

Book Catalogues and Readers in Norway 1750–1814

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Introduction

More than 650 titles were published in the year 1799 in the kingdom of Denmark-Norway. Not only the bourgeoisie and the government officials bought books. Norwegian peasants also had private book collections, most of them very small, but some had collections with a hundred books or more. How did they know what books to buy? Copenhagen was the capital, and where almost all of the printing presses were located up till 1770–72, a period with a total freedom of the press. Later the number of provincial printing presses grew considerably.

My project deals primarily with the Norwegian book market. The main sources are the printed information on books that was produced locally in the country. So far I have registered more than 150 catalogues printed in Norway in the period 1750–1814. The auction catalogues are quite dominant in my material. Other catalogues present books available in readings societies, or offer books for rent. A very few of them are published by book sellers.

By using SPSS, a statistical program, I am now recording what kind of information the catalogues offer on the books: Level of author and title information, format, number of pages, paper quality, price etc. I will also use variables that will tell what languages are represented in the catalogue. Information on the catalogue itself will also be covered: What type of catalogue is it, where was it printed, how is the information organized etc. The paper also discusses some of the variables selected in relation to what kind of knowledge I expect to establish by using them. Is it possible to say something about what social groups the different catalogues were meant for? Will it be possible to say anything about what interests of the reader the catalogues set out to meet? These are important questions to which I have few answers yet.

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Literacy in Norway in the 18th century

It is difficult to measure the level of literacy in the past. Traditionally the impression has been that most of the Norwegian population was illiterate well into the 19th century. Newer research shows us that this was not the case. Probably as many as 70–80% of the population could read by the end of the 18th century. Research has shown that children was taught to read by their parents, and thus not totally dependent on the school system. Compulsory school for children in rural areas was established as early as 1739, the quality varied a lot.

Access to literature and information about literature

Before you decide to purchase a book, you need to know that the book exists. This was the same in the 18th century as it is today. The closer the book was to you, the better. If you had direct access to the book itself, you might not need any more information about it. If you had the necessary economic means to pay the sum of money asked for in the shop, in the circulating library, or the membership fees in the reading society, you simply had to decide for yourself whether you wanted to read the book or not. The next best thing to the book itself, would be a book catalogue or an advertisement, and better still, a review of the book. You would be made aware of the book, and could order it, or buy it yourself when travelling to where it was available.

One might present the public's access to literature, from the most easy to the more complicated, like this:

- a. Local access, via book shops, travelling salesmen, auctions, loans from friends or reading societies etc.
- b. Access to printed catalogues or reports and advertisements in newspapers and journals (Norwegian, Danish, foreign)
- c. Access to review journals (published in Copenhagen, published abroad)
- d. Import of books from Copenhagen, via contacts, via the captain of smaller cargo boats, or your own travels
- e. Import of book from other countries, via contacts or your own travels

The different groups of readers in Norway, had obviously not the same access to literature. The more local the access was, the broader the group of people was that had access. Peasant farmers would buy or borrow books from the local vicar, or consider buying books at a local auction. A farmer or a workman would also buy pamphlets and broad sheets from travelling salesmen. Borrowing books from a friend was also a possibility, but probably more common among the upper classes? Also peasant farmers could receive information of books through advertisements in the Norwegian newspapers published in the second half of the 18th century.¹ The books were for sale at the office of the publisher, or by private persons in the town. We know that Norwegians subscribed to *de Berlingske Aviser*, published in Copenhagen,² what groups in society that did so, we know less about. It is a fact though, that some peasant farmers in the southern part of Norway did subscribe to these papers. We have reason to believe that newspapers circulated to some degree. They were not thrown away when read, like they are today. In my examination of catalogues for book auctions, I have found bundles of newspaper turning up as objects for sale regularly. The same goes for journals like *De kiøbenhavnse lærde Efterretninger* and *Minerva*, journals that published reviews on new books. Journals like these were meant for reader groups like government officials and the middle and upper classes, people that could easily get the books that were reviewed from Copenhagen or other cities. These journals were probably seldom read by the peasant farmers. Though even they ordered books from Copenhagen occasionally. The possibility to ask a cargo boat shipper to bring back books was always there. The upper classes bought books themselves when travelling, and established personal contacts with book shops in Copenhagen as well as in Germany. To these contacts they could send orders, often based on catalogues they had received. My examination of catalogues for book auctions shows that bundles of book catalogues turn up from time to time.³ As book shops held titles in stock for more years than we are used to today, when it will be difficult to buy a book older than 2–3 years, the catalogues would be of interest for a longer period in the 18th century. The most popular titles were also reprinted again and again.

¹ The first one was published in Oslo 1763, then followed Bergen 1765, Trondheim 1767 and Kristiansand 1790. Advertisements for books we find from the very beginning in these weekly newspapers.

² Torkhild Kjærgaard: "The rise of the press and public opinion in eighteenth-century Denmark-Norway". I: *Scandinavian journal of history*, 14 (1989), nr. 3: s. 215–230.

³ An example is the books left by the student Jens Bohm. In the catalogue, printed in Trondheim 1794, we find "en Bundt Boglade Cataloger" (a bundle of catalogues from book shops).

Based on the book catalogues, what kind of books could a reader expect to find locally?

In my project I have examined the two important retrospective bibliographies, *Bibliotheca Norvegica* and *Bibliotheca Danica* to find the book catalogues printed in Norway in the period 1750–1814. I have found 157 catalogues registered in these bibliographies.⁴ So far I have been able to perform a preliminary examination of 102 of them.

Since I am interested in studying what information value of the catalogues had for the different groups of readers, I found that a typologisation would be necessary for my work. The number of catalogues represented in the different categories is as follows:

Bibliographies	4
Libraries	14
Book binders	2
Book sellers	2
Printers	1
Auctions after deceased persons	94
Circulating libraries	3
Reading societies	16
Other auctions ⁵	18
Uncertain	3

As we can see the number of catalogues for auctions after dead persons is very high compared to all other types of catalogues. As a rule, when the husband died the widow sold all his books at an auction.⁶ This was to get money to support the remaining family. The auction was normally performed locally. If not all of the books were sold, there would be a new auction in a nearby small town, in the hope that the rest of the books would find buyers there. The size of the catalogues varies. One of the smaller I have registered is the catalogue over the books left by the student Jens

⁴ This is a small number if we compare with catalogues printed in Copenhagen, only catalogues for auctions after deceased people fill more than 20 columns in *Bibliotheca Danica*. The number is still big enough to make it interesting to limit my study to the prints from Norway separate.

⁵ Here we find auction in connection with people moving away, bankruptcy etc.

⁶ I have one example of auction after a deceased woman in my material: Mrs. Jepsen in Trondheim 1805. An eight pages catalogue, that I need to study more in detail.

Bohm, only eight pages in quarto, printed in Trondheim 1794. The largest is the catalogue over the books left by bishop Frederik Nannestad, 456 pages in quarto, printed in Oslo 1777.

The first printing press was established in Norway as late as 1643, in Oslo, 200 years later than in the rest of Europe, and respectively 161, 133, 110 years later than Denmark, Sweden and Iceland. During the 18th century printing presses were also set up in Bergen (1721), Trondheim (1739) and Kristiansand (1780).

The relative number of catalogues within the different types, varies from one printing place to another. From Kristiansand I have only found catalogues for auctions after deceased persons, and altogether only three. Trondheim is where most of this type of catalogues were printed, 72% of the total for the whole country, or 80% of all the catalogues printed in Trondheim. In Oslo, they made up almost half of all the catalogues printed there. What I find more interesting is that, although the number is small, all the catalogues from book binders, printers and circulating libraries were printed in Oslo. I have only found two catalogues from book sellers, one printed in Oslo and one in Bergen. In Bergen the auction catalogues are not dominating, instead we find that almost 40% of the catalogues printed there are from reading societies, that is 90% of the total number of this type of catalogues in the country.

The number of catalogues printed seems to be the same for the period 1750–80, 10–15 a year. In the eighties the number rose to 20, and in the nineties to almost 40. The number of catalogues remained this high to approx. 1810, and then the number went down again. In my material almost 50% of the catalogues were printed between 1790 and 1810.

What kind of information did the catalogues give on the books?

I have a long way to go before I have finished my analyses of the 157 catalogues. Even so, I can already outline some very clear features regarding what kind of information the catalogues presents for each book. The information on author and title is mostly rather short, but enough to identify the book, in most cases. For an interested buyer in the 18th century, I would guess that many of the titles were well known. Where and when the book was published, is information given in some catalogues, but far from all. How many pages a book consisted of, must have been of little interest

two hundred years ago. This information is never given, how many volumes on the other hand, is information always given. I had expected to find information on what kind of paper the book was printed on, as the costs of paper was so high, still up to 50% of the production costs in the 18th century. Only very seldom have I found any information on this, and then regarding unbound books only.

The format of the book must have been important for people. The catalogues are almost always organized by format. First come the folios, then follow quartos, octavos, and at the end duodecimos or maybe "forma minoris". The books within each format are registered in no order whatsoever. The impact of a book's format has been thoroughly illustrated by Robert Darnton in *The business of enlightenment. A publishing history of the Encyclopédie 1775–1800* (1979). He shows how prices went down and the number of copies went up, when the format was smaller, and also the outfit of the book was made more simple. The experience was the same in the Nordic book market. Books in the smaller formats were cheaper, and were printed in more copies. These smaller formats, as Henrik Horstbøll has shown, are the mediaform the popular (folkelige) prints were produced in. He explains that just by looking at the format and the number of pages of a book, a potential buyer would recognize whether this book would be of interest to him. The format signals the book's function, what kind of reader's needs it was supposed to meet.⁷

The format system

The format system,⁸ based on the folding of the handmade paper, was introduced in Denmark-Norway in the 16th century. First came the bigger formats, the folio was used for the official books of the clergy, while code of law books were printed in quarto. The quarto was the format mostly used up till the Reformation, when the octavo forced its way. At the very end of the 16th century the smaller formats, duodecimo and sedecimo, were introduced. As the total number of printed books increased, the relative number of books in the smaller formats grew even more. Latin was the dominant language in the bigger and more expensive books, while Danish is the most common language in the smaller formats. If we look at the prints that have survived till today the picture is clear, the smaller the format, the more books in Danish. The coherens between the format and the

⁷ Henrik Horstbøll: *Menig mands medie. Det folkelige bogtryk i Danmark 1500–1840. En kulturhistorisk undersøgelse*. København 1999.

language of the book, makes the format system a relevant and fruitful classification system, from a communication historical point of view, says Horstbøll. Analyses of the format opens up for an identification of the popular print as a specific mediaform. If there also is a coherence between format and the content of a book, we will be able to shed light over the printed medias different target groups, and with that also the history of reading.

Horstbøll has studied what kind of literature that have survived in the smaller formats, from the 16th century. The *Almanac* found its form about 1550 and kept to it the following 300 years. Usually it had 32 pages, in sedecimo, which equals one folded sheet of paper. Occasionally half a sheet or even one full sheet was added, giving the *Almanac* 48 or as much as 64 pages. *The Catechism* and *The Hymn book* were both printed almost exclusively in the small formats, along with *The Prayer Book* and religious histories. Even books of comfort for illness, melancholy and death were printed in these formats. Books dealing with death was otherwise normally printed in octavo. Sermons over dead persons as well as the history of famous persons, from real life or in fiction, were also printed in octavo. In this format we also find books in a new genre, the books of regulation (forskriftslitteraturen), as Horstbølls names them. These are guidebooks on how to behave when you were dying, giving birth, or taken ill. Also guidebooks and norms on how to behave within your occupation, within the household, in church, within your social group or as a citizen of the country, were all printed in octavo. The right life and the right death, was the world of the octavo prints, Horstbøll explains. The popular literature (den folkelige litteraturen), consisted of one or two sheets of paper, in octavo or the smaller formats, and the books were in Danish. This is how it was from the time of The Reformation up till the middle of the 19th century, Horstbøll concludes.

Horstbøll's theories are based mostly on printed material from the 16th century. My own material is from the late 18th century. I still want to use his theories on my material, as Horstbøll shows in his thesis that the profile of the popular prints in the earlier period had a strong influence on the development in the 17th and 18th centuries as well.

⁸ The presentation is based on Horstbøll 1999.

Some preliminary findings

The figures, based on my preliminary study of 102 printed book catalogues, shows that the number of titles offered in the different formats is as follows:

Folio	7 376 titles
Quarto	28 712 titles
Octavo and smaller ⁹	66 951 titles

I was surprised to find that such a large number of book was offered to the public through catalogues printed in Norway. Obviously many of the almost 100 000 titles I have found, will be the same ones offered up for sale or loan over and over again. All the same, the figures show that this number of books were available more or less locally, constituting a considerable market for second hand books.

As one can see the number of books in the smaller formats is very high compared to the folios and the quartos. The smaller formats are were we would expect to find the popular prints, according to Horstbøll. Taking into account the large number, it should be natural to assume that these books probably did reach a broad audience, both geographically and socially.

The language of the books offered in the catalogues, will of course be vital to decide what groups of readers we would assume to find anything of interest in the catalogue. So far I have registered that there are Danish books in all the catalogues. The same goes for books in Latin, with the exception of one auction catalogue.¹⁰ The portion of the differnt languae differs much from one catalogue to another. Latin is, not surprising, very well represented in auction catalogues after dead clergy men. I have also found a number of catalogues where books in Danish are quite dominant. Books in German is the the third largest group, French is also well represented. I have also found books in English, Dutch, Swedish and other languages. A more thorough analysis of the number of titles in the different languages remains to be done.

⁹ So far I have registered all of the smaller formats together, as a number of the catalogues do so. In the total number is included at least 4 678 titles in duodecimo.

¹⁰ Books left by shop keeper Paul Bahnsen. Catalogue printed in Trondheim 1793.

Some remarks on the auction catalogues

As mentioned above the catalogues prepared for book auctions after deceased persons, are quite dominant in my material, 94 of a total of 157 catalogues. So far this is also the type of catalogue I have the most knowledge of.

The auctions were not seldom held in rural areas, where the deceased had lived and worked. It is therefore not unreasonable to assume that the books offered for sale in these kind of catalogues, were the ones that were distributed most widely in the population, both geographically and socially. Unfortunately the catalogues does not give information on the book prices. I have found hand written prices in a number of them, though. A further analysis of the prices, should give us some indication on what groups of readers that could be expected to buy the books. We also have handwritten official records from auctions held in Norway from this period. Could we compare records from an auction with the catalogue from the same auction, we would know more about the buyers, and presumably the readers.

I have earlier looked briefly at a number of official records from auctions in Kristiansand, in southern part of Norway, and found that the records have information both on the price asked for, as well as the price sold for. The name of the buyer was also often recorded. Asborg Stenstad has done a closer study of three of the records I found.¹¹ The records are from 1791, 1793 and 1794. They were chosen because they in time are close to the first comprehensive census in Norway in 1801. Stenstad has been able to identify 33 of the 46 buyers registered by name, and describes 23 of them as members of the social elite in town, the magistrate, the district magistrate, lawyers, doctors, a vicar, shopowners, shipowners. Among the rest she finds workmen like a printer, a stool maker, a book binder, a couple of clerks and a couple of sailors. She also identified two peasant farmers among the buyers. Only two of the identified buyers were women. She was able to identify the age of 26 of the buyers, and could from that see that they fell into two major groups. Just over 50% are well established elder men, and the rest are young men at the beginning of their career. 10% are what Stenstad calls "big buyers", they bought almost 60% of the books. Among them she found a peasant farmer.

¹¹ As part of her studies at Library and information studies at the Oslo university college.

She made one very interesting observation: the books normally are sold for much higher prices than originally asked for. Could this be because of a demand for books, that the market had problems meeting, especially outside the capital area? Or was it just that the prices asked for was set to low?

More studies of auction records are required to give us an insight into the market of second hand books, a market not insignificant in Norway. These studies would also give us more knowledge of the readers. That might be my next project.

The fact that printed book catalogues prepared for auctions after deceased persons are so dominant in my material, makes me wonder over the age of the information most easily available for most people in the Norwegian book market, and what possible consequences that might have had. Maybe little, as the upper classes got their information and input from newer books reviewed in journals published in Copenhagen? The fact that Norway got a new and modern constitution in 1814, makes the question interesting. Especially if we take into account that even farmers were a part of that process, as elected representatives of their regions.

The need for more detailed studies

As mentioned above, I need to go deeper into my material, and look more closely at the format of the books as well as the language of the books offered. This in order to relate the catalogues and the books offered to groups of readers and their needs. The age of the books will also be of interest to me. For practical reasons it will not be possible for me to astudy all of the catalogues, with the 100 000 titles offered, very closely. I will instead study a limited number of catalogues in etail. When choosing which catalogues, I will look at types of catalogues, the year the catalogue was printed, maybe also where it was printed.

How far I will get by using the variables I so far have established in SPSS, a statistical program, remains to be seen. Possibly I will have to identify all the seperate titles in a catalogue, to be able to determin what reader groups that might have been intersted in them, as well as whether the books of the catalogue tried to meet the demand for books for the salvation of the soul, pure entertainment or social advancement. If so, the number of detail studies clearly will have to be limited.