



PROJECT MUSE®

Northern Declarations of Freedom of the Press: The Relative  
Importance of Philosophical Ideas and of Local Politics

Jonas Nordin, John Christian Laursen

Journal of the History of Ideas, Volume 81, Number 2, April 2020, pp. 217-237  
(Article)

Published by University of Pennsylvania Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jhi.2020.0014>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/753535>

# *Northern Declarations of Freedom of the Press: The Relative Importance of Philosophical Ideas and of Local Politics*

Jonas Nordin and John Christian Laursen

Two important Scandinavian declarations of freedom of the press occurred within a few years: 1766 in Sweden, and 1770 in Denmark. Several texts help to contextualize these declarations and their aftermath: Peter Forsskål's pamphlet on freedom of the press of 1759, Johann Friedrich Struensee's articles on freedom of expression of 1763–64, the translation into Danish of David Hume's essay on freedom of the press in 1771, and the free-press debates in Stockholm and Copenhagen in the early 1770s. These writings and their political contexts can assist in an assessment of the relative importance of philosophical ideas on the one hand, and of local contexts on the other, in the genesis of those declarations.<sup>1</sup>

Recent scholarship has attempted to contrast a Radical to a Moderate

---

<sup>1</sup> Recent publications on freedom of the press in eighteenth-century Scandinavia include Øystein Rian, *Sensuren i Danmark-Norge: Vilkårene for offentlige ytringer 1536–1814* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2014); Ellen Krefting, Aina Nøding and Mona Ringvej, *En pokkers skrivesyge: 1700-tallets dansk-norske tidsskrifter mellom sensur og ytringsfrihet* (Oslo: Scandinavian Academic Press, 2014); Jesper Jakobsen, *Uanstændige, utilladelige og unyttige skrifter: En undersøgelse af censuren i praksis 1746–1773* (Copenhagen: Københavns Universitet, 2017); Bertil Wennberg and Kristina Örtenhed, eds., *Press Freedom 250 Years: Freedom of the Press and Public Access to Official Documents in Sweden and Finland—a living heritage from 1766* (Stockholm: Sveriges riksdag, 2018 [Swedish original 2016]), <https://www.riksdagen.se/globalassets/15.-bestall-och-ladda-ned/andra-sprak/tf-250-ar-eng-2018.pdf>.

Enlightenment. Jonathan Israel asserts that “no compromise or half-way position was ever possible, either theoretically or practically” between the two forms of Enlightenment. He disapproves of John Pocock’s conception of a “family of enlightenments,” in which ideas about reform could be merged in various combinations on a sliding scale, forming a multi-faceted opposition to the *ancien régime*. In Israel’s view, this concept deflects attention from “the split for and against democracy, equality, a free press, and separation of church and state. For all these were essentially either/or questions.”<sup>2</sup> In Israel’s extensive writings, Baruch Spinoza is the figurehead of Radical Enlightenment, whereas David Hume personifies the Moderate position.<sup>3</sup>

Arthur H. Cash took a different approach in his biography of John Wilkes, “the scandalous father of civil liberty.” Wilkes was an unyielding advocate of freedom of the press and of separation of church and state, but he was by no means a democrat who believed that all citizens should have a direct influence on politics.<sup>4</sup> To resolve this apparent paradox, Cash followed Thomas H. Marshall who, half a century ago, proposed a distinction between notions of civil and of political rights.<sup>5</sup> Empirically this distinction was expressed during the early phase of the French Revolution in the division between “active” and “passive” citizens.<sup>6</sup> If we do not carefully separate civil and political rights in our analysis we are at risk of overlooking how the notion of innate human rights was already widespread decades before the French Revolution and how little this notion had to do with the question of political representation. Kings might promote civil liberties, but kings rarely supported extended political participation. And as often as we reproach “moderate” reformers for not being radical enough, we must remember that “radical” reformers may not have been consistently so. For example, Maximilien Robespierre believed in democracy and a free press,

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Israel, *A Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 17 f.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 52. See also Israel’s *Radical Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) and *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights 1750–1790* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), which do not differ on these matters in any important way.

<sup>4</sup> Arthur C. Cash, *John Wilkes: The Scandalous Father of Civil Liberty* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006). See also Peter D. G. Thomas, *John Wilkes: A Friend to Liberty* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), esp. chap. 13, “Radical or Rascal.”

<sup>5</sup> Thomas H. Marshall, “Citizenship and Social Class,” in Marshall, *Sociology at the Crossroads and Other Essays* (London: Heinemann, 1963).

<sup>6</sup> D. M. G. Sutherland, *The French Revolution and Empire: The Quest for a Civic Order* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), chap. 3.

but he was also a religious man, and one who went to extremes to suppress the same human rights he claimed to be defending.<sup>7</sup>

Simple either-or explanations tend to suppress the consideration of multiple causes. Possibilities might include a dual influence—both Hume and Spinoza. Worldviews are shaped by a host of sources and experiences, and the comprehensive origins of specific ideas are often impossible to ascertain. As long as the two sets of ideas are not intellectually incompatible, we must acknowledge that both thinkers, or for that matter neither, may have had an influence. An analysis of collective processes cannot assume a single and universally shared set of ideas. The form of government and political culture in each country is another factor; we must ask what roles previous political experience and historical accident played in Sweden and Denmark in this period. Therefore, rather than attempting to construct a bipolar model, we offer a complex explanation as to why freedom of the press was declared almost simultaneously in two such widely different political systems as Sweden and Denmark.

Identifying the most important influences in and around the Swedish and Danish declarations of freedom of the press will help us determine whether they are properly characterized as products of particular philosophers or rather of local circumstances, and thus the degree to which the declarations might be seen as Enlightenment products. Indeed, the case of Hume in this regard is not simple. Israel knows that Hume “vigorously championed toleration and liberty of the press.” He paraphrases Hume’s essay “Of the Liberty of the Press” (1741): “the altogether exceptional freedom of the press flourishing in early and mid eighteenth-century England . . . [was] a crucial safeguard of political liberty” and “was not at all to be taken for granted and needed to be vigilantly and staunchly defended.” But he also observes that “Hume devotes his powerful philosophical mind and sophisticated social criticism to essentially conservative political, social, and moral goals.”<sup>8</sup> He was an anti-Semite and a racist, firmly anti-democratic, and, “on the whole, more of an opponent than an ally of the Radical Enlightenment.”<sup>9</sup> Even if this is true, we do not see an obvious contradiction in these positions. Rather, it seems, Israel nurtures a “mythology of coherence,” to use Quentin Skinner’s phrase.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Peter McPhee, *Robespierre: A Revolutionary Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), e.g. 88–89, 169–70, 174–76, 185–86, 198, 201 passim.

<sup>8</sup> Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 53–54.

<sup>9</sup> Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 55, 57.

<sup>10</sup> Quentin Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” in *Visions of Politics: Volume 1: Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 67–72.

In assessing Hume's stance we must consider that throughout the 1720s and 1730s there had been an elaborate discussion in Great Britain on the extent to which freedom of the press should be tolerated. As recently demonstrated by Eckhart Hellmuth, positions wavered between those who regarded freedom of expression as "the *conditio sine qua non* of a free government," and those who thought that living "in civil society meant tempering and regulating human opportunities and abilities," including public discourse.<sup>11</sup> A closer exploration of the context around the Swedish and Danish declarations of freedom of the press may help us understand to what extent and against what background the same kind of considerations factored in other political environments.

In the eighteenth century, Sweden and Denmark were constitutional opposites. During the so-called Age of Liberty, 1719–72, Sweden had a republican constitution which reduced the king to a mere figurehead. Executive rule was exercised by the sixteen counsellors of the realm while legislative power rested with the four-estate Diet, which was dominated by two opposing parties, the Hats and the Caps. Denmark, on the other hand, had the only codified absolutist regime in Europe. *Kongeloven* (The King's Law), in force between 1665 and 1849, only put three constraints on the king: he had to adhere to the Lutheran faith, he was obliged to defend the territorial integrity of the realm, and he was not allowed to reduce his own power. Thus, formally the king was the sole bearer of all executive as well as legislative power.<sup>12</sup>

### EARLY SWEDISH PRECEDENTS

A first relaxation of Swedish censorship laws came in 1735, when it became permissible to print court proceedings. The first proposition to abolish censorship altogether was presented at the Diet four years later by Henning Adolf Gyllenborg, a member of the Noble estate. "That each and every citizen without constraint or supervision may put his thoughts under the free judgment of the public, it drives away the barbarian darkness in a

<sup>11</sup> Eckhart Hellmuth, "Towards Hume—the Discourse on the Liberty of the Press in the Age of Walpole," *History of European Ideas* 44 (2018): 159–81, quotes 164, 172.

<sup>12</sup> For an introduction to Scandinavian politics, see, e.g., Harald Gustafsson, *Political Interaction in the Old Regime: Central Power and Local Society in the Eighteenth-Century Nordic States* (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 1994), and Pasi Ihalainen et al., eds., *Scandinavia in the Age of Revolution: Nordic Political Culture, 1740–1820* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011).

country, it encourages competition between cultured writers, through whom the truth more and more comes to the fore, and it helps a free people to know itself, its strengths and its weaknesses.”<sup>13</sup> If someone should abuse this precious freedom and publish something offensive to government, religion, or good morals he could be punished according to law. In other words, Gyllenborg advocated the abolition of prior censorship but did not define the legal boundaries of freedom of expression. This was consistent with the English model that Hume lauded in “Of the Freedom of the Press,” published two years later (1741).

Gyllenborg’s proposition was received encouragingly by the other three estates, but it was presented at the close of the Diet and there was no time to discuss it before the session ended. Gyllenborg seems never to have returned to the matter, but from this time there was a growing discussion of the need for a free press in Sweden. The most persistent advocate was Anders Nordencrantz, known for his early introduction of Hume into Swedish intellectual discourse.<sup>14</sup>

It appears that censorship in Sweden did not work particularly well, with only one censor for civil matters beyond the religious control exercised by the consistories. “Structural glitches” included lack of coordination, lack of competence, lack of consensus among the censors, and an inability to interpret subtle theological messages in the texts; some censors passed ideas that they sympathized with personally, and many faced difficult working conditions.<sup>15</sup> If censorship failed actually to suppress anything that Swedish readers found important, there may have been little pressure to end it. If authors could get around it, they may not have perceived it as a serious problem either. In addition, authors universally self-censored. Nevertheless, in 1759 one author, Peter Forsskål, refused to play by the rules and thereby came to undermine the foundation of censorship in Sweden.

<sup>13</sup> “Kammarherren, Grefve H. Gyllenborgs memorial om tryckfrihet,” in *Sveriges ridderskaps och adels riksdags-protokoll från och med år 1719: 1738–1739: Bilagor* (Stockholm: Norstedts, 1889), 11:71: “At hvar och en medborgare utan tvång och upsyningsman får lägga sina tanckar under det almännas fria omdöme, det bortjagar det barbariska mörckret i et land, det främjar täflingen mellan vittra pennor, hvarigenom sanningen altmer och mer upbläncker, och det hjälper et fritt folck till at kiänna sig sielf, sin styrcka och sin svaga.”

<sup>14</sup> On Nordencrantz, see Lars Magnusson, “Anders Nordencrantz,” in *Press Freedom 250 Years*, 77–87.

<sup>15</sup> Ann Öhrberg, “‘A Threat to Civic Existence’: Forbidden Religious Literature and Censorship in Eighteenth-Century Sweden,” in *Religious Reading in the Lutheran North*, ed. Charlotte Appel and Morten Fink-Jensen (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2011), 119–22. The standard work on censorship during the Age of Liberty in Sweden is Anders Burius, *Ömbet om friheten: Studier i frihetstidens censurpolitik* (Uppsala: Institutionen för idé- och lärdomshistoria, 1984), with a summary in German.

## PETER FORSSKÅL

Peter Forsskål's "Thoughts on Civil Liberty" (*Tankar om borgerliga friheten*) was written in 1759 and published in slightly censored form later that year.<sup>16</sup> Attempts have been made to trace Hume's influence on Forsskål's philosophy, but there is no evidence of his having read Hume or Spinoza.<sup>17</sup> Forsskål's most important philosophical work, his Göttingen dissertation *Dubia de principiis philosophiae recentioris* (1756), contains no references to either philosopher. What we find are the usual ancient philosophers—Aristotle, Cicero, Seneca—and some of the widely accepted more recent philosophers, including Grotius, Leibniz, Wolff, and more. Henrik Lagerlund is probably right in asserting that "Forsskål, although he sometimes reminds us of Hume in his final position, seems not to have read him. He was more influenced by Locke."<sup>18</sup> However, John Locke was not cited in Forsskål's dissertation either. Links between Forsskål and John Milton are also similarly circumstantial. Forsskål writes, for example, "Because truth always wins when it is allowed to be denied and defended equally"—an argument Milton had used more than a century before.<sup>19</sup> It is not known whether Forsskål could read English, and we do not know of early translations to any language of *Areopagitica*. Such similarities should probably be regarded as commonplace, with no single identifiable source.

Although Forsskål's pamphlet had been approved by the censor before publication, he was subjected to extrajudicial interrogation. It was not a regular court proceeding but a hearing before an administrative body, the Chancery of the Realm. The prosecutors soon found themselves in an awkward position. The normal practice was that an accused person yielded to the pressure and begged for pardon, which was then granted after an appropriate reprimand. Forsskål, however, refused to admit to any wrongdoing: He had only defended the civil liberties of Sweden and what he

<sup>16</sup> Peter Forsskål, *Thoughts on Civil Liberty: Translation of the Original Manuscript with Background*, ed. David Goldberg, Gunilla Jonsson and Thomas von Vegesack (Stockholm: Atlantis, 2009). A revised edition in both English and Swedish is available at <https://litteraturbanken.se/forfattare/ForsskalP/titlar/ThoughtsOnCivilLiberty/etext>.

<sup>17</sup> A connection between Hume and Forsskål has been proposed by Johan Dellner, *Forsskåls filosofi* (Stockholm: Natur och kultur, 1953). It has been accepted by, for example, Thomas von Vegesack, "Background," in Forsskål, *Thoughts on Civil Liberty*, 25.

<sup>18</sup> Henrik Lagerlund, "The Reception of David Hume's Philosophy in Sweden," in *The Reception of David Hume in Europe*, ed. Peter Jones (London: Thoemmes Continuum, 2005), 227.

<sup>19</sup> Forsskål, *Thoughts on Civil Liberty*, § 8; John Milton, "Areopagitica" (1644), in *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, ed. Ernest Sirluck (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959), 2:561.

found to be the natural rights of man. Furthermore, he declared that his pamphlet contained no original thinking and that all of its arguments had already been maintained in other publications. His accusers admitted to this, but claimed that the earlier examples were not “brochures or handbills, that can be bought for a few pennies, nor in the mother tongue, but in works and volumes written for enlightened citizens, and not for the general public.”<sup>20</sup> Forsskål had in fact already identified many of his sources of inspiration in a letter to the Chancellery. They were all Swedish, among them Nordencrantz but also several anonymous political pamphlets.<sup>21</sup>

After lengthy and futile questioning, the Chancellery found no other solution than to let Forsskål off the hook, unpunished. They were afraid that he would become a public martyr. An order was issued to confiscate his pamphlet, but only seventy-nine of the five hundred copies were found. The Consistory at Uppsala University was indeed instructed to give Forsskål a warning, but when he disputed even this measure the authorities found it safest to discontinue all further action against him. To be sure, all handling, including possession, of Forsskål’s pamphlet was subject to heavy fines, but he seems never to have been personally chastised.

Political control was exercised through a good deal of restraint and self-censorship among ordinary citizens, but by his conduct Forsskål demonstrated that the emperor in fact had no clothes, and his case became a milestone in the growing demands for proper freedom of expression.<sup>22</sup>

## THE 1766 ORDINANCE

On December 2, 1766, the Council Chamber in Stockholm issued “His Majesty’s Gracious Ordinance Relating to Freedom of Writing and of the Press.”<sup>23</sup> It may have been the world’s first government-sponsored declaration of freedom of the press.

<sup>20</sup> Chancellery minutes quoted from Henrik Schück, *Från Linnés tid: Petter Forsskål* (Stockholm: Norstedts, 1923), 191: “icke uti broschyrer och löpande ark, som för några ören kunna köpas, icke på modersmålet, utan i wärk och volumer, skrifne för uplyste medborgare, men icke för allmänheten.”

<sup>21</sup> Schück, *Från Linnés tid*, 142–43.

<sup>22</sup> Jonas Nordin, “Peter Forsskål 1732–1763: En Linnélärjunge i kamp för civila rättigheter,” *Svenska Linnésällskapets årsskrift* (2013): 39–52; Ere Nokkala, “Peter Forsskål—the Freedom to write and the Principle of Public Access to Official Documents,” in *Press Freedom 250 Years*, 61–76.

<sup>23</sup> English translation by Peter Hogg in *The World’s First Freedom of Information Act*, ed. Juha Mustonen (Kokkola: Anders Chydenius Foundation, 2006), 8–17, <https://www.chydenius.net>. The original printed ordinance, *Kongl. Maj:ts Nådige Förordning, Angående Skrif- och Tryck-friheten*, may be consulted at <http://libris.kb.se/bib/18397754>.



The 1766 Ordinance did not declare unlimited freedom of the press. After some remarks about the importance of “unrestricted mutual enlightenment” and an assertion that “the previously established office of the Censor shall be entirely abolished,” the preamble added that “the authors themselves shall be responsible, together with the printers, for what shall appear in print,” reminding writers that they could be fined or jailed for anything that upset the authorities. It was also provided that “the importation and sale of harmful books” would be supervised by the Chancellery and the respective consistories so that “no banned and corrupting books” would be distributed (§ 10). The first section of the Ordinance covered religion: “No one shall be permitted to write or publish anything that is contrary to the confession of Our true faith and the pure Evangelical doctrine.” The office of the censor was abolished, but “all manuscripts that in any way concern doctrine and our fundamental Christian articles of faith shall be inspected by the nearest consistory.” The original proposal was to abolish all censorship, but the more radical proponents had to concede this provision in order to get the Clergy to accept the law in the Diet.

The second section protected the “fundamental laws” of the state: “No one shall venture in any way to assail or question [them] by means of publications or printed material.” The third section prohibited “vituperative or disparaging opinions” about the king and the Royal House, as well as such criticism of councilors, the estates of the realm, and insults against officials and citizens. “Abusive statements in public writings about crowned heads or their closest blood relatives and contemporary ruling authorities,” or publishing “in print anything by which a manifest vice is promoted or justified and is thus incompatible with decency” were also prohibited. There seems to have been a great deal of interpretive leeway for condemning authors and publishers to fines and punishments. The principle of freedom of the press may have been vindicated, but in practice a broad range of actions could be punished.

However, in spite of the restrictions, the real importance of the Ordinance was that it was formulated according to an exclusivity principle: *nulla poena sine lege*. Only felonies that were clearly defined in the law (granted the apparent interpretive leeway) could be tried by the courts: “[E]verything that is not clearly contrary to that is to be regarded as legitimate to write and print” (§ 5). The immediate result was a massive increase in political writing. About 75 percent of all political pamphlets issued in the eighteenth century were published between 1766 and 1772, when a royal coup d’état invalidated the 1766 Ordinance. Moreover, political discussion was severely radicalized during these years and the privileges of the

nobility came under such heavy attack they were all but abolished. They were immediately restored after the royal coup.

Later sections of the Ordinance provided for the publishing of all types of official documents such as the minutes of government meetings and of the Diet, the relations of the kingdom with foreign powers, correspondence and documents of courts and public authorities, and more. The Ordinance has been labeled the world's first Freedom of Information Act.<sup>24</sup> It certainly went beyond what either Spinoza or Hume had said about freedom of the press. Most of the provisions were retained after the abolition of freedom of the press, except for those that concerned government papers.

Intellectual sources for the Ordinance must include Anders Chydenius, generally considered to have been its chief framer. Chydenius was a pastor from Finland who attended the Diet as a representative of the clerical estate in 1765. He had previously written policy papers in support of liberalization of trade in Finland. He also had strong opinions about freedom of the press and was a driving force in the parliamentary committee that drafted the Ordinance.<sup>25</sup> A review of his intellectual sources by Pertti Hyttinen identified Bacon, Descartes, Hobbes, Locke, Newton, Leibniz, Spener, and Wolff, but not Spinoza or Hume.<sup>26</sup> Juha Mustonen lists Bacon, Locke, Pufendorf, and Du Halde as European influences on Chydenius, but again, neither Spinoza nor Hume.<sup>27</sup>

Some scholars claim to have found Hume's influence. Carl Uhr declared that "it is certain he never heard of Adam Smith, and what little he knew of Davenant, Locke, Hume, Mun, and Child he obtained mainly from the writings of a somewhat liberal Swedish mercantilist, Baron Norden- crantz."<sup>28</sup> Uhr does not find any influences from Spinoza or any Spinozist. Lars Magnusson asserts that Chydenius read Nordencrantz, who drew his attention to Hume, along with other figures of the Scottish Enlightenment, Pufendorf, and Montesquieu, but he does not mention Spinoza.<sup>29</sup> Carola Nordbäck finds that Chydenius's meditations on religion can be compared

<sup>24</sup> Mustonen, *The World's First Freedom of Information Act*.

<sup>25</sup> See Carl Uhr, *Anders Chydenius 1729–1803: A Finnish Predecessor to Adam Smith* (Åbo: National-ekonomiska institutionen, 1963); Gustav Björkstrand, "Anders Chydenius," in *Press Freedom 250 Years*, 94–100.

<sup>26</sup> Pertti Hyttinen, *Anders Chydenius: Defender of Freedom and Democracy* (Kokkola: Chydenius Institute, 1994).

<sup>27</sup> Mustonen, *The World's First Freedom of Information Act*, 25–27, 36, 39–40.

<sup>28</sup> Uhr, *Anders Chydenius 1729–1803*, 9. See also Pentti Virrankoski, *Anders Chydenius: Demokratisk politiker i upplysningens tid* (Stockholm: Timbro, 1995), 75, 77.

<sup>29</sup> Magnusson, "Den ekonomiska diskussionen under frihetstiden—ett framlängesperspektiv," in *Riksdag, kaffehus och predikstol: frihetstidens politiska kultur 1766–1772*, ed. Marie-Christine Skuncke and Henrika Tandfelt (Stockholm: Atlantis, 2003), 33–34.

with Hume and Jeremy Bentham, “regardless of whether Chydenius was familiar with their opinions or not.”<sup>30</sup> Nordbäck does not mention Spinoza, nor is he cited as an influence in the comprehensive volume issued by the Swedish parliament to celebrate the 250th anniversary of the Freedom of the Press Ordinance.<sup>31</sup>

Two factors may explain why scholarship on the Swedish declaration of freedom of the press does not mention Spinoza. One is that many historians of ideas were not particularly attuned to looking for a Spinoza connection before Jonathan Israel began promoting it. A second factor is that authors of the period did not always acknowledge Spinoza’s influence because he had a bad reputation, and acknowledging him might subject an author to charges of atheism and subversion. Nonetheless, the lack of references to Spinoza may just as well mean that he truly was not influential. By the end of the eighteenth century, at least, we do find his books in contemporary catalogues of the two largest public libraries in Sweden: the Royal Library in Stockholm and Uppsala University Library. Yet exactly when and how the books were acquired is impossible to determine.<sup>32</sup> To what extent his books were present in private collections is equally hard to ascertain, although we have a note that the university librarian in Uppsala, Andreas Norrelius (1678–1749), owned Spinoza’s personal copy of the famous Ferrara Bible of 1553, written in Ladino.<sup>33</sup> Spinoza’s books were often prohibited and hard to obtain. There are records of them being confiscated at book auctions in the eighteenth century. Hume’s books sometimes faced a similar situation.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Carola Nordbäck, *Lycksalighetens källa: Kontextuella närläsningar av Anders Chydenius budordspredikningar, 1781–82* (Turku: Åbo Akademis förlag, 2009), 39, but cf. 197–98; esp. on freedom of the press, 89–93.

<sup>31</sup> *Press Freedom 250 Years* (as in note 1).

<sup>32</sup> Royal Library (today The National Library of Sweden, Stockholm): *Renati Des Cartes principiorum philosophiae 1 & 2* (1663); *Lucii Antistii Constantis De jure ecclesiasticorum, liber singularis* (1665); *Tractatus theologico politicus* (1670); *Opera posthuma* (1677); *De rechtzinnige theologant, of godgeleerde staatkundige verhandelinge* (1693); *A Treatise Partly Theological and Partly Political* (1737). Uppsala: *Opera posthuma* (1677); *Tractatus theologico politicus* (1670); *Traité des ceremonies superstitieuses des Juifs* (1678); *La clef du sanctuaire* (1678). The records from the Royal Library are collected from the handwritten catalogue, U 126, kept between 1769 and ca. 1840. An older catalogue, U 123, shows no records of Spinoza, but this catalogue is notoriously unreliable. Records from Uppsala are gathered from the printed catalogue, *Catalogus Bibliothecae Regiae Academiae Upsaliensis*, ed. Pehr Fabian Aurivillius (Uppsala, 1805–1814), which documents the state of the collections in 1796.

<sup>33</sup> Carl Magnus Carlander, *Svenska bibliotek och ex-libris* (Stockholm: Iduna, 1904), 2:1:242.

<sup>34</sup> Leonard Bygdén and Eugène Lewenhaupt, eds. *G. Benzeltjernas censorsjournal* (Stockholm: Norstedts, 1884), 243; Burius, *Ömbet om friheten*, 44–46.

## JOHANN FRIEDRICH STRUENSEE

Now let us move to Denmark. Johann Friedrich Struensee, chief minister of the Danish king in the early 1770s, was the man behind the Danish declaration of freedom of the press of 1771. The Danish declaration was more wide-ranging if also more naïve than the Swedish law. The Swedish law had been prepared by a parliamentary committee of fifteen representatives from all four estates working for nearly a year. They had tried to foresee and parry all possible difficulties that could occur in the application of the law.<sup>35</sup> The Danish declaration was issued as a cabinet order in the king's name, and must have been prepared in a matter of days by Struensee himself, possibly prompted by the king.<sup>36</sup> It was much briefer. After a sentence praising the search after truth, it stated, "We have decided to permit in our realms and territories in general an unlimited freedom of the press of such a form, that from now on no one shall be required and obliged to submit books and writings that he wants to bring to the press to the previously required censorship and approval."<sup>37</sup> Only a year later, Struensee felt obligated to issue another cabinet order requiring publishers to put their names on their publications to hold them responsible in case of libel or slander or if printing anything otherwise unlawful.

In the 1760s Struensee had practiced as a physician in Altona, adjacent to Hamburg. It seems quite likely that he was influenced by some of the Spinozists of the period. Johann Lorenz Schmidt lived in Hamburg in the previous decades and translated Matthew Tindal's *Christianity as Old as the Creation* in 1741. Tindal was also known for his *Letter to a Member of Parliament, shewing that a Restraint of the Press is inconsistent with the Protestant Religion, and dangerous to the Liberties of the Nation* (1697) and *Reasons Against Restraining the Press* (1704), in which he argued that

<sup>35</sup> See the detailed account by Skuncke, "Press Freedom in the Riksdag 1760–62 and 1765–66," in *Press Freedom 250 Years*, 109–44.

<sup>36</sup> Ulrik Langen's recent attempt to see the feeble-minded king, Christian VII, as the initiator of the law is not convincing, although it was probably issued with his consent. Langen, *Den afmægtige—en biografi om Christian 7.* (Copenhagen: Jyllands-Postens Forlag, 2008), 323, 325.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Edvard Holm, *Nogle Hovedtræk af Trykkefrihedstidens Historie* (Copenhagen: J. H. Schultz, 1885), 4: "Vi have i saadan Betragtning efter nøje Overlæg allernaadigst besluttet, udi Vores Riger og Lande i Almindelighed at tillade en uindskrænket Frihed for Bogtrykkerierne saaledes: at fra nu af skal ingen være pligtig eller forbunden til at lade sine Bøger og Skrifter, som han vil overgive til Trykken, underkaste den hidtil anordnede Censur og Approbation." See also John Christian Laursen, "David Hume and the Danish Debate about Freedom of the Press in the 1770s," *The Journal of the History of Ideas* 59 (1998): 168.

liberty of the press was the mother of all other liberties.<sup>38</sup> In his translation, Schmidt added his own 130-page introduction in defense of freedom of the press.<sup>39</sup> He also translated Spinoza's *Ethics* in 1744. Interest in Spinoza preceded Struensee in the region and extended to others in his community; before Struensee's time, Spinozists such as Johann Conrad Dippel and Theodor Ludwig Lau lived in or passed through Hamburg and Altona. Struensee dined daily with Hartog Gerson, son of the clandestine Spinozist David Gerson, and with other Spinozists. So it seems probable that he developed some of his ideas about freedom of the press from Spinoza and these Spinozists.

But there were other philosophical movements in favor of freedom of the press in Struensee's environment. One of them was ancient cynicism. While living in Altona, Struensee wrote for three periodicals that were repressed by the censors,<sup>40</sup> an experience that could have made him want to abolish censorship. In those periodicals he published two articles that drew heavily on the ancient cynical tradition. One article, "In Praise of Dogs and of Greek White Powder," lampooned the quack medicines of a rival doctor. The other was "Reports on Diogenes," which praised Diogenes for his fearless speech and compared dogs (for whom the cynics were named) favorably to most people. So cynic *parrhasia*, or freedom of speech, seems to have been one of the philosophical currents that supported Struensee's declaration of freedom of the press in 1770.

There is no particular evidence that Struensee was influenced significantly by Hume. His more thorough Danish freedom of the press declaration in 1770 may have developed from a combination of factors including his own personal experiences and cynic *parrhasia*—and if Spinozism had any influence in the Scandinavian press debates, Struensee was the most likely source.

<sup>38</sup> Ernest Sirluck, "Areopagitica and a Forgotten Licensing Controversy," *The Review of English Studies* 11:43 (1960): 260–74; Hellmuth, "Towards Hume," 164.

<sup>39</sup> See Laursen, "Hamburg/Altona as a Fertile Ground for Theories About Freedom of the Press in the Mid-Eighteenth Century," in *Hamburg: Eine Metropolregion zwischen Früher Neuzeit und Aufklärung*, ed. Johann Anselm Steiger and Sandra Richter (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2012), 317ff. The rest of the material in this paragraph draws on this article.

<sup>40</sup> See Laursen, "Hamburg/Altona as a Fertile Ground for Theories About Freedom of the Press," 325–26, and Laursen, "Humanism vs. Cynicism: Cosmopolitan Culture and National Identity in Eighteenth-Century Denmark," in *Northern Antiquities and National Identities: Perceptions of Denmark and the North in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Knud Haakonssen and Henrik Horstbøll (Copenhagen: Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters, 2008), 145–62 and 336–39. The rest of the material in this paragraph draws on these articles.

Jonathan Israel also observed that the leading Danish official Otto Thott had “one of the most extensive collections of forbidden philosophical books and manuscripts to be found anywhere in eighteenth-century Europe.”<sup>41</sup> That is true, but in fact Thott had the largest collection of every kind of book in the north: a library of 10,000 incunabula and 130,000 books.<sup>42</sup> His vast collection included much Spinozana, but there is no evidence that Thott actually read Spinoza or tried to spread his ideas.

Hume’s “Of the Liberty of the Press” was translated into Danish in 1771, most likely from the German edition of 1756.<sup>43</sup> This was part of a much larger outpouring of pamphlets discussing everything from economic policy to military reform, church policy, women’s participation in political life, and freedom of the press that were published when Struensee declared freedom of the press in 1770.<sup>44</sup>

Hume’s essay contained passages that gave theoretical support for freedom of the press even in an absolute environment like Denmark. According to Hume there was a lack of “jealousy” (i.e., suspicious fear) in absolute monarchies, where all power was in the hands of one man: “In a government, such as that of France, which is absolute, and where law, custom, and religion concur, all of them, to make the people fully satisfied with their condition, the monarch cannot entertain any *jealousy* against his subjects, and therefore is apt to indulge them in great *liberties* both of speech and action.”<sup>45</sup> Absolute monarchy thus fostered a certain trust between monarch and subjects, according to Hume. This observation could easily be applied to Denmark. One of the most persistent elements in Danish political mythology was the idea of the benevolent ruler who paid equal regard to all of his subjects, whether high or low. There also developed a certain theory of “opinion-guided absolutism” in the eighteenth century.<sup>46</sup> This perception distinguished Danish political culture substantially from, for example, the situation in France where, in theory, the king’s authority demanded him to be all-knowing and infallible and, thus, public opinion

<sup>41</sup> Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 133, see also 686.

<sup>42</sup> Laursen and Horstbøll, “Spinoza in Denmark: An unknown painting of Spinoza and the Spinoza collection of Count Otto Thott,” *Studia Spinozana* 15 (1999 [2006]): 249–64.

<sup>43</sup> See Laursen, “David Hume and the Danish Debate,” 167–72.

<sup>44</sup> See Laursen, “Luxdorph’s Press Freedom Writings: Before the Fall of Struensee in Early 1770s Denmark-Norway,” *The European Legacy* 7 (2002): 61–78.

<sup>45</sup> Hume, “Of the Liberty of the Press,” 10. See also Hellmuth, “Towards Hume,” 178–79.

<sup>46</sup> Holm, *Om det Syn paa Kongemagt, Folk og borgerlig Frihed, der udviklede sig i den dansk-norske Stat i Midten av 18de Aarhundrede (1746–1770)* (Copenhagen: J. H. Schultz, 1883); Jens Arup Seip, “Teorien om det opinionsstyrte enevælde,” [Norwegian] *Historisk tidsskrift* 38 (1958): 397–463.

mattered little. This changed in the years before the French revolution, but rather than fertilizing the political landscape, the regime's sudden appeal to public opinion further increased the crisis of confidence of the monarchy.<sup>47</sup> In Denmark, on the other hand, the theory of the importance of opinion prepared citizens to recognize the importance of freedom of the press.

Hume's essay came to Denmark along with Voltaire, another proponent of extended civil liberties but less so of popular political participation. The translation of Hume's essay was part of a pamphlet entitled *Mr. F. A. de Voltaire's Letter to His Majesty the King of Denmark concerning freedom of the press in his states, together with some essays of relevant content*.<sup>48</sup> Voltaire's letter was in praise of the king for granting freedom of the press, thanking him for "granting man his rights" and "permitting him to think."<sup>49</sup> The pamphlet contained two more short pieces by Voltaire and then the translation of Hume.

The many pamphlets released in the early 1770s as an immediate consequence of Struensee's rescript are gathered in the Luxdorph collection at the Royal Library in Denmark.<sup>50</sup> A survey of this material failed to produce any references to the Danish translation of Hume's essay, and thus no case can be made for a direct influence. Many different angles were expressed in the Danish debate, so we may conclude that they did not need to turn to Hume's piece.<sup>51</sup> But of course his ideas may have percolated under the surface, both in those pamphlets and in later debates.

Spinoza was mentioned, usually with opprobrium, in the Luxdorph pamphlets, but mostly with no particular reference to freedom of the press. One pamphlet grouped him together with Tindal, Collins, and Bolingbroke as those "who have taught [religion] again to use its divine strength, and

<sup>47</sup> Keith Michael Baker, "Politics and Public Opinion: Some Reflections," in *Press and Politics in Pre-Revolutionary France*, Jack R. Censer and Jeremy D. Popkin, eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 204–46.

<sup>48</sup> *Hr. F. A. Voltaires Brev til Hans Majestaet Kongen af Danmark angaaende den udi hans Stater forundte Tryk-Frihed: Tilligemed nogle Afhandler af beslegtet Indhold* (Copenhagen, n.d. [1771]), 23–31.

<sup>49</sup> Voltaire, "Épître au Roi de Danemark, Christian VII, sur la liberté de la presse accordée dans tous ses états," *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire* (Paris: Garnier, 1877), 10:421–27. See Laursen, "Voltaire, Christian VII of Denmark, and Freedom of the Press," *SVEC* [formerly *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*] (2002): 331–48.

<sup>50</sup> Horstbøll, "Bolle Willum Luxdorphs samling af trykkefrihedens skrifter 1770–1773," *Fund og Forskning i Det Kongelige Biblioteks samlinger* 44 (2005): 371–414. Cf. online bibliography, Luxdorphs samling af trykkefrihedens skrifter 1770–1773 by Henrik Horstbøll, The Royal Library, Copenhagen, October 5, 2005, accessed August 17, 2018, [http://www.kb.dk/export/sites/kb\\_dk/da/nb/publikationer/fundogforskning-online/pdf/luxdorph-sml.pdf](http://www.kb.dk/export/sites/kb_dk/da/nb/publikationer/fundogforskning-online/pdf/luxdorph-sml.pdf).

<sup>51</sup> See Laursen, "David Hume and the Danish Debate," 171.

the greater its enemies and the more dangerous their weapons, the greater, the more decisive its victory.”<sup>52</sup> Another pamphlet referred to “a Dutch Jew, Spinoza by name, who in a thick, tedious book in metaphysical Latin has attempted to prove that all of nature is only one substance and that all parts of nature are only as many modifications of it.”<sup>53</sup> One author made the connection to liberty of the press, but not in a positive sense: among its fruits were “controversial writings . . . project writings . . . heretical writings . . . financial writings . . . Machiavellian and Spinozistic writings, of which there were a great number.”<sup>54</sup> Apparently, none of them cited Spinoza in favor of freedom of the press.

### BACK TO SWEDEN

Although no immediate connection can be established between Forsskål and Hume there were indeed others who took an interest in the Scottish philosopher. In 1770, Anders Nordencrantz asserted that the study of history could help prevent ignorance and prejudice from influencing public opinion and was consequently “indispensable to rational public debate.”<sup>55</sup> He drew on Hume to admit that perfect knowledge of history as a basis for contemporary politics would never exist, but that “a less demanding” standard for history could provide important tools for political criticism.<sup>56</sup> Like Hume, who worried about the effects of unrestrained public opinion at the time of the Wilkes riots in 1768 in London, Nordencrantz also saw the potential dangers of freedom of the press.

In 1770, the historiographer Anders Schönberg also criticized the way in which the commoners had distorted history during the so-called Strife of the Estates. He borrowed from Montesquieu and Hume to argue that “history proved that even if complete equality was possible, it was undesirable. The reason was simple: equality was the surest—and indeed fastest—way to tyranny.”<sup>57</sup> Schönberg drew on Hume as an authority for the contemporary value of distinctions of rank. For example, nobility could counterbalance the power of the king and of the people. Hume’s critique of Cromwell

<sup>52</sup> Cited in Laursen, “Spinoza in Denmark and the Fall of Struensee,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 61 (2000): 196.

<sup>53</sup> Laursen, “Spinoza in Denmark,” 197.

<sup>54</sup> Laursen, “Spinoza in Denmark,” 197–98.

<sup>55</sup> Peter Hallberg, *Ages of Liberty: Social Upheaval, History Writing, and the New Public Sphere in Sweden, 1740–1792* (Stockholm: Department of Political Science, 2003), 96.

<sup>56</sup> Hallberg, *Ages of Liberty*, 177.

<sup>57</sup> Hallberg, *Ages of Liberty*, 218.



was also useful: radical egalitarianism could easily lead to authoritarianism.<sup>58</sup> Nordencrantz and Schönberg exemplified how one can favor freedom of the press without denying its dangers. Arguments for a measured and limited freedom of the press in Sweden are reminiscent of Hume's theory.

Swedish publisher Carl Christoffer Gjørwell wrote to a friend in 1774 that the "success of a historian like Charles Rollin and a philosopher-historian like David Hume were closely related to their publishers' realization that only a small format [such as octavo] could increase the number of sales and hence increase the author's influence."<sup>59</sup> The fact that Hume's writings were widely available in multiple languages and that Spinoza's writings had been prohibited in many places and thus were harder to find must have made a difference in the relative influence of their ideas.

Gjørwell made another point in the "publisher's preface" to Sven Lagerbring's *Sammandrag af Swea-rikes historia* (Summary of the history of the Kingdom of Sweden) of 1778–79. As Peter Hallberg writes, "Recognizing David Hume's dictum that all governments are founded 'on opinion only' and echoing Schönberg's notion of a 'superstructure,' Gjørwell maintained that history could become instrumental to change the hearts of a young generation that 'had imbibed Party venom with their very breath.'" After the restoration of strong monarchy in 1772, the Age of Liberty, with its excessive ferocity, "served as a reminder of a dark age to be avoided." Lagerbring himself asserted that "ever since the passing of the 1766 Ordinance for the Liberty of Printing . . . the reading public had almost been drowned in a flood of pamphlets and journals, the vast majority of which were submitted by prejudiced writers."<sup>60</sup> Lagerbring favored the nullification of the Ordinance by the change in the constitution of 1772. He viewed his own publication of a new and better history to be part of a necessary corrective to excessive press freedom.

There was no direct evidence of any philosophical influence in the extensive discussions by the committee that prepared the 1766 Ordinance; all specific references were to national legislation and practices, either in Sweden or abroad.<sup>61</sup> The only intellectual support that was produced during eleven months of deliberation was a reference to Gilbert Mabbot, English licenser of the press from 1647 to 1649. Mabbot resigned his office

<sup>58</sup> Hallberg, *Ages of Liberty*, 219.

<sup>59</sup> Cited in Hallberg, *Ages of Liberty*, 96.

<sup>60</sup> Hallberg, *Ages of Liberty*, 261, 263.

<sup>61</sup> The Third Committee 1765–66, minutes and appendices, R 3405, Riksarkivet/Swedish National Archives.

in May 1649 and three weeks later was called to account for his actions before Parliament. At that point he published a vindication in which he rejected the necessity of censorship.<sup>62</sup> In the committee's discussions Chydenius urged the Swedish censor Niclas von Oelreich to follow Mabbot's example and abolish his own office. The actual circumstances and Mabbot's motives were more ambiguous than Chydenius intimated (for one thing, the office of licenser of the press was not abolished at this point, and Mabbot stayed in office several months after his official dismissal; and he resumed his service in full a few years later), but the rather obscure episode served a rhetorical purpose and could not easily be countered. Chydenius used distant China to the same effect.<sup>63</sup> Why Mabbot—and not, for instance, Milton—was given the role as the great defender of the freedom of the press was quite circumstantial. Nordencrantz, who misleadingly called Mabbot “the first and last censor in England,” claimed to have translated a Danish edition of his vindication. Whether this was true or only served to strengthen his argument is not easy to determine; Nordencrantz nevertheless emphasized that Swedes, “as a free people,” should be informed of such properties of liberty “which are not denied the Danes, who live under an absolute rule.”<sup>64</sup> There was, of course, no freedom of the press in Denmark at that time—which Nordencrantz very well knew.

Mabbot's resignation was published again in 1768, in 1769, and in 1794, a circumstance that indicates that Mabbot's justification was a major inspiration for advocates of free speech in Sweden.<sup>65</sup> In all its simplicity it was probably one of the few known foreign texts that argued for the freedom of the press on principled grounds. One of Mabbot's arguments—that

<sup>62</sup> William M. Clyde, *The Struggle for Freedom of the Press from Caxton to Cromwell* (London: Humphrey Milford, 1934), 172–75; Frederick Seaton Siebert, *Freedom of the Press in England 1476–1776: The Rise and Decline of Government Control* (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1952), 217–18.

<sup>63</sup> Hilding Eek, “Om 1766 års tryckfrihetsförordning, dess tillkomst och betydelse i statutvecklingen,” *Statsvetenskaplig tidskrift* 46 (1943): 185–88; Virrankoski, *Anders Chydenius*, 188–89, 391; Skuncke, “Press Freedom in the Riksdag 1760–62 and 1765–66,” 114, 130–31.

<sup>64</sup> Anders Nordencrantz, *Förswar af Rikens höglofl. ständers och riksdagsmäns rättigheter* [. . .] (Stockholm: Nyström & Stolpe, 1761), 52–57.

<sup>65</sup> *Maboths ansökning hos parlamentet i England, at få nedlägga sitt censors-ämbete, såsom skadeligt för sanning och nationen. I från engelskan öfversatt* (Stockholm: Carl Stolpe, 1768); [Anders Nordencrantz], *Tankar om hemligheter, tyshets-eder, censurer, inquisitioner* [. . .], 1 (Stockholm: Ludvig Grefing, 1769), 74–79; “Mabot's Ansökning hos Parlamentet i England at få nedlägga sit Censors-Ämbete,” in *Skrifter af Sällskapet för allmänne medborgerlige kunskaper*, 1 (Stockholm: Johan A. Carlbohm, 1794), 122–31. The second publication was attributed to Chydenius by his contemporary Jonas Apelblad. It is said to have been translated from English, but the variations between all four

pre-censorship was needless as long as the author took full legal responsibility for his words after publication—was one of the supporting arguments for the 1766 Ordinance.

In short: any claim that philosophical ideas such as those of Spinoza and Hume were the most influential factors in the Swedish debates about freedom of the press would require so much qualification and contextualization as to essentially redefine the question. Hume's influence may have been more pervasive than Spinoza's, simply because he was more widely read, but their ideas were so deeply entwined with those of other thinkers as well as competing political forces and social change that only a complex account of these developments can fully account for the Swedish declaration of freedom of the press.

## CONCLUSION

Let us now return to our initial questions. Our investigation has demonstrated that while it is difficult to find any influence of Spinoza in Sweden, it is possible that he made some impression in Denmark, through Struensee. But we should avoid the idealistic view that confuses impression with impact. In both Denmark and Sweden we find far more references to Hume, who seems to have been acceptable to a wider range of intellectuals.

It might seem natural to look for a common reason why two neighboring Protestant countries in northern Europe issued laws on freedom of the press at nearly the same time. Upon a closer look, however, there is little resemblance between the two cases. In Sweden the need for freedom of the press had been discussed for several decades and was accepted in theory by a wide political spectrum, although opinions differed on how it was to be realized. At the Diet of 1760–62 various solutions, including voluntary censorship, had been presented. But, in the republican Swedish form of government, political decisions had to be reached by a compromise between the sentiments of four estates and two political parties. Denmark was Sweden's opposite, as the only codified absolute monarchy in Europe. Under such a regime politics was exercised through the discretion of the sovereign—or of his highest officials. A related example is Prussia, where Frederick the Great could declare press freedom one year, only to abolish it the next, and where the king had a very relaxed view of religious heterodoxy and dissension

---

editions are insignificant. The summary published by, e.g., Clyde and Siebert (see note 62), shows no similarities with the Swedish texts.

mostly because he was an atheist himself.<sup>66</sup> When freedom of the press was promulgated in Denmark it came as a bolt from the blue. No discussion had preceded the proclamation, which was the whim of one man, Struensee, a physician with radical ideas who suddenly found himself governing a monarchy. Even though press freedom was initially unrestricted, Struensee soon experienced the need for some instrument to attribute legal responsibility to authors. Accordingly, thirteen months after the first rescript a new decree declared that authors were legally responsible for anything that violated common law, that is, the same restriction that was already found in the Swedish ordinance.<sup>67</sup>

The immediate result of the freedom of the press was very similar in both countries. It gave birth to a rapid and large-scale increase in pamphleteering on various subjects, high and low. Those in power came under written attack. In Sweden, discontent was chiefly addressed against the aristocracy and their privileges, whereas in Denmark, the target was Struensee rather than his principal, the king. This eruption of disorderly opinions led many people to desire new curbs, and in both countries freedom of expression was restricted within a few years.

Both Denmark and Sweden also experienced political revolutions. Struensee was deposed and executed in early 1772. Half a year later King Gustav III carried out a coup d'état in Sweden and put an end to the Age of Liberty and party politics. Regardless of their true positions the new regimes in Copenhagen and in Stockholm were well aware that the fresh experience of freedom of expression was applauded by wide ranges of the population and they did not dare return to the status quo ante. In the end there were two steps forward and one step backward. Prior censorship was not reestablished in either realm, and despite various new restrictions the climate was more open than it had been before the intense freedom-of-the-press period in both Denmark and Sweden.

The two kingdoms had widely differing political systems and partly diverging intellectual climates, though they shared a Lutheran faith. Their examples show the diverse routes by which states might reach freedom of the press. They also show that it is too simple to ascribe intellectual influence to any single philosopher, be it Hume or Spinoza or anyone else. Rather, multiple streams of ideas formed the spirit of the times, helping give rise to a whole spectrum of ideas that might be labeled proto-liberal, presenting various solutions to similar problems.

---

<sup>66</sup> Tim Blanning, *Frederick the Great: King of Prussia* (London: Allen Lane, 2015), 319–26.

<sup>67</sup> Jakobsen, *Uanstændige, utilladelige og unyttige skrifter*, 172–79.

These examples also emphasize the importance of social and political context. A certain kind of political environment is required to establish freedom of expression in practice. Great Britain and The Netherlands were countries with a comparatively relaxed control of print already early in the eighteenth century. By the end of the century several states had formally legislated freedom of the press one way or the other. These included Sweden (1766), Virginia (1776), France (1789), and the United States, Geneva, and Poland (all 1791). All these states had republican forms of government, in the eighteenth-century understanding of the word; that is, they all had some sort of popular assembly or political nation that exercised a veto or checked the government in other ways. Politics in those countries was not solely based on authority from above, but also needed consent from below, which fostered the need for a public sphere capacious enough for a variety of opinions. Denmark is the exception that proves the rule. We would not expect freedom of the press in an absolute monarchy like Denmark's. Indeed, it would most certainly not have been brought about if not for Struensee's haphazard intervention. However, a free press suited the already established idea of opinion-guided absolutism, and a too strong reaction against what was officially King Christian VII's decree would have been a contradiction of this cherished idea. All future restrictions therefore needed to be carefully worded and prudently implemented. While still adhering to the concept of freedom of the press the regime tightened its grip on the press bit by bit. On the other hand, the intellectual landscape had been fundamentally transformed by the unrestricted freedom of the press in 1770–73: the public sphere was extended, news distribution was improved, and the topics accessible for public debate had multiplied. Although there were several setbacks, especially after 1799, this trend was irreversible and "opinion-guided absolutism" was now probably more effective and less of a theoretical concept than it had been before 1770.<sup>68</sup>

Our review of the ideas and practices behind the two Scandinavian declarations of freedom of the press tends to confirm John Robertson's view that when we talk about "the Enlightenment" we are talking about a wide mix of ideas, political interests and forces, as well as economic factors that cannot be simplified into a handful of key ideas of a handful of thinkers.<sup>69</sup> A

<sup>68</sup> Horstbøll, "Anonymiteten, trykkefriheden og forfatterrollens forandring i 1700-tallets Danmark," *Lychnos: Årsbok för idé och lärdomshistoria* (2010): 147–61; Rian, *Sensuren i Danmark-Norge*, 311–30; Krefting et al., *En pokkers skrivesyge*, 255–82. See also Laursen, "Censorship in the Nordic Countries, ca. 1750–1890: Transformations in Law, Theory and Practice," *Journal of Modern European History* 3 (2005): 100–116.

<sup>69</sup> John Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples, 1680–1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

decade ago, Michael Sonenscher's book attributed the origins of the French Revolution to a combination of public debt, inequality, and ideas, and our analysis tends to confirm the similarly interdependent mix of politics and ideas that led to Scandinavian freedom of the press.<sup>70</sup> A wide variety of intellectual inputs and a wide variety of social and political circumstances led to freedom of the press in mid- and late-eighteenth-century Europe. Among prominent philosophers, Hume seems to have been the most important, and the idea was by no means limited to self-described or later-described radicals. This modulated and context-sensitive explanation may also help to explain other liberal changes of the era.

Lund University, Sweden  
University of California, Riverside.

---

<sup>70</sup> Michael Sonenscher, *Before the Deluge: Public Debt, Inequality, and the Intellectual Origins of the French Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

Copyright of Journal of the History of Ideas is the property of University of Pennsylvania Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.