet, almost word for word.

MO: So Breivik's testimony isn't being broadcast live?

AA: The judge said no to that, so there is no live broadcast on radio or television but instead through a moderator who gives transcripts live on the internet.

MO: When you say moderator, you mean someone is censoring?

AA: Yes, in a way, to protect some of the survivors by not giving out too many details about the wounds for instance. And because we want to protect the families of the deceased we don't want to provide too much detail about the autopsies. But Breivik's testimony on the other hand has been reported quite accurately. There are several newspapers such as NRK who have journalists in the courtroom and they're writing everything down. As we speak now I'm reading that he's saying that he gave his weapons names from the Nordic era, the Viking era. Also reporters from several other Norwegian and foreign media are doing the same. The journalists are reporting live from that for newspapers. Our editor is also there because we don't want to broadcast all of the details. As I said, our main reason for censoring is to protect the victims.

MO: What about coverage of him expressing his quite extreme views? What's your stance on that?

AA: It's been a big discussion in Norway. Many media including NRK would like to broadcast his statement live on television and web TV because we think it is, yes, quite ugly stuff, but we think it's important that the audience gets to hear it. In many ways it's also extremely stupid. He contradicts himself several times and he has problems explaining himself. We are not afraid of showing that but the courts have made a decision that they don't want it to be broadcast live because they don't want to give him a platform to preach.

MO: But you don't agree with the court's decision?

AA: No, no I don't. I'm more afraid of hiding it. I think it's important to get it open, to get it out. I think that's been one of the problems. Breivik and some of his friends have been talking to each other on the internet, feeling neglected and feeling that they can't discuss their views in the open. They have felt the need to hide and that's not a good thing. I think that that's more dangerous than getting it out. There will always been some fanatics who will believe his message to be a good

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one but they will be in the minority. And because this trial is as much about him being declared sane or insane, we believe its important for the public to be given the option of seeing for themselves.

MO: So you think his testimony will actually be bad PR rather than good PR for similar rightwing extremist views?

AA: Mostly yes because he's presenting himself in quite a pathetic way. He calls himself a Knights Templar and a freedom fighter and all that bullshit, and I think that's okay to see. He's very particular in how he's responding, correcting the judge all the time. It's very weird following the transcript from court. Very weird.

MO: And yet, he's not alone in the views that he holds and we can't treat Breivik as an individual case. He is part of a rise of extreme rightwing politics across Europe. Has his case shed any light on why people turn to such extreme ideologies?

AA: Absolutely. That's another big discussion in Norway. Scientists are doing research on rightwing ideologies and groups. Lots of journalists have been digging into rightwing extremism, trying to find out more about the people who hold these views, about how they get these opinions, about how they work together and how they connect. Breivik's claiming that there are three people in Norway who hold these extreme views. He's now in jail but he has said there are two others out there who are willing to commit the same atrocities as him. He could be lying, because he keeps contradicting himself and he's not able to explain the events coherently. Yesterday, he said, "I don't want to answer" and "No comment" 144 times in the courtroom. I understand the fear of giving him a place to express his opinion but on the other hand his message is given in a way that most people find appalling.

MO: Last month in France Mohamed Merah killed seven people and when it emerged that he had been visiting extremist websites Nicholas Sarkozy announced a draft law to punish those visiting such sites. Breivik visited extreme rightwing websites but Norway has made no such announcement. What do you think of this idea of monitoring people's use of the internet in this way?

AA: I don't think it's possible. Is it possible to monitor the internet in that way? People will always find a way to go around such measures. That's my opinion but I'm not a specialist. That's not even a discussion in Norway. But then there are many differences between Norway and France. What we have discussed is the importance of not neglecting those extreme discussion groups on the internet and that it's dangerous to let them talk amongst themselves without being challenged. It's everybody's responsibility to engage in those discussions.

MO: Can we go back a year and can you tell me about the media response to the murders and the challenges you faced in covering the tragedy. How did friends and families of the victims respond?

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AA: The first thing that happened was the bomb went off and the media were quick to speculate that a radical Muslim was behind the explosion. After that, there were a couple of incidences when people of different ethnic origins were bullied and harassed in different ways. Then, a few hours after the massacre on Utøya, we found out that a Norwegian man living in Oslo was responsible and I believe many of us felt shame. I think for Norwegian society, it was feeling of extreme shock; a feel that this doesn't happen in Norway, it happens somewhere else. Press coverage was enormous. We did experience a few problems with journalists on the island broadcasting scenes they probably shouldn't have but we know it was because they had never dealt with anything like this before – people were in shock. But apart from that I'd say our coverage was acceptable and good, and within ethical standards.

Shortly after, our prime minister said our answer to the massacre should be more openness and more democracy. He added that we would not change our society as a result of this tragedy. And, the young people who belonged to the youth division of the Labour Party quickly accepted this path. I think it could have gone the other way. There was also a girl, who had lost one of her best friends, who went on Twitter and said that if one man could cause so much destruction from hate, imagine what the rest of us could do with love. This message went worldwide. It was maybe a kind of naïve message, but it communicated very well. People also gathered at churches and then we had a road gathering outside City Hall and I think around one million Norwegians went out onto the street across the country. So it was the result of good leadership, but also the fact that Norway is a very stable society. We don't have big economic difficulties, and integration in Norway is actually fairly successful compared to many others. And it's a very peaceful country. I don't know if a similar message from Sarkozy would have communicated as well in France with their history.

MO: During his testimony, Breivik spoke out against multiculturalism. Have the murders shaken the sense that multiculturalism can be successful?

AA: There are many sceptics in Norway about immigration but fewer than other European countries. They have become a little more vocal but maybe Breivik's case isn't only about immigration in Norway but also about him feeling neglected and not heard. And immigrants were an easy target and "cause". He actually killed kids of all ethnic origins on Utøya. As a result, there has been a sense that "We're all in this together". Many have since said that they have never ever felt more Norwegian because it was all of us against him. Our society will go on. It's not perfect, but it will go on. There will always be people who are afraid of difference, but I strongly believe that the events of the 22 July have been a setback for rascism in Norway.

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