



## Media framing of aquaculture

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### ABSTRACT

Norway is the world's largest producer of farmed salmon. Aquaculture is the country's second largest export industry and thus vital for employment in coastal areas of Norway. The industry is dependent on public acceptance and good standing in local communities in order to gain access to new sites and to be able to sell its product. Public opinion (and assumptions about public opinion) on aquaculture may influence the industry's framework conditions and policy. Being located in coastal and rural areas, the industry must rely on the media to spread information to the public about the industry. Therefore, the media are an important source of information about farmed salmon, and the way the media present aquaculture issues has an impact on public opinion as well as authorities. This article examines how the aquaculture industry is portrayed in Norwegian newspapers and discusses how media topics and media framing may influence public opinion. The analysis shows that the most frequent topics covered in Norwegian newspapers are connected to the environment, aquaculture industry, and politics, where the concerns about the environment are dominant within the risk frame. The negative images portrayed by the media have a strong agenda-setting force and may skew public opinion to a narrow focus on environmental risks, influencing both the debate's content and the regulators' increased emphasis on environmental risks. This is strengthened further by the focus on sustainability, where the focus is solely on the dimension of environment, making other sustainability dimensions less prominent in the media coverage.

### 1. Introduction

“Four hostile newspapers are more to be feared than a thousand bayonets.” – Napoléon Bonaparte [1], p. 11.

Norway is the world's largest producer of farmed Atlantic salmon (*Salmo salar*), and the aquaculture industry<sup>1</sup> is one of the largest export industries in the country. The industry is an important contributor of value creation and employment in the coastal areas of Norway. To maintain and increase current production levels, the industry is dependent on access to favorable production sites. Local communities are first-line gatekeepers approving or denying access to sites in local coastal waters, and public acceptance and good standing in local communities therefore is important. The industry also is dependent on its image or reputation, as represented in news media and manifested in the general public opinion (national and worldwide) to be able to market and sell its product. Furthermore, media coverage and public opinion on aquaculture may influence politicians and regulatory authorities, impacting on the industry's framework condi-

tions as conditioned by a supportive governance system.

Public opinion is a challenging object to study. In relation to aquaculture, however, media representations have been used to study public perception and to uncover different media framings [2–5]. On the relatively specialized topic of aquaculture, it is useful to know what information is available to the public. Understanding the content of newspaper articles cannot inform us about people's view on aquaculture, but it can provide an idea of the issues people may think about when considering the aquaculture industry. In the case of aquaculture, this does not suggest that the media have the impact to tell people exactly *what to think*, but the media can be quite successful in telling the people *what to think about*. When it comes to fish farming in Norway, the media's issue agenda (what issues are put on the agenda) and coverage (how they report on these issues) of aquaculture industry is central in informing the public of prominent issues and debates. This is strengthened further by the fact that most people do not have the opportunity to learn about aquaculture from firsthand experience because the industry is located in rural areas with production out in

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<sup>1</sup> The focus in this article is limited to the Norwegian salmon farming industry/aquaculture industry producing salmon. Both aquaculture and fish farming are concepts used interchangeably in the current literature, and this article will continue using both concepts, however, focusing solely on the production of salmon.

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open waters.

Mass media plays a key role in structuring and dominating the public sphere and is one of the most used and preferred information sources as well as being characterized as the “watch dog” or the “fourth power” of government [6,7]. Media information related to farmed salmon, such as food health issues, can influence public opinion and consumers’ decisions and perception with respect to the aquaculture industry [8]. There are several examples of media controversy over foods, and farmed salmon is no exception [4,9,10]. Consumers are exposed to numerous, and often contradictory, messages with respect to issues such as food safety and environmental conflicts. Competing claims can put consumers in difficult positions when weighing risks and benefits of aquaculture production [11], and there are concerns about the mass media’s role as “meaning-makers” [12,13]. A demonstration of the media’s influence on people’s perception is the media storm that erupted after a research study stated that farmed salmon contained more health-threatening pollutants than wild salmon. This had an immediate impact in the media, in addition to impact on the public. Later, however, experts reached different conclusions (due to differences in choices of data), but these results were not as publicized as those from the other study [9,14]. This demonstrates the power of what Flyvbjerg [7] describes as tension points, meaning points of potential conflict, that are particularly interesting to the public and media. Tension points are of great interest to media as these conflicts tend to make good stories when focusing on power and dubious practices.

In addition to public opinion and perception of the aquaculture industry, citizens’ political priorities can be determined by media agendas and this has ramifications [15]. If people believe the industry has negative impacts on the environment and human health, the public will demand a better regulated industry (e.g., citizens would want politicians to act upon these issues, or in other words, control the industry better). The media coverage of an issue therefore may have an impact on the public’s demand for (politically) solving an issue. The media also are involved in indirect attempts to influence policy [16]. Goldenberg, cited in Ashmoore, Evensen, Clarke, Krakower, and Simon [1], p. 239, said, “Through the media, issues are frequently brought to the attention of the public and governmental officials.” News coverage is used for many purposes, and to gain a hearing in the political process and attain the political agenda is one of them. In such ways the media are the key access point to public officials for all (interest) groups. It is recognized that media agenda is the journalists and newspapers way to inject their voices into the news, although the media agenda itself is also a subject influenced by politicians, government officials, stakeholders, the public, and scientists attempting to shape or manipulate the media [7,17]. On the other hand, the market also creates a tension between media civic responsibilities and media profit motive. As a result of this tension the media could be forced to value audience size over news content, resulting in content that sells rather than content that informs [17]. Influences from the market as well as from various stakeholders are important in shaping the media agenda. However, within the scope of this article the media content is seen as an expression of media agenda, independent from various stakeholder agendas and their possible influence on media.

Newspaper articles from nine newspapers in 2012–2014 were examined and the content analyses show how the media represent salmon aquaculture and how this coverage potentially could influence the public. This study focuses on the information made available to the public as a signal of what the public might think about aquaculture; the design of the study and the dataset is able only to suggest potential rather than real/demonstrated media effects on public opinion. On the basis of previous studies documenting how media affect opinion, however, this paper examines how media coverage can potentially shape public opinion related to Norwegian aquaculture in “an era in which the media have become such a crucial dimension of the political game” [13]. In this study, the focus is on how the news media in

Norway inform the public on the aquaculture industry and the issues connected with salmon farming. How is public opinion subject to media framing and agenda setting? What are the prominent topics, frames, and positions in the media coverage of Norwegian aquaculture industry, and what can we infer on the impact on public opinion?

This paper is structured as follows: after a brief introduction, Section 2 elaborates the ongoing debates on aquaculture and the challenges facing the industry. Section 3 presents how the media influence both public opinion and government management of the aquaculture industry. In this section, the concepts of discourse, agenda setting, and framing are elaborated. Methods and materials are outlined in Section 4, while results and discussion of media coverage is presented in Section 5. Conclusions are in the final section.

## 2. Aquaculture in Norway and ongoing debates

With the development of modern aquaculture, and salmon aquaculture in particular, a range of controversial issues has emerged. Aquaculture is seen as both the most promising and the most controversial new industry [11]. In the debate on aquaculture, there are several master themes, and the controversy on aquaculture is complex and multidimensional, facing competing claims from a range of different actors. However, one can observe a pattern revolving around issues connected to environment, human health, rights, and rural development [11].

In Norway, fish farming has been a recurring topic of debate. Interestingly, although salmon as a product has a fairly good reputation, the aquaculture industry for several years has struggled with bad publicity and a poor reputation [18]. The ongoing debates are marked by concerns about the sustainability of the aquaculture industry and in particular the environmental sustainability. Aquaculture is related to a range of environmental risks, such as negative impacts on biodiversity, fish escapes, and challenges with salmon lice and lice treatments. In addition, the industry faces other challenges (e.g., availability of suitable locations, concerns for fish welfare, and use of fish-based feed). To be able to grow and to maintain its position as a major player in global food production, the industry needs to foster a favorable public image [2,3] and is dependent on broad public acceptance. Such acceptance and a positive public opinion, in turn, will affect the industry’s critical framework conditions such as access to suitable and productive sites, predictable rules and regulations, room for innovation, access to markets, and favorable logistics.

## 3. Media and public opinions role in shaping aquaculture regulation and reputation

It is evident that the media have an impact on public opinion [3,19,20], but the degree of media influence remains a matter of debate and uncertainty. The media are an important part of people’s news information, and citizens are highly dependent upon the media for public affairs information [15,16]. Political knowledge and images of our modern society (our reality) are created primarily through individual contact with the media rather than direct experience, and we live in what Johnson-Cartee [16] calls a mass-mediated reality. We construct meaning in a process often dominated by the mass media, and the media work hard to ensure that the public understand the content by delivering sharp and simple stories, along with pictures to present a strong visual impact [21]. Traditionally, the effect of mass media influence can be divided into two levels: micro-effects, or those effects related to an individual, and macro-effects, those effects related to society at large. Micro-effects can be seen as influences on an individual’s knowledge, actions, or emotional responses to what is known, while macro-effects can be seen as influences that either maintain existing structures and behaviors in society or allow society to change or evolve [16].

Media coverage influences public perception and subsequent con-

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