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‘REMEMBER, IT’S JUST TELEVISION’

RUBICON TV AND THE COMMERCIALISATION OF NORWEGIAN TELEVISION

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Abstract: This article investigates the historical development of one of the most successful television production companies in Norway, Rubicon TV, focusing on its changing leaders, their mission statements and programme portfolios. Based on primary historical documents, the article shows how the various CEOs of the company have consistently argued that television is not a ‘window to the world’, but a harmless medium for light, engaging entertainment. This understanding was originally a reaction to the perceived elitism and paternalism of public service television, allowing the company leaders moral leeway to produce provocative and innovative programmes that came to change the Norwegian television landscape.

Keywords: television industry, media production, commercial television, Rubicon TV, mission statements, media management.

1 Introduction

The history of European television has largely been told from the perspective of the national public service institutions. Consequently, many studies have stressed the ways in which television in Europe has been framed within a public-service ethos devoted to national identity, culture and language.² Although this perspective has value, Europe is

¹ The authors’ names are listed in alphabetical order; this article was an entirely collaborative effort.

² See, for example, Jonathan Bignell and Andreas Fickers, eds, *A European Television History*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2008.

also home to a significant private and commercial television sector. To develop a more complete understanding of the history of European television, it is necessary to conduct studies of private and commercial institutions — both television channels and independent production companies.³

This article focuses on the historical development of one of the most successful television production companies in Norway: Rubicon TV. The Scandinavian media conglomerate Schibsted started Rubicon TV as an independent production company in 1993, immediately following the breakthrough of commercial television in Norway. Over almost twenty-five years of operation, Rubicon TV has gone from producing entertaining and provocative programmes for a small selection of Norwegian broadcasters to become a truly global and digital player, producing linear 'flow' programmes as well as web-TV and streaming series for both national and international players. Currently, Rubicon TV is one of the largest and most influential production companies in Norway, boasting approximately 150 person-years annually.⁴ One of Rubicon TV's most successful and well-known productions is *Lilyhammer* (2012–14), a television drama about a US mafia boss in witness protection in Norway. It was commissioned by the Norwegian public service broadcaster NRK in collaboration with the international streaming service Netflix. The first season alone sold to more than 130 countries and is to this date the most exported television drama produced by a Norwegian production company.⁵

Despite Rubicon TV's strong position in the Norwegian television market, it has received little academic attention.⁶ The company has sporadically been mentioned in studies about the commercial channel TV 2,⁷ which was established just one year before Rubicon TV; in overviews of the Norwegian television sector⁸ and in case studies of particular television programmes.⁹ So far, the historical development of the company has not been studied. This article addresses this knowledge gap by combining a structural approach to television history with insight into the ideas and operations of one of the most successful private and commercial television production companies in Norway. The specific aim of the study is to discuss the mission statements of the changing leaders of Rubicon TV, and how their programme portfolios have contributed to the development of the Norwegian television industry during the company's nearly twenty-five years of operations.

2 Theory and Method

In contrast to publicly funded media, private and commercial organisations must create products someone is willing to buy in order to survive. For independent television production companies the main customer is not the television viewer or the advertiser but rather the television channel, meaning that the companies must continually decode the needs and profiles of the various television channels with which they do business, whereas the channels are

3 Eva Bakøy, Roel Puijk and Andrew Spicer, eds, *Building Successful and Sustainable Film and Television Businesses*, Intellect, 2017. See also Karen Donders, Caroline Pauwels & Jan Loisen, eds, *Private Television in Western Europe: Content, Markets, Policies*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2013.

4 Proff.no, 'Rubicon TV AS', <http://www.proff.no/selskap/rubicon-tv-as/oslo/filmproduksjon/IG0CXAC03GF/>. Accessed 27.12.2016.

5 Magne Hansen, 'Lilyhammer solgt til over 130 land', news article, *NRK.no*, February 15 2013.

6 An exception is Eva Bakøy, 'På innsiden av et TV-produksjonsselskap. Organisasjonskulturen i Rubicon TV', pp. 77–92, in Eva Bakøy, Tore Helseth & Roel Puijk, eds, *Bak kamera. Norsk film og TV i et produksjonsperspektiv*, Oplandske bokforlag, 2016.

7 Gunn Sara Enli, Trine Syvertsen and Susanne Østby Sæther, eds, *Et hjem for oss—et hjem for deg? Analyser av TV 2 1992–2002*, IJ-forlaget, 2002; Gjører Skaalmo & Bjørn Eckblad, *Se hva som skjedde: Historien om TV 2*, Font forlag, 2012.

8 Vilde Schanke Sundet, 'Den private tv-industrien i Norge: En medieøkologisk produksjonsanalyse', in Eva Bakøy, Tore Helseth & Roel Puijk, eds, *Bak Kamera. Norsk film og tv i et produksjonsperspektiv*, Oplandske bokforlag, 2016; Jo Sondre Moseng, 'The film and television industries in Norway', in Eva Bakøy, Roel Puijk and Andrew Spicer, eds, *Building Successful and Sustainable Film and Television Businesses*, Intellect, 2017.

9 Hilde Heines Bachmann, "'Vil du bli millionær?'" TV2s bruk av internasjonale underholdningsformater', pp. 205–226 in Gunn Sara Enli, Trine Syvertsen and Susanne Østby Sæther, eds, *Et hjem for oss—et hjem for deg. Analyser av TV2 1992–2002*, Fagbokforlaget, 2002; Vilde Schanke Sundet, 'Co-Produced Television Drama and the Cost of Transnational "Success": The Making of *Lilyhammer*', in Eva Bakøy, Roel Puijk and Andrew Spicer, eds, *Building Successful and Sustainable Film and Television Businesses*, Intellect, 2017.

responsible for doing audience research.¹⁰ Because most independent production companies create content for several television channels at the same time, this decoding process can be challenging, time consuming and often frustrating.¹¹ This does not mean that production companies are in such perpetual disarray that *any* project or production has the same probability of being developed. Instead, the company's mission and vision statements will privilege certain actions and productions over others.¹² Theories of organisational culture often emphasise the importance of beliefs and values to organisational behaviour. Edgar H. Schein, for example, sheds light on how the values and basic assumptions of founders and leaders of organisations impact the strategies of companies.¹³

Management literature argues that having a clear mission and a clear vision is important to leadership, strategy implementation and change. According to Ingenhoff and Fuhrer, 'mission' is a succinct expression of corporate purpose, while the perspective of 'corporate vision', on the other hand, is more forward looking: "Vision specifies the desired status of the company in the future".¹⁴ The two authors underline that mission and vision statements provide a significant channel for communicating the most essential values of a business as well as what sets the company apart from competing firms.

However, research has shown that most business practitioner's do not differentiate clearly between the two concepts.¹⁵ The written historical documents that this article is based on show that this is also the case with regard to the leaders of Rubicon TV. We prefer to use the term mission statement in this article, because the leaders change relatively frequently and do not seem to operate with very long time horizons when they speak about their business plans.

Methodologically, this study is based upon primary historical sources. With no access to the archives of the company, we have systematically analysed articles from the most important Norwegian newspapers as well as the trade press. Due to Rubicon TV's position as one of the most important television production companies in Norway, the selected publications contain rich historical material concerning the mission statements of the company leaders as well as changes in and controversies concerning the programme production. Newspapers articles are in general viewed as reliable historical sources when their potential moral and political bias are taken into consideration. The media savviness of the leaders¹⁶ also imply a certain amount of control concerning how the press reproduces their statements. Oral testimonies are problematic due to memory loss, but the discussion of the mission statements of the two last leaders of Rubicon TV includes semi-structured qualitative interviews as a supplement to the written sources.

In the following, we will look at the role Rubicon TV has played in Norwegian television culture by focusing on three key moments in which the leaders of the company clearly articulated their mission statements and implemented programme genres and formats that obviously contributed to changing the Norwegian television landscape. The first moment occurs in the early 1990s, when Rubicon TV was founded primarily to produce national television programmes for Norway's first commercial television channel (TV 2). The second moment takes place in the early 2000s, when digital distribution increased the number of domestic television channels and, consequently, the demand for television content, prompting a wave of new formats and programme categories. Finally, the third moment happens in the early 2010s, when media convergence and globalisation allowed Rubicon TV to produce content for both new platforms (such as web-TV) and new international players (such as the streaming service Netflix).

10 Philip M. Napoli, *Audience Evolution: New Technologies and the Transformation of Media Audience*, Columbia University Press, 2010. See also Ien Ang, *Desperately Seeking the Audience*, Routledge, 2005 (first published in 1991).

11 Bakøy, 2016.

12 Bakøy et al., eds, 2017.

13 Edgar H. Schein, *Organization Culture and Leadership*. Fourth edition, Jossey-Bass, 2010. See also Lucy Küng-Shankleman, *Inside the BBC and CNN: Managing Media Organisations*, Routledge, 2000.

14 Diana Ingenhoff and Tanja Fuhrer, 'Positioning and differentiation by using brand personality attributes. Do vision and vision statements contribute to building a unique corporate identity?', *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, Vol. 15:1, 2010, 83-101.

15 Sooksan Kantabutra & Avery C. Gayle 'The power of vision: statements that resonate', *Journal of Business Strategy*, Vol. 31:1, 2010, 37-45, p.37.

16 John Thornton Caldwell, *Production Culture. Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television*, Duke University Press, 2008.

Based on the discussion of each key moment, we conclude that one of Rubicon TV's core strategies in the television industry has been *opportunism*—that is, aggressively seeking new opportunities that would be good for business. The leaders of the company legitimated this opportunism by defining television as a harmless medium for light entertainment. Consequently, their mission statements privileged emotional engagement with public education as guideline for the programme production. Finally, we find that the opportunism of Rubicon TV stands in sharp contrast to the public service broadcaster NRK, the eldest and largest broadcaster in Norway. This channel and production company defines television as a powerful medium with the potential to shape social life in a fundamental way, and aims at producing programmes that contribute to democracy and the social and political consciousness raising of the Norwegian population.

3 The 1990s: Providing a Popular Alternative to the NRK, Yet Still with a Hint of Public Service Paternalism

Until the late 1980s, the license-funded public service broadcaster NRK was the only television channel in Norway, and because it produced most of its programmes in house, the market for independent producers was virtually non-existent. During the 1980s, this monopoly gradually gave way, first through the introduction of private and commercial cable and satellite channels in the late 1980s, including TV 3 (started in 1987) and TVNorge (started in 1988), and second through the introduction of TV 2, a private and commercial channel regulated by public service obligations, in 1992. In contrast to NRK, TV 2 was obliged to outsource most of its programme production to independent production companies, in the interests of creating growth in the independent production industry in Norway.¹⁷

Rubicon TV was established in 1993 as a direct response to this new television landscape. Although, from the start, it was supposed to serve different commissioners, its most important buyer was undoubtedly the new TV 2 channel. The Scandinavian media conglomerate Schibsted was the major owner of both Rubicon TV and TV 2 during their first years of operation, and sought to profit from both production and distribution.¹⁸

During its early phase, Rubicon TV had two strong leaders, both of whom clearly influenced the company's profile, values and production strategy. The first was Petter Wallace (1993–97), who had studied television in the United States and came from a position at TV 3. Just before his transition to Rubicon TV, he produced the first Norwegian version of the French format *Fort Boyard* (in Norwegian, *Fangene på Fortet*, 1993–2011), in which contestants had to complete appalling challenges to win prize money.¹⁹ Wallace brought to Rubicon TV an innovative, commercial and slightly provocative approach to television that clearly differed from the more informative and paternalistic attitude of the public service broadcaster NRK.²⁰ During the 1980s, the idea of media pluralism and diversity had become increasingly important in Norway, as it had in many other European countries, and NRK was often criticised for being both paternalistic and undemocratic, and for prioritising urban areas and left-wing values.²¹ Against this background, Wallace, with his US education and extensive experience with commercial formats based on popular taste rather than elite culture, was an obvious choice to lead the new production company.

His successor, Vidar Nordli-Mathiesen (1997–2001), started his media career as a photographer and journalist before turning his interest to television production. He worked as a project leader and producer at both NRK and

17 See Trine Syvertsen, *Den store TV-krigen. Norsk allmennfjernsyn i 1988-96*, Fagbokforlaget, 1997.

18 See Sissel Rinde, 'Store forhåpninger. Enterprise-kanalen TV 2', pp. 227–241, in Gunn Sara Enli, Trine Syvertsen and Susanne Østbye Sæther, eds, *Et hjem for oss—et hjem for deg? Analyser av TV 2 1992–2002*, IJ-Forlaget, 2002.

19 Wallace was also the man behind the popular talk show *Diskutabelt* (*Debatable*, 1989–90), with the tough and confrontational Robert Aschberg as host.

20 See Bakøy, 2016.

21 See Syvertsen, 1997.

TV 2 before accepting the position as CEO of Rubicon TV. In an interview immediately after he took office, Nordli-Mathiesen stated, 'Remember, it is just television'.²² By downplaying the social and political importance of the medium, he gave moral leeway to programme productions that did not adhere to the tastes of the cultural elite, and thereby continuing to frame Rubicon TV's production as a popular alternative to the work of the public service broadcaster NRK.

Television, then, in the eyes of both Wallace and Nordli-Mathiesen, was clearly not only about ensuring dialogue and democracy or being a 'window to the world', but also about telling popular stories in fun and entertaining ways. However, even Nordli-Mathiesen had moral constraints he was not prepared to break. When asked by the commercial channel TVNorge to produce *Big Brother* (2000), he turned the offer down, explaining, 'If I have to make programmes like that, I would rather die . . . It is a result of a cynical attitude, where the goal is to get as many viewer as possible'.²³ His protest was futile, however—the owners of Rubicon TV at the time (Metronome Film and Television AB, which was also part of Schibsted) let one of their sister companies (Nordic Entertainment) take over the production. In the intense public debate that was spurred by *Big Brother*,²⁴ Nordli-Mathiesen was accused of being sanctimonious and duplicitous, since he had already produced a programme where television cameras followed two girls around every room in their apartment, including the toilet, thus breaking the boundaries of what could be shown on television.²⁵ Nordli-Mathiesen left Rubicon TV shortly after the *Big Brother* debate and became a partner in another production company (Dynamo Story).

During its first years, Rubicon TV produced both light entertainment and more serious, informative programmes. As a key strategy, however, Rubicon TV was responsible for adopting and translating a range of commercial and entertaining genres and formats—mainly from the United States—to the Norwegian market. For example, Rubicon TV produced the first Norwegian soap opera, *Familiesagaen de Syv Søstre* (*The Seven Sisters*, 1996–2000). The show followed the classic soap opera ensemble of mixed families and characters, including an immigrant, an upper-class and middle-class presence, a homosexual, and a 'sexy lady'. Rubicon TV's first leader, Wallace, initiated the series, and because of the lack of soap opera experience among Norwegian producers, he hired two Swedes (Peter Emanuel Falck and Christian Wikander) with experience producing the popular Swedish soap opera *Rederiet* (*The Shipping Company*, 1992–2002). The Norwegian soap opera became instantly popular, presenting intriguing issues such as love, infidelity, unemployment, racism and homophobia and featuring talented and well-known Norwegian actors in leading roles (see picture 1). Rubicon TV was also responsible for producing Norwegian versions of other popular commercial television genres, including one of the first popular talk shows in Norway, *På tide* (*About Time*, 1992–94),²⁶ the *Lonely Planet*-inspired travel show *S&S* (2000–2001)²⁷ and the crime series *Fox Grønland* (2001–2003).

Video 1. *Familiesagaen De Syv Søstre*, Episode 1. Please visit the [online version](#) of the article to watch this video.

To summarise, Rubicon TV was established in the wake of the arrival of private and commercial television in Norway and therefore looked to Hollywood to answer the interests of its main commissioner at the time, the newly established commercial public service channel TV 2, and the two Norwegian-speaking commercial channels, TV 3 and TVNorge. These three television channels all had the ambition of providing Norwegian television viewers with more diversity in terms of programming, and hoping to earn their income from advertising. As such, Rubicon TV became important in bringing 'the American way of producing television' to Norway and over time making it 'the Norwegian way of

22 Quoted in Eva Granheim, 'En gjennomsnittlig mirakelmann', news article, *Bergens Tidende*, August 10 1996.

23 Quoted in Ståle Winterkjær, 'Rubicon-sjefen nekter å lage norsk "Big Brother"', news article, *VG*, May 27 2000.

24 See, for example, Kristin Vold, 'Annonserne advares mot "Big Brother"', news article, *NRK.no*, January 19 2001; Anne Marit Sletten, 'Støtter opprør mot drittsekk-tv', news article, *Dagbladet*, January 5 2001.

25 The programme was called *Helt privat* (*Totally Private*, 2000). See Jan Arild Slinning, 'Reality-TV og dobbeltmoralisme', news article, *VG*, September 22, 2000.

26 Per Annar Holm, 'På skjermen igjen: Kapret til talkshow—på TV 2', news article, *Aftenposten*, May 19 1994.

27 Arve Henriksen, 'TV-kamera i kofferten', news article, *Aftenposten*, February 11 2000.



Figure 1. *Familiesagaen de Syv Søstre* ('The Seven Sisters').

producing television' as well. Rubicon TV's first two leaders were both proponents of a new understanding of television as mainly a light entertainment medium, which broke radically from the public-service ethos. However, as illustrated by the Nordli-Manthiesen's negative reaction to *Big Brother*, there were limits to how far he was prepared to deviate from the public service ideals. His protest did not impress TVNorge, which had realized that stretching moral boundaries could increase audience ratings. As the next key moment will illustrate, Rubicon TV - being dependent on the goodwill of the channels - was in no position to refuse their propositions in the long run.

4 The 2000s: No Moralizing – It Is All about Moving People's Hearts and Minds

In the early 2000s digital distribution increased the number of domestic television channels, and, as a consequence, the demand for televised content. Most of the new channels came from one of the four established broadcasters—NRK, TV 2, TV 3 and TVNorge—and were launched as profiled niche channels targeting a distinct theme or audience group.²⁸ In addition to the new channels, the Norwegian television market also expanded when new players started to experiment with television-like content online. All of the main newspapers, for example, ventured into digital news production, launching online video and web-TV services and using video in addition to text and pictures. This development coincided with the more general wave of social media growth which offered audiences and users new ways of consuming, sharing and producing media content. Furthermore, new programme formats were created that mixed ordinary television programmes with activity on the Internet and on mobile phones.²⁹

28 See Karoline Andrea Ihlebæk, Trine Syvertsen and Espen Ytreberg, 'Keeping Them and Moving Them: TV Scheduling in the Phase of Channel and Platform Proliferation', *Television and New Media*, Vol. 15:5, 470–486, 2014.

29 See, for example, the case studies in Yngvild Beyer, Gunn Sara Enli, Arnt Johan Maasø and Espen Ytreberg, 'Small Talk Makes a Big Difference: Recent Developments in Interactive SMS-Based Television', *Television and New Media*, Vol. 8:3, 213–234, 2007; Gunn Sara Enli, *The Participatory Turn in Broadcast Television: Institutional, Editorial and Textual Challenges and Strategies*. PhD thesis, Department of Media and Communication, University of Oslo, 2007; Yngvar Kjus, *Event Media: Television Production Crossing Media Boundaries*, PhD thesis, Department of Media and Communication, University of Oslo, 2009.

For Rubicon TV, the new television market represented both opportunities and challenges. Clearly, an expanded market meant new openings for doing business, but the industry also became more competitive, especially as new global players began to seek out positions previously held by domestic entities. This unstable industrial context was reflected in Rubicon TV's leadership—in total, three different people headed the company during the early 2000s: Thomas Persson (2001–2004), Hrafiðildur Eydal (2004) and Lars Hognestad (2005–2010).

Persson had a degree from Stockholm Business School and was hired to reorganise the company and find a leader to succeed him. Persson also announced to the press, 'Our goal is to produce all kinds of genres for all kinds of TV channels',³⁰ thereby making the opportunism of Rubicon TV very explicit. Finding a new leader proved to be more difficult than expected, but Persson hired Eydal in 2004. Eydal had considerable experience in publishing but was new to the television industry. When Hognestad replaced her, after only one year, the company had already suffered severe economic losses that were partly caused by too much investment in programme development. Eydal insisted: 'This work demands big investments, since maybe just one in ten ideas succeeds'.³¹ During this period, as well, Rubicon TV had intensified its focus on drama productions, as a response to both new funding schemes³² and new regulations that obliged NRK to outsource more of their drama productions to independent producers. The economic balance stabilised under Hognestad's guidance—he had worked for several years in television (at NRK and then TV 2) before accepting the position as CEO of Rubicon TV. Norway's leading business newspaper, *Dagens Næringsliv*, described Hognestad as a man who found bureaucratic shortcuts, was a tough negotiator, and was socially very clever and almost smooth.³³

During the early years of 2000, Rubicon TV continued to seek out new programmes and concepts. When Hognestad took over the company, he stated that Rubicon TV had to become more focused and stressed the need to relate more to the viewers' emotions and feelings: 'I think it is more and more about making programmes which touch the hearts and the values of people'.³⁴ He also directed Rubicon TV to explore several proposals for programmes devoted to environmental protection, starting the 'green television' trend. This commitment to the environment was not successful, however, as Hognestad explained: 'Making entertainment of such themes easily turns into moralizing'.³⁵

One of Rubicon TV's key strategies during the first decade of the 2000s was to accommodate its audiences in new ways and through new roles, thus activating a deeper engagement with viewers. Most importantly, Rubicon TV embraced the wave of reality TV and produced television programmes in which so-called 'ordinary people' had a more prominent part in the episodes as on-screen participants.³⁶ Interestingly, Rubicon TV produced these programmes both for commercial channels as well as for the public service broadcaster NRK, indicating that Rubicon TV's mission statement and production culture now influenced private and public television in Norway. Among others, Rubicon TV produced *Campingsliv* (*Camping Life*, 2001) for NRK, featuring people who spent their holidays at campsites. Other examples of reality programmes included *Mamma søker kjæreste* (*Mother Searches for a Boyfriend*, 2008), a programme about single mothers looking for love, and *Ekstrem oppussing* (2005), a Norwegian adaption of the US series *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*.

In addition, Rubicon TV incorporated new means of audience participation, including so-called multiplatform formats. In 2004, Rubicon TV began to produce *Big Brother* for TVNorge, as well as another infamous programme, *Mess-TV* (2002–2009), for the same channel. Both programmes allowed audiences to participate and communicate using SMS. The latter programme typically aired from late evening to early morning, filling a slot that had previously been empty.³⁷

30 Quoted in Kampanje, 'Ny toppsjef i Rubicon TV', news article, *Kampanje.no*, December 30 2004. Available: <http://kampanje.com/archive/2004/05/ny-toppsjef-i-rubicon-tv-/>. Accessed 30.12.2016.

31 Quoted in Bjørn Eckblad, 'Tilbake til storebror', news article, *Dagens Næringsliv*, February 24 2004.

32 Most importantly, the Norwegian Film Fund established a new scheme for television drama.

33 Simen Tveitereid, 'Xtra Lars', news article, *Dagens Næringsliv*, May 7 2005.

34 Quoted in Tveitereid, 2005.

35 Quoted in Arve Henriksen, 'Miljøengasjementet som forsvant', news article, *Aftenposten*, 2009.

36 For a discussion of 'ordinary people' in this context, see Laura Grindstaff, 'Self-Serve Celebrity: The Production of Ordinarity and the Ordinarity of Production in Reality Television', pp. 71–86, in Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks and John Thornton Caldwell, eds, *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*, Routledge, 2009. See also Annette Hill, *Reality TV: Audiences and Popular Factual Television*, Routledge, 2005.

37 See Beyer et al., 2007.

Figure 2. *Mess-TV*.

The picture below (picture 2) show how audiences participated, both in terms of votes and of SMS engagement. In the red horizontal line, viewers were asked to vote on whether the two hosts should make out, while in the white vertical line, they were asked to send an SMS with greetings or comments to the host or the show.

Video 2. Excerpt from *Mess-TV*. Please visit the [online version](#) of the article to watch this video.

In addition to programmes which incorporated 'ordinary people' and audience feedback, Rubicon TV increased its investment in drama productions. This strategy resulted in a crime series (*Fox Grønland*, 2001–2003) and two feature films: *Switch* (2007), about a young man trying to succeed as a snowboarder, and the docudrama *Kautokeinoopprøret* (*The Kautokeino Rebellion*, 2008), about riots in the Sami community in 1852 in response to Norwegian exploitation and oppression. Both films did well in Norwegian cinemas, but Hognestad continued to view feature film production as a side-track to the core mission of the company: making television programmes that generated emotional reactions among viewers.³⁸

In summary, the early years of 2000 was a turbulent time for Rubicon TV that produced severe economic setbacks and a rapidly shifting leadership. Changes in the industrial context, such as new niche channels and the expansion of social media, also made it more difficult to understand or anticipate the expectations of the television channels that bought Rubicon TV's products and required both technical innovation and reorientation in relation to reaching audiences. In consequence, a lot of money was spent on developing new programmes that failed to attract interest from the television channels. Yet Rubicon TV's mission persisted: to make programs that emotionally impacted audiences in a positive way, while avoiding paternalism. In terms of its programme portfolio, the company continued to adapt and localise international formats to Norwegian culture, in this way introducing new and innovative programmes from elsewhere to the Norwegian market. The company was also eager to become part of the hype around television drama caused by broadly popular series like *Sopranos* (aired in Norway on NRK between 2000 and 2007) and the

38 Tveitereid, 2005.

'new' providers of quality television that were challenging the aesthetics, production culture and business models of traditional television—first and foremost HBO.³⁹

5 The 2010s: Making Programmes for as Many Viewers and Players as Possible

In the early 2010s, media convergence and globalisation allowed Rubicon TV to produce content for both new platforms (such as web-TV) and new international players (such as the streaming service Netflix). This period is characterised by a considerable increase in the numbers of companies operating in what we might call the 'expanding market for audio-visual content', producing, publishing and distributing video and television content for both linear and non-linear consumption. This development is particularly evident in the market for web-TV. During the early 2010s, that is, all of the main media companies in Norway operated one or more web-TV services. For instance, the leading Norwegian newspaper VG launched VGTV as a separate subsidiary for web-TV service, in order to experiment with new ways of producing and publishing television content online.

Another area where these new trends manifested themselves is the market for television streaming. During the 2010s, streaming became a readily available means of distributing and consuming television content in Norway, and new streaming services like Netflix and HBO entered the Norwegian television market with alternative publishing and business models. These new players replaced the flow model of traditional television with large, searchable programme archives, some of them using algorithmic models to provide viewers with recommendations based on previous programme preferences.

For Rubicon TV, the early 2010s involved further organisational change, as Schibsted in 2009 decided to withdraw from film and television production and sold Rubicon to the British company Shine Production, owned by Elisabeth Murdoch, the daughter of Rupert Murdoch. Six years later, this company merged with the Dutch company Endemol to form the huge international media conglomerate known as the Endemol Shine group. This merger meant that Rubicon TV had access to more financial resources, more widespread distribution and new formats owned by the conglomerate. According to the CEO of the Endemol Shine Group, Sofie Turner Laing, Rubicon TV was allowed to keep its distinct character. She described the Endemol Shine Group as a loose federation of relatively independent firms competing among themselves and claimed that this identity encouraged the most creativity.⁴⁰

Only one year after Shine Production acquired Rubicon TV, the company got a new CEO: Lasse Hallberg (2010–2014). Hallberg, who was of Swedish origin, claimed that most Norwegians took television much too seriously, in this way signalling the same ideas about television as his forerunners: 'Television is light entertainment. In Norway, it is just ten years since we had one state channel with public education as a goal. We have not yet realised the change'.⁴¹ Hallberg was the first producer of the Norwegian version of *Big Brother* and evoked previous leaders of Rubicon TV with the following statement: 'I want to make television that people talk about in the cafeteria the next day'.⁴²

Hallberg's career as CEO of Rubicon TV ended abruptly when he got drunk and swung from a chandelier at the Cannes film festival.⁴³ He was quickly replaced by Pål Kruke Kristiansen in 2014, and Kristiansen remains CEO

39 See, for example, Avi Santo, 'Para-Television and Discourses of Distinction: The Culture of Production at HBO', pp. 19–45 in Marc Leverette, Brian L. Ott & Cara Louise Buckley, eds, *It's not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era*, Routledge, 2008.

40 Peter White, 'Endemol Shine Group's Battle for Independence', news article, *Broadcast.now.co.uk*, October 15, 2015.

41 Lasse Hallberg, former CEO of Rubicon TV, in-person interview, Oslo, 2014.

42 Hallberg, interview 2014.

43 Knut Kristian Hauger, 'Rubicon ønsker ikke å fremstå slik', news article, *Kampanje.com*, July 1 2013.

of Rubicon TV today. Kristiansen's vision for the company is distinctly commercial—he wants to produce popular entertainment for as many viewers as possible. Unlike his predecessors, he did not find it necessary to legitimize his view by defining television as a medium for entertainment, reflecting the fact that commercial television is now looked upon as an accepted and natural part of Norwegian television culture, at least from within the television industry. Furthermore, Kristiansen stressed the new opportunities represented by an increasingly international market: 'It is an extremely exciting time to be a producer. The market has been global, and we have the opportunity to work with a lot more clients'.⁴⁴ Thanks to the increasingly globalised market, Rubicon TV devised a strategy through which every drama production was produced for both 'a local and an international audience'.⁴⁵

In the first part of the 2010s, Rubicon TV produced a variety of programmes for an ever larger range of television distributors. It has also continued to localise international formats, produce programmes with 'ordinary people' in major roles, and generate multiplatform productions and television dramas. In 2008, for example, Rubicon TV began to produce a Norwegian version of the British/US format *Luxury Trap* (*Luksusfellen*) for channel TV 3. Commissioned by NRK, the game show *Det store korslaget* (*The Big Choir Battle*, 2009–2012) - where Norwegian choirs compete against one another - became a huge success. The crime series *Det tredje øyet* (*The Third Eye*, 2014–) also reached a large audience. In addition to making television programmes for the traditional television channels, Rubicon TV turned to the new web-TV providers, producing, for example, the web-TV drama series *Kasim Bæder* (2013–2015)⁴⁶ for VGTV and *Lilyhammer* (2012–2014) for Netflix (in collaboration with NRK). As mentioned in the introduction, *Lilyhammer* is perhaps Rubicon TV's greatest success, thanks to the international popularity of the series (see picture 3). Part of this success is due to the star actor of the serial, the US musician Steven van Zandt, who also became famous as a Mafioso in the HBO television series *Sopranos*. Equally important is probably NRK's willingness to greenlight a rather quirky externally produced drama series, which most likely would not have been produced by NRK's internal drama division, as it was not considered sufficiently 'house trained'.⁴⁷ With *Lilyhammer*, Rubicon TV broke new ground in terms of international coproduction and distribution, giving the company valuable experience and a long-awaited success in drama production.



Figure 3. *Lilyhammer*.

44 Pål Kruke Kristiansen, CEO of Rubicon TV, in-person interview, Oslo, January 21, 2015.

45 Anne Kolbjørnsen, former Director of Drama at Rubicon TV and Executive Producer of *Lilyhammer*, in-person interview, Oslo, March 27, 2015. See also Vilde Schanke Sundet, 'Still "Desperately Seeking the Audience"? Audience Making in the Age of Media Convergence (the *Lilyhammer* Experience)', *Northern Lights*, Vol. 14:1, 11–27, 2016.

46 The comedy *Kasim Bæder* plays with cultural stereotypes and features young migrants speaking so-called Kebab-Norwegian. It started as a YouTube phenomenon before it was picked up by VGTV.

47 See Sundet 2017.

Video 3. *Lilyhammer* Trailer. Please visit the [online version](#) of the article to watch this video.

During the early years of 2010s, we see that Rubicon TV became a truly international television company, owned by one of the world's most influential media conglomerates, with the ambition and economic strength to create drama series reaching a global audience. It is ironic that Rubicon TV, which has long proclaimed a certain distance from public service television, got its international breakthrough with a drama series collaboration with NRK. The success illustrates the continued impact of public service television as an innovator within the increasingly commercial Norwegian television landscape, as well as the strong interconnection between private and public institutions within the industry. Furthermore, this period demonstrates Rubicon TV's persistent commitment to popular formats and new opportunities with new players in the television industry, but most of all its energetic opportunism and desire to amuse its audiences.

6 Conclusion: Opportunism as a Key Strategy

Numerous studies have been written about the historical development of European public service channels including their ideas about what kind of medium television is and their guidelines concerning their programme production. The numerous private television production companies have not received the same attention. By analysing the mission statements and programme portfolios of the changing leaders of Rubicon TV, this article offers a fresh look at the development of the European television industry. It suggests that in order to survive over time and grow, independent production companies have to adopt a pragmatic and opportunistic business strategy tailoring their programme production to the needs of the steadily growing number of television distributors while also being acutely aware of new and popular programme trends which can be copied or developed. This study also indicates that defining television as a relatively powerless medium helped to legitimate the opportunistic and pragmatic attitude.

The discussion of Rubicon TV also sheds light on the role the company has played in the commercialisation of Norwegian television. With the most important commercial television channels in Norway as its main customers from the start, Rubicon TV came to define the meaning of Norwegian commercial television as an alternative to the perceived elitism and paternalism of the public service channel NRK. The leaders of Rubicon TV appealed to the commercial television channels by expressing a negative attitude to moralizing and by privileging light entertainment and audience engagement.

In summary, during the three key moments described above, Rubicon TV was at the forefront of introducing and developing new programme genres, formats and business models, functioning as an innovative and creative partner for both private and public television channels in Norway, as well as international companies seeking a foothold there. As such, Rubicon TV has played an important part in the professionalization of Norwegian television in general, raising it to international standards while ensuring that Norwegian television viewers could access a greater variety of programmes on more media platforms. Throughout this process, Norwegian television lost its innocent identity as an instrument of public enlightenment and became more like a large shopping mall, thereby raising concerns about cultural fragmentation and social disintegration. However, the above analysis indicates that it is unlikely that Rubicon TV shares this concern: 'Remember, it's just television', after all.

Biography

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