

The Co-operative Movement and its Press

To Broaden the Horizon

Reflections on the Aims and Problems of  
a Consumer Co-operative Journal in Sweden

by

NILS THEDIN

(Vice-President, KF,  
Head of Education & Information Division)

The consumer co-operative movement in Sweden runs a great number of papers and journals. Some of these are published by KF, the Swedish Co-operative Union and Wholesale Society. Best known among these publications are:-

Kooperatören, The Co-operator, which is the official organ of the movement, a journal for co-operative and economic information and debate. Its circulation is around 11,000 copies a month.

Vi, the weekly paper We, which is a journal for consumer information, social and cultural reporting, good entertainment and at the same time the champion of consumer co-operation in the general debate. It has a circulation of 323,000 copies, which means that it is one of the largest Swedish journals but that it reaches only 20% of the co-operative membership.

Vår Tidning, Our Paper, a journal for the co-operative employees, with a circulation of 40,000 copies a month.

Other periodicals are published by local co-operative societies and distributed to members free

of charge, by mail or through the co-operative stores. The most important of these is the fortnightly of the Stockholm Co-operative Society, Storstaden, with a circulation of 240,000 copies.

There are also a number of papers which are published by various co-operative enterprises, mainly intended for the employees.

But consumer co-operation is only one part of the total co-operative sector in Sweden. The agricultural co-operative movement, the housing co-operative movement, the co-operative oil and motor-owners' movement, the co-operative insurance society - all these various organizations have journals of their own, often with large circulation and a considerable influence on public opinion.

A survey of the co-operative press in Sweden would therefore tend to become an enumeration of dozens and dozens of periodicals, with different tasks, target groups, technical standards, circulation figures, etc. And such a list would make a tedious reading.

Therefore, let me try to illustrate some of the problems of the co-operative press by referring mainly to one periodical, namely the weekly paper Vi. It has of course its own aims and ambitions, it has its own problems, successes, failures. It is by no means typical of the whole co-operative press in Sweden. But it may illustrate some of the ambitions and difficulties that a co-operative movement is confronted with in its press policy.

### Fighting for the Movement

Let me start this case study by recalling one of the most dramatic moments in the history of

Swedish co-operation. When the fourth annual Congress of the Swedish Co-operative Union, KF, met in 1903, the prospects of the movement seemed very gloomy. A Co-operative Wholesale Society had been started a couple of years earlier, but now it had gone bankrupt. In a letter to the general secretary of KF, the manager of the Wholesale described the situation in these terms:-

"Our Wholesale is doomed. The societies are too weak to help. Many of them could not raise one shilling to pay for goods already delivered, even if we were to threaten them with a lawsuit. This has been the bitterest disappointment of my life. Our dream is ended!"

Yes, many feared that the movement would be unable to survive this cruel failure. In fact the 1903 Congress, representing 53 societies with 12,500 members, had to decide whether KF should be dissolved or continue its work! In spite of all the difficulties, however, delegates unanimously decided to fight on.

But how? What measures should be taken?

Two decisions, relating to the future, were of special importance.

One was to assist the societies in their purchasing by placing a consultant at their disposal. Thus, the Union itself started operations as an agency, which gradually developed into a wholesale. This was the humble beginning of the economic activities of KF - today Sweden's largest enterprise.

The other decision concerned the moral strength of the movement. It was obvious that the failure of the Wholesale Society had been a severe shock to the co-operators. Something had to be done in order to

inspire new confidence among them, and to this end it was considered essential to start a co-operative journal. The objectives of this new journal were obvious. It was necessary to give them information and advice in order to improve the management of the societies.

Kooperatören, The Co-operator, was started in 1904. Even if, from a technical point of view, this was a very humble publication, the content was bold enough. And it was indeed imperative that the organ of the co-operative movement should inspire confidence by its visions, by its attacks on the private profit system, by its arguments for co-operative democracy. The movement was still weak, the co-operative shops were small, the assortment restricted and poor. But the movement had great potential possibilities, and private merchants were already worried. Very soon boycott actions were taken against the co-operatives. KF had to fight. And in this struggle, the co-operative journal was one of the important weapons. In 1909 KF bought a margarine factory in order to counteract the boycott action by the margarine cartel against the movement. Once again, it was a question of life and death. The quality of the co-operative margarine was certainly not the very best, but that was of minor importance. To buy margarine, as well as other commodities, in the co-operative shop was to participate in the fight against a system which exploited the consumers. And it was this truth that the co-operative journal had to disseminate.

But it had already become evident that it was too difficult to combine technical advice to co-operative managers and elected officers with popular information and propaganda intended for the ordinary member. At that time Great Britain already had a differentiated and, comparatively speaking, widely distributed co-operative press. So was the case in

some countries on the continent. It was to these countries that the Swedish co-operators looked for inspiration. The model, which served as an example, was to have one specialized journal designed for elected officers and managers, and one propaganda and information journal for the members.

The Swedish co-operators followed this pattern. The Co-operator served the first purpose, and in 1913 a first issue of a members journal, Konsumentbladet, The Consumer's Paper, was published.

The Consumer's Paper had many different tasks. It should give advice on consumer problems, for instance in the form of practical information on household matters for the housewife. It should carry entertainment stuff. But first and foremost: it should be the propaganda organ of the co-operative movement. A young, weak, fighting movement needs an aggressive journal which endeavours to convince people of the potential of the co-operative movement in the struggle for economic justice and democracy.

### A Turning Point

Still it can be said that The Consumer's Paper, in spite of growing circulation, was of importance mainly to the co-operators themselves. Its programme was limited, its aims were restricted.

Did not the co-operative movement also have a cultural responsibility? KF had been one of the founders of the Workers' Educational Association in 1912. How should this ambition be reflected in its press policy?

The editor of The Consumer's Paper, Axel Gjöres, in 1924 proposed to the Board of Directors and the Advisory Council that KF should start a new journal, which would compete with the commercial weeklies by

publishing entertainment material of high cultural value. The proposal was not accepted. The Board and the Council were more interested in the propaganda objectives of the co-operative press. And as a consequence, Axel Gjöres decided to change The Consumer's Paper, by bringing in more entertainment stuff of high quality. He approached a number of young authors, most of them self-taught men and women from the labour class. They were looking for a literary forum, Axel Gjöres was eager to get good collaborators, who understood the problems and the needs of the broad masses of the population. And thus, the co-operative paper got a new dimension. It became a literary journal at the same time as it was a propaganda organ.

In a doctor's thesis on the co-operative paper Vi it is maintained that this was perhaps the most important change that had taken place within the Swedish co-operative press. It did not only demonstrate the fact that the co-operative movement has a cultural responsibility, that it is something more than an organization for the production and distribution of consumer goods. It also demonstrated the fact that a popular movement can publish a journal which gets general recognition as one of the best and most influential publications of the country.

The editorial credo of the journal, which in 1937 changed its name to Vi (We) was formulated in the following way:

To entertain and amuse without dulling the intellect.

To reflect contemporary reality, but never falsify it.

To act as a link with the cultural tradition, but never romanticize the past.

To follow the battle of ideas, but never relinquish its demand for the freedom of the individual.

To endeavour to broaden the horizon.

Nothing is said about co-operation in this declaration. It is a cultural and democratic programme. In this respect it did not reflect the true character of Vi, because the paper certainly continued to act as a powerful propaganda organ of the co-operative movement.

And it had an astounding success. With a circulation of over 500,000 copies a week (in the 1940's), it was Sweden's largest paper. The price was low, the costs for KF and the local societies were almost insignificant.

### A Vicious Circle

At this time, however, difficulties began to crop up. They were mainly due to increasing costs. At a time when the cost of printing, of paper and of postage went up steadily it was necessary to take a difficult decision: should these costs be covered by the subscription price or should KF subsidise the paper to such an extent that its price could still be kept at a very low level. The decision was to let the subscribers pay the increased costs. The argument for this was that those who were really interested in the paper would continue to buy it. The important thing, after all, is not the circulation of the paper but the number of readers.

As the costs went up, however, it seemed meaningless for the local societies to continue to subsidise the paper. Consequently, the price went up even faster, as these subsidies disappeared too. Circulation decreased, and this in its turn increased

the price per copy. Vi was caught in a vicious circle of increasing costs and diminishing circulation. Some of the larger local societies at this stage found it necessary to publish their own papers which were distributed free of charge to members, either through the stores or by mail. Vi, as a members' journal, was consequently confronted with a growing competition.

An effort was made at this stage to make the paper more attractive to the general public by augmenting the number of pages, improving the technical quality, and devoting a larger part of the contents to practical consumer information and advice. The extra costs for this, amounting to 5-7 million kronor a year, were borne by KF. The effect of these measures was not so significant, however, as one could have hoped for. Probably the measures were taken too late. It is much more difficult to increase the circulation of a paper than to prevent the decrease by vigorous measures, taken at an early stage.

The change was not, however, only of an editorial and a technical nature. It also involved a fundamental change in the relations between the editor and the leading organs of KF. It is true that the editor and his staff had always been independent. No censorship had been exerted over the paper. It had always been taken for granted, however, that the paper should in the first place be an organ of KF and the societies, that it should propagate co-operative products, defend co-operative policies, refute criticism against the movement.

But more and more strongly the co-operative movement had claimed to be "the interest organization of the consumers"; not only a consumer owned enterprise, but an organization in the defence of consumer interests in all fields.

What is the role of a journal in an organization with these ambitions? Obviously not to defend the commercial activities of the movement in all weathers! The co-operative paper should not be a propaganda organ for co-operative products and enterprises. It should be the defendant of consumer interests.

This was also recognized by the Advisory Council and the Executive Board of KF. The tasks of Vi were formulated as follows (1966):-

- "1. The weekly paper Vi shall be an instrument for contact and information, serving the co-operative democracy. It shall inform the reader about the ideas and objectives of the co-operative movement, about its local, social and international activities, about the problems the movement may encounter and the society in which it works.
- "2. The weekly paper Vi shall, as a consumer organ, serve the interests of the households, partly by giving objective and meaningful information about goods and services, partly by representing the household interest in various social, economical and cultural matters.
- "3. The weekly paper Vi shall be an effective mouth-piece for the co-operative movement, which works in hard competition with other forms of enterprise

This might seem quite self-evident, acceptable to any co-operative movement. But what is the practical interpretation of the second paragraph? This has been explained in a special instruction for the editor of Vi. The relevant paragraphs in this instruction run as follows:-

"The editor works within the frame of objectives, which has been decided for the paper by the Board of KF

The paper shall express the fundamental opinions that KF has as a consumer movement, but in current matters the paper can express its own view within the frame of fundamental opinions.

"The paper is a consumers' organ, which puts forward the consumers' views on social, economical and cultural questions in order to look after the consumers' interests and contribute to an increased consumer awareness.

"In such cases, where opposite interests in certain matters may arise between the co-operative movement as a sales organization and the consumers, it is important that the paper represents the consumers' interests. Thus the paper's function as a consumer organ within the co-operative movement is further stressed, and the paper acts as a supplement to the democratic bodies of the co-operative movement."

#### Enquiry into the Problems of the Co-operative Press

As a consequence of the declining circulation of Vi it was deemed necessary to make an investigation into the problems of the whole consumer co-operative press. An expert together with an advisory committee was charged with this delicate and complicated task in 1970. Two years later his report was published. It was sent out to the local co-operative societies, which were invited to present their opinions on the findings and recommendations of the report. As regards Vi, the report presented two alternatives. One was to change the paper into a fortnightly, but to retain its actual form as a process-printed photo-gravure magazine of high technical quality. The other alternative was to publish a technically cheap tabloid paper in offset print with 22 issues a year, to be distributed free of charge to the members by the local societies.

However, the replies from the societies and various member groups showed that Vi in its actual form had a very strong position in Swedish opinion and represented a considerable goodwill value to the co-operative movement. It was therefore decided by the Executive Board, and confirmed by Congress, that the paper Vi should be retained as a process-printed photogravure magazine of high quality. The major part of the costs should continue to be paid for by the subscribers. (For 1977 the subscription price for members will be 65 kronor or approximately £8). But KF should contribute with annual subsidies of approximately 5 million kronor.

It has to be accepted that the circulation of the paper is limited to 300,000 - 400,000 copies (the present circulation is 323,000). A consequence of this is that the larger co-operative societies issue their own papers, which are distributed free of charge to the members.

But Vi is still the co-operative paper for a large number of co-operators, influencing opinion in consumer questions and economic affairs. In the report of the Committee on a "Co-operative Programme of Action", published in 1974 and adopted by Congress in 1976 (with fairly few alterations), the general principles governing the editing of Vi were confirmed. The paper is a consumers' journal, independently edited, supporting the principles of the co-operative movement but free to criticize their application in practical life.

This has also been the case. In several important questions, Vi has published constructive criticism. One example, given in the Committee report, concerns the attitude towards fashions. Vi criticized the movement for being subservient to the

fashion industry. The frequent, and often quite meaningless changes in fashions were contrary to the consumer interest. The co-operative movement therefore ought to introduce and vigorously advertise and market "basic models" which should be practical and professionally designed, and which could really stand the test of time: the same models should be retained for many years ahead.

Consequently vi did not publicise the more fashionable clothes that were sold in co-operative departmental stores. The paper advocated another policy in the interest of consumers. It was supported by the Consumer Congress in 1971, and shortly afterwards the first basic models were marketed. They proved to be an unexpected, splendid commercial success! (But of course they do not exclude the "fashion models" from the assortment - they are a supplement.)

The co-operative paper had shown its ability to discuss and interpret consumer needs and to influence public opinion. KF had demonstrated its readiness to "listen to the movement" and to translate wishes into practical action.

And this is certainly one of the most important tasks of the co-operative press as a whole: to take part in a dialogue, to be a means of communication in the service of co-operative democracy. No doubt this means that there will be less propaganda, more criticism. In a strong co-operative movement that is a sign of health. Fear of criticism is fear of democracy. Therefore, it may be proper to end this article by quoting a statement from a paper on Co-operative Democracy, which was presented to and accepted by the ICA Congress 1969: "It is virtually impossible to conceive co-operative democracy as viable without a strong co-operative press."