The Urge to Write: Spectator Journalists Negotiating Freedom of the Press in Denmark–Norway

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The ideal of freedom of thought and expression is a crucial part of the Enlightenment legacy, closely tied to the idea of enlightenment itself. Christen Pram, the editor of the weekly journal Minerva in Copenhagen, clearly points to this connection in a piece published in February 1792, where he defends “freedom of thought, freedom of speech and of the press” as the indispensable condition for “the expansion of civil enlightenment”, conceived as “the collection of sound and precise concepts and knowledge that can be useful to man as man and as citizen in general, regardless of his individual rank or occupation”. ¹ Freedom of the press ensures that truth is no longer monopolized by the state or any other single authority. Pram saw periodicals as an important venue for expressing and publicizing truths that are useful to society: he therefore called for an increase in the number of journals in Denmark–Norway and argued for their importance in producing enlightened, virtuous, and happy citizens.

There was, however, no such thing as a single idea of either freedom of expression or freedom of the press in the eighteenth century. The principle of freedom of expression as a personal liberty and individual right that surfaced in continental Europe with the French Revolution and the Declaration of the Rights of Man of 1789 followed a series of arguments and debates on various degrees of press freedom. The ideas raised were intended to serve a range of good purposes. The complex history of these discussions reveals that the ideal of freedom of expression is no single manifestation of Enlightenment thinking, whatever the variety (e.g. Lockean; Kantian or Christian; moderate or radical, to use Jonathan Israel’s distinction). ² The Dutch historian Joris van

Eijnatten has identified several different categories of arguments supporting freedom of expression in England and Holland in the eighteenth century: Christian, cultural, educational, nationalist, commercial, political, and utility-centred—alongside arguments appearing later that were based upon human rights. Other countries, including Denmark–Norway, certainly witnessed a similar range of arguments.

Starting in the late seventeenth century the twin monarchy gained a reputation as the most perfect absolutist regime in Europe, founded on a written absolutist constitution, the *Lex Regia* of 1665. As Jacob Maliks showed in his chapter, absolutist rule entailed a rigid system of privilege and pre- and post-publication censorship for the purpose of keeping close control over the press and book and periodical publications. These censorship policies prevailed in the eighteenth century, with the addition of more regulatory decrees, until Struensee, in the name of the mentally ill King Christian VII, famously declared complete ‘freedom of writing’ in 1770, creating a paradigm of enlightened absolutism.

Struensee’s abolition of censorship can be seen as a result of his radical intellectual bent. But arguments for freedom of the press as a ‘civic liberty’ within the absolutist monarchy as well as ideas about a monarchic rule guided by public opinion had also circulated among less radical figures in Denmark–Norway for some time. One example is a professor of political science at the Academy of Sorø, Jens Schielderup Sneedorff, who in his work from 1757 *Om den...*

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4 The former British ambassador to Denmark, Robert Molesworth, published in 1694 *An Account of Denmark as it was in 1692*, which quickly became a standard work and contributed distinctively to the kingdom’s bad reputation among a wide European readership. See Sebastian Olden-Jørgensen, ‘Robert Molesworth’s *An Account of Denmark as it was in 1692*: A political Scandal and its Literary Aftermath’, in Knud Haakonsen & Henrik Horstbøll (eds.), *Northern Antiquities and National Identities: Perceptions of Denmark and the North in the Eighteenth Century* (Copenhagen, Det Kongelige Danske Videnskabernes Selskab, 2008).