

8. Printing children's news

Three editors' views on newspapers for a young audience

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Reading news in a printed newspaper and subscriptions to the same have decreased among the population in recent decades. Analogue media have in many segments been replaced by their digital versions and young people have established habits of finding information through the appropriation of digital devices and digital media content. Despite this development, the past few years have seen the launch of a number of new titles of printed newspapers for children in the Scandinavian countries. For this chapter, three editors-in-chief have been interviewed to share their thoughts and reflections on why these titles have been launched now, what needs the printed newspapers can meet and why they believe there is a place for an “old-school” product in the digital media environment.

Once upon a time a newspaper subscription was almost as natural as a landline phone in households in the Nordic countries. Then the internet came and in due course social media, which had a profound impact on the number of media platforms available, and on the consumption and use of media in general. The fact that news consumption in the way adults were used to since their upbringing was not the same anymore soon became obvious to media houses in their interaction with the younger generation.

The decline in newspaper reading and newspaper subscriptions among the population in the Nordic countries has become clearly visible in the statistics. Between 2000 and 2017 in Sweden, the reading

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of a morning paper on an average day dropped from 74 to 44 per cent, while household subscriptions decreased from 72 to 49 percent.¹ Since 2000, analogue media has been ousted by digital versions in many segments of society.

In the current decade, the 2010s, well-established media houses such as *Aftenposten* in Norway (Schibsted), *Berlingske* in Denmark and *Svenska Dagbladet* in Sweden (Schibsted) have nonetheless chosen to launch new titles of printed newspapers for children. A much smaller actor, the Swedish *MiniBladet*, was launched onto the scene in 2014.

Following the negative development of printed news media, and reading about and observing the younger generation's appropriation of, and devotion to, digital media devices with on-demand service at any time of the day, this recent predilection for printed news magazines has come as a surprise to many. How come these titles were launched in these times? What needs can be met for the young readers of a printed newspaper in a time when news and other current affairs information are available anywhere and at every minute, for free, through the internet and social media platforms? These are some of the issues that will be explored in this chapter.

Three editors-in-chief of Scandinavian children's newspapers have been interviewed to share their thoughts and to reflect on these issues. The interviewees represent *Aftenposten Junior* (AJ) in Norway, *Børne-*

Aftenposten Junior, Norway

Aftenposten Junior is published once a week (Tuesdays) and distributed to its subscribing readers. Only a small share of the circulation is sold as single copies. The newspaper was launched in 2012 by Schibsted Media Group in Oslo. Ever since *Aftenposten Junior* was launched circulation has grown steadily and it is now (2018) the seventh largest newspaper in Norway with 30,000 copies/issue and it is financially profitable. *Aftenposten Junior* does not contain any advertising and is not dependent on sponsors. The Norwegian subscribers market were willing to pay for quality journalism for young people, something that surprised many sceptics according to Mari Midstigen, editor-in-chief since February 2018. Readers are mainly in the eight-to-thirteen age range but some are as young as six years old.

In 2015, the Swedish daily newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet*, also within Schibsted Media Group, launched *SvD Junior*, a newspaper very similar to *Aftenposten Junior*. The two newspapers exchange material from time to time.



Børneavisen, Denmark

In May 2018, the Danish publishing house JP/Politiken announced the launch of a weekly newspaper for children. The mission is to provide curated news content to their readers as an alternative to the overwhelming abundance of information, and sometimes disinformation, from social media, but also to contribute to young Danes' democratic and social education. Editor-in-chief Louise Abildgaard Grøn previously worked with JP/Politikens' school activities for several years. The editorial office consists of three journalists and with a planned launch in September 2018 *Børneavisen* will be spread mainly through subscriptions but also through single-copy sales.

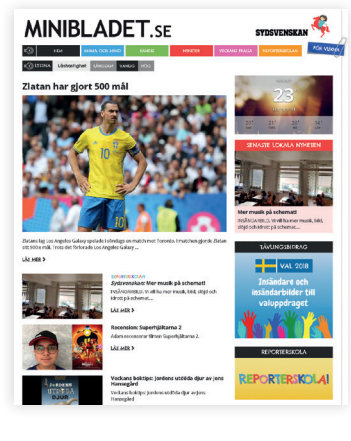
The first announcement of JP/Politikens' plans for a printed newspaper for children came at the same time as its main competitor Berlingske Media decided to close down their newspaper *Kids News* (February 2018). *Kids News* was launched in 2014 but closed down only four years later following a strategic shift within the media company.



avisen (B) in Denmark and *MiniBladet* (MB) in Sweden.² They form a rather heterogeneous group comprising a now established successful title (AJ), a yet-to-be-launched title (B) and a title launched by a former teacher and enthusiast without the infrastructure of an established media company (MB). The main target group for all three newspapers is children from about six years of age up to the early teens. For a more detailed presentation of each title, see the fact boxes.

MiniBladet, Sweden

Behind *MiniBladet* is Maria McShane, teacher and author of educational books. After many years working with young immigrants in language and reading development she felt that free easy-to-read news material for children was missing. Together with an illustrator, a web designer, a language consultant and journalists, *MiniBladet* was developed. The newspaper is available on paper, published once a week and is also an interactive website, which is updated on a daily basis. The editorial office of nine persons cooperates with ten local newspapers all over Sweden, which publish *MiniBladet's* content once a week. The aim is to offer a version in every region with local as well as national/other news for young readers. Readers are between three and twelve years old and the online texts are offered at different levels of legibility. *MiniBladet* also runs Reporterskolan (*the Reporter School*), where school classes can contribute with material to the newspaper in cooperation with journalists.



Youth and the news

Whether there are children's newspapers or not, young people hear, see or read about big news events either through media or just by hearing adults talking about them. With a smartphone in their pocket, participation in social media and access to more news channels than ever before it is almost impossible for children not to pick up news of all sorts. And the inherent curiosity, the wish to learn about and try to understand the surrounding world, is an important part of growing up and of forming one's own knowledge and opinions. The abundance of information, sensations, images, messages and events can, however, complicate the process of understanding, sorting out right from wrong, being informed and getting a manageable overview. And of course, this goes for young people as well as adults.

In Norway, the reporting around the terrorist attacks on 22 July 2011 (in Oslo and Utøya) highlighted the need to explain news events in alternative ways. The events had a huge impact on everyone in the society and young people in particular were affected, as victims and as recipients of reporting in the media. The need for a reliable source that explains an event in a sensitive way adapted to a young reader became clear to parents and other adults. Although not being a single cause, it did matter in the launch of *Aftenposten Junior*.

The old-school newspaper in the digital environment

Both *Aftenposten Junior* and *Børneavisen* initially met voices of doubt around the idea of a printed newspaper for children in these times. But referring to their own experiences from partaking in school activities, the editors' impression was that children themselves do not seem to have anything against the paper version. When given the choice to publish online or in print, the latter was surprisingly often preferred by children. Print was considered by the majority to be more serious, more "for real" – it seemed as if children placed more trust in something that is printed: "You will be perceived as a more serious person if you read a newspaper. And children want to be taken seriously."³ Something that is published online could easily be changed or altered, according to the children, and was therefore seen as less important, less trustworthy. Similar experiences from classroom activities are shared

by the editor of *MiniBladet* in retelling the pride with which children show the printed versions of articles they have produced.

The possibility of using the full spread of a printed newspaper is also described as an advantage when explaining complex news items. There is enough space to include fact boxes, maps, big images and graphic elements, which immediately give the reader a better overview than a web page or a smaller screen on a tablet or phone where information is given more on demand, by clicking on a link.

When extraordinary or violent events occur the limits in space of the printed newspaper provide clear frames, a selected and curated experience. The reader can find information about a news event without becoming overwhelmed by too many details. Gory or graphic details that may frighten or be “too much” will not pop up unexpectedly. A news event explained by a professional journalist can also be a help to parents who sometimes find it difficult to explain or talk to their children about complex issues in the news.

MiniBladet had another point of departure. In the years before the founder began to design it, Sweden scored lower than ever on reading skills in the international Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) report (2012),⁴ something that created worries, not least among teachers and politicians. Since there was no newspaper for children at the time (*SvD Junior* was launched in 2015), the idea of launching one was born. With a focus on reading and a special concern with less affluent families and children developing their basic skills, *MiniBladet* began as an educational project to enhance reading skills. According to the founder, many efforts have been made in society aimed at encouraging the reading of books. However, the shorter items in a newspaper and the curiosity for news can be an alternative way to improve reading skills. An equally important aim was to offer an opportunity to learn to read and produce news, to offer a space where children could learn to express their views and learn to become critical media users – a media literacy project.

In the interviews the editors all mention the fact that the newspaper is not trying to compete with, or be an alternative to, other digital news sources, but rather to be seen as a complement. Although both young people and adults live in an environment with an abundance of news and access to all kinds of information, it is easy to feel over-

whelmed and confused. The newspaper provides the most important facts and information and you can finish the reading with a feeling of being up to date with current events. Someone has brought some order to the chaos. A wish for time and a place to dig deeper into a topic or event at your own pace, to be able to delve in peace and quiet, is something that all three interviewees mention: “You need some tranquility in your brain!”⁵

Content

Topics addressed in the newspapers can be of any kind, the editors say. What is important is how topics are presented – not in a frightening way with too many or scary details. Occasional crime events, personal tragedies, etc. are avoided. The events are explained thoroughly so that previous knowledge about an event is not needed. Another aim is to describe actions taken to help solve or improve the problem that has occurred, that something is being done not to leave the reader in despair. The fact that the newspapers are published once a week is, in this case, often an advantage since it gives time for an event to develop and more information can be included. But as one of the interviewees mentioned, they will not sugar-coat a news story to give something a happy ending but rather strive to give an accurate but constructive image of the situation.

To find out which topics to address, a close relationship with their readers is something all three interviewees pointed out as being important; listening to the children is vital – what are *they* talking about, what do *they* want to know and how do we take their interests and feelings seriously? Input from parents and teachers is also important to find the right way to address an issue.

Differences from an adult newspaper

Although no topics are avoided, there are differences in how they are treated. The focus is on explaining a situation or event, presenting a story from scratch and giving context. Young readers of different ages who are still in school do not have the same level of general knowledge as can be expected from an adult population. However, as one of the interviewees mentioned, this is something that could be done to a greater extent in newspapers for adults as well. Another difference that was mentioned is the tone or angle in a story. While a common crite-

tion in journalism for adults is to focus on the conflict, the sensation, the three editors of children's news all mentioned that this is not at all necessary in their writing.

Initially the editorial team of *Aftenposten Junior* thought they would be able to benefit from material intended for the main newspaper (*Aftenposten*) and just rewrite the text. This proved not to work out well since rewriting took longer than writing the article for children from scratch. In fact, it has been the other way around when *Aftenposten Junior* has presented texts from a children's perspective.

Images, graphic elements, maps and illustrations are used to a greater extent than in an ordinary newspaper and provide different entries to the news story. This also makes it easier to get information about something even if the reading skills are under development, and eventually the readers can access longer texts. The newspaper is also printed on a heavier paper, which displays photos better and makes it easier for smaller hands to turn the pages.

On the importance of news for children and some advice

When asked to reflect on if, or why, news for children is important, all three editors stressed the value for young people in building knowledge about the society and the surrounding world through news reporting. News that is available and adapted to your level of knowledge is essential when learning how to be a citizen and the role of news media in a democratic society. To become *media literate*, it is important that you have the opportunities to practise these skills somewhere, that there is a platform to turn to. And the three interviewees all found that there was a gap here to be filled:

Parents worry about their children's societal and democratic knowledge, believing that it is under pressure from all the chaos with all kinds of input from all kinds of channels. And they don't know what to do about it. [...] I believe parents are willing to invest in children's building of knowledge, their curiosity, where they can explore topics in a quieter environment. (Abildgaard Grøn, *Børneavisen*)

If children learn about what a newspaper is, its role in a democratic society, they become media literate. But it is important that there is a platform to turn to for this. (McShane, *MiniBladet*)

I believe the world will be a better place if children learn to love news. Learn to appreciate the value of keeping abreast with what is happening in the world. [...] I think this need can be found everywhere, the need for a trustworthy, serious news outlet that children love to read. (Midststigen, *Aftenposten Junior*)

And of course, for the commercial media houses represented in the Norwegian and Danish examples, there is an interest in establishing the habit of reading news, to create brand awareness and learning about and attracting future customers. However, in the case of *Aftenposten Junior* in Norway, the newspaper has already proved to be a financially successful idea. They found what they perceived as an underused market for quality journalism for children, and a will to pay for it.

Based on the experiences the three interviewees have had so far, what advice would they then like to pass on? The main advice given is this: listen to children and take them seriously! Working close to the target group is important, initially and along the way. Listen to them and explore what interests them, their needs and concerns, and learn about their everyday life.

To establish a new product there is obviously a need for initial funding. Together with a degree of patience on behalf of the editorial team, it is important to get the financial backing from an owner or sponsor who is willing to last until awareness and new habits have been established. Raising interest in, and an ability to read, news, and learning about the world, should be of interest to society. Reading news can lead to insights into, and an understanding of, other cultures and issues of equal rights. Thus, to be able to reach out to as many children as possible, not only to those who have parents/carers who give active support or can afford a subscription, is also mentioned as something that ought to be of great public interest.

So why now?

Although the conditions for the three cases at the time of the interviews were very different, the editors-in-chief seem to agree about many aspects concerning the *raison d'être* of printed newspapers for children. Children are curious and interested in the surrounding world and reading news adapted for them will contribute to their societal knowledge.

To practise reading skills they also need different kinds of platforms complementing each other. Although the opportunities in terms of access are unprecedented, the constant flow of information and images around us can create an overwhelming feeling. Thus, returning to the initial question of *how come these printed newspapers for children were launched now*, with all the opportunities to find news and information at any time and any place on any device, an answer could be that it is actually *because of precisely this*.

Notes

1. Nordicom (2018).
2. The chapter is based on interviews with the editors-in-chief of three newspapers for children: Mari Midtstigen, *Aftenposten Junior* (4 July, 2018), Louise Abildgaard Grøn, *Børneavisen* (13 July, 2018) and Maria McShane, *MiniBladet* (20 August, 2018). The interviews were filmed and recorded via Adobe Connect and later transcribed.
3. Abildgaard Grøn (2018).
4. PISA (2014).
5. Abildgaard Grøn (2018).

Reference

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