

# HENRIK IBSEN STUDIED BY MEANS OF THE INTERNET AND UNDERSTOOD IN RELATION TO RESEARCH ABOUT THE INTERNET

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper I will present new perspectives in Ibsen studies as examples of research in humanities both conducted by means of the Internet and interpreted and understood in relation to research about the Internet.

In the first part of the paper I will present new knowledge of Ibsen's background based on the research conducted by means of the digital archives on the Internet. In the second part I will try to give a better understanding of Ibsen's development as an artist by using perspectives, theories and methods from research about the Internet.

**Key words:** Facebook, Henrik Ibsen, Internet research

## INTRODUCTION

Norway is a small nation in the north-western corner of Europe. No wonder that just a few Norwegians have won worldwide attention. The most successful of all Norwegians was Henrik Ibsen. Today he is the most staged playwright in the world – after William Shakespeare.

A challenging question is how it was possible for H. Ibsen to get this position without the advantage of the world language and the worldwide colonial power, as W. Shakespeare had. How was this possible for an author writing in a language, which was understandable only by a few millions of his countrymen and –women in addition to most Danes and a few neighbouring Swedes?

Or from a contemporary point of view: How could H. Ibsen get a worldwide importance before the worldwide web?

In this paper I will try to give an answer to this question in three steps: Did H. Ibsen have special conditions, which he could utilize to get a position – which again gave him an expanded importance?

To try to answer this three-fold question I will both apply research provided by means of the Internet and transform designs and results from research about the use of Internet.

**NEW RESEARCH ON IBSEN'S BACKGROUND PROVIDED  
BY MEANS OF THE INTERNET**

Johan Kielland Bergwitz published the only study of Ibsen's genealogy a hundred years ago (Bergwitz, 1916). The study was biased because the author's intention was to prove that Ibsen's family background was Norwegian. It was in addition limited to what the author personally and actually could find in the archives.

Except a local study of Ibsen's family relations in the community Ulefoss, published 20 years ago (Høgvoll, & Bærland, 1996), we have had very limited and rather uncertain knowledge of Ibsen's background. Most biographies and studies on H. Ibsen have been based on J.K. Bergwitz or even been just speculations and suggestions based on what might have been or could have been the case.

Now, however, new possibilities are opened. All the material in the national archives in Norway can be searched both in a Norwegian and an English version (*Digital Archives*). In addition all the material in the National Library of Norway (Nasjonalbiblioteket) will be digitised with open access provided by the Internet. It is therefore now possible both to correct J. K. Bergwitz' and to fill in all the blank areas in his presentation both by searching in the *Digital Archives* for digitised censuses; parish registers for baptism, marriage and death, as well as real estate registers; public records for mortgage and taxation; landed property tax records; tax lists and legal proceedings and sanctions. All these digitised sources can be searched both for individuals and properties and information from all the digitised archives in Norway can be combined.

Based on the Digital Archives it is now possible to perform a total revision of all "established facts" about Ibsen's life and background. In most cases the new information provided by using the Internet has actually revealed that what has generally been known and accepted as facts – has on the contrary just been myths or pure invention.

Contrary to the established understanding of Norway as a poor, underdeveloped country of farmers, Ibsen's background was radically different. On his father's side H. Ibsen had no Norwegian farmers among his ancestors. On his mother's side we find the first farmer 15 generations earlier – in the mid 1400s. Against J. K. Bergwitz' claim that H. Ibsen was a Norwegian, most of his ancestors on both sides of his family had been foreign specialists and entrepreneurs bringing into Norway new technology and knowledge, being for generations managers at saw mills and iron-works, higher civil servants, merchants and ships captains (Nygaard, 2013, 2016). The Norway of his forefathers and –mothers was not at all backward as generally suggested (Meyer, 1971; Rønning, 2006; Moi, 2006; Figueiredo, 2006), but dynamic and always open to the most developed parts of Europe (Christensen, 1996).

This was especially prominent in his birth town Skien, which was not at all an unimportant coastal town, as it has been described (Gosse, 1907; Meyer, 1971), but it had over hundreds of years had a dominant position both as a civic centre and a centre for trade and industry. Most probably Skien is actually the oldest town in Norway and the only town founded exclusively on trade and export. When H. Ibsen was born many of the most important families in Norway were living in the town and in its surroundings and the H. Ibsen family was related to all of them, as

Ibsen underlined in a letter to the Danish critic Georg Brandes (HU XVII, p. 484).

During and after the Napoleonic Wars, however, when Norway was shut off from England, its most important market, almost all the members of the rich upper class in Norway went bankrupt. It was therefore not only his father who had to give up the upper class life in Skien and move out to a farm in the surrounding countryside. All the rich families moved out of town, in Skien as well as in other towns in Southern Norway. The patrician class in Skien survived actually better and longer than in other towns, as in the capital Christiania (Oslo). Ibsen's father also ran his business much longer than his fellow members of the merchant class in Skien. The year of disaster in Skien was in 1828, the year H. Ibsen was born. His father, however, continued his business eight years longer, until 1836.

Which means that H. Ibsen in his childhood both experienced the summit and the fall of the patrician upper class. This experience was an important condition for his later turn to be a professional artist, first as a theatre director and manager and then as a playwright.

Not only H. Ibsen, but also other young boys in his related family with the same age, background and experience as him, became professional artists. Ibsen's second cousin, August Cappelen, became an important national romantic painter who unfortunately died young. His cousin again, Severin Herman Løvenskiold, became a composer, among others of the music to *Giselle*, the Danish national ballet

To reason why upper class boys, like H. Ibsen and his contemporary relative A. Cappelen and his relative again S.J. Løvenskiold, became professional artist when their class went bankrupt and lost its economic capital, can be explained by Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu, 1984). People of the similar social class share habitus as a system of embodied dispositions and ways of interaction with the social world. All the Cappelens, Løvenskiolds and also H. Ibsen's ancestors had been adaptive and in Bourdieu's concepts always able to *convert* their *social* and *cultural capital* and find other options to ensure their social position and income. Instead of strange speculations on the influence of his German or Scottish "blood" it is more fruitful to underline H. Ibsen's special social condition and position. He was born into the patrician upper class. When this class lost its economic basis, he found a new basis when arts like the theatre and literature turned from being an upper class entertainment to be a profession. As a professional artist he could both convert his social and cultural capital, but more important, because of the expanding book market in Norway and Scandinavia he could also considerably reinforce his economic capital. Because he could take advantage of these new opportunities, Ibsen became the most successful Norwegian ever.

#### **HOW COULD IBSEN ESTABLISH A SOCIAL NETWORK AND CONSTRUCT HIMSELF AS AN INTERNATIONALLY WELL-KNOWN ARTIST?**

H. Ibsen was not born to be an artist, as Hans Heiberg (1967) has suggested. He did not from his early childhood have an urge to be the playwright he later became, as Haldvan Koht (1828, 1854) has claimed. But he had special conditions, which he could utilize to get an expanded importance.

To understand how H. Ibsen established or constructed himself as an artist, I find it relevant to use theories and methods from studies about the Internet. First of all I will discuss H. Ibsen in relation to studies about social networks, construction and co-construction of identity and about how a desired identity again is applied to get a global audience.

Today teenagers have been the first to take social network sites to heart. In studies of how young people today practice friendship, Malene Charlotte Larsen (2008, 2009) has found that social network sites are used as part of everyday teenage life to maintain social relations and are an integral part of the young users' friendships and social lives. This means that even if they could have Facebook friends all over the world, their Facebook friends are just their everyday friends. Facebook and other social network sites are not in addition to or a substitute for social relations. With reference to other studies (Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2006; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Boyd, 2007) and her own study (Larsen, 2005) M. Ch. Larsen underlines that social network sites are related to their "offline" life and their social relations to their closest friends. They are therefore not concerned about whether they communicate online or offline. The most important relation is face-to-face. Their friends on social networks are based on existing friendships and not on general interest (Larsen, 2008, pp. 46-47). In accordance with Stig Hjarvard (2005), she concludes that for children and young people the Internet is first of all a social technology.

Even today, when they seemingly have access to the whole world, teenagers are first of all social and the social relations are more crucial for them than general interests. M. Ch. Larsen's studies of teenagers today, are, however, also important for understanding Ibsen's situation as a teenager.

Most Ibsen scholars have underlined that after the family moved out of Skien to the farm Venstøb, he was isolated and withdrawn both from the other siblings and from the boys of his age in the neighbourhood. The reason was according to the established Ibsen scholarship that H. Ibsen already in his childhood years had special interests as his puppet theatre and reading and many have even claimed that he already as a teenager was an eager theatregoer (Mosfeld, 1949; Larsson 1999). This explanation seems obvious if we take it for granted that he was born to be an artist and accordingly from the earliest years had an urge for literature and theatre.

We know that the other boys gave him a beating because they found him snobbish and stuck-up. We also know that he knew proper behaviour and was reported to be quite a dancer. This was again a result of his experience in the first years of his childhood, when upper class Skien was still extremely happy and social – as he tells in his draft for an autobiography (HU XV, p. 369). Against this background young H. Ibsen was not necessarily lonely and isolated and without social contact in his Venstøb years, as generally granted. But he belonged to another social network and had other social values than his siblings and neighbours. Even after the family had moved out of Skien, H. Ibsen was representing the social values of the patrician class.

Contrary to the general understanding, as recently presented by Jørgen Haugan (2014), young H. Ibsen did not lose contact with his friends in Skien when the family moved out of town. His best friends were the two brothers Lieungh, who

were still living in Skien town. Of these two friends, Hedevald, just as H. Ibsen himself, started as an apprentice in a pharmacy. Hedevald went to Hønefoss, north west of Christiania (Oslo), Henrik to Grimstad on the Southern coast of Norway.

Ibsen's social construction or "face" as a patrician was strongly underlined when he as a young boy arrived in Grimstad in his evening dress. Then and later he was always extremely concerned about his appearance. He was eagerly searching for orders and decorations and positions of honour. In his mature years he had in front of his writing desk a painting of himself as honorary doctor at Uppsala University decorated with the order of the khedive of Cairo. From the start of his career he was regularly distributing photos of himself to a variety of receivers as theatre managers, literary critics, possible translators, cultural and official persons. He was known as a bad letter writer, but still his correspondence circle numbered, according to Narve Fulsås (2013), more than 1500 persons. Peter Larsen (2013) has also presented how Ibsen distributed photos of himself to establish social networks and in promotion of himself and his writing.

All this resembles all kinds of self-presentations on Facebook today. It was not necessarily an expression of narcissism, but it had a fundamental social purpose. It was all elements in his construction of himself as a special individual, as a prominent artist.

Despite the general understanding that he was shy and timid and avoided social attention, H. Ibsen was actually a social genius, because of his patrician background and proper training in refined behaviour. He was always able to find the right friends and important helpers – and he was able to meet the most prominent figures of his time. Before Facebook and Internet he could therefore establish himself as an internationally known person.

Instead of describing his early years in Grimstad as banishment, as generally is the case, these years were the start of Ibsen's brilliant career and his ability to pick the right friends. The most important was Ole Schulerud who gave him the idea of writing a drama and have it submitted to the Christiania Theatre. When H. Ibsen later moved to Christiania (Oslo) he immediately met with Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, Aasmund Vinje and Jonas Lie, all three to be prominent Norwegian authors and promoters for Ibsen's further development as an artist. In Christiania H. Ibsen contributed with a prologue and a song to a festival night to support the newly established Norwegian Theatre in Bergen. The representative of the theatre, the world famous violinist Ole Bull, was so impressed by H. Ibsen that he offered him a position at the theatre. The very next morning O. Bull and H. Ibsen embarked the ship to Bergen. In Bergen they soon found out that H. Ibsen had no theatre training and knowledge at all so he got a scholarship to study theatre in Copenhagen and Dresden. In Copenhagen he of course met with Hans Christian Andersen, the most famous Dane, ever. Five years later, in the age of 29, he was called to the position as manager at the Norwegian Theatre in Christiania. Ten years later, after publishing *Peer Gynt*, he was already established as a celebrated author in Scandinavia and was because of that appointed to be the official representative of the Swedish and Norwegian king at the grand opening of the Suez channel in 1869. From then on, he was world famous.

## CONCLUSION

In the paper I have tried to answer the question how it was possible for Henrik Ibsen, coming from a small country and language group in the outskirts of Europe, to win world wide fame and become the most staged playwright in the world – after William Shakespeare.

My answer has been based on both research by means of the Internet and an interpretation and understanding in relation to research about the Internet.

By means of the Internet, the Norwegian Digital Archive, it has been possible to revise the general understanding of H. Ibsen and his social background. He was born into an upper class family and in his childhood he experienced both the summit and the fall of the upper class. This experience was an important condition for his later turn to be a professional artist. And not only H. Ibsen, but also other young boys in his related family and neighbourhood with the same age, background and experience as him, became professional artists.

Understood in relation to contemporary research about how young people today use the Internet, first of all Facebook, we can see how young H. Ibsen also constructed or created a desired identity to get important friends who again supported and helped him to get the necessary positions which later gave him a worldwide fame and audience. Because of his patrician background and proper training in refined behaviour Ibsen was actually a social genius. And long before Facebook he knew how to distribute his face by sending photos and notes, "likes", to a systematically established system of important "friends".

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