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**Collaboration between
News Agencies
in Nordic Countries**

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COLLABORATION BETWEEN
NEWS AGENCIES IN NORDIC COUNTRIES

by

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INTRODUCTION

Within the field of news-agency-operations the Scandinavian countries represent a unique situation in several ways. The origin of their national agencies dates back to the very early days of news agency history in the middle of the 19th century. They have sustained continuous businesses in news gathering and distribution for more than a hundred years. They have succeeded in maintaining their position through the rapid transition of mass-media structures in more recent years mainly by taking a lead in the use of the most advanced telecommunication-technology. It is in the context of this paper perhaps most noteworthy that in spite of the relative weakness of the commercial base for each of these agencies, and in spite of the relative political dependence of the respective countries upon policies and decisions made elsewhere, the national agencies have maintained not only their autonomy within their own fields of operations, but also the credibility among their clients at home and abroad. Part of this position has been achieved through the individual policies of national service, open-door management and self-sustainment which form the basis of reliability, but part of it may also be due to the close cooperation which those agencies have maintained and developed among themselves and in relations outside their immediate spheres of interest. It is therefore proposed in this paper to trace specifically the form, structures and content of this cooperation and its role in international news agency operations.

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The birth of the Scandinavian agencies from 1866 onwards was not blessed by bright prospects of independence and prosperity. In fact the optimism of the founders can only have been nourished by the scope of improvement from what little existed before in the way of news and information. Organized gathering, processing and distribution of news was minimal and left to individual newspapers of meager means, to businessmen and to authorities. Physically it was tied to the movements of men, horses and boats.

The pioneers of news agency business, Charles Havas in Paris from 1832, Bernhard Wolff in Berlin from 1849 and Paul Julius Reuter in London from 1851, had established their first agreement on exchange of quotations from the exchanges and commodity markets in 1856 primarily to serve their private customers. This agreement was extended in 1859 to all fields of news-gathering and distribution. The three agencies agreed to support each other in their respective spheres of interests. Havas would serve the two others with its news from France, Spain, Italy and Austria, Wolff would serve its partners with all the news from Germany, Russia and the Scandinavian and Slavic countries in which it operated. Reuter would deliver the news from England and its colonies.

When in 1866, Eric Nikolai Ritzau, of German origin, decided to try to earn a living by establishing a "telegram-agency" in Denmark, he followed the example of Havas in Paris, Wolff in Berlin and Reuter in London. The first telegraph-line from continental Europe to Denmark had been opened from Hamburg to Copenhagen in 1854. Four Copenhagen newspapers had joint correspondents in Hamburg to transmit brief market reports and relevant news. Ritzau established his own correspondent in Hamburg and offered his service to the newspapers. He then wrote to Reuters to obtain a limited service from London, but was discouraged by a reply insisting on negotiations only in case the new agency wanted a regular comprehensive service. Another vain attempt to establish direct connection with St Petersburg was made before the new Danish agency finally wrote its first contract with Wolff. An appeal from Ritzau to Wolff for a loan to start up the service in Denmark and the other Scandinavian countries was however refused.

The first national agency in Sweden, Svenska Telegrambyran, was opened up in 1867 through combined assistance from Wolff and Ritzau. The Norwegian national agency, Norsk Telegrambyra, was opened later in that same year and was serviced from Copenhagen and Stockholm. The first formal agreement between the privately owned Scandinavian agencies, committing one to serve the other partner with domestic news free of charge on demand by the receiver was established in 1889, copying within Scandinavia the model agreements between the world-agencies.

This form of agreement was probably the only way in which the agencies could establish business on an economic basis without running into news-gathering costs which would have been far beyond the economic resources of the press at that time, but was not beyond suspect. Several Scandinavian editors and politicians from time to time criticized the dependence upon a single main source of news : Berlin. One prominent Danish editor once concluded that "the official and semiofficial or trust-like international information system, which operated until the First World

War, was possibly the most important factor of influence upon the attitudes of nations and states in their mutual relations in particular up to and during the First World War and one which instigates the sympathies and antipathies among nations which occasionally would explode in upheavals."

In Finland Finska Telegrambyran had been operating in close collaboration with St Petersburg since 1887. Finland being governed at that time as a barony under the Russian emperor, the Finnish agency was allowed from the start only to receive its foreign news via the Agency in St Petersburg, but managed to establish contact also with Svenska Telegrambyran in Stockholm for Swedish and Scandinavian news. From 1919 the Finnish agency, Finska Notisbyran was free to establish direct contracts with Wolff in Berlin and Reuter in London as well as direct news-exchange with its Nordic sister-agencies, Tidningarnas Telegrambyra in Sweden, Norsk Telegrambyra in Norway and Ritzaus Bureau in Denmark.

Apart from the breaking-up of former patterns of cooperation and exclusive agreements between agencies, the First World War brought a new technology: radio came on the market, which faced the agencies with a new challenge. Would this radio become state-controlled and be the basis for new official news-services, or would the agencies be allowed to use the radio for their own services and to protect such broadcasts for the use of paying clients only?

In the thirties the national European agencies of the smaller countries also found the service of the bigger agencies becoming more and more propagandistic in tone and content. At a meeting of Agencies Alliées in Oslo in 1938, attention was drawn to the fact that an increasing use of news services for propagandistic purposes was noticeable. As it had always been a fundamental principle that the national agencies should base their services of reliability and facts, they could not accept the risks of this new development. A meeting of agencies of neutral states was called in November 1938 to form a separate unbiased exchange of news between these countries, and the "Hællcommune" was started in February 1940 between the Nordic countries, Holland, Belgium and Switzerland, only to be stopped by the German invasions two months later.

Both European alliances of news agencies were revived and revitalized after the Second World War.

The smaller group of autonomous national agencies from neutral states, named Group '39, met in 1945 to continue a closer collaboration. In 1956 the Austrian agency joined the Group.

GROUP '39

This group of eight national agencies formed on the basis of non-engagement in the political confrontations leading to the Second World War, include the national agencies of Austria, Denmark, Belgium, Finland, Holland, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland.

Members are fully autonomous private or cooperative agencies enjoying an independent status vis-a-vis official authorities. The Group promotes direct exchange of news between its members and exchange of professional as well as managerial information. It allows its members mutual benefit from experiences and initiatives or ideas in the editorial, technical and administrative fields.

Group '39 organized the European Technical Conferences of News Agencies in June 1952 (Brussels), October 1956 (Rome) and August 1957 (Strasbourg) which led to the establishment of the European Alliance of News Agencies.

The Nordic Agencies

No formal statute or name has been given to the collaboration between the Nordic news agencies, which however is both broader and more intense than any other agency-collaboration in Europe.

Editorially it has been recognized since the birth of the Nordic agencies that the interests of the four countries (and Iceland without an agency) are so similar that a broad exchange, to be limited only by the receiver's capacity of handling and distributing, should be on a permanent basis. In the beginning this exchange took place daily via telegraph, later on via telephone, then in some instances by "hell-schreiber" and after the Second World War by teleprinter.

The teleprinters served by leased wire systems with almost unlimited capacity which were installed after the Second World War have escalated the inter-Nordic exchange of news in more than one way. The world agencies at that time came to the European scene in an open and extremely competitive search for new markets and clients to their services, which now had to cover the whole world and could no longer be founded on the principles of exchange without charges, but had to be built upon the dogma that the first to serve was the one to win. Costs soared, search for new service and new income accelerated the growth of the world agencies.

At times, when competition in the Nordic countries for services out of and to those markets was going full out, the Nordic agencies would face situations in which Reuter, AP, UPI and AFP were more often quoted in national newspapers than the national agency. It was a situation which could not be accepted either commercially or professionally by the national agencies. Efforts to improve the domestic services as well as the "nordic" services were undertaken jointly.

At a second stage, when the cold war period once more tainted big-power coverage, attempts were also initiated to create complementary independent services from key posts abroad.

In order to increase efficiency the agencies also undertook joint enterprises of technical and editorial nature at big international events. They started working closely together for coverage of the Olympic Games by joint teams of editorial and technical staff and jointly leased wire systems. Joint correspondents have been employed since the beginning of the sixties by the four agencies, partly on an ad-hoc basis on the occasion of important events abroad or short-time assignments to the U.N. and other international institutions, and partly on a permanent basis from Brussels, Moscow, Washington and Peking.

At certain periods the posting of correspondents abroad has also been practiced within the Nordic countries themselves in an attempt to bring fresh impulse to the reporting on each others' affairs under the assumption that the happenings even within Nordic countries are best explained from a foreign point of view.

EVALUATION

It is difficult to measure the effects of cooperation at so many varied levels. It becomes only feasible to have some general ideas, if efforts are measured against expectations.

At the Group '39 level, apart from the benefits reached at the level of European cooperation, the hope was that compatible editorial views and interests would allow for the exchange of background and current news material, which would

- a) supplement the range of world agency material
- b) increase common understanding and knowledge of comparable societies, and
- c) add an independent evaluation to domestic events based upon a common European cultural and sometimes political (neutral) background.

In spite of efforts through meetings of editors, special editions of background articles and special services in the case of events of national interest to collaborating agencies, the editorial benefits will in the eyes of most clients have been negligible. Two exceptions would be sports and photo, both of which lend themselves to special services, where domestic agencies will be able to go further than world agencies in providing services of special national interests. This fact has been substantiated by the development of a special European Photoservice and the collaboration between national agencies at Olympic Games and other major sports-events. Also in some cases of pooling-arrangements when one agency had a chance to send reporters on special assignments have copies of the reports been valuable additions to the general news-coverage also in other countries.

At the Nordic level an evaluation would have to part from two sets of expectations, that of the general reader and listener and that of people and politicians with special interests in broadening the general understanding among the people of the Nordic countries.

The agencies have gained professionally and administratively from being ready at all times to share their editorial as well as technical and administrative resources. The four agencies have also benefited economically from technical collaboration especially in the field of telecommunications and shared know-how in the field of teletypesetting, special telephone-services, financial services etc. They have obtained certain concessions in the economic field by joint negotiations.

They have probably also more than satisfied the needs of the Nordic newspapers in general for services from and reports about the neighbouring countries.

They have, however, not been able to satisfy the hope of Nordic-oriented observers that more news would create greater demand and gradually increase the knowledge of and interest for Nordic domestic affairs. On the contrary, experience from attempts made in the mid-fifties indicates that even a considerable increase of news from one neighbouring country to the clients in another country would not result in any noticeable increase of the Nordic coverage of individual newspapers. Long-term statistics from the mid-sixties also indicate that the percentage of Nordic coverage of the general foreign coverage of a single Nordic agency (in this case the Danish agency) had decreased from about 15% in 1954 to about 8.5% in 1966.

This downward trend in percentage does not reflect a corresponding decrease in actual daily volume of Nordic news as the total wordage had increased, but it still indicates that Nordic news have great difficulties in competing with growing foreign news files in general and that the mutual interest in Nordic affairs has a threshold level which it would be extremely difficult to raise.

This has not prevented the Nordic Council from continuing efforts to encourage broader Nordic reporting and to help create a greater demand for Nordic news. The first noticeable effort in this direction was an initiative in 1953/54 by the Nordic Council to prevail upon telecommunication authorities to lower certain leased wire rates. This initiative some ten years later enabled the Nordic countries to establish direct teleprinter-lines round the clock, thereby increasing the exchange of news, and probably also allowing for more frequent reporting by correspondents from the other countries.

A special study on Nordic news in the Danish, Norwegian and Swedish press published by the Nordic Council in 1967 came to conclusions about the general interest for Nordic news similar to the one above and had no better advice for the improvement of mutual readers' interest than the establishment of a special Nordic background feature service set up by the Nordic Council, which however, has not been followed.

It remains to be seen whether present discussions within the Nordic Council of opening access to all Nordic TV channels via satellite broadcasts (a special investigation into this has been initiated by the Nordic Council of Ministers) will achieve what a broader reporting in the press and what improved conditions for translation and distribution of Nordic literature in the other countries have not been able to achieve: a breakthrough for a Nordic cultural consciousness and a consequent increased devotion of more leisure time reading/listening/viewing to Nordic affairs.

In May 1976 the Nordic Council and the Nordic Ministerial Council organized a second meeting with media editors and agency representatives to evaluate the availability of Nordic news and the treatment of Nordic news material in agencies and newspapers with the purpose of increasing Nordic news in the media.

The seminar was the outcome of a meeting of the Nordic News agencies held in February 1975 to discuss the collaboration between the agencies concerning the exchange of Nordic news.

It was agreed that further efforts should be made to improve the mutual coverage of Nordic news. Decision was taken to increase the daily wordage of news sent to other Nordic countries. It was agreed that the news would be offered whenever needed in a re-written, explanatory form with sufficient background information to make it intelligible to readers in other Nordic countries. Thirdly, it was agreed to exchange information of special interest to the respective readerships from other Nordic countries. And fourthly, to exchange every day a list of news and background stories. Among these measures, specially edited Nordic news columns seem to be popular among newspapers.

The discussion also touched upon other forms of cooperation, but they were hampered by the economic difficulties. However, it was felt that a meeting of representatives of the press in all countries and those responsible for the agency fields should be held to discuss further the criteria followed by individual newspapers in deciding upon their coverage of other Nordic countries, and the proposition was taken up by the Nordic Council.