

Assessing the state of free speech in Norway

University of Oslo professor Tore Slaatta describes a pioneering project to evaluate freedom of expression in a whole country.



The terrorist acts on 22 July 2011 crystallised issues related to free speech in Norway in a dramatic way. On this day, the right wing extremist Anders Behring Breivik set off a bomb in the centre of Oslo, killing eight people and damaging core governmental buildings. Later the same day, he single-handedly shot and killed on Utøya island 69 people who were participating in a youth camp organized by the Norwegian Labour Party's youth organisation. These violent and traumatic events have brought heightened attention to hate speech, the effect of extremist discourses, and the protection and respect of victims' privacy, suffering and human dignity.

A new research project will provide a comprehensive review of the status of free speech in Norway. Beside the dramatic events on 22 July, the project focuses on four societal changes that have had a particular impact upon issues relating to free speech over the past fifteen years.

Globalisation processes are transforming Norway into a more multicultural and multi-religious

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society, heightening the need for tolerance, understanding and respect across increasing cultural and religious differences in everyday life. In addition, the increasingly transnational orientation of the Norwegian economy as well as the recent use of Norwegian forces in military operations outside Europe, have contributed to a sharpened debate on the limits and content of free speech.

Digitisation is reshaping the media landscape and the public sphere. The project will investigate the influence of new media and communication technology on news consumption and media interaction, and the opportunities of the public to express their views through old and new media. Of particular interest is how new forms of media interaction and professional practices in journalism and cultural production are connected to changes in attitudes and experiences of freedom of expression and autonomy among journalists and artists.

Following new technological developments, there have been great changes in the surveillance opportunities of both the state and the market, challenging core liberal ideas of privacy and professional autonomy. The project will look at how values and norms of privacy and autonomy are interpreted under varying conditions of the extra-ordinary in contemporary society.

The increasing emphasis on managerialism in the labour market is also a societal process to be addressed. The emphasis on factors such as control, incentives and loyalty can be seen as potentially challenging the important democratic principles of participation and influence. Through a selection of private businesses and public sector offices, the project will study rules and guidelines as well as attitudes among both employers and employees concerning free speech in the labour market.

There are a number of factors which make Norway an interesting nation to measure and monitor. The penetration of digital media and mobile platforms is among the highest in the world. The media public sphere has traditionally been centred around a nationwide public service broadcasting organisation and a state subsidised newspaper system with close to 200 print newspapers, many with local and regional circulation. The population of Norway is relative small, some 5 million, and the idea of a shared national identity is still widely accepted across territorial distances and cultural differences. A high level of trust has generally existed both between citizens and towards private and public institutions. And law and regulatory instruments aim to secure transparency both in government and market institutions.

Legislation on free speech was reformed in 2004 and the new Article 100 of the Norwegian Constitution [points](#) to its own justification "...in relation to the grounds for freedom of expression, which are the seeking of truth, the promotion of democracy and the individual's freedom to form opinions." In its final part, Article 100 in addition states that: "It is the responsibility of the authorities of the State to create conditions that facilitate open and enlightened public discourse."

One of the particular concerns in recent Norwegian legislation has been free speech within the workplace, which was [addressed](#) in the reformed Working Environment Act of 2007.

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The project will look at both the general public and a selection of ethnic minorities' attitudes to and experiences with issues of free speech. A comparative study will also focus on experiences, practices and attitudes among professional cultural producers, such as journalists and artists, and analyse their relationships to various gatekeepers and censoring institutions, including editors, web page moderators, publishers, curators, stage directors and repertoire controllers.

The project is funded by the Norwegian free speech foundation Fritt Ord ('Free Word') and will be completed in 2014. The research partners are The Institute for Social Research (ISF, Oslo), Department of Media and Communication (University of Oslo) and Institute for Applied International Studies (FAFO, Oslo). For further information please contact Tore Slaatta (tore.slaatta@media.uio.no).

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