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# Contingent availability: A case-based approach to understanding availability in streaming services and cultural policy implications

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## **Abstract**

Streaming services have emerged as increasingly important access points for cultural content, often promising, as Netflix does, ‘unlimited entertainment’. However, the actual conditions of availability remain under-examined. While streaming services typically contain a vast selection of objects, they certainly do not hold the total amount of all possible items. Streaming services thus pose new challenges for policy makers who wish to ensure access to, and availability of culture. In this paper, we build on previous research (Tallerås, Colbjørnsen, & Øfsti, 2019) to develop the term ‘contingent availability’ and discuss how cultural items are made available in streaming contexts. Departing from a pyramid model of availability, we investigate these levels empirically through a case-based approach. Nine Norwegian award-winning or critically acclaimed books, movies and TV series were strategically selected to highlight how availability in streaming services is contingent upon multiple conditions. For each case, we assess the ways in which Norwegian cultural policy influences production, distribution and availability of culture. We discuss how cultural policy measures do secure availability for most of the cases, but is unable to effectively combat fragmentation of availability.

## **Keywords**

Availability; Streaming; Cultural policy; Cultural industries

## Introduction

Over the past decade, streaming services have become important and even dominant access points for films, TV-shows and books in digital format. In Norway and the other Nordic countries, this tendency is especially pronounced: More than half of the Norwegian population subscribe to Netflix. Almost nine out of ten use a music streaming service. At least 150 000 subscribe to a streaming service for ebooks and audio books (Author 2019).

Streaming services like Netflix, Spotify and Storytel (each dominant in one of the cultural sectors in Norway) provide access to enormous amounts of media content. However, it is not always straightforward for users to navigate these services. For content producers and streaming providers, coming to terms on distribution licenses in an international marketplace is hard. Hence, not only can a single item be lost in the abundance of a vast database, but it can also be difficult to track down which service has rights to distribute which item, if anyone at all. Adding nuance to the myth of streaming ubiquity and abundance, is part of our motivation in this paper.

In a previous article (in Norwegian only), we explored conditions for availability in streaming services both conceptually and empirically, departing from a notion of ‘contingent availability’ (Norw. *relativ tilgjengelighet*) (Author 2019). We argued that distribution, dissemination and presentation is in effect a structured set-up of multiple layers that filters the content stream before it can reach a user. This filtering process is affected by cultural economics, technology, laws and regulations. The article mostly explored availability from a user’s standpoint and with specific attention to the role of algorithms.

In this article, we go into detail on specific cultural items from Norwegian film, television and book publishing, thus shifting the perspective. We investigate availability in streaming services empirically through a case-based approach, selecting nine Norwegian award-winning and/or critically acclaimed books, movies and TV series to highlight how availability is contingent upon multiple conditions. For each case, we assess the ways cultural policy measures influence production, distribution and availability.

The research question: *What factors enable and restrict the availability of specific cultural items, and how does cultural policy address contingent and limited availability in digital contexts?*

The remainder of this paper contains a theory and background section followed by nine case presentations, a discussion and a short conclusion.

## Theory and background

The internet and digitization of media have enabled new forms of distribution and access to content, making an impact on all the major culture industries (Herbert, Lotz, and Marshall 2018). The music industry has in a short time moved from physical formats through downloadable file formats to streaming services. Streaming services, with Spotify and Apple Music as the global leaders, are now the dominant access point for music. The audiovisual market has experienced a similar development, although with a more fragmented outcome. Along with national broadcasters and cable providers, streaming services such as Netflix, Amazon Prime Video and HBO make for new distribution channels and production frameworks for film and television programming. While still comparatively marginal, streaming services also provide access to ebooks and digital audiobooks. Amazon's Kindle Unlimited and Swedish Storytel are pushing this development. All in all, this shift can be characterized as a move away from markets based on single transactions to markets based on the purchase and sale of rights and access (Colbjørnsen 2020; Lotz 2017; Smith and Telang 2016).

Commercial streaming services are typically financed through either a monthly subscription fee or through advertising. In exchange for payment or ad-exposure, the user gets access to the entire database, usually without restrictions on use. Non-commercial entities such as public service broadcasters and library organisations also operate streaming services, with similar characteristics apart from the funding. Unlike digital formats based on downloading files (like iTunes), the user of streaming services has access to media files that are continuously flowing from a database, but cannot extract the files themselves, share them with others outside the service or remix the content (without violating the terms of service) (Küng 2017; Perzanowski and Schultz 2016).

The business model of streaming services also has another side, based on the fact that users contribute data to the service when they interact with it (Maasø and Hagen 2019; Bolin and Velkova 2020). Large amounts of data about the user's habits and preferences informs the streaming provider's decisions on how to display and recommend content. This presentation of content to users takes place on a screen, a user interface, or more colloquially, a 'shop

window', where only a small minority of items from the database are visible at a time. The selection of this content can be done automatically, by algorithms, or by human editors and other curators.

Already in the databases, content has been filtered. Even in content bases containing tens of thousands (or even millions of) items, there will be missing bits. The Norwegian streaming services for audio books and e-books contain thousands of items, but are still limited, especially compared with the offers available in libraries and bookstores. And while some items are singled out for recommendation by the service's algorithms, others rarely or ever reach a single user. In the case of Netflix, the content structure at the database level may best be illustrated with the large variations on the catalog size according to where the subscriber resides (Lobato and Lotz 2020; Stewart 2016). Algorithms that operate based on databases are thus inherently restricted by what these databases contain and how the data in them are structured (Bucher 2018; boyd and Crawford 2012).

The discourse on streaming services is characterized by hyperbolic claims: 'Unlimited entertainment' is a marketing catchphrase from Netflix. However, there are many obstacles or barriers that limit availability of media content, even in a world of supposed abundance and availability. According to the Oxford online dictionary, 'availability' is the quality of being able to be used or obtained. In this context, where we primarily discuss books, films and television programs, we understand availability in a broad sense as the opportunity to read or see them. For the consumer, availability may seem a dichotomous dimension: Either you find what you were looking for, or you do not. You may, however, end up reading another book, see another movie or just browse the internet, without your initial desired object being strictly unavailable. You could subscribe to the wrong service, misspell a title when you search for it or have a deprecated version of mandatory software on your smart TV. Availability, then, is influenced by how much effort, money, expertise or technical infrastructure you bring to the table.

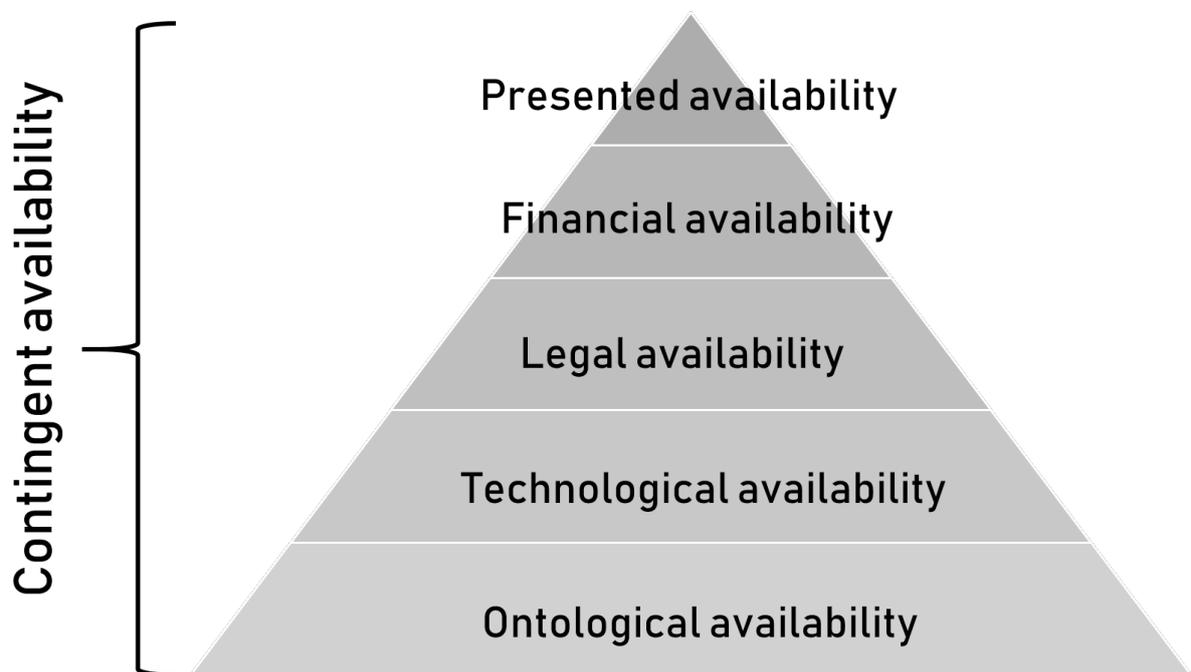
### **The pyramid of availability**

With the concept of *contingent availability*, we seek to capture the factors that enable and restrict availability, looking at different stages in the process of making a cultural item available. In Author (2019), we suggested that availability consists of five levels. In order for a cultural product to be selected by an end user, it must be made available at all these levels.

The *making available* is crucial, as it highlights how items do not simply *become* available: Availability is managed, both supported and hindered by social actors. Below we provide a visualization of how availability in streaming services is structured and subsequently summarize the five levels.

Overall, the concept of contingent availability can be presented as a pyramid with different levels where content is included or excluded as one moves towards the top of the pyramid (see Figure 1). In this paper, we have made the small alteration from Author (2019) that «algorithmic availability» is substituted with ‘presented availability’, indicating that the final presentation to the user in an interface can be performed by both machine algorithms and human editors.

Figure 1: The pyramid of availability



**Ontological availability:** The fact that an item is ontologically available means that it exists in the world, and is thus an absolute prerequisite for it to be available at all.

**Technological availability:** The fact that an item is technologically available means that it exists in a format and in a state that can be played and read by the available media technology in question.

Legal availability: The fact that an item is legally available means that there are contractual agreements and licenses and/or laws and regulations that contribute to, or do not prevent, the work being able to reach the end user.

Financial availability: The fact that an item is financially available means that it exists at a price that both the licensee and the end user can accept.

Presented availability: The fact that an item is presented as available means that end users are exposed to the work, either through a form of algorithmic filtering, by a human editor/editorial team, or a combination of the two.

We wish to note that, while we focus here on availability in streaming services, the pyramid model is likely to be applicable in other contexts as well, both digital and analogue, cultural or non-cultural. Our conceptions of levels of availability have much in common with general theories of how information systems work (Flodén 2018). Nonetheless, there are specifics to culture markets that need to be taken into account.

### **Culture markets and their mechanisms**

In this article, we approach items belonging to three separate industries: television, film and book publishing. While these are disparate in many ways, they also share some characteristics. Both similarities and differences need to be explicated because they have a bearing on how availability has traditionally been managed in the cultural industries.<sup>i</sup>

The television, film and book industries comprise production, distribution and sales/consumption. The end products are for sale in open consumer markets and subject to copyright protection. The products of the cultural industries are symbolic goods whose value is multidimensional and difficult to pin (Bolin 2016).

Production is quite different between the three industries, where film and television production has typically been very expensive endeavours, and thus managed in studio systems, while book production is comparatively cheap, and thus organized in individualized author contexts. While there are huge differences between the cost structure of a major film production and a novel, the shared assumption is that culture industries products are characterized by high initial costs and low reproduction costs (marginal cost). Mechanical reproduction and later digitization has further contributed to lowering marginal cost (Towse 2019).

Distribution is also different between the industries, but there is a shared tendency for indirect sales, thus the common prevalence of middlemen and intermediary organizations enabling the diffusion of symbolic goods from producer to consumer. Intermediaries such as studios, agencies and publishers take on risks and initial costs and typically advertise and market the culture items.

Cultural products are categorized in different sectors, and sales and distribution channels are traditionally separate for each industry: Television programmes have been available through television sets and via cable or satellite; films can be seen in cinemas and purchased on DVD/Blu-Ray; books are sold through book stores and lent through libraries. Internet distribution and streaming services have made for new channels across all industries.

Each item can also be packaged in different ways and sold at different prices. Content producers typically use this repackaging strategy to create various ‘windows’ where availability is managed to create maximum profit from all potential customers (price discrimination) (Shapiro and Varian 1998; Smith and Telang 2016): TV series are aired on cable TV before released to streaming services; films are first shown in cinemas before made available for screening on TV, in rental services and for streaming; books are first available in hardback, before the paperback and ebook versions arrive (Smith and Telang 2016). For TV programming, the notion of scheduling has been an important way of managing how programs reach the public. Streaming marks a break with scheduling, as content is typically, but not exclusively, made available in bulk (Lotz 2017; Spilker and Colbjørnsen 2020).

Typically, for each window, the price to consumer decreases. The decrease in price per window can be seen to heighten availability, as a larger portion of the audience is able to access content. However, most cultural items have a short life span and disappear from commercial circulation after some years. Libraries, archives and public service repositories may prolong the life span, but even here, availability is limited by resources and opportunities for dissemination and display (Burkart and Leijonhufvud 2019).

Overall, digitization of cultural items can be expected to increase availability, for various reasons. The scarcity of material objects is not technically an issue with digitized items. A digital media file can be disseminated across the globe, and the costs of copying and spreading are miniscule. Moreover, digital items are not subject to material decay, so can enjoy a long life and do not even require shelf space (if not on physical carriers).

Streaming services are perhaps the best example of the promise of availability in the digital age. As mentioned, streaming also tends to break with established cultural sector practices such as windowing, price discrimination and scheduling: In streaming services, content is often made available all at the same time, on-demand and at a flat price. And as international services, they cater to audiences across the globe.

## **Cultural policy**

Access to and availability of cultural content is not just the domain of commercial corporations, but the concern of cultural policy making, laws and regulation. Indeed, the idea that ‘culture is a pure public good, one that should be equally available to all’, is one of the core tenets of most cultural policies (Hesmondhalgh and Pratt 2005, 7). The Declaration of human rights, Article 27, states that ‘Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits’ (United Nations 1948).

The Nordic countries are typically associated with the so-called ‘architect model’ in which a ministry of culture is tasked with organizing the general cultural policy framework (Duelund 2003). Additionally, Norway has, in line with the British model, established an arm’s length organ, the Arts Council. Overall, according to Duelund (2008), cultural policy in the Nordic countries since 1945 has been rooted in the basic idea ‘to promote art and culture with a view to ensuring artistic freedom and cultural democracy’ (2008, 7). This view of cultural policy also extends to the media sector (Syvertsen et al. 2014).

While cultural policy measures can be located at both national and international levels (Mitchell 2003), here, we focus on national cultural policy. We take a fairly ‘narrow’ perspective on cultural policy as part of deliberate measures taken by cultural government agencies (Duelund 2003), but also incorporate issues of availability that have often been sorted under the term ‘media policy’. Ultimately, our approach is influenced by the fact that digitalization changes and challenges cultural policy (Valtysson 2020), taking into account such aspects as global platforms, digital licensing schemes and algorithmic filtering.

Although some private foundations do provide financial support, the state plays the crucial part in supporting the arts and culture in Norway. Availability and access are considered some of the most prominent aims of cultural policy, as expressed in the 2018 Norwegian white paper *The Power of Culture*:

An active cultural policy is a prerequisite in order for art and culture to benefit as many people as possible, by ensuring that all people have actual access to culture, regardless of their background (Ministry of Culture 2018, 16).

Norwegian cultural institutions such as public libraries, a public broadcaster and the otherwise heavily subsidized media and cultural sectors receive funding and privileges in exchange for obligations on content diversity, quality and access for all. Access and availability is supported by legislation that sets requirements for how important information and cultural content should be made available and used by the population, across all the cultural sectors that we analyze here.

The commercial side of the Norwegian literary institution also enjoys subsidies and support mechanisms, striving to ensure access and availability for readers. This is achieved through several different schemes, three of which are particularly central: The Norwegian Book Agreement is a legally binding agreement which, among other things, ensures that the bookstores are obligated to obtain all available titles from any publisher upon request and sets terms for price fixation (Løyland and Ringstad 2012; Poort and Eijk 2017). The fixed price agreement means that streaming services for ebooks and audio books are effectively backlist services. Further, print books (and, from 2019, digital books) are exempt from value added tax (Standard rate 25 %) (Colbjørnsen 2014). Finally, the Government subsidizes the purchasing of a number of literary books, non-fiction books and children's literature for libraries. Aside from an expansive public library system, the Norwegian Government also funds the vast digitization efforts of the National Library (Gran, Røssaak, and Kristensen 2019) and The Norwegian Library of Talking Books and Braille (NLB), which produces and lends out audio books and braille books, free to use for patrons with disabilities. In order for literature to reach non-Norwegian audiences, a cultural export programme exists, Norla - Norwegian literature abroad.

While cultural policy on literature is applied at several stages in the production and dissemination of books, Norwegian cultural policy for film and television largely targets production (Moseng 2017; Bjerkeland 2015). The Norwegian Film Institute (NFI) awards funding to select productions based on either the perceived artistic or commercial merits of project applications. NFI also grants production funding for some television-drama projects, but while the NFI funding is usually the base funding for film projects, it is usually the top financing for TV projects. In addition to funding awarded prior to production, finished films

might receive marketing support from the NFI as well as post-hoc support (Norw. ‘etterhåndsstøtte’): If a film sells more than a set minimum of cinema tickets in Norway, currently 10.000 or 35.000 depending on the kind of film, the NFI will match the earnings from any market.

Further, the government directly supports two public service broadcasters (PSBs). NRK, the traditional non-commercial national broadcaster, was until 2020 supported by a license fee and is now financed over the national budget. TV2, a commercial public service broadcaster founded in 1992, began receiving limited direct support in 2018 after arguing that the commercial broadcasting privileges were no longer sufficient to maintain the station as a PSB. Both broadcasters also operate under regulations that require them to have a certain amount of original Norwegian television drama, and to use external production companies.

In addition to the PSBs there have been other policy-driven attempts to support dissemination of Norwegian films and to a lesser extent TV series. The company Norgesfilm has operated several VOD services aimed at schools and libraries as well as the open service Filmarkivet. NFI runs the streaming service Filmbib for documentaries and short films. In 2016, Nettkino.no received funding for a service that could bridge the gap between cinemas and the home entertainment market. Despite also receiving EU support, the service was deemed unwanted by cinemas and distributors and unpopular among users (Ryssedal 2018). It has since been relaunched as a conventional VOD service with a focus on Norwegian and “quality films”. All of these services remain marginal compared to the commercial VOD services.

To sum up, Norwegian cultural policy works at different levels: Overall cultural policy *frameworks* (legal, political, ideological, infrastructural) can support the arts and culture by other means than financial, whereas *subsidies* (direct and indirect) provide a financial support mechanism. More concretely, availability of cultural items like books, films and television programming can be supported by the state providing basic artist support (grants, housing), by project/production support (direct subsidies or by application), or by supporting or creating channels for distribution, dissemination and consumption.

Finally, it should be noted that the cultural field is strongly hierarchized: Divides between high culture (theatre, literature, art) and popular culture (e.g. comic books, video games, pop music) still exist and influence cultural policy. The tendency has been for high culture to be

subject to support mechanisms whereas art forms associated with popular culture are more rarely supported, but this has changed with increased attention to the commercial potential of the so-called creative industries (Garnham 2005; Hesmondhalgh and Pratt 2005).

## Materials and methods: Case selection

In the following section, we will present nine cases of books, films and TV programs, all selected with the purpose of highlighting aspects pertaining to the notion of contingent availability. Thus, the cases are not representative of books, films and TV programs in general, but are purposefully sampled to gain rich information for in-depth study (Flyvbjerg 2006; Yin 2009). Seeking cases that lend themselves well to discussing contingent availability in streaming services, the purpose of the case sampling strategy was to ‘clarify the deeper causes behind a given problem and its consequences’, to quote Flyvbjerg (2006, 229).

The status of our cases is somewhere between ‘extreme cases’ and ‘critical cases’ (Flyvbjerg 2006). In our selection process, we used the following broad criteria: We sampled evenly across the three industries, three from each. The cases needed to be recent, from 2013-2017, but not so recent that their newness could hamper availability in itself. All cases would have received awards, critical and/or popular acclaim. They can thus be expected not to disappear from the cultural memory because of lack of quality or appeal. However, we are not explicitly interested in popularity or audience numbers as such. As will be shown in the following analysis, the cases are all in some way supported by cultural policy. We also sought to ensure breadth in genres and formats, both to ensure case variation and to explore the ways that availability is influenced by these factors. Finally, we wanted to avoid obscure cases that would be entirely unfamiliar to both Norwegian and international readers.

Through the analysis of these nine cases, we aim to shed a light on the extent to which items of cultural importance are available to the public and how laws, regulations and subsidies enable access. Specifically, we wish to analyse availability in streaming services, but the case presentations also touch on availability in other distribution channels. In the following, we first give an introduction to each work and its author/originator and context, and then indicate its availability for Norwegian audiences.

## Results: Case presentation and analysis

### **Dag Solstad, *The Insoluble Epic Element in Telemark in the Years 1592–1896*, Oktober forlag, 2013**

Dag Solstad is arguably Norway's most acclaimed living author. Since his debut in 1965, he is the author of 19 novels and a number of essay collections, dramatic plays and non-fiction books. Solstad received the honorary Brage award, Norway's most prestigious literary award, in 1999 and the Brage Prize for fiction in 2006. He is also the recipient of the 1989 Nordic Council's Prize for Literature and was awarded the Norwegian Critics' Prize in 1969, 1992 and 1999. Solstad was granted Honorary salary of the Norwegian State ['Statens æreslønn'] (200 000 NOK annually for life) in 2011. Solstad is widely translated and acclaimed internationally, having been short- or longlisted for the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize three times (2007, 2009 and 2012).

*The Insoluble Epic Element in Telemark in the Years 1592–1896* [Norw. *Det uoppløselige episke element i Telemark i perioden 1591–1896*, aka the Telemark novel] was published in Norwegian in 2013 by publisher Oktober forlag. The novel follows Solstad's family on his mother's side, and the farms that the family was connected to for close to 300 years. The Telemark novel takes the form of a highly detailed chronicle, resembling a non-fiction genealogy. It is one of several publications from Solstad's hand that transgress or play around with genre boundaries. Besides speculations to the contrary (Korsvold 2013), it was included in the library purchasing programme for literary fiction. (A previous genre-breaking effort from Solstad, *Medaljens forside. En roman om Aker* (1990), was not included in the library purchasing programme.) *The Insoluble Epic Element in Telemark* was nominated for Brage and the Norwegian Critics' Award in 2013.

#### *Availability*

The Telemark novel was published as hardback and ebook first in October 2013. A paperback version came in 2014, before a softcover version was published in 2016 as part of the Collected works of Dag Solstad series. It is not released as audio book, unlike several of his previous novels. In terms of how readers can access it, the Telemark novel is still widely available in several print formats and as an ebook. It can be purchased through a number of channels and, because it was included in the purchasing programme, is available in public libraries, though not in digitized format from the National Library. The book is not available

in the Norwegian streaming services Storytel, Fabel and Ebok.no Pluss, neither as ebook nor audio book. However, a digital audio book version is available through The Norwegian Library of Talking Books and Braille.

### **Steffen Kverneland, *Munch*, No comprendo press, 2013**

Steffen Kverneland is a Norwegian author, artist and illustrator. Kverneland has published numerous comic strips and albums. Since 1993, he has specialized in adapting classical literary texts into comics strips or albums. His work includes two large-scale ‘graphic biographies’ of artists Olaf Gulbransson (*Olaf G.*, 2004, with Lars Fiske) and Edvard Munch (*Munch*, 2013).

*Munch*, the graphic biography of Norwegian modernist painter Edvard Munch was published by No comprendo press in 2013. The Munch book is essentially a reworked and expanded version of previously published stubs in the *Kanon* comic book series published 2006–2012. *Munch* comprises Kverneland’s drawings detailing the life and work of the famous painter, with careful renditions of Munch’s art combined with drawings in his own style. All quotes, most of them from Munch’s contemporaries, are referenced judiciously, as in an academic publication.

The book was very well received and widely construed as a genre-crossing masterpiece. It won the Brage prize for non-fiction in 2013, as the first graphic work. Nonetheless, it was submitted to the Arts Council’s library purchasing programme for comic books, not for non-fiction. The Norwegian Ministry of Culture awarded *Munch* with a prize for comic books and children's literature for 2013, but the book is primarily directed at adult audiences. The first chapter of the *Munch* book was exhibited at the Munch museum in Oslo, and later acquired in its entirety by the National Gallery of Norway. The book was supported by the Norwegian Arts Council and the private Fritt Ord foundation. *Munch* has been translated into numerous languages, supported by Norla.

#### *Availability*

The print version of *Munch*, published in one edition (soft cover, four colour illustrations) in April 2013, is widely available in bookstores and libraries. No ebook version is available in Norwegian, but the English ebook can be obtained through Amazon’s Kindle store and the dedicated comics store comixology.com (a subsidiary of Amazon), only in the US. The book is not available in Norwegian streaming services at all. The graphic format helps to explain

the unavailability of an audio version. Norwegian streaming services do not provide comic books or graphic novels at all.

### **Heidi Sævareid, *Slipp Hold*, Mangschou, 2015**

Heidi Sævareid is a Norwegian author, primarily of books for children and young adults. Sævareid has practiced as a teacher and a literary editor, as well as a book critic and translator. She has been nominated for a Brage award thrice. Her first novel was awarded the debutant price from the Norwegian Ministry of Culture. Sævareid has published with several publishers: Her first young adult book *Spranget* (2013) with Omnipax, her second YA book *Slipp Hold* (2015) with Mangschou, and then her next two YA books *Slagside* (2016) and *Bruddlinjer* (2018) with Gyldendal. The non-fiction book *Life in the UK* was published by Flamme in 2018, before her debut adult novel *Longyearbyen* was published by Gyldendal in 2020. Internationally, she is represented by Oslo Literary Agency and published in Croatian, Danish and German.

Sævareid's second book, *Slipp Hold* (2015) is the story of the couple Mari and Torger and follows Mari's explorations of self and body. It has been described as a bold and unusual novel for the target group 15+, detailing so-called body suspension techniques. It was overall very well received by book critics. The Norwegian language society Riksmålsforbundet awarded Sævareid in 2016, and *Slipp Hold* was nominated for a Brage.

#### *Availability*

*Slipp Hold* was published as a hardback in February 2015. This version is still widely available in bookstores. It has not been published in other formats for sale, neither physical nor digital. The novel was included in the library purchasing programme for 2015, meaning that approx. 1700 exemplars are available in public libraries across Norway. *Slipp Hold* is not available in any of the streaming services, nor as downloadable ebook/audio book. This is unlike Sævareid's later titles published with Gyldendal which are available in ebook format in Norwegian book stores. Similar to the Solstad case, a digital audio book version of *Slipp Hold* is available through The Norwegian Library of Talking Books and Braille.

**Bjørn Olaf Johannessen, Erlend Loe and Per Schreiner, *Struggle for life*, NRK, 2014-2015**

*Struggle for life* (*Kampen for tilværelsen*) was an award-winning Norwegian TV-drama produced by and initially broadcast on state broadcaster NRK. Touted as the first 'writer-led' NRK drama series it was met with relatively high expectations already at the pre-production stage, not the least because all three writers were award-winners already and in the case of Erlend Loe a writer of numerous best selling and award winning books as well.

It received uniform critical praise and was nominated for best TV drama at the 2014 Prix Europa as well as several awards at the Norwegian 'Gullruten', where it won best TV screenplay in 2014 and best TV direction and best TV cinematography in 2015. It aired at main channel NRK1 at 21:35 on Wednesdays and re-broadcast the following Sunday at 01:05.

*Availability*

All episodes were available on NRK's streaming platform after the initial broadcast of each episode and until six months after the final broadcast of the final episode of season two. The first episode was broadcast September 10th 2014, and the final broadcast of the final episode was May 4th 2015.

As September 3rd 2015 and the removal of the series from the streaming service drew close, reactions to the removal appeared in the press. Critics, scholars and notably writer Erlend Loe, lamented the 'total disappearance' of the series. At this point, other NRK drama productions, like *SKAM* (see below), were available to stream 'in all perpetuity'.

Unlike these recent productions *Struggle for life* had been made under older contracts with, among others, the actors guild. These contracts limited streaming to a 'catch-up' service after transmission. According to NRK, putting the series on the streaming services would require 'millions' in payments to the actors guild. *Struggle for life* was also not released on DVD, unlike earlier NRK drama series. NRK had decided to end this practice as DVD sales had floundered and was not prepared to make an exception.

The series briefly resurfaced twice after its disappearance from the NRK streaming service. First, from July to October 2016, it featured as an inflight movie on Norwegian flights to the US and Thailand. Later in 2016 it was announced that HBO Nordic had bought the rights,

and would start streaming the series in December 2016. By May 2019, however, *Struggle for life* was once again unavailable except for, according to a tweet from Erlend Loe, as a personal copy on a USB stick carried by each of the three writers.

### **Jon Iver Helgaker and Jonas Torgersen, *Norsemen*, Viafilm/NRK, 2016-**

*Norsemen (Vikingane)* is a TV comedy series set in 790 AD in a fictional viking village. The show is produced by Viafilm and was initially broadcast by NRK. *Norsemen* was shot in both Norwegian and English language versions, although when the first season was in production no international sales had been made.

The entire first season was released on NRK's streaming platform on Friday October 14, 2016. The first episode was then broadcast on NRK1 at 22.30 on Friday October 21, and the rest of the first season was broadcast on the following Fridays. The first episode was seen by 646 000 on linear TV, and had another 246 000 views online. NRK quickly commissioned season two, which premiered in November 2017, and season three followed in February 2020. *Norsemen* season 3 received production and development support (2.4 mill NOK in total) from NFI.

*Norsemen* won Gullruten for best comedy show in 2017 and 2020, and was the only Norwegian show listed among in *The New York Times*' list of 30 best international shows of the decade.

#### *Availability*

Currently all seasons of *Norsemen* are available on the NRK streaming service, until September 2023, January 2024 and February 2027 respectively. In June 2017 it was announced that Netflix had bought the global rights, including Norway, for the English version. Originally this was only for the first season, but season two followed in September 2018 and season three in July 2020. After the sale of the first season to Netflix, Viafilm launched a targeted Facebook campaign in order to drive interest for the show on Netflix. Viafilm spent 30 000 dollars on the campaign, and sent all the traffic directly to Netflix. While they could not directly measure the effects of the campaign themselves, as Netflix does not divulge viewership numbers, there were a number of clear indications of success. Firstly interest in the show and actors soared on IMDB, secondly Nielsen ratings measured the show as the 4th most popular Netflix show at a moment in time. According to Viafilm, this led to

Netflix picking up the second season as well as branding it a ‘Netflix Original’ and increasing its internal promotion.

### **Julie Andem, *SKAM*, NRK, 2015-2017**

*SKAM* is a TV series which gained significant worldwide popularity during its running time from 2015 to 2017. The teen drama, created by Julie Andem and launched by NRK, follows a group of teenagers at a secondary school in Oslo. Each of the four seasons have a lead character thematizing topics such as sexual assault, homosexuality and religion. *SKAM* was published daily as a multimedia product comprising postings in social media and shorter clips on a website (skam.p3.no). The clips were synthesized into episodes published weekly, at NRK’s streaming service and shown on one of NRK’s linear TV channels (NRK3). In 2016 Sweden, Denmark and Iceland bought the rights to show the series.

With more than 1 million people streaming the weekly episodes, *SKAM* is one of the most streamed shows at NRK. It has received a number of awards, including thirteen prizes at ‘Gullruten’, in the years 2016-17. It was also well received among critics and has been a hot topic in studies of media and popular culture. The academic interest is often related to its social media-driven publishing model, the strong engagement among its fans and the international success. Until January 2017, the series was available globally from NRK’s website and streaming services, and nationally in the mentioned Nordic countries. The series was not dubbed into non-Nordic languages, but subtitles were translated by fans and spread through social media. The success has also led to remakes in the US (with the title “SKAM Austin”) and in several European countries.

#### *Availability*

*SKAM* was made available on an open website, through NRKs streaming service, and shown on national linear TV in several Nordic countries. Clips and episodes are still available through the NRK website. As mentioned, the series was only globally available from NRK until January 2017, before the launch of its fourth season. Then music organizations claimed that license agreements, meant for a Norwegian audience, were violated by the large international following, and NRK chose to ‘geo-block’ (Lobato and Meese 2016) international access.

### **Bent Hamer, *1001 grams*, BulBul Film/Norsk filmdistribusjon, 2015**

Bent Hamer is one of Norway's most recognized movie directors. His movies, from the debut *Eggs* in 1995 to his latest *1001 grams* in 2013, have won a number of Norwegian and international awards. At the 2014 Toronto film festival, *1001 grams* was presented in the *Masters* program, illustrating Hamers position as an internationally acclaimed director. *1001 grams* was his second movie to represent Norway for the Oscars. His movies tend to attract more cinema visitors abroad than in Norway. Hamer has been associated with the tradition of 'art cinema narrators' (Torkelsen 2011), and is arguably representing a genre often well received by critics and cinephiles, but also often overseen by the larger audience.

*1001 grams* follows a researcher calibrating measurement tools at the Norwegian Institute of Weights and Measures. The title *1001 grams* refers to a prototype of a kilo located at the institute. The movie received substantial support for production and distribution from NFI.

#### *Availability*

*1001 grams* has been broadcast twice at NRK, the last time in December 2019. Following this broadcast, the film was available through NRK's streaming platform for a year. It is released and still available on DVD. It is also available through iTunes and some other providers in the transactional video on-demand (TVOD) market, such as Amazon's Prime Video. According to a survey conducted by NFI in 2018, it was at that time part of the rental catalog offered by some of the Norwegian TV distributors. It is not available in any of the well-known Norwegian or international streaming services.

### **Frode Fimland, *Siblings are forever*, Filmfilm/Tour de Force, 2013**

Frode Fimland has contributed to a number of productions for NRK and other Norwegian TV channels. After the success of the documentary *Siblings are forever* (Norw. *Søsken til evig tid*), he has mainly worked as a documentary filmmaker.

*Siblings are forever* portrays the siblings Magnar and Oddny and their struggle to run a family farm in the western parts of Norway. It became a success at the cinema and is the documentary movie with most viewers (linear) at TV2, the second largest Norwegian TV channel. It won a best-movie award at the Big Sky Documentary Film Festival in the United States, and it was nominated for the 'People's Amanda Prize' at the International Film Festival in Haugesund. The popularity in the cinema, and the moderate feedback at the

Amanda awards indicate that this film is more of an audience favorite than a critics' pick. This is somewhat an opposite situation to *1001 grams. Siblings are forever* received development production and distribution support from NFI.

#### *Availability*

According to NFI's investigations of availability of Norwegian movies that have premiered on cinema, documentaries prove particularly difficult to obtain. This applies both to TVOD and streaming services. *Siblings are forever* illustrates this by being inaccessible in both markets. The movie was bought by and aired on TV2 (linear). Afterwards, it was available through TV2's own streaming service, Sumo, but is no longer available there. It has not been broadcast on NRK. The only possibilities to watch the movie today are by purchasing a DVD, or using the public library streaming service «filmbib.no».

#### **Thea Hvistendahl, *The Monkey and the Mouth*, Einarfilm/Euforia, 2017**

*The Monkey and the Mouth* (Adjø Montebello) is Thea Hvistendahl's debut feature and is an experimental concert film where footage from the popular Norwegian rap duo Karpe's three sell-out concerts at major Norwegian concert venue Oslo Spektrum is intersped with short fiction films forming a narrative. *The Monkey and the Mouth* was nominated in four categories for Amanda awards and won for best production design.<sup>ii</sup> The film was produced by Einar film and distributed by Euforia. *The Monkey and the Mouth* did not receive production or development support from NFI, but did receive marketing support.

#### *Availability*

The initial release of *The Monkey and the Mouth* was characterised by a strategically limited availability. It was first released in cinemas for four days in December 2017. During the summer of 2018 it was screened again at some festivals, and in December 2018, a full year after the cinema premiere, it was released digitally. Another year later, in December 2019, it was screened by NRK and remains available on their streaming service until December 2022. It has not been made available on any other streaming services, unlike most of Euforia's catalog which is available on *Norsk Film*, a streaming service available for free to customers of broadband and cable TV provider Teliaplay.

#### Discussion

In this article, we have taken a case-based approach, gathering information on specific titles to see to what extent they are available to the public, specifically in streaming services, and how cultural policy plays in. In doing so, we have attempted to test assumptions that digitalization enhances availability, and that cultural policy further supports availability and promotes access. By choosing critically acclaimed, popular and widely recognized items, we wanted to highlight the ways in which even culturally significant titles may be unavailable or rather lacking in availability when measured against the hyperbole of digital marketing and the lofty goals of cultural policy.

Our findings may seem paradoxical: On the one hand, the nine items are, or have been, publicly displayed and widely available. They are circulated in bookstores and libraries, screened on the most watched Norwegian channels and produced in numerous editions and versions, including digital versions with seemingly endless “spreadability” (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013). However, upon closer inspection, we see that availability is contingent upon a number of conditions and aspects. The book cases indicate how recent publications that are widely available in print format can be unavailable in streaming. Indeed, traditional distribution and dissemination channels such as physical libraries and brick and mortar book stores remain the access points for users who require the fullest possible selection. However, if their requirements also involve a technological preference, these channels fall short, as digital and streaming offers are typically provided elsewhere. None of the three literary works are available in commercial streaming services, although, interestingly, audio book versions for streaming of the Telemark novel and *Slipp Hold* are indeed in place in the NLB library for the visually impaired and people with reading difficulties. Kverneland’s *Munch* is available in ebook format only in the English translation and through comixology.com. The widely touted digitization initiative of the National Library of Norway (Gran, Røssaak, and Kristensen 2019), is limited to works published before year 2000.

For films and television programming, there is a parallel pattern, in which traditional channels maintain availability and visibility. At the time of their release, *Struggle for life*, *SKAM* and *Norsemen* and had the highest degree of availability any TV show in Norway could expect, as all were broadcast on the biggest channel, NRK1, and in good, if not optimal, scheduling slots. All three shows were also available on the open NRK streaming service. Currently the situation is very different for the three shows. *Struggle for life* was caught in the transition between technologies, or more correctly in the judicial and economic

fallout of the transition from DVD to streaming. While NRK remains the sole rights-owner, they still consider it too expensive to release it on either the streaming service or as a physical medium. *SKAM* is available on NRK for streaming, for the foreseeable time. *SKAM* is nevertheless an example of how availability at the legal level can be complicated by international success.

*Norsemen* remains available on NRK's streaming service and will remain available there for far longer than what was the case with *Struggle for life* made only a year earlier. Due to the Netflix sale, *Norsemen* can be considered the 'most available' Norwegian television series in the world. However, it is important to note that this is in large part due to the Viafilm campaign. While this did not change ontological, technological, legal or economic availability of the series, it raised the presented availability. By skillfully using Facebook's marketing algorithms, Viafilm increased the Netflix viewership of the show in ways that the Netflix algorithm had not. This likely helped the show overcome the cold-start problem associated with recommendation algorithms (Bobadilla Sancho et al. 2012) and probably started a positive chain-reaction for the show. As more people watched the show, the Netflix recommendation algorithm could more easily recommend the show to more viewers and so on. This led to Netflix branding it as a 'Netflix Original' which also seems to be associated with added visibility on the platform (Author 2019).

Neither *1001 grams*, *The Monkey and the Mouth* nor *Siblings are forever* are available on commercial streaming services. *1001 grams* and *Siblings are forever* went through periods of wide circulation, involving cinema screenings and broadcasting, but are now harder to come by for users of streaming services. DVD copies and download options ensure that *1001 grams* is still available, though. The availability of *Siblings are forever* is somewhat secured by library distribution through the filmbib portal. *The Monkey and the Mouth* followed an opposite path, where the availability was kept low by the distributor with a limited cinematic distribution and delayed digital availability until it became broadly available on NRK.

In the previous article (Author 2019), we found that Norwegian films, ebooks and audio books were generally poorly represented in the major streaming services, and that available content is scattered across various services and typically offered only in certain windows of time. In practice, a member of the public who wishes to have access to a wide array of Norwegian titles (films, TV, books) in streaming format must subscribe to a number of services and would still be missing many titles, both old and new. Thus, while streaming

promises abundance, fragmentation must be considered a severe hindrance on availability of concrete items.<sup>1</sup> The present case studies confirm the tendencies toward a fragmentation of distribution channels.

A fundamental aspect of streaming services is that they are global phenomena, which interrupt the national media structure of providers and services (Gran, Røssaak, and Kristensen 2019). This implies both that global media companies gain considerable market shares in national markets, such as Netflix in the Norwegian TV and film markets, but also that services imitate and resemble each other, with interface, presentation algorithms and the functional streaming models based on similar technical infrastructures.

The massive global impact is challenging for a cultural policy that has traditionally been oriented towards local challenges. The streaming market are nevertheless approached with policies and regulations. With its Audiovisual Media Services Directive, the EU demands a certain quota of the content offered through streaming services to be produced in member countries, aiming at “preserving cultural diversity” and “safeguarding media pluralism” (European Parliament and the Council of the European Union 2010). As a national example, book streaming services are required to provide all available titles in the Norwegian book market upon request, as per a 2017 addendum to the Norwegian Book Agreement. The practical realization of this addendum is nevertheless still to come.

Provided new developments and adaptation, cultural policy measures can still be used to counter availability challenges, especially at the financial and legal levels in the pyramid. There are however severe challenges at the presentation level at the top of the pyramid, that need to be mentioned. Most streaming services provide a larger database of content than is manageable for any single user to browse. These services therefore resort to automated forms of exposure via algorithms. We have not investigated the extent to which our chosen cases are actually exposed to users of streaming services, but this would probably constitute a significant part of their potential availability. Today, there are regulations that prohibit Google and other web search providers from conducting hidden advertising through their search results, but no cultural policy measures that say anything about what is to be recommended through the interface of streaming services. This is an area of increasing

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<sup>1</sup> In this, streaming services for film, tv and ebooks/audio books can be seen to differ from music streaming services such as Spotify and Apple Music, who contain similarly vast catalogs of 40-50 million tracks.

research and discussion, especially with regard to the consequences of public service broadcasters starting to use similar algorithms in their services (Tallerås et al. 2020).

## Conclusion

We will conclude here by noting that digitalization in general, and more specifically streaming, cannot be seen to have increased availability across all the items we have analysed. The nine items we have looked at will struggle to reach the widest possible digital audience, primarily because cultural economics and media technological restraints result in fragmentation and unavailable items. In the cultural economy, time is managed to create a profitable business. This has consequences for our cases. Films and TV shows such as *Struggle for life*, *Norsemen*, *1001 grams* and *Siblings for life* are made broadly available only in short periods, through screening on the public service broadcasting channels or in cinemas. For the Telemark novel, *Munch* and *Slipp Hold*, screening windows are not a matter of concern, but publishers nonetheless tend to publish books in versions that are made available sequentially over the first few years of the book's life-span. Thus, ebooks and digital audio books are not necessarily available from day one – and frequently not even at a later stage.

Streaming is typically the latest version to appear. The time constraints are due to licensing terms which again are a matter of economics. While we have not examined the issue specifically in this article, both the case of *Slipp Hold* and the three film cases suggest that distributors and publishers play a key role. Heidi Sævareid's book with a small publisher, Mangschou, is less available than her later books with major publisher Gyldendal; and all three film cases were distributed by companies that do not have output deals with streaming services, unlike the leading Norwegian distributor Nordisk Film Distribusjon.

Technology and formats also amount to hindrances, as genre-crossing and innovative titles may not fit with established channels and platforms. As new technologies appear and older technologies vanish or lose their central position, certain titles may lose out, as *Struggle for life* exemplifies. All together, the various mechanisms and practices that characterise the culture industry contexts which we have investigated means that items are far from unavailable, but rather that their availability is fragmented.

Two cases stand out as exceptions: *The Monkey and the Mouth* comes forth as an exception as its availability is strongly linked to streaming distribution rather than traditional (linear)

channels for audio-visual content. Similarly, *SKAM* emerges as a highly available PSB hybrid success. This show is also an example of how illegitimate distribution channels ('piracy') solves a problem of unattainability, all because of geographical restrictions on distribution.

Despite our reservations about broad proclamations that cultural policy ensures availability, a pattern emerges across the nine cases: National cultural policy institutions actually do promote access: Without distribution channels such as NRK and public libraries, availability would be hampered even more. All the three TV cases indicate how direct funding of NRK has been important. Support from the Norwegian Film Institute was crucial for *Norsemen* season 3, as well as all the film cases. The Norwegian Arts Council is critical in providing production and distribution support for literature. National cultural policy nonetheless seems unable to create frameworks that support availability on a more ambitious scale where fragmentation is less of a concern. As new services from public service institutions are added to the media mix, they do in effect make for a more fragmented media sector.

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The authors have no financial interest or benefit that has arisen from the direct applications of this research.

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## Figures

Figure 1: The pyramid of availability

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<sup>i</sup> We have opted here for the term ‘cultural industries’ rather than alternatives such as *media* industries, *culture industry*, *culture* industries, *creative* industries or *copyright* industries (cf. Hesmondhalgh 2019 for a conceptual discussion).

<sup>ii</sup> <https://730.no/karpe-filmen-adjo-montebello-vant-amandaprisen-i-natt/>