

The Future of the Nordic Media Model

A Digital Media Welfare State?

EDITED BY:

PETER JAKOBSSON

JOHAN LINDELL

FREDRIK STIERNSTEDT

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Peter Jakobsson, Johan Lindell, &
Fredrik Stiernstedt (Eds.)

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THE FUTURE OF THE NORDIC MEDIA MODEL *A DIGITAL MEDIA WELFARE STATE?*

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Preface

In comparative media research, it has been noted that the media in the Nordic countries are organised in a similar way. These countries have long traditions of press freedom, strong public service media, high levels of news circulation and media trust, and generous media subsidies. In recent years, however, scholars have observed changes within the media systems of the North. In different ways globalisation, digitalisation, and ideological shifts in media policy challenge the Nordic media model. A key task for contemporary media researchers, and the basis from which this book materialised, is that these challenges need to be better understood. Our hope is that the volume at hand will take a step in that direction, in what – to our minds – is a crucial issue for the future social development in the Nordic countries.

As editors we would like to extend our thanks to the contributors to this volume, whose respective chapters all contribute to a rich and nuanced exploration of both change and continuity in the Nordic media system that pose important questions regarding the future of Nordic media. It has been an honour and a pleasure to work with such outstanding colleagues from all of the five Nordic countries. A special thanks also goes to the reviewers of the book and the Nordicom staff, and in particular Johannes Bjerling, who has provided valuable feedback and assistance throughout the process.

A generous grant from Anne-Marie and Gustaf Ander's Foundation for Media Research made it possible to organize the symposium on "Contemporary Challenges to the Media Welfare State" at Uppsala University in December 2020, which was the starting point for the volume at hand.

Peter Jakobsson, Johan Lindell, & Fredrik Stiernstedt

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The future of the digital media welfare state

PETER JAKOBSSON,^I JOHAN LINDELL,^I & FREDRIK STIERNSTEDT^{II}

^I DEPARTMENT OF INFORMATICS AND MEDIA, UPPSALA UNIVERSITY, SWEDEN

^{II} SCHOOL OF CULTURE AND EDUCATION, SÖDERTÖRN UNIVERSITY, SWEDEN

ABSTRACT

For decades, comparative media studies have classified and compared different media systems around the world. Analyses suggest that the media systems of the Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden) share certain traits, rendering them media welfare states. In this introductory chapter, we discuss the constituents of the Nordic media model and its contemporary status and challenges. We then introduce the 14 chapters included in this volume. The chapters are written by Nordic scholars and deal with a range of aspects connected to the transformation or stability of the Nordic media system in the digital era.

KEYWORDS: Nordic media, media welfare state, media system, media policy

Introduction

Every country has its own unique media landscape, mixing global, regional, and national digital platforms, newspapers, radio and television channels, public service media, so-called alternative media outlets, social media influencers, and so on. Furthermore, countries also differ in terms of how the media is governed and regulated through laws, policies, and institutional frameworks. Some research suggests that among this wide variety there are countries whose media governance and media landscapes produce better social and cultural outcomes than those of other countries (Neff & Pickard, 2021). What “better social and cultural outcomes” means is, of course, a normative and political question, but the gold standard in contemporary comparative media research is the pluralist liberal democratic model. This book concerns the Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden), which are five countries that are usually featured in the top-10 in global rankings measuring the state of democracy (Martela et al., 2020: 130). From the perspective of comparative media research, the media in the Nordic countries function and are organised in a similar way, with long traditions of press freedom, strong public service media, high levels of news circulation and media trust, and generous subsidies (Brüggemann et al., 2014). This similarity is traced back to the political systems and the political cultures of the Nordic countries (Syvertsen et al., 2014). The strong democratic cultures of the Nordics are reflected in the functioning and organisation of the media. At the same time, the media systems in the Nordic countries contribute to upholding and reproducing their democracies. The way that democracy and the media function in these societies is sometimes even hailed as a role model for other countries (Neff & Pickard, 2023; Nord et al., 2021: 393).

For some, this might seem too idealised a picture. Following the Covid-19 pandemic, critics have claimed that the consensus-oriented political culture in Sweden led to a situation where politicians and the media colluded during the pandemic, stifling voices that were critical of how politicians and health authorities handled the public health crisis (Lindström, 2021). Others might object that there is in fact nothing distinctive about how the media function and are organised in the Nordic countries: Globalisation, digitalisation, and de-regulation have made the media landscapes and their regulation in the Nordic countries increasingly similar to other Western democratic countries (Ohlsson, 2015). There are also voices who argue that the Nordic media model is nothing to strive for, and one should instead value more market liberal (or illiberal) forms of media policy. Elements of such media policy ambitions have had some success even in the Nordics, challenging and transforming the media landscapes in these countries (see, e.g., Holtz-Bacha, 2021; Jakobsson et al., 2021).

In any comparative book on media and politics in the Nordic countries, there are questions that need to be asked: Is there something distinct about

the media's function and organisation in the region? What are the components of the Nordic media model, and how do they relate to their political systems and political cultures? In what ways do the media in these countries produce desirable social and cultural outcomes, and how are such outcomes defined and measured? The contributors to this edited volume ask and answer questions like these throughout the book, albeit from different perspectives and sometimes with different and conflicting answers. The main purpose of this book is to discuss contemporary developments and the future of the media systems in the Nordic region. What are the main developments that will likely impact the future of Nordic media? What are the theoretical and methodological frameworks needed to study the ongoing changes and development? Furthermore, from a normative standpoint, what is needed to keep and develop those aspects of how the media and media policy function in the Nordic countries, which has proven to have positive social and cultural outcomes?

The last question is perhaps one that the Nordic countries should solve together. Regardless of whether one subscribes to the idea of Nordic exceptionalism, there is undoubtedly a long history of Nordic unity and collaboration across national borders. This is also true for Nordic media and communications research, evidenced by the Nordic conferences for media and communications research and Nordicom, a hub for Nordic media research since the 1970s. This collaborative spirit is reflected in this book, which gathers researchers from across the Nordics who together take on the question of contemporary developments and the future of media in the Nordic region.

In this introductory chapter, we provide a background for the following chapters of this edited volume. Starting in existing research, we discuss the claimed commonalities between the Nordic countries. Do they in fact have similar media systems, and is that indeed a useful concept (Flew & Waisbord, 2015)? Or in any case, are they governed in similar ways when it comes to the media, and has this governance produced similar results? In this section, we draw from comparative media systems research in order to provide an overview of the media landscapes in the Nordic region. Following this, we discuss the media welfare state (Syvertsen et al., 2014). In their influential study, Syvertsen and colleagues (2014) described the Nordic countries as media welfare states, indicating a relationship between the Nordic social welfare states and the Nordic media systems. We discuss what the Nordic media welfare state means and what it entails. This concept has by now generated a substantial body of literature, which we touch on briefly here. One question that we address is what “welfare” might mean in relation to media. Another question is whether media welfare *societies* might be a better concept than the media welfare *state*, since many of the things associated with the original concept are only tangentially related to the state. The last section of the introduction provides an overview of the contributions to the book.

The Nordic countries in comparative media research

There are many examples of comparative media research that groups the Nordic countries together – on their own or together with a few other countries. In this context, the concept of a media system is often used to denote how the media in a single country can be characterised as a system of “complex coexistence of media operating according to different principles” (Hallin & Mancini, 2004: 12) or “typical patterns of how journalism cultures, media policy, media markets, and media use are connected in a given society” (Brüggemann et al., 2014: 1038). A media system can thus be described as constituted by the totality of media outlets, media infrastructures, patterns of media use and media policy, and the interrelation between these components in a given country or region. In the vast literature on media systems, there are differences in how this concept is understood and used, including “thin” and “thick” uses and definitions. Thinner versions pinpoint factors such as media policy and media organisations, whereas thicker versions of the concept tend to include wider concepts such as patterns of media use, public trust of media and journalism, and the public’s opinions, understandings, and interpretations concerning the media landscape. There are also variations in the degree to which discussions of media systems include historical and cultural factors, such as religion, political history, or the development of literacy in specific regions, or whether they mainly focus on structural and contemporary elements.

Noting similarities in the constitution and development of media systems in certain countries, comparative media research claims media systems can be grouped together by different idealised models that describe their central and important characteristics. Following this line of argument, Hallin and Mancini claimed in their 2004 book *Comparing Media Systems* that the media systems of the Nordic countries can be described as belonging to the democratic corporatist model (together with, e.g., Germany and the Netherlands). Building on this, Brüggemann and colleagues’ (2014) analysis identified a Northern model consisting of the three Scandinavian countries – Denmark, Norway, and Sweden – together with Finland. In a similar vein, Syvertsen and colleagues (2014) – discussed more extensively in the next section – claimed that the five Nordic countries have media systems that share a number of distinguishing features, making them media welfare states.

Although most researchers share the basic premise that there are several similarities regarding the organisation and functioning of the media in the Nordic countries, it has been difficult to reach a consensus as to which similarities these are, how strong they are, and whether they add up to a single “uniform” media model (Lund, 2007: 31). Furthermore, different researchers concentrate on different systemic features when constructing their models. For example, Hallin and Mancini (2004) mainly focused on journalism and the news media. This limits the reach of their model in today’s fragmented

media landscapes, and many have pointed to the necessity of including new forms of digital communication outside the narrow realm of traditional news production in comparative analyses (e.g., Hardy, 2013).

As mentioned above, Brüggemann and colleagues (2014) empirically identified a fourth type of media system alongside the three ideal types discussed by Hallin and Mancini. This fourth type is what they label a Northern media system, which corresponds with a comparably healthy press market, strong public service media, and high journalistic professionalism. The Northern model, they argue, sets itself apart from the democratic corporatist model in terms of its more generous press subsidies and lower levels of ownership regulation.

The Nordic (media) welfare state

In 2014, Syvertsen and colleagues published the book *The Media Welfare State: Nordic Media in the Digital Era*. The book extended the argument made by Hallin and Mancini (2004) while also criticising their analysis of the Nordics for not taking the countries' specific political histories and conditions into consideration. They argued that the history of the Nordic countries as social welfare states – which has been discussed extensively in other disciplines (Edling, 2019) – has shaped how the media systems in these countries developed, making them distinct from other media systems.

Syvertsen and colleagues (2014) identified four policy pillars that relate to the social welfare state and characterise media policy in the Nordic countries: 1) universal access to information and communication infrastructure, 2) a strong tradition of editorial freedom and freedom of the press, 3) links between media and cultural policy, and 4) a culture of cooperation and consensus-based approach to media policymaking. Even though the book has been well-received, the model has had its fair share of critics, who claim it underestimates the development of the Nordic media systems in a liberal and market-oriented direction (Picard, 2015) and comes across as a picture in the rear-view mirror (Ala-Fossi, 2020). Nevertheless, since the concept of the media welfare state has become a way to describe a distinct Nordic model of media policy, we have decided to borrow the concept for the title of this edited volume. This does not mean that all authors and contributions to this volume fully agree with the concept. Our position, as editors, is that the notion of the media welfare state is a useful concept to think with. Besides the empirical questions of what characterises the media systems in the Nordic countries, their developments, and their similarities and differences, the concept evokes important political and normative questions about the desirability of different media policies and their outcomes. It also connects media policy to the institutions of the social welfare state, which gives the concept a useful rhetorical force in media policy debates due to the value these institutions still have in political debates in the Nordics.

Social welfare programmes are not unique to the Nordic countries; however, the development of the social welfare state in the Nordic countries followed its own unique trajectory (Esping-Andersen, 1990). While this development took off in the nineteenth century, the majority of the reforms associated with the Nordic welfare state were introduced after World War II (Kildal & Kuhnle, 2005). The policy model reached its high point in the 1970s, after which the economic crises of the decade were instrumentalised by political and market actors to restructure the welfare state through deregulation and privatisation (Greve, 2018). It is worth stressing that the social democratic welfare state of the Nordic countries did not develop as the result of a unified ideological programme, and that the welfare state has always been a dynamic concept, changing and adapting in relation to the political and social context (Kuhlmann, 2018). Nevertheless, the welfare state in the Nordics must be understood as the result not only of adaptations to a changing reality but also of political struggles – that is, struggles for equality, community, and redistribution that permeated much of the post-war development in the Nordic countries and in which the strong social democratic parties and labour unions were key actors.

Behind the many faces of the Nordic welfare state, it is possible to identify certain political and normative ideas that have remained relatively stable (Kildal & Kuhnle, 2005). We (Jakobsson et al., 2022b) have argued that these normative principles (such as equality, de-commodification, community building, risk minimisation, and human dignity) are relevant for both contemporary and historical discussions on media policy. The four pillars of the Nordic media welfare state provided by Syvertsen and colleagues (2014) are conceptualised in a broad and encompassing way, but, unlike the normative ideals discussed above, are tightly connected to the existing institutions of the Nordic media systems, including public service media, press subsidies, and journalistic professionalism. In a situation where the concept of the media as such is becoming increasingly unstable – through, for example, processes of digitalisation – it is necessary to revisit the idea of welfare in relation to media and communication. What is needed is to seek new ways in which the political history and culture of the Nordic countries can be leveraged in research concerning the future of the Nordic media welfare state (Jakobsson et al., 2022b). This book is an attempt to move the scholarly conversation in that direction.

Conceptual issues

One critical response to the idea of a Nordic media welfare state concerns its continued relevance in the contemporary and future media landscape. Several authors (e.g., Ala-Fossi, 2020) have argued that many of the traits specific to the Nordic media system are transforming. One key argument here is that

media policy development has become increasingly transnational. This manifests in the ongoing digitalisation of media and communications and increased reliance on transnational digital infrastructures owned by private companies. The nature and extent of this change is a multi-layered question, and how it is estimated depends on how we define the media welfare state. For example, infrastructures for media distribution, as several chapters in this volume show, have changed substantially, and competition for audiences in many respects has strengthened, particularly with regard to streaming platforms. Furthermore, the increased dependency on foreign companies, particularly global Big Tech companies, has created new conditions for the relations between the state and the private media sector. While legacy media like the press still hold a strong standing, market concentration has increased, particularly due to a restructured advertising market. All of these developments can be understood as consequences not only of digitalisation but the increasingly transnational media landscape, which is a potential challenge to the Nordic media welfare state. These international trends play out differently in the different Nordic countries; for example, Sweden and Denmark have been more affected by infrastructure restructuring than Norway. On the other hand, there are quite a few continuities within the Nordic media system. Public service media has strong support among the population, high audience shares, and is generally well-funded in the Nordic countries. Public news consumption is still high and fairly equally distributed among the population. Nordic media users read the written press and use online social networks and the Internet to a higher degree than Europeans on average, and they are more willing to pay for online news. They watch television (on a physical set or online) to the same degree as other Europeans (Nordicom, 2023; Schröder et al., 2020). The Nordics remain at the top of global indexing of press freedom and democracy. To assess the extent of change and whether the media welfare state model is essentially an “image in the rear-view mirror”, as suggested by Ala-Fossi (2020), is dependent on what one considers the most important feature of the Nordic media model. It is furthermore at its core an empirical question, and the chapters in this book take us part of the way towards assessing the changes and continuities in a digital media welfare state.

Other international developments are potential challenges to the Nordic media model. Scholars have noted how media policy in Nordic countries is becoming more “liberal” and similar to media systems in the UK and the US, manifesting in media deregulation and a weakened press (Ala-Fossi, 2020; Jakobsson et al., 2021; Nord, 2008; Ohlsson, 2015). This might also be interpreted in the light of international developments that include a general trend of neoliberal policies during the last 30 years, putting increasing weight on competition policy and deregulation. It also connects to policy transfers in which harmonisation of policies takes place, for example, within and through the push from transnational organisations. Three of the five Nordic countries

are members of the European Union, through which an increasingly market-oriented view of public service has also become influential. This manifests through so-called public value tests (Donders & Moe, 2011), which are state assessments of “significant new services” developed by the public service companies, weighed against their potential “damaging effects” on the paid media market (Swedish Parliament, 2018). It also manifests in increasingly market-oriented governance within public service companies, through “new public management” (Coppens & Sayes, 2006). These developments are all international trends, but they play out in specific ways within the Nordic context, and potentially in different ways within the Nordic countries. Therefore, this volume’s empirical work is necessary.

Yet another international trend is the increasing politicisation of media policy, including right-wing mobilisation against journalism and public service media, which constitutes a challenge to the Nordic media model (Jakobsson et al., 2022a). Right-wing radical parties tend to name journalists and the media as opponents and enemies (Medin, 2019) and portray them as part of a “left-liberal establishment”, and thus “enemies of the people” (quotes from Linus Bylund and Jimmie Åkesson, leading politicians within the Swedish radical right-wing party, The Sweden Democrats). This has led right-wing radical movements to construct alternative media to fight what they perceive as an ideological dominance, as well as to discredit and attack established media (Heft et al., 2020). This is an international development, and the Nordics have not been unaffected by it. This mistrust of the legacy media also means that radical conservative parties try to change media policy through parliamentary measures. Radical conservative parties want to change fundamentally the media while at the same time preserving what they perceive as “traditional”, “eternal”, or “natural” values, such as the nation, culture, and hierarchies of society (cf. Enocksson, 2018).

Until very recently, reports from organisations such as Freedom House and Reporters Without Borders highlighted authoritarian regimes and dictatorships as the main threats to freedom of the press and expression. But more recently, reports have noted a negative development for press and freedom of expression even in countries that have traditionally been considered stable democracies (Holtz-Bacha, 2021). In Europe, the political successes of right-wing radical parties have brought concrete changes in several national media systems and political pressure for many others. This pressure and changes in laws and regulations have mainly been directed at public service organisations, but the commercial media have also been affected (Sehl et al., 2020). In Poland, Hungary, and Italy, the government usurped direct influence over public service media. In other countries, including the UK, Germany, Austria, Denmark, and Switzerland, right-wing radical voices have questioned the legitimacy of public service funding or even cut off funding. In this pursuit, the right-wing radicals have allied themselves with established

neoliberal forces and other forces in society that want to avoid public scrutiny and democratic control (Holtz-Bacha, 2021; Sehl et al., 2020). In the Czech Republic and Slovakia, where right-wing radicals have achieved great success, domestic oligarchs have also bought up media houses to protect their own interests and discourage critical scrutiny (Surowiec & Štětka, 2020). While the Nordics have not been unaffected by international developments, it is too early to say what impact these political ideas will have on Nordic media systems. Within the realm of media politics, the strong consensus around many of the policies of the Nordic system (such as public service broadcasting and press subsidies) have broken down. However, as our own research from Sweden suggests, the support for the Nordic media model is still strong among the general population, and there are grounds to speak of a widespread “media welfare state of mind” among citizens (Lindell et al., 2022). The international trend of right-wing media critique and questioning of the media as an institution will most certainly play out differently in the Nordics than in many other countries in Europe, due to the form and shape of existing institutions, the structure of the media markets, as well as the specific histories and trajectories of the Nordic media landscapes.

Another critique of the idea of a Nordic media welfare state concerns the question of what is meant by the Nordics. It is worth noting that in Brüggemann and colleagues’ (2014) support for a specific Nordic media system, Iceland is not included. There are substantial differences between the media systems in the Nordic countries that might be obscured through over-emphasising the similarities within the region. For example, while Denmark, Norway, and Sweden have substantial press subsidies, Finland and Iceland do not. Iceland also stands out with a much lower rate of public funding for its public service broadcaster (64%, compared to 90%+ in the other Nordic countries) (Nordicom, 2023). Ravn-Højgaard and colleagues (2021) discussed the relation between the “West-Nordic” countries – the Faroe Islands, Greenland, and Iceland – and the other Nordic countries. They concluded that while there are many similarities in policymakers’ perceptions of media as cultural institutions, as well as the central role of public service media, the “micro-size” of the media systems within these countries leads to specific characteristics. For example, journalistic professionalism is harder to uphold in small settings, and they are more susceptible to clientelism (Ravn-Højgaard et al., 2021). Moreover, in a similar study, Guðmundsson (2021) showed that political parallelism is still strong in Iceland.

The issue of whether it is reasonable to speak of the Nordic media system as including all five Nordic countries will not be settled in this book; many of the chapters focus specifically on one of the five countries and are not comparative per se. Others more directly tackle the question of differences and similarities. The book as a whole, however, heuristically holds on to the concept of the Nordic media welfare state, implying that there are substantial

similarities between the societies in the Nordic region and in how their media systems are organised and operate. Iceland, while included in the definition of the Nordic media system and in the contributions in this book, is an outlier in this respect, and as the chapter by Guðmundsson and Jóhannsdóttir (Chapter 7) shows, support for the Nordic media welfare state is fragile in Iceland, and its prospects remain uncertain. Another interesting question is to what extent international developments, such as digital infrastructures and platforms, will push the Nordics in different directions and decrease or strengthen the similarities between the countries. The contributions in this volume give mixed answers to these questions.

Although the media welfare state is a concept used throughout this book, media welfare *society* could be a more precise term. For one thing, including “state” in the concept may be misleading. Naturally, state media is a problematic concept in liberal democracies, and is mainly used as a pejorative term by critics of public service broadcasting. The wide scope of the media welfare state makes the phrasing somewhat confusing. Regarding issues such as press subsidies and regulation of the media industry, there is of course a relation between the state and the media, but the concept also includes wider behavioural and attitudinal sentiments such as media use, public trust in the media, and welfarist states of mind (Lindell et al., 2022), which are not necessarily directly connected to the state. Nevertheless, the media welfare state is now a well-established concept, due to its several conceptual advantages.

Yet another issue in relation to the concept of the media welfare state concerns its implied political and normative dimensions. In discussions of Nordic exceptionalism, there is always the threat of chauvinism and flag-waving, and implicitly or explicitly overstating the positive dimensions of “Nordicness” or essentialising and mystifying the specificities of the Nordics. The concept can be used in a strictly descriptive sense, but authors have also suggested that the Nordic media model is desirable and that the media policy regimes of the Nordic countries have distinctively positive outcomes (Benson et al., 2017; Neff & Pickard, 2021). On this front, we believe there is need for caution. It is true that the Nordics generally perform well in international comparisons of press freedom, journalistic professionalism, and trust in the media. These might be understood as positive outcomes, and they might have something to do with the ways in which media are organised in the Nordic countries – but the relationship between media policy and such outcomes are by no means straightforward and simple. While Nordic countries rank high in most indexes of democracy, their media systems are not necessarily the reason for this – it is probably the other way around. And most importantly, there is a need to be cautious in smuggling normative claims into discussions and analyses of Nordic media welfare. The Nordic media system(s) may have good and productive features well worth defending, but in that case, such normative claims must be clearly defined. In what sense is the media welfare state a good thing? For whom? How? And when?

The contributions of this book

As we have seen, the notion of the media welfare state has sparked many debates. These have revolved around normative questions regarding which kind of media system is desirable, the extent to which a unified Nordic media system actually exists, and how it compares to other media systems. Importantly, a key contemporary debate regards the contemporary challenges and future direction of Nordic media policy. How much has changed in the wake of commercialisation, globalisation, datafication, and platformisation, and how much of the seemingly new are actually examples of continuity under the guise of innovation and change? This book is an attempt to tackle such questions. It gathers 14 chapters from authors in all the Nordic countries who in different ways address these questions.

Part I of the book is called “The media welfare state and media policy in the Nordics” and gathers seven chapters that in different ways assess the Nordic media model as it exists today and how it deals with contemporary challenges. Kim Schrøder, Mark Blach-Ørsten, and Mads Kæmgaard Eberholst (Chapter 1) deal with the challenge posed by audience fragmentation and polarisation in the digital media landscape providing an abundance of news sources. Their longitudinal analyses of generational differences between news media practices and attitudes, via survey data from the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report*, suggest Nordic media audiences are less polarised, more likely to encounter quality news, and more willing to pay for news than their European counterparts. In Chapter 2, Randa Romanova and Mats Bergman take a different perspective and analyse different models of media accountability systems in the Nordic countries. Through qualitative analyses of journalistic self-regulation, they explore the significant differences in media accountability between the Nordic countries, thus challenging the notion of a coherent Nordic media model. Reeta Pöyhtäri (Chapter 3) analyses how the Nordic countries deal with the issue of online hate speech. Surveying policy responses to hate speech in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden, Pöyhtäri finds that, although digital media platforms are identified as central in disseminating hate speech online by policymakers, concrete policy measures are scarce. Pöyhtäri also highlights that when this issue is discussed in policy circles, many of the discussions concern threats to politicians rather than hate speech directed towards minority groups. The chapter is thus one of several contributions to the book that identifies a lack of policy responses from the Nordic countries in relation to contemporary challenges in the digital media landscape. With Minna Horowitz and Hannu Nieminen’s Chapter 4, we turn to how the Nordic countries have responded to the existing “information disorder”. Focus is placed on how a set of communication rights is reflected in citizens’ media practices and levels of trust in the media. While the Nordic citizenries seem well-equipped to manoeuvre in the current information disorder, Horowitz and Nieminen argue that a rights-based approach to

communication is key to maintaining distinct digital media welfare states. At this stage, it is worth highlighting that, while most of the contributions in this book deal with key issues and debates tied to the future of the Nordic media model, most chapters do not tackle the question of public service media, which is a key institution in this media system (see, e.g., Puppis & Ali, 2023). Marko Ala-Fossi, Katja Lehtisaari, and Riku Neuvonen (Chapter 5) turn to precisely this institution as they discuss the future of public service broadcasting, namely whether public service organisations will decide, or be forced, to make the switch to online delivery instead of through terrestrial broadcasting. More specifically, they discuss the Finnish public service broadcaster Yle and its attempts to deal with this issue. Although the switch to online delivery has already been carried out in other European countries, it is not clear that the Finnish online delivery network is robust enough to manage this switch, posing serious questions for the future of public service in Finland and potentially the other Nordics when their time comes to make the switch. In Chapter 6, Lars Julius Halvorsen and Paul Bjerke turn to Norway and the question regarding the relation between the state, or politics, and two media fields: print news media and book publishing. Through the analyses of rich empirical material, the chapter shows that a key feature in the Nordic media model – the consensual relations and meso-level autonomy on the media market – remains relatively intact, indicating the ability of the Nordic media model to persist in the midst of changes not only in the media landscape but also in the political field. In Chapter 7, Birgir Guðmundsson and Valgerður Jóhannsdóttir turn to Iceland, an outlier in the Nordic media welfare state model. Analyses of legislative parliamentary debates on media subsidies lead Guðmundsson and Jóhannsdóttir to conclude that support for the Nordic media welfare state is fragile in Iceland, and its prospects there remain uncertain.

Part II of the book is called “Beyond the Nordic model”. This title is understood in two different ways: On the one hand, some of the chapters discuss how the digital media landscape transforms the Nordic media landscape in a way that makes it more and more removed from the Nordic model as it once existed and on the other, some of the chapters operate on a more conceptual and theoretical level, discussing ways in which the concept of the Nordic media welfare state should be expanded to include other aspects. These chapters also discuss the consequences of those expansions for the concept. Sofie Flensburg and Signe Sophus Lai (Chapter 8) analyse the future of the Nordic welfare state in light of an increasingly globalised and commercial communication system, with a focus on digital infrastructures and digital platforms in the Nordic countries. The analysis reveals that the control over digital infrastructures in the Nordics is increasingly in the hands of a few global companies. This means, according to the authors, that the efficacy of existing political frameworks is diminishing, and the pillars of

the media welfare state, such as universal access and editorial freedom, are becoming reliant on the benevolence of commercial global media companies. Helle Sjøvaag and Raul Ferrer-Conill similarly analyse digital infrastructures in Chapter 9, but they focus primarily on Norway. Their analysis highlights that the Internet infrastructure in Norway is largely unregulated and increasingly controlled by foreign and non-media companies. This, Sjøvaag and Ferrer-Conill conclude, has consequences for how Norwegian legislators can regulate these infrastructures and safeguard communication rights for citizens. Together, these two chapters show how the digital communication environment is increasingly controlled by stakeholders operating outside of the consensual relations between politics and industry that were a characteristic feature of the Nordic media welfare state. The next chapter, by Nina Kvalheim (Chapter 10), is also focused on Norway, but Kvalheim instead analyses ownership patterns in the Norwegian media market. The chapter is framed by a central question in the tradition of political economy research: Who are the owners behind Norwegian media companies? The novelty of the analysis comes from the author's analysis of not only the direct owners of media companies, but the owners *behind* the owners, including foundations and investment companies. Kvalheim also analyses the potential consequences of these ownership patterns, including decreased content diversity and changes in editorial principles due to foreign ownership.

The final four chapters in the book explore a possible expansion of the concept of the media welfare state, as such. This includes empirical re-orientations, such as incorporating the library sector into the understanding of media welfare (Chapter 14 by Terje Colbjørnsen, Håkon Larsen, Kim Tallerås, & Maciej Liguzinski) and including new forms of automated (mediated) surveillance and systems of tracking and data-processing within discussions of media welfare (Chapter 12 by Anne Kaun & Helena Löfgren). This naturally also opens for a renewed theoretical and conceptual discussion, for example, regarding the definition of “media” in terms of the media welfare state. Chapters 11–13 extend the discussion of the media welfare state through analysing materials not so often used in the field. Linus Andersson, Martin Danielsson, Malin Hallén, and Ebba Sundin (Chapter 13) turn to the genre system of Nordic television and ask if there is a specific genre or cultural form of the media welfare state. Anne Kaun and Helen Löfgren (Chapter 12) develop the idea of a *data* welfare state and compare it to the media welfare state in order to explore roads ahead for policy discussion in datafied media societies. Another conceptual development comes from Hallvard Moe, Gunn Enli, and Trine Syvertsen (Chapter 11), who revisit some important policy discussions relating to Norwegian media. They argue that previous understandings of media welfare have been somewhat blind to issues of environmental sustainability, an issue that contemporary realities have forced on the agenda. Our contemporary moment, in which issues of sustainability are

pressing and urgent, also allows us to see how these dimensions have been discussed (and silenced) in previous policy debates, for example, regarding television in the 1960s and 1970s, but the chapter also urges us to develop this aspect of welfare more clearly, as it must be a key aspect of a media welfare state for the future.

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PART I

THE MEDIA WELFARE STATE AND MEDIA POLICY IN THE NORDICS

Nordic media welfare states from a comparative perspective

Unpacking audience fragmentation and polarisation

KIM CHRISTIAN SCHRØDER, MARK BLACH-ØRSTEN, &
MADS KÆMSGAAARD EBERHOLST

DEPARTMENT OF DOMMUNICATION AND ARTS, ROSKILDE UNIVERSITY, DENMARK

ABSTRACT

In 2014, Trine Syvertsen, Gunn Enli, Ole J. Mjøs, and Hallvard Moe raised two central concerns as to the future of the ideal of the Nordic media welfare states regarding increasing demographic fragmentation and political polarisation. Using audience data from the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report*, we offer a comparative longitudinal perspective on how these concerns have played out in four Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden) from 2016–2022, compared with the US and the UK. We find that despite some fragmentation according to age, fragmentation may not be problematic per se if people's news diets draw substantially on quality journalistic news outlets with a guarantee of relatively shared news agendas. A moderate degree of political polarisation exists for some types of Nordic news media, with public service media showing less polarisation than some newspapers and digitally born outlets.

KEYWORDS: Nordic news media, comparative analysis, news audiences, fragmentation, polarisation

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Introduction

In 2014, when Syvertsen and colleagues published their seminal book about the Nordic media welfare states, *The Media Welfare State: Nordic Media in the Digital Era*, two central concerns were raised as to the future of the media welfare state ideal. One was the possibility of a future “fragmentation” of news audiences in the form of increasing digital divides in media use with respect to age, socioeconomic status, and so on. The other was that in the years to come, users would increasingly only consume media that they agreed with, a concern that has since often been labelled as increasing “polarisation” (Arguedas et al., 2022; Blach-Ørsten & Mayerhöffer, 2021). In this chapter, we offer a comparative longitudinal perspective on how these challenges have played out in the Nordic countries from 2016–2022. We do so by comparing audience data from four Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden) and the US and the UK, all of which participate in the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report*, for which we the authors are the Danish partners.

Our retrospective and contemporary analytical gaze will illuminate tendencies and transformations in audience behaviours and patterns of media consumption, focusing on preferred sources of news, paying for news, and trust in the news. Focusing on trust, we consider both general trust in the news media and trust with respect to political standpoints. Here, we shall ascertain to what extent general trust in the news media is higher in the Nordic countries than in the US and the UK, with public service media often earning the highest amount of trust. In addition, we expect that users who position themselves at the political extremes trust news media less, though this tendency towards polarisation is much less salient than in other countries.

In offering a cross-Nordic comparative analysis of the national audiences’ consumption of news, our study fills a gap in the news research landscape:

There exists no common study of media habits in the Nordic countries, as the extensive national data that exist are rarely statistically compatible. [...] Questions asked of respondents often share several features, but samples, survey implementation, wording of questions, and response options vary, thus preventing analytical comparisons [translated]”. (Hellingwerf, 2021)

As we have shown in a previous study (Schröder et al., 2020), data from the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report* can remedy this situation, because identical questionnaires are implemented across all the participating countries. Moreover, our study draws on recent Nordic research, which has analysed the degree of popular support for the Nordic media welfare state (see, e.g., Lindell et al., 2021). Our empirical study examines the four Nordic populations’ actual media consumption by comparing reported audience behaviours across the four countries, as a Nordic average, and with two characteristic

exponents of two other media systems: the UK and the US (Brüggemann et al., 2014; Newman et al., 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022).

Media systems research, national news landscapes, and audience practices

In studies of national media systems, it is widely recognised that a given media system should be understood in terms of its complementarity and reciprocity with the country's political and social parameters. For instance, Hallin and Mancini's (2004) seminal theory of Western media systems considers a country's media system – and by implication, the supranational media-systemic commonalities characterising countries' media landscapes – as deriving from several sociopolitical features and media-organisational properties. For Hallin and Mancini, the Nordic countries do not constitute a full media system, but rather a subgroup within the democratic corporatist media system.

The Nordic politics–media nexus consists of political pluralism and corporatism, state involvement in the economy and society, public service media, and early professionalisation of journalism. Theories of national and supranational media systems are thus predicated on the idea that media characteristics are correlated with the corresponding geographical entity's sociopolitical forces and relations. In this vein, Enli and colleagues (2018) extended their previous analysis of the Nordic welfare states and their national media systems (Syvertsen et al., 2014) with a historical perspective, “examining the historical preconditions for communications as well as welfare state systems, with an emphasis on mutual interdependence and those instances in which developments in one sphere represent a precondition for developments in the other” (Enli et al., 2018: 602). Analytically, Enli and colleagues (2018: 614) demonstrated how “welfare states and media systems are closely interlinked” and can thus be seen as parallel developments.

Coupled with such an agnostic stance to the question of directionality and causality between sociopolitical and media system properties (as merely “parallel”), Syvertsen and colleagues (2014) were the first to include a media use and audience perspective on media systems: They mapped the first stages of the Nordic populations' transition from traditional media to digital media, finding that, although media use (including news use) was diversifying following the advent of digital and social media in the so-called “high-choice media society”, media user patterns were at that time still characterised by commonality and egalitarianism across differences in social class and age. In our study, we build on their findings as we first explore a range of news consumption practices, and secondly analyse homogeneous datasets, which overcome Syvertsen and colleagues' acknowledged limitation of working with disparate national datasets that make valid comparison a challenge.

Because the dominant paradigm of media systems research has tended to neglect the formative role of audiences in the operation of a media system,

the analytical and theoretical work of Zrinjka Perusko and colleagues (2015) can be considered a corrective to the mainstream of media systems research, as they have argued that indicators of audience practices are a *sine qua non* of media systems analysis. Perusko and colleagues followed the work of Brüggemann and colleagues (2014) in moving beyond Hallin and Mancini's focus on mostly *press* characteristics, identifying a Northern type of digital *media* system, characterised by high political and social inclusiveness, higher globalisation, a highly developed digital media market, a moderately open creative economy, and television concentration (Perusko et al., 2015; see also Andersson, 2023). When dealing with the audience practices of media systems, however, they tended to see the relationship in one-directional causal terms, talking about “the *impact* of the macro-level of institutional structures *on* micro-audience practices” and highlighting how “the various digital media systems have a significant *effect on* all aspects of media use [emphasis added]” (Perusko et al., 2015: 360).

A similar one-way causal view has characterised other analysts who have explored the media system–audience nexus:

System differences themselves are of *independent significance* in accounting for *why* people use news the way they do and why news use differs in systematic ways even within a sample of, from a global perspective, relatively similar technologically developed, high-income, stable democracies [emphasis added]”. (Hölig et al., 2016: 103)

In our view, however, it is more fruitful to see the relationship between media systems and audience practices less deterministically and to understand this relationship as two-way traffic, where the properties of the media system or landscape and news audience practices mutually influence each other. This may happen, for instance, when the available news media ensemble certainly sets the frames for what audiences can choose to consume; but the selective choices of audiences (depending, e.g., on their degree of trust in media types and brands, their willingness to pay, etc.) also, in turn, have a shaping influence on the composition of the national media ensemble, whose actors may then respond with countermeasures to attract audiences, and so on, *ad infinitum*. Our comparative analysis of news audience data, therefore, does not simply consider the underlying audience practices as derived from and dependent on media systemic properties, but as organically implicated in the ongoing dynamic reformation of the respective media systems. Studying audience formation on a global scale, Taneja and Webster (2016: 163) adopted a similar perspective, leaning theoretically on structuration theory:

In a nutshell, structuration sees agents (media users) drawing on the resources of the media to achieve their own ends. These resources include the available technologies, programs, and services. As agents use media, they reproduce and alter the structural features of the environment. In this view, agency and structure are mutually constituted.

In this vein, in our previous work on Nordic news media audiences (Schröder et al., 2020), we added an audience perspective to media systems theories based more on sociopolitical and media infrastructural factors (Brüggemann et al., 2014; Perusko et al., 2015), establishing the audience-anchored existence of “a Nordic media system”:

Our study compared news audience practices in the Nordic countries with those of countries belonging to other supranational media systems. We find that while there are some internal differences within the Nordic countries, there are salient news consumption commonalities that are specific to the Nordic countries, such as preferred sources of news, pathways to news, paying for online news, and trust in the news. (Schröder et al., 2020: 23)

In that study, we therefore concluded that when seen through the lens of news audience research, it makes sense to talk about a Nordic media system.

In this chapter, we continue our efforts to explore the role of news audiences in the Nordic media system seen as one analytical unit, by adding a historical perspective which traces selected audience uses of news media over 2016–2022, in order to gauge the development of audience practices across the Nordic countries and compare the Nordic picture with audience practices in the alternative media systems found in the US and the UK. In doing so, we recognise the definitional work on the concept of media welfare state recently undertaken by Jakobsson and colleagues (2022: 307). On the one hand, they defined this entity in institutional and policy terms, as “a media policy paradigm manifested in a well-financed public service institution with extensive media subsidies, a cultural policy that covers the media and so forth”; on the other hand, it rests on a set of ideals, norms and values, which constitute “the ‘pillars’ of media welfare [...]. Concepts such as freedom, universality, diversity and quality” (Jakobsson et al., 2022: 307).¹

In our comparative analysis of news audiences, we explore whether these Nordic institutions and ideals appear to foster news audience practices, which can be argued to maintain the existence of a civically informed citizenry, who also possess other important democratic prerequisites, in ways that differentiate such media welfare states from countries that cannot be characterised with this label.

Following from this argument, we seek to answer the following research question:

- RQ1. To what extent can news audience practices be seen as contributing to the maintenance and development of Nordic media welfare states?

In pursuit of fragmentation, polarisation, and digital divides

In our analysis of several properties of the Nordic media welfare states, we also contribute to research about the development of fragmentation, duplication, digital divides, polarisation, and so on, in audiences' news consumption. As the literature shows, it has been notoriously difficult to find methods that can adequately capture and speak authoritatively on this point (for instance, tracking- and survey-based network analysis in the respective studies of Taneja & Webster, 2016, and Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017).² What we have to offer is also no more than an approximation of final insights into the issue.

In terms of nomenclature, where “fragmentation” and “polarisation” are often used interchangeably, we consider audience *fragmentation* to be the basic and superordinate term, as it covers any disappearance of common user patterns and the emergence of “digital divides”: The national news audience “fragments”, often along sociodemographic lines of age, income, education, and so on, as opposed to a situation in which the news media use of various social groups overlaps (i.e., it is “duplicated”), so that there is a certain measure of commonality in news consumption, which may ensure the news media's continued function as social glue. The concern here has to do with the possible emergence in the high-choice media landscape of “a situation where people increasingly use media they only share with small groups of like-minded individuals” (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017: 476), resulting in the creation of so-called echo chambers. When such echo chambers form around more or less extreme political views, the literature speaks about the *polarisation* of the media–politics landscape. This occurs when “communities of opinion” arise along the spectrum of political opinions, where news consumers only seek information in media whose political slant they agree with, leading to a sociopolitical landscape characterised by a high degree of disrespect and implacability.

In our analysis, we try to exercise a measure of conceptual clarity by applying the term fragmentation to differences in media consumption along sociodemographic lines, and in our case, looking for differences between age groups across the various analytical variables. Polarisation is the term used only when we study the news consumption of groups with different political attitudes. Syvertsen and colleagues (2014: 39–40) found that “there is evidence in the Nordic countries that media user patterns are becoming more differentiated”; previously, “people from all walks of life have consumed broadly the same media”, and even if “socioeconomic status matters [...] there is little evidence of a fundamental digital divide”.

Importantly for our analysis, which concentrates on age differences and not socioeconomic class, Syvertsen and colleagues (2014: 40–42) concluded that “socioeconomic status is less important than age when it comes to explaining differences [...] and increased age differentiation seems to represent

the most significant change in user patterns in recent decades”, continuing that “although the differences are profound, the old and young do not live on different planets media-wise”.³

We hypothesise that this may be truer in 2022 than in 2014, because the quite distinctive gap that had then emerged between young and old media users has narrowed in recent years because the older groups, at risk of digital marginalisation, have increasingly adopted the media practices they, as digital immigrants, had at first not acquired (Prensky, 2010). We therefore explore to what extent news consumption patterns in the Nordic countries show signs of fragmentation, and whether digital divides have widened or narrowed in the period under investigation (2016–2022), as well as ask whether fragmentation necessarily matters for the acquisition of civic prerequisites. Syvertsen and colleagues (2014: 43) found that “to a high degree, the media continue to function as social glue and that the way users move across the media environment does not seem to produce highly polarized audiences”. Our analysis explores the developments in this respect since 2014.

Finally, like Fletcher and Nielsen (2017), we should acknowledge a common limitation that follows from the analysis of audience parameters: Research which analyses audiences’ news exposure and news attitudes begs the question of what insights audiences take with them from the news types and brands they use. This is because “many of the consequences for debate, shared public agenda, and common culture are rooted in news content and not in news sources” (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017: 493). Following from this argument, we seek to answer the following research question:

- RQ2. From the perspective of media use, or the audience, has there been increased fragmentation and polarisation in news media use in the Nordic countries from 2016 to 2022?

Methodological design and data

As we observed earlier, comparative research about the Nordic countries has been hampered by the fact that “the extensive national data that exist are rarely statistically compatible [translated]” (Hellingwerf, 2021). Fortunately, in 2016, Norway and Sweden joined Denmark and Finland in the international line-up for the annual *Reuters Institute Digital News Report*. This means that since 2016, we have survey data based on identical questionnaires across the Nordic region, as well as more than 40 countries across the world. In addition to basing our comparative analysis on identical questionnaires, it must be considered a strength that the survey provides “single source” data (i.e., from the same individual) about each individual’s total cross-media news consumption, spanning both legacy media on traditional offline platforms and digital and social media on online platforms. Fletcher and Nielsen (2017: 485) called single source survey data “the gold standard

of audience measurement, because it does not rely on data fusion in order to produce a cross-platform, cross-media dataset”.

Of note, among the limitations of survey research, as opposed to tracking people’s online behaviour, is the fact that the data are based on recall and therefore subject to the (in)accuracy of memory. Also, because the respondents (approx. 2,000 in each country) were recruited from YouGov’s online panel, they do not constitute a completely random sample, resulting in underrepresentation of people who are not consistently online (typically older and less affluent people).

Under these empirical conditions, our analysis pursues the analytical foci of cross-national comparative analysis, longitudinal comparison, news consumption variables, and age demographics and political observation.

Cross-national comparative analysis

We base our analytical comparison on a calculated average across four Nordic countries – Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden – which we compare to data from the UK and the US. This selection is based on a simple rationale: The Nordic countries are welfare states and public service media cultures; the UK has prominent public service media but is not a welfare state; and the US is neither a welfare state, nor does it have a strong public service media tradition. While we analyse the calculated Nordic averages, we follow the lead of Jakobsson and colleagues (2022: 306), recognising that “while there are important differences between these countries when it comes to media welfare, we concentrate on the broader similarities within this region”. We shall, however, be observant of potential conspicuous differences – for instance, statistical outliers – between the Nordic countries.

Longitudinal comparison

We trace developments in media use from 2016 to 2022, with a side glance at the middle year, 2019. We thus avoid potential anomalies due to the extraordinary circumstances of 2020–2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

News consumption variables

We analyse audience uses of both offline and online news media. When we consider “sources of news”, we compare traditional news sources (television news, radio news, print newspapers), online news media (broadcasters’ and newspapers’ news websites and apps), and news from social media. Like Fletcher and Nielsen (2017), we also argue that fragmentation is not just a question of using different news sources, but also a question of the quality of the news source. Previous studies of news quality in Denmark have highlighted the quality of public service news (Curran et al., 2009; Willig

et al., 2015) as well as the quality of Danish newspapers, online and offline (Blach-Ørsten et al., 2015; Willig et al., 2015). As such, the print and online editions of, for instance, the Swedish newspaper *Dagens Nyheter*, carry the same curated quality journalism – often the exact same news stories. A recent study on media use and political information and knowledge in a so-called high-choice media environment concluded that “users of traditional news and public media tend to score better than any other user profile on all sorts of knowledge questions” (Castro et al., 2022: 850). The same study also concluded that this particular user profile was more common in Scandinavian and democratic corporatist systems than anywhere else.

One of the greatest challenges for commercial news organisations is how to generate revenue from audiences’ use of their online news. We look at data about people’s willingness to pay, asking them if they have “paid for online news content in the last year”, encompassing any form of digital subscription, combined digital and print subscription, and so on. The Reuters Institute survey is also interested in the societal and personal value people attach to news, one aspect of which is the extent to which people trust the news, both in general and the different news brands they know. We therefore ask directly about people’s (dis)agreement with the proposition: “I think I can trust most news most of the time”.

From a political polarisation perspective, the urgent question is whether people who hold different political beliefs generally find their way to the same news providers, or whether they live in separate political news worlds, aka echo chambers. The answer to this question determines whether the media can be said to play the role of “social glue” and establish a predominantly consensus-oriented culture, or whether they cater, centrifugally, to a potentially more divisive culture. We examine this issue from two different perspectives. First, we analyse the patterns of trust in the news media in our three geographical areas, focusing on how people’s political leaning affects their overall trust in “most of the news media most of the time”. Second, we analyse the political composition of the audiences of key news brands on the left–right political spectrum. Because this measurement deals with news brands, which are national in terms of language and content, we here leave the “Nordic averages perspective” and bring news media brands from each of the four Nordic countries into the Nordic map of political polarisation, to be compared with the UK and US news-brand maps.

To do this, we apply an index-like method developed by the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report*, based on all respondents having positioned themselves on the left–right political spectrum, and indicating which news brands they use:

We compare the left–right make-up of each news outlet’s combined online and offline audience to the left–right make-up of the national population,

allowing us to see whether each outlet's audience skews left or right from the population average, and by how much. (Fletcher, 2022: 38)

Age demographics and political observation

In this study, as mentioned above, we have chosen to analyse the fragmentation of news consumption between age groups and not pursue other demographic categories due to considerations of space. We have also decided to analyse the “polar” ends of the age continuum, which can be assumed to help us highlight relevant and salient aspects of age fragmentation. We thus compare the 18–24 and 55+ age groups for all media use variables.

Analysis

Main sources of news: Unpacking fragmentation of news types

One important indicator of the quality of news consumption can be found in the composition of people's main sources of news. As mentioned above, we follow the research literature in associating quality with both offline and online curated content from mainstream news organisations, and less with social media. Here, we analyse the development in people's main sources of news across 2016–2022, comparing the four Nordic averages (with some moderate internal differences between the four countries)⁴ with the parallel figures from the UK and the US. From the rich array of Reuters Institute data, we have chosen to focus on three types of news sources: 1) all forms of online news sources (mainstream newspapers' and broadcasting organisations' news websites, and apps); 2) social media and blogs; and 3) all traditional news sources (television, radio, and print).

As shown in Table 1.1a, the picture of preference levels emerging in the Nordics in 2016–2022 is one of relative stability, and with some fragmentation between age groups: Over this time span, the 18–24 age group plateaued for online news (around 47%) and traditional sources (approx. 28%), coupled with a small⁵ increase in the preference for news from social media (from 21% to 26%). The 55+ age group displays a stable, very low usage level of news from social media (approx. 4%), a moderate decrease in traditional news (from 75% to 66%), and a moderate increase in online news (from 20% to 29%).

Table 1.1a Nordic average main source of news, 2016–2022 (per cent)

Age group	Source	2016	2019	2022
18–24	Online	49	45	47
	Social media	21	27	26
	Traditional	28	28	27
55+	Online	20	26	29
	Social media	3	5	4
	Traditional	75	69	66

Table 1.1b UK main source of news, 2016–2022 (per cent)

Age group	Source	2016	2019	2022
18–24	Online	60	40	40
	Social media	24	32	38
	Traditional	15	27	23
55+	Online	18	18	27
	Social media	2	3	6
	Traditional	78	79	67

Table 1.1c US main source of news 2016–2022 (per cent)

Age group	Source	2016	2019	2022
18–24	Online	31	30	33
	Social media	27	37	44
	Traditional	36	33	22
55+	Online	19	22	29
	Social media	5	10	12
	Traditional	71	68	59

COMMENTS: Survey question: You say you’ve used these sources of news in the last week, which would you say is your main source of news?

SOURCE: Newman et al., 2016–2022

Figure 1.1 shows the magnitude of the gaps between the two age groups’ preferred news media types from 2016–2022 (i.e., the fragmentation between the two groups). These developments in the Nordic patterns of main sources of news mean that fragmentation between the groups has declined considerably by 11 percentage points (pp) for online news (the gap diminishing from 29pp to 18pp) and moderately by 8pp for traditional media (the gap decreasing from 47pp to 39pp), whereas fragmentation has increased incrementally for news from social media by 4pp (from 18pp to 22pp). When this landscape is observed from a high altitude through figures like these, it can be concluded

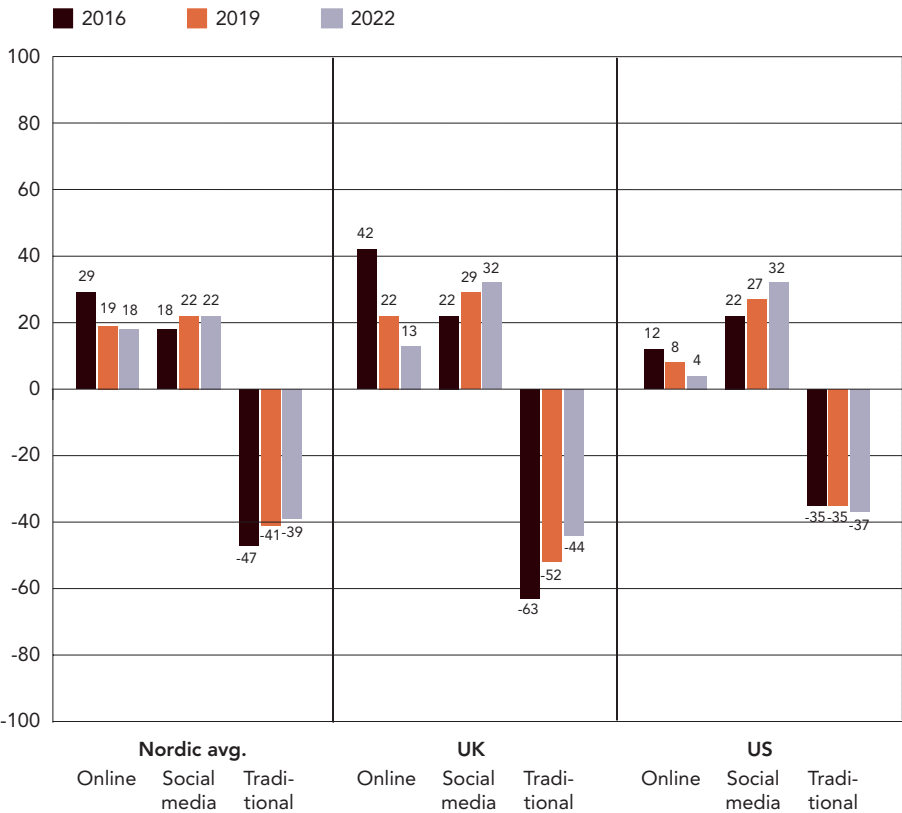
that Nordic fragmentation levels are characterised by less fragmentation in 2022 than in 2016, which knee-jerk reactions should make us applaud.

Interestingly, for our understanding of the implications of fragmentation, however, less fragmentation – meaning that young and old increasingly use the same types of news sources – can be, but is not necessarily, a good thing. In the Nordic situation in 2022, less fragmentation around online news sources is civically “good”, because it is caused by the 55+ age group increasing their use of online news media, which offer journalistically curated quality news. However, less fragmentation of traditional news sources could be seen as civically “bad”, because it stems from the 55+ age group to some extent turning away from quality traditional news media (public service media, publicly oriented newspapers), thus getting closer to the young group’s use level of traditional news media.

On balance, however, it is fair to say that these shifts, both of which are caused mainly by changes in news consumption in the older group, neutralise each other. Thus, we see the same “aggregate” level of fragmentation in 2022 as in 2016. This is also the case because neither age group relies heavily on news from social media (where fragmentation has increased slightly), where the identity and quality of the ultimate news providers are much more uncertain. What matters in terms of civic considerations is that, irrespective of the extent of fragmentation between them, both groups get their news diets to a substantial extent from quality journalistic news sources.

In Table 1.1b, the corresponding picture for the two age groups in the UK shares some similarities with the Nordic scene. However, while we found considerable Nordic stability in preferred news media types in the period analysed, the British scene is characterised by stronger fluctuations between 2016–2022. The young group shows a big drop in online news provision (from 60% to 40%), a considerable increase in news from social media (from 24% to 38%), and a moderate increase in traditional news providers (from 15% to 23%). The older group shows a moderate increase in online news provision (from 18% to 27%), a considerable drop in traditional news types (from 78% to 67%), and a small increase in news from social media (from 2% to 6%).

Figure 1.1 *Difference index of main sources of news between age groups (percentage points)*



COMMENTS: Survey question: You say you’ve used these sources of news in the last week, which would you say is your main source of news?
SOURCE: Newman et al., 2016–2022

Therefore, in the British fragmentation balance (see Figure 1.1), we see that fragmentation has decreased by 29pp in online news (from 42pp to 13pp), and by 19pp for traditional news (from 63pp to 44pp), because many in the 18–24 age group have deserted online news providers, and some have turned more towards traditional providers, while the older group has increased online consumption and now consume traditional media to a lesser extent. At the same time, young Britons have turned in considerable numbers towards news from social media, leading to a fragmentation increase of 10pp on this parameter.

Pursuing our argument from the Nordic situation above, in the British case it is equally dubious to draw positive civic implications from empirically established less fragmentation. For instance, less fragmentation of online news consumption should be considered civically negative, because it is due to the

younger group having turned their backs on this form of journalistic news. Addressing the question of the civic consequences of these British fluctuations in the 2022 news consumption landscape, the main difference from the Nordic scene, in terms of fragmentation, consists of the considerably larger number of young Britons basing their democratic prerequisites on news from social media, rather than from mainstream journalistic news organisations.

Relying partly on our readers' ability to now do a parallel analysis of the American figures in Table 1.1c and Figure 1.1 for themselves, we shall merely summarise the American fragmentation situation by pointing out that the period has witnessed considerable fluctuations, as the 18–24 age group shows a big leap in the use of news from social media (from 27% to 44%) and a considerable drop for traditional media types (from 36% to 22%), while on the whole maintaining their allegiance to online sources (33%). The 55+ age group has increased its preference for online news (from 19% to 29%), as they have turned away from traditional sources (from 71% to 59%) and moderately increased their consumption of news from social media (from 5% to 12%).

In the aggregate American picture, fragmentation between the age groups has become less pronounced for online news sources (the gap declining from 12pp to 4pp; see Figure 1.1), but this civic improvement has been more than offset by the increased fragmentation of news from social media (rising to 32pp). What matters more than developments in fragmentation per se, however, is the fact that Americans, young and old, have now come to rely less on traditional and online providers of quality journalistic news than especially their Nordic, but also their British, counterparts, and have turned more towards news from social media.

When we consider news-derived civic prerequisites, we suggest that we should not focus on whether younger and older citizens use the same or different news types for their daily information needs, but on what kind of journalistic quality their preferred news sources come with, in terms of setting important societal agendas and framing events in non-partisan ways. In relation to the three news media types analysed above, the important distinction is not between younger and older people's differential use of each of them (which may incidentally have been "overstated", according to recent research by Mangold et al., 2022) but the extent to which the preferred news media can be relied upon to deliver journalistic quality to the two groups. Although the news that people in increasing numbers, across age groups, encounter through social media cannot uniformly be dismissed as problematic, it is nevertheless the case that news from social media leads into an algorithmic black box of information sources, which carries news of unknown veracity and civic relevance.

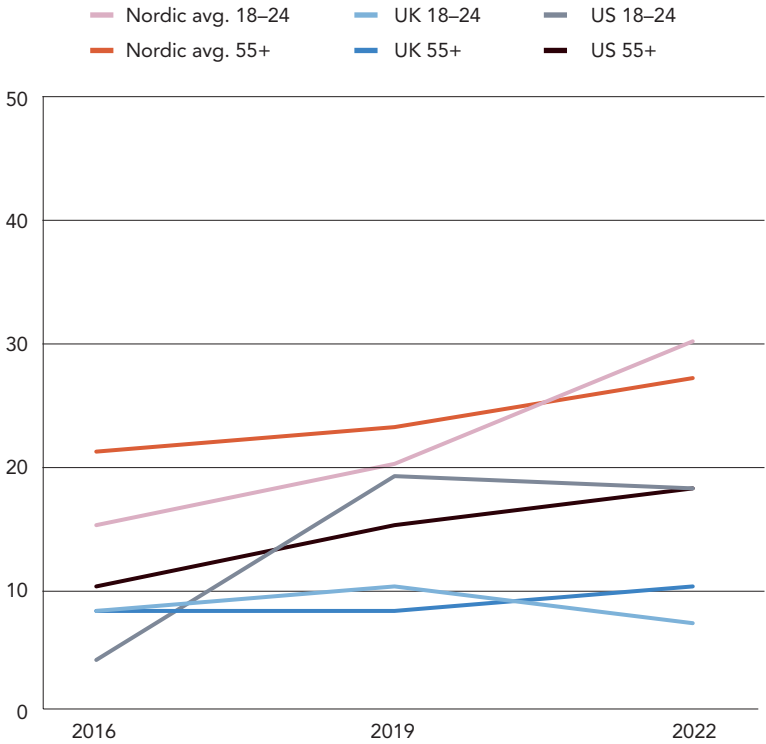
Paying for news

Looking at social economic factors related to the question of fragmentation, the question of income is often mentioned as a factor in willingness to pay, although just how much of a factor it is varies between studies (O'Brien et al., 2020). In general, however, it has been seen as an uphill struggle for the news industry, to go from almost giving news away for free at the start of the digitalisation era, until now, when paywalls and subscriptions are seen as a central part of the transition to a digital economy (Newman et al., 2022). In the debate about willingness to pay, some studies suggest that younger people will be more willing to pay than other age groups (Goyanes, 2014), while other studies question whether a transition to digital subscriptions as a new economic model for the news media will be achievable at all, at least in the US (Chyi & Ng, 2020).

In Figure 1.2, we see that there has been a general increase in willingness to pay in 2016–2019. From 2019 to 2022, the Nordic average continues to grow, especially if looking at the younger age group. Thus, willingness to pay in the 18–24 age group has increased significantly from 15 per cent in 2016 to 30 per cent in 2022. It should be noted, however, that this average covers some clear differences between the Nordic countries, with 40 per cent of this age group paying for news in Norway and Sweden in 2022, but a lesser 24 per cent in Finland and 19 per cent in Denmark.

In the US and the UK, there is growth in the willingness to pay from 2016 to 2019, especially for the younger age group in the US. However, in 2022, the same age groups drops in willingness to pay in the UK, while in the US it remains much the same as in 2019. In the Nordic countries, the younger age group is now on average *more* willing to pay for news than the older age group, thus at least partly confirming Goyanes's (2014) study that suggested that young people would be more inclined to pay for news than other age groups, while growth in both the UK and US is much lower and more in line with the more negative projections by Chyi and Ng (2020).

Figure 1.2 Willingness to pay for news by age group (per cent)



	2016	2019	2022
Nordic avg. 18-24	15	20	30
Nordic avg. 55+	21	23	27
UK 18-24	8	10	7
UK 55+	8	8	10
US 18-24	4	19	18
US 55+	10	15	18

COMMENTS: Survey question: Have you paid for online news content, or accessed a paid for online news service in the last year? (This could be a digital subscription, combined digital/print subscription or one-off payment for an article or app or e-edition).

SOURCE: Newman et al., 2016–2022

Trust in news and polarisation

Trust in news media is connected to a general trust in society's political institutions (Andersen et al., 2021; Hanitzsch et al., 2018). Thus, low trust in news media often equals low trust in political institutions and vice versa. For this reason, trust in news media also plays a part in the debate about political polarisation. One recent study found that, in most countries, the relationship between political polarisation and trust was weak, with the US as a noticeable exception (Suiter & Fletcher, 2020), while another study emphasised that political polarisation at a systematic level has a negative impact on media trust (Schranz et al., 2018). Despite the widespread focus on trust, there is limited research which analyses the relationship between news uses via different media platforms and trust. One recent study, also based on data from the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report*, found that higher levels of trust were associated with the use of mainstream sources such as television news and the websites of newspapers, as well as with the use of digital-born news websites (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019). This study also found that using social media as the main source of news was correlated with lower levels of trust in news. Another recent study of trust and media use found that habitual consumption of news from traditional news media had a positive effect on media trust (Schranz et al., 2018). The same study also highlighted that in Germany, younger Germans trust media less than older Germans.

Looking at Table 1.2, some of these findings seem to be corroborated by our data analysis. Thus, the table shows that the younger age group, who have a clear preference for getting news from social media, also have the lowest levels of trust. In 2016, the Nordic trust average of the younger age group is lower than the trust of the same age group in the UK, but higher than in the US. Over time, the Nordic trust average for both the younger and the older age groups increases. For the younger age group, the increase is from 40 per cent in 2016 to 49 per cent in 2022, while for the older age group, the increase is from 54 per cent to 63 per cent. We know from other studies that trust in news in general increased during the Covid-19 pandemic (Newman et al., 2021). However, while this has changed in 2022 in many countries (Newman et al., 2022), it has remained at a high level in the Nordic countries (Schröder et al., 2022). Despite this level of high trust, there is still a difference of 14pp in the trust score between the younger age group and the older age group, confirming what other studies have also found regarding this age group and media trust. On the other hand, while trust in the Nordic countries has gone up on average, trust in news in both the UK and the US has gone down.

Table 1.2 *Trust in news media by region, age group, and political wings, 2016–2022 (per cent)*

Year	Region	18–24	55+	Left	Centre	Right
2016	Nordic avg.	40	54	51	52	46
	UK	44	51	39	55	57
	US	32	33	34	38	23
2019	Nordic avg.	41	57	54	54	48
	UK	37	43	38	43	41
	US	27	35	53	33	9
2022	Nordic avg.	49	63	59	60	57
	UK	31	39	9	38	35
	US	24	28	39	28	14

COMMENTS: The table shows the percentage that agrees with the following survey question: Thinking about news in general, do you agree or disagree with the following statements? - I think you can trust most news most of the time.

SOURCE: Newman et al., 2016–2022

Turning to the question of political polarisation, the table shows trust in news media in relation to the political position of left, right, and centre. Looking at trust in relation to political persuasions, previous studies have suggested that in general, citizens with a strong ideological persuasion either to the left or the right tend to trust news media less (Schranz et al., 2018).

Looking first at the Nordic average, we see that trust in the news media in general has increased from 2016 to 2022. While this is true for all three political positions, the increase in trust is the highest for voters who vote right-of-centre. Thus, 46 per cent of these voters trusted news in general in 2016, but in 2022, the number rose to 57 per cent. This is especially interesting because previous studies of trust and political position in, for instance, Denmark (Schrøder et al., 2020), have found right-wingers to have considerably *lower* trust in the media.

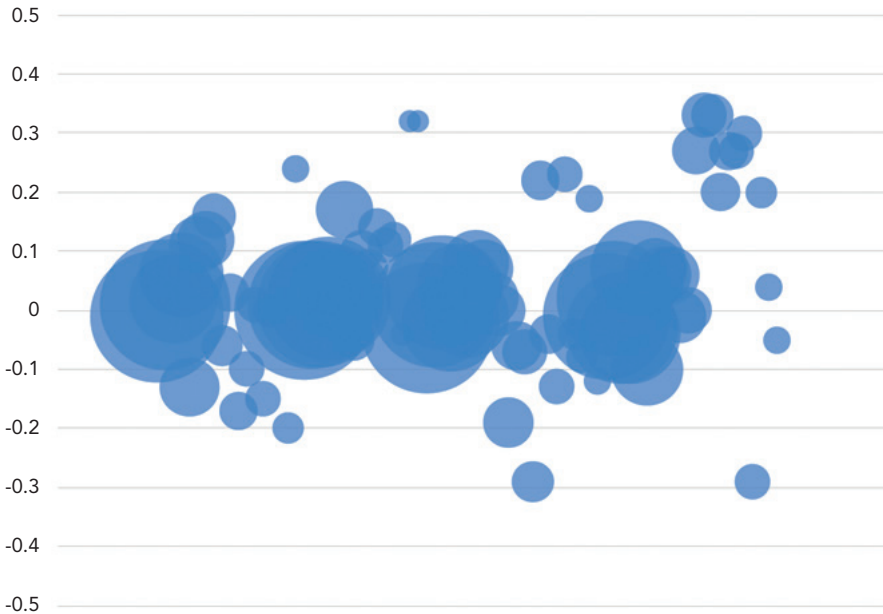
While trust is on the rise in the Nordic countries, we again see the opposite development in the UK and the US. Regardless of political position, trust has gone down, though in the UK it is the left-leaners who are least trusting, while in the US it is voters leaning to the right. However, both countries were experiencing a trust crisis in 2022 (see also Newman et al., 2022).

Now turning to our final point, we looked at the entire media landscape in relation to media use and political persuasion to investigate if political polarisation has shaped a media market where users mostly use news from news origins they feel are in line with their own political persuasion (see the Methodological design and data section for details). Here, the models below show three very distinct pictures of the three geographical areas. Looking first at political polarisation in the Nordic media market (see Figure 1.3), we see that most Nordic news media brands are converging on a “centre” position (the zero line), with a few news media also positioned more to right as well

as more to the left of the political centre (the upper and lower sections of the figure, respectively). In other words, in the Nordic media landscapes, there are news media that are predominantly used by voters from the left or voters from the right. However, most of the largest Nordic news media – both public service news media and legacy online news media – occupy the centre of the figure, leading us to conclude that in general, we see a low level of polarisation in the Nordic countries when looking at media use.

This corresponds with Fletcher (2022), who, based on a measure that compares the left–right make-up of each news outlet’s combined online and offline audience to the left–right make-up of the national population, calculates a so-called polarisation score. The polarisation scores of each of the four countries are as follows (with 50% indicating maximum polarisation): Norway (15%); Finland (11%); Denmark (15%); and Sweden (22%). Thus, while there is low polarisation on average, there is more polarisation in Sweden than in the other Nordic countries due to a higher number of alternative news media that mostly serve readers from the right.

Figure 1.3 *Polarisation of Nordic media, compound of brand score across off- and online media*



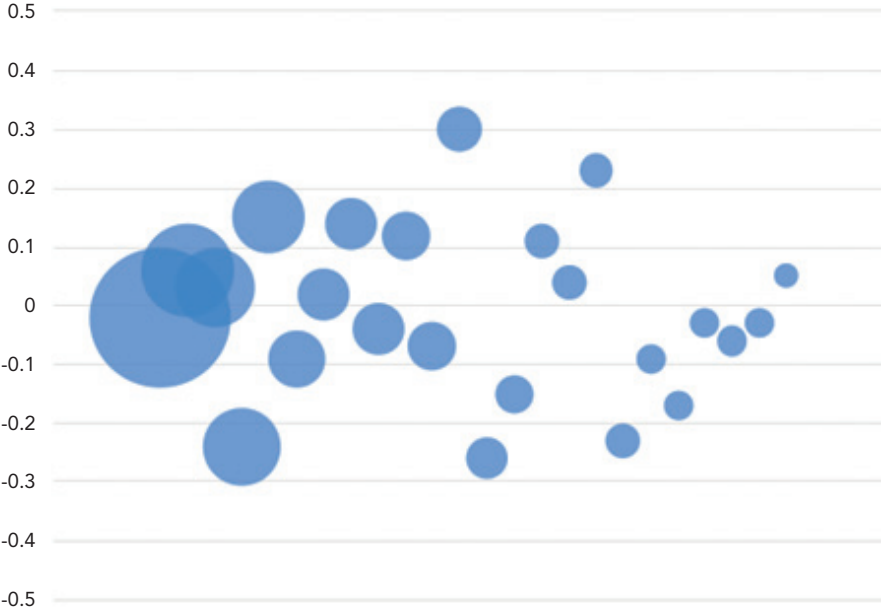
COMMENTS: 2022 data only. Y-axis shows polarisation, positive values indicating right-wing audience media use. Bubble size indicates audience size.

Survey questions: 1) Which of the following brands have you used to access news offline in the last week (via TV, radio, print, and other traditional media)? Please select all that apply. 2) Which of the following brands have you used to access news online in the last week (via websites, apps, social media, and other forms of Internet access)? Please select all that apply.

SOURCE: Newman et al., 2022

Turning to the UK, the equivalent Figure 1.4 shows that a good deal of the news media are clearly positioned to either the left (lower area) or the right (upper area), though often not very far to either side.

Figure 1.4 Polarisation of UK media, compound of brand score across off- and online media



COMMENTS: 2022 data only. Y-axis show polarisation, positive values indicate right wing audience media use. Bubble size indicate audience size.

Survey questions: 1) Which of the following brands have you used to access news offline in the last week (via TV, radio, print, and other traditional media)? Please select all that apply. 2) Which of the following brands have you used to access news online in the last week (via websites, apps, social media, and other forms of Internet access)? Please select all that apply.

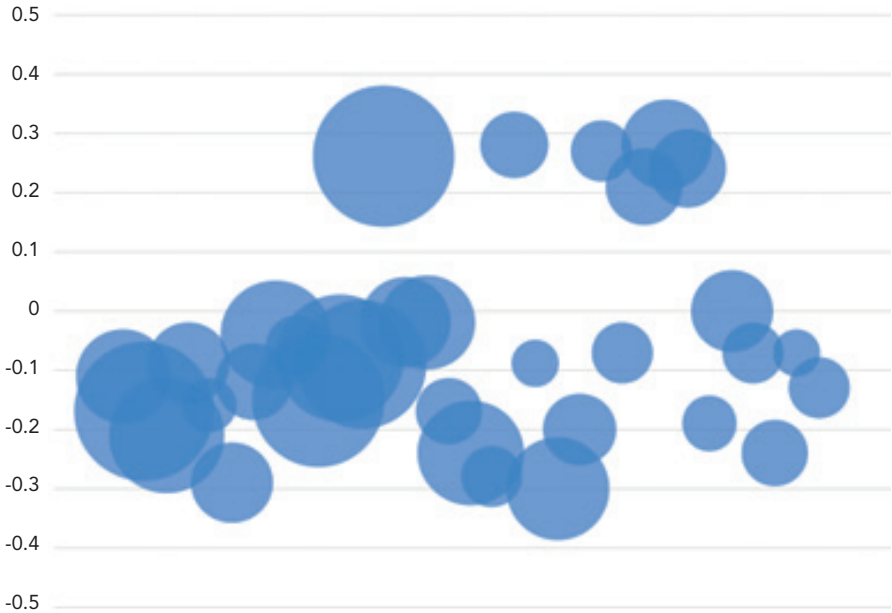
SOURCE: Newman et al., 2022

At the same time, the BBC occupies a central position in the middle together with other television news outlets like ITV and Sky. The aggregate British polarisation score is 25 per cent (Fletcher, 2022).

Turning to the US, in Figure 1.5 we see a much clearer image of polarisation, as the political middle in the US consists of much fewer media outlets than both the UK and the Nordics. Thus, as previous analysis has also suggested, the US appears to present as a “worst case” when looking at many of the parameters that we focused on in this chapter. Still, the US can also be considered somewhat more nuanced than the public debate would sometimes suggest, with a large number of news media positioned only a little to the left of the centre (lower area) and an outlet like *The New York Post* placing

itself clearly in the middle. The aggregate American polarisation score is 34 per cent.

Figure 1.5 Polarisation of US media, compound of brand score across off- and online media



COMMENTS: 2022 data only. Y-axis show polarisation, positive values indicate right wing audience media use. Bubble size indicate audience size.

Survey questions: 1) Which of the following brands have you used to access news offline in the last week (via TV, radio, print, and other traditional media)? Please select all that apply. 2) Which of the following brands have you used to access news online in the last week (via websites, apps, social media, and other forms of Internet access)? Please select all that apply.

SOURCE: Newman et al., 2022

Conclusion and discussion

In this chapter, we have asked two questions about media use and the Nordic media welfare state. The first research question states the overall question that we sought to address this chapter, and it relates to the democratic ideal that media use is a crucial dimension of the Nordic media systems, as the ideal of an enlightened public with equal access to information has been a key aspect of the Nordic welfare states. Thus, the first research question asked: To what extent can news audience practices be seen as contributing to the maintenance and development of Nordic media welfare states? The second research question addresses the more practical way in which we want to analyse the overall question: From the perspective of media use, or the

audience, has there been an increased fragmentation and polarisation in news media use in the Nordic countries from 2016 to 2022?

Addressing the second research question first, our answer derives from having analysed fragmentation from an age group perspective with respect to the following: 1) the main news source, 2) the willingness to pay for news, and 3) trust in news. With respect to polarisation, we have looked at trust in news in general and from an aggregated index of news brands and the political orientation of the media users. In the Nordics, we find age fragmentation across all three focus points, however not at a very high level. Thus, with respect to the main source of news, we find that over 2016–2022, the younger group has plateaued for online news (around 47%) and traditional sources (approx. 28%), coupled with a small increase in the preference for news from social media (from 21% to 26%). The older group displays a stable, very low usage level of news from social media (approx. 4%), a moderate decrease in traditional news (down 9pp to 66%), and a moderate increase in online news (up 9pp to 29%).

As we argued above, however, rather than bemoaning age fragmentation as problematic in itself – which has been almost mandatory in the research literature – we invite readers to consider the composite pictures of patterned news preferences across the three regions with respect to the civic prerequisites that users may derive from them. Low fragmentation appears to be a misleading indicator of civic news quality, because the actual exposure figures may tell a very different story about the underlying journalistic quality of the different main sources of news.

Looking at willingness to pay, we find a shifting pattern between the age groups. While in 2016, the older age groups were more willing to pay for news, this has shifted in 2022, with the younger age group now being more willing to pay for news. Turning to trust, in the Nordics we find a stable difference between the age groups, with the older age group being more trustful than the younger group, and although trust has gone up in both age groups from 2016 to 2020, the differences between age groups remain. Finally, regarding polarisation in the Nordic countries, we find that while there are differences in trust regarding news in general between voters from the left, the centre, and the right, differences between the levels of trust between right-wingers and left-wingers have diminished from 2016 to 2022. Looking at the Nordic media landscapes from a high altitude, we also see that most news brands are placed at the centre, with some outliers both to the left and the right; but all in all, it shows a relatively pluralistic and consensual media landscape with a low level of polarisation,⁶ although Sweden tops the other Nordic countries in this regard. Comparing the Nordic countries to the UK and the US regarding fragmentation and polarisation, we find that both these phenomena have deeper roots in both places than in the Nordic countries – although the level of fragmentation and polarisation, especially

in the UK, is not so pronounced as one might expect from recent public and academic debates. Still, the US is very low on trust and the UK very low on willingness to pay, with social media playing a still more dominant role in both countries.

This brings us to the first research question and the overall question of the extent to which news audience practices can be seen as contributing to the maintenance and development of Nordic media welfare states. Based on the parameters explored in this chapter, we argue that Nordic audience practices do indeed contribute to the overall ideal of an enlightened public. Thus, the young Nordic news audiences are today more likely than especially their American counterparts to acquire civic prerequisites that support the maintenance of Nordic media welfare states, due not least to the preferred main sources of news in the Nordic countries, which we argue are more conducive than social media to the maintenance of a media welfare state with a civically informed citizenry. This is supported by the comparatively high degree of willingness to pay in the Nordic countries in general, especially by the young audience. Adding to this fact, the Nordic media landscapes are far less polarised than especially the US, as our study suggests a media welfare state with a majority of politically unbiased news media and only minor elements of fragmentation between age groups. It is tempting to see a parallel between the analysed news audience practices in these three geographical areas and the fact that the Nordic countries are welfare states with widely trusted public service media, whereas the UK is a non-welfare state with trusted public service media, and the US is neither.

Thus, looking to future consequences or scenarios for the Nordic media welfare state from our perspective, it is vital to keep the comparative, empirical perspective in mind. As already mentioned, the study by Castro and colleagues (2022) on political information and civic knowledge in a high-choice media environment concluded by highlighting the positives of the Nordic and democratic corporatist countries, especially the high use of quality journalism from traditional news media and public service news media. The study also argued how this may even have broader ecological effects on other news organisations in the media system, making them increase their quality.

Another recent study on the developments of media systems by Humprecht and colleagues (2022), which included 30 countries, argued that political polarisation and threats to professional journalism are changing media systems, with the US, as well as southern and eastern Europe, becoming more polarised, while also seeing a rise in political parallelism and a decrease in journalistic professionalism. The same study singled out the countries in the democratic corporatist model as having more stable media systems with strong media organisations, high journalistic professionalism, and low political parallelism.

Finally, the most recent version of the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report* (Newman et al., 2023) also underlines the increasing difference between the Nordic countries and most of the other countries under study, especially with respect to use of traditional news media, high trust, and high willingness to pay for news.

From this internationally comparative point of view, it seems clear that the Nordic media welfare state has something special to offer democracy: a less polarised and more well-informed citizenry. And while this informed citizenry also owes a huge debt to both relative income equality and free education, it also hinges on a media system where the quality of news and information remains high and relatively free of polarisation, misinformation, and threats towards news media and journalists. Thus, the media subsidies to traditional news media and amply funded public service news media seem more important than ever, as does the protection of media freedom and the increasing regulation of social media at both a national and European level.

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Endnotes

¹ The four Nordic countries analysed in this chapter are all media welfare states in the sense of having similar media institutional arrangements and ideals. However, their media welfare systems should also be seen as variations on a common theme. As Ala-Fossi (2021) has observed, for instance, the Finnish media landscape has a distinct shape in comparison to the other Nordic countries.

² For instance, the interesting study by Fletcher and Nielsen (2017) advances the counter-intuitive argument that, although there is a high level of fragmentation and a low level of news source duplication among news audiences in the UK and Denmark, this does not pose a threat to diversity or the democratic well-being of these countries, because the content massively consumed from public service news media is both politically and culturally diverse and balanced. Thus, a high level of “fragmentation”, as defined in their study, did not lead to the high level of potentially polarised echo chambers that the authors had expected.

³ We do recognise that class and socioeconomic status also constitute important factors in patterning the use of news media and media in general. As Lindell and Hovden (2018: 641) put it for the case of Sweden, “class structures have created different audience and user segments in the Swedish population” (see also Lindell, 2018). The same point was made for Denmark by Schröder and Phillips (2007). It may be an exaggeration, however, when Lindell and Hovden (2018: 650) concluded that “social groups orient themselves in diametrically different ways in the media environment”, as their study seems to underplay the wide reach and trust of news media that serve as bridges between what they see as separate “audience islands”.

⁴ For the 55+ age group, all four Nordic countries are very close (1–4 percentage points) to the Nordic average across the years studied. Among the 18–24-year-olds, Norway and Sweden are close to the average throughout, while Denmark and Finland sometimes deviate by 5–6 percentage points, and in a couple of cases by up to 10 percentage points.

⁵ We label the found increases and decreases following this descriptive legend: “small” = 0–5 percentage points; “moderate” = 6–10 percentage points; “considerable” = 11–15 percentage points; “big” = 16+ percentage points.

⁶ This complies well with the findings of Miriam Brems’s forthcoming study of alternative news media audiences in Denmark, to the effect that users of alternative news media are also frequent users of mainstream media (Miriam Brems, personal communication, 25 August 2023).

Similar media systems, different self-regulation

*A closer look at the Nordic media
accountability models*

RANDA ROMANOVA & MATS BERGMAN

SWEDISH SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE, UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI, FINLAND

ABSTRACT

This chapter reviews existing media accountability systems in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden, and probes how current self-regulatory practices fit the idea of a homogeneous Nordic media welfare state model. This conception implies that Nordic institutions – including users, companies, regulators, and the state – would react to the emerging changes in the digital environment along largely uniform lines. However, a closer look at the systems of self-regulation in the Nordic countries reveals differences between their respective ethical frameworks, which in turn affect how they face perceived challenges of globalisation, digitalisation, and marketisation. Despite several historical commonalities, the Nordic self-regulatory bodies do not necessarily demonstrate a common developmental pattern in the digital era. The implications uncovered in this appraisal thus offer insights into comparative research on media systems in general and the Nordic media welfare state in particular.

KEYWORDS: media ethics, media systems, media accountability, journalistic self-regulation, media welfare state

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Introduction

Nordic media structures have often been characterised in terms that emphasise strong journalistic professionalism and an adherence to the principle of freedom of speech (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Syvertsen et al., 2014). Editorial freedom has become one of the pillars of the media welfare state concept alongside universal services, cultural policy for the media, and consensus between public and private stakeholders. It is referred to as a characteristic feature of the five Nordic countries: Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden (Syvertsen et al., 2014). According to Syvertsen and colleagues (2014), a combination of negative and positive policies, support schemes for the press, and institutionalised self-regulation remain key aspects fostering good professional practice in the region and counteracting the forces of globalisation, marketisation, and fragmentation.

The first part of this book focuses on policy responses in relation to contemporary challenges in the digital media landscape. In this chapter, we initiate a debate on media policy by delving deeper into institutionalised journalistic self-regulation and its recent transformation. In this context, institutionalisation is understood as a range of measures set up to maintain good professional practice immune to editorial or state interference. These measures include various media accountability instruments operating in the region at the professional and organisational level. More aspects of media policy, such as support schemes, are addressed by Halvorsen and Bjerke (Chapter 6).

In many respects, the Nordic media accountability systems seem to meet the criteria of the media welfare state. First, there is a long tradition of establishing tribunal bodies dealing with complaints about the press. Second, Nordic countries tend to hit the top of international ratings related to media trust and press freedom. Thus, according to the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report* (2023), trust in news in the Nordic countries remains above international averages. Press freedom ratings (RFS, Freedom House) traditionally put the Nordics at the top of the list. In the *Worlds of Journalism* (2022) country reports (2012–2016), it has been noted that Nordic journalists exhibit a particularly strong adherence to professional codes: More than 96 per cent of journalists in Finland, Norway, and Sweden believe that a journalist should always follow codes of professional ethics, regardless of situation and context. Although the results from Denmark and Iceland indicate lower support for the codes, the country reports still ascribe a strong commitment to professional ethics to Danish and Icelandic journalists (Fengler et al., 2015).

According to Syvertsen and colleagues (2014), the development of the media welfare state in the digital age has been characterised by the continuity and adaptability of its institutions. However, we suggest that some key elements of the media system were overlooked in their analysis. In this chapter, we focus on the current state of the Nordic media accountability models and

probe similarities and differences in the developmental paths of journalistic self-regulation in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. We look into these specific aspects of the development of the media welfare state aiming to answer the following research questions:

- RQ1. Which patterns characterise the adaptation of Nordic self-regulatory systems in the face of global challenges such as globalisation, marketisation, and digitalisation?
- RQ2. How do these patterns contribute to or contradict the uniform notion of a media welfare state?

Research design and methods

With our research questions, we seek to identify specific patterns characterising the transformation of the Nordic media accountability institutions. However, within the confines of this chapter, we cannot provide an extensive analysis of the whole self-regulatory system. Therefore, our focus is limited to the professional level of journalistic self-regulation represented by press councils and ethical codes (Eberwein et al., 2018). This entails the following active media institutions in the Nordic countries: the Council for Mass Media [Julkisen Sanan Neuvosto] and Guidelines for Journalists in Finland; the Media Ombudsperson [Medieombudsman], the Media Ethics Committee [Mediernas Etiknämnd], and the Code of Ethics for Press, Radio and Television in Sweden; the Ethical Committee [Siðanefnd] and the Rules of Ethics in Journalism in Iceland; the Press Professional Committee [Pressens Faglige Utvalgs] and the Code of Ethics of the Norwegian Press in Norway; and the Press Council [Pressenævnet], the National Code of Conduct, and the Media Liability Act in Denmark. The data have been obtained from the councils' official publications, annual reports, complaint decisions, and ethical codes.

Our examination sets out from media accountability studies that describe and classify existing models and tools maintaining accountability and press freedom in Europe and beyond (Bertrand, 2000; Eberwein et al., 2011, 2018; Fengler et al., 2015). In the first part, we identify the latest theoretical implications of media accountability instruments and analyse their relevance for the Nordic media landscape. In the second part, we focus on four dimensions used by Syvertsen and colleagues (2014: 120) to demonstrate “the adaptability of policy principles and solutions in the face of new challenges” of the media welfare state model. Taking into consideration institutionalised self-regulation as a part of the media accountability system maintained by respective instruments, we discuss whether phenomena of public engagement and professionalisation, marketisation, convergence, and technological development have been addressed by Nordic self-regulators at the professional level. Each dimension is investigated in terms of its effect on the structural

and organisational elements of the bodies. A comparative perspective is used to outline the main differences and similarities in the changing structures of active self-regulatory institutions in the Nordic countries.

Theory and practice of media accountability in the digital age

Media accountability systems – self-regulatory practices aimed at making the press accountable to the public – was operationalised as a theory in the early 2000s when institutionalised norms were already in place in most European countries. As such, media accountability systems were addressed as involving combinations of training, evaluation, monitoring, and feedback in “any non-State means of making media responsible towards the public” (Bertrand, 2000: 108). These functions were executed by instruments meant to

improve the services of the media to the public; restore the prestige of media in the eyes of the population; diversely protect freedom of speech and press; obtain, for the profession, the autonomy that it needs to play its part in the expansion of democracy and the betterment of the fate of mankind. (Bertrand, 2000: 57)

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, researchers identified more than 30 different categories of media accountability instruments, including broadcast documents, individuals, groups, and processes. However, all of them referred to traditional media: press, radio, and broadcasting.

With the development of the media landscape, the concept of media accountability has evolved as well. Its scope has been expanded to “any informal institution, both offline and online, performed by both media professionals and media users, which intends to monitor, comment on and criticise journalism and seeks to expose and debate problems of journalism” (Eberwein et al., 2011: 20). Questions of digitalisation – of the impact of globalisation, technological development, and marketisation – have been brought into the debates about media accountability. Due to increased interest in online formats, researchers have emphasised the role of the public in online media monitoring and suggested a new model of audience-inclusive media accountability (Eberwein et al., 2011). At the same time, the emergence of new forms of digital media, multi-channel news outlets, and novel sharing platforms has highlighted the need to revise traditional self-regulatory systems. As a result, separate professional standards for different types of media have become more and more problematic, and it has been suggested that one-media press councils ought to be converted into multi-media ethics councils (Frost, 2007).

Indeed, media research has detected general patterns in the restructuring of press councils and the revising of ethical codes (Fielden, 2012; Harjuniemi, 2013, 2014). Country reports have documented a tendency to transform press

councils into media councils as well as to expand the press ombudsperson's role in the Nordic states (Brurås, 2016; Guðmundsson, 2015; Harjuniemi, 2013, 2014; Lidberg, 2011). Additionally, most European media councils now process complaints regarding online reporting. Some national ethical codes contain guidelines about journalistic behaviour on the Internet.

Nonetheless, the transition has been challenging for a system that is typically slow to respond to innovations. Traditional self-regulatory instruments are being challenged by an immense technological growth, leading to a re-consideration of professional practices for the production, distribution, and consumption of news. Most European media councils are struggling with issues related to social media platforms, journalistic blogs, user-generated content, audience-inclusive media, and blurred outlines of journalistic identity. Therefore, even the strongest accountability systems do not currently provide journalists with sufficient professional standards. Thus, the needs of the professional community are not adequately reflected in the directives and codes of conduct put forward by editorial offices and professional self-regulatory bodies. Without such institutionalised ethical foundations, these bodies risk losing their legitimacy. The Nordics are no exception.

The media welfare state theory has emphasised that the Nordic media exhibit a strong adherence to universalism, implying an equal and broad access to information for all citizens as well as a versatile variety of communication channels available for the public (Syvertsen et al., 2014). Therefore, a profound media sector fostering democratic and cultural values and shaping the stature of media self-regulation in the Nordics is expected to stay one step ahead in an effective problem-solving process.

In the next part of this chapter, we examine how Nordic self-regulatory models have responded to current challenges based on their recent structural and organisational activities. Despite Nordic media operating in similar conditions, this closer look at their self-regulatory practices reveals certain distinctions in their models of media accountability.

Navigating the recent development of media accountability in the Nordic countries

National media accountability instruments have become a distinguished feature of Nordic media self-regulation. In the Nordics, the instruments have most effectively been developed and implemented by means of normative documents, ombudspersons, and press councils established by the media- and journalistic associations. This combination has been considered a successful model in safeguarding trust in journalism in Europe and beyond (Brurås, 2016; Fielden, 2012; Lidberg, 2011).

Sweden, Finland, and Norway were pioneers in establishing national press councils and promoting the idea of institutionalised self-regulation enshrined

in the guidelines and codes of conduct. The process of the institutionalisation of professional standards began in the 1910s in Sweden, and over the years, it has achieved significant public recognition in the whole Nordic region. Nowadays, each Nordic state has an operating press council that stipulates general principles of good journalism embodied in national codes of ethics or other normative documents.

Historically, the structural organisation of Nordic media accountability systems includes several types of self-regulation, combining voluntary independent self-regulation with co-regulation based on both statutory and self-regulatory elements. For instance, while other Nordic countries rely on the media council, the media ombudsperson handles most of its functions in Sweden. Moreover, Denmark exhibits a special case of media-state co-operation, where the state can revise the self-regulatory system if it finds it unrepresentative (Koene, 2009).

A closer look at internal procedures and the organisational management of these bodies provides more detailed insight into the different approaches to the methods of self-regulation adopted in the region. Based on challenges addressed by previous studies (Eberwein et al., 2018; Syvertsen et al., 2014), in what follows we examine Nordic professional media accountability instruments in light of four dimensions especially relevant for their recent development: public engagement and professionalisation, marketisation, convergence, and technological growth. These dimensions capture a transformation of current Nordic media accountability systems linked to global challenges.

Public engagement and professionalisation

Universal access to information has become one of the key aspects of the media welfare state: “The citizens should not only be informed, but able and motivated to take an active part in both political and cultural activities” (Syvertsen et al., 2014: 24). Recent surveys indicate that Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden have made significant progress in achieving this goal. In 2021–2022, these Nordic countries ranked among the top for both press and online news consumption as well as engagement with social media in the EU (Eurobarometer, 2022). Remarkably, among all Nordic and European countries, Iceland stands out as a leader in various digital activities.

However, the role of the public reaches beyond mere media consumption. It also encompasses participation in news production (e.g., in terms of user-generated content) and media monitoring. In the Nordic countries, this public role plays a vital role in national media accountability systems, particularly in press councils. Originally, the primary objective of press councils was to hold the media accountable to the public (Bertrand, 2000). Consequently, the composition of the Nordic councils reflects a balance between legislators, journalists, and the public that come together to resolve complaints against the media.

Notably, in Norwegian and Swedish media councils, nearly half of the members represent the public. Denmark and Finland follow closely, with substantial public representation at 33 and 28 per cent, respectively. In contrast, the Icelandic Ethical Committee consists solely of active or retired journalists in a small board of five members. The growing prominence of professional and public representatives in Nordic media councils reflects changes in the role of the councils. As the media landscape undergoes significant social and professional transformations, open discussions and debates on current threats are expected to arise within the councils, effectively amplifying professional and public debate (Eberwein et al., 2018).

Another trend is increasing professionalisation: Today, staff members and chairpersons tend to have more extensive journalistic backgrounds. Among the Nordic countries, Norway has the longest tradition of journalistic presidency, since 1972. In Finland, a professional journalist became the chairman of the Council for Mass Media in 2008. Additionally, a shift from a traditionally legislative background is notable in Sweden: After a long occupation by lawyers, a professional journalist was first appointed ombudsperson in 1992 and again in 2020. In the Icelandic model, all members have a journalistic background: Three members come from the Journalistic Union and two more from academia. At present, only in Denmark must the chairperson and vice-chairperson be law graduates: “in practice, the chairman is a member of the Supreme Court, and the vice-chairman is a solicitor” (Koene, 2009: 60).

The nature of the required professional background can be linked to the regulatory tasks and general social activity of the council. On the one hand, a legislative background is more important for a tribunal function aimed at addressing disputes between journalists and the audience. This explains the case of Denmark: Adjudicatory skills bring more value to the handling of complaint processes. On the other hand, a journalistic affiliation supports a focus on professional challenges. Both patterns of expanded public inclusion and the professionalisation of self-regulatory institutions accompany two essential principles of the media welfare state: first, the assurance that the audience is informed, protected, and takes an active part in political and cultural activities; and second, the ability of the media to regulate itself without state interference (Syvertsen et al., 2014).

Marketisation

The media market has sought to respond to global opportunities, striving to maintain competitiveness at the international scale. Traditional media has frequently appeared to be faced with a veritable thunderstorm of innovative communication services rapidly developing in the digital age. In order to maintain relevance for readers and viewers, the Nordic print press and broadcasters have demonstrated a prompt adaptation, expanding the production and distribution of media content to new levels (Syvertsen et al., 2014).

However, increased competitiveness can threaten key democratic principles of media freedom and accountability, which should ensure that profit motives do not prevail over the quality of journalistic content.

Attempting to address challenges of the changing media landscape, Nordic self-regulators have begun to re-evaluate some of their basic roles and functions. We have particularly noticed that recent activities within the Finnish and Swedish media councils demonstrate a small yet significant shift from a tribunal function to more explicitly social and professional objectives that accompany the complaint-handling procedures. Generally, such side functions refer to the protection of freedom of speech and publication as well as the interpretation of good journalistic practice. The “Basic agreement” of the Council for Mass Media in Finland decrees that the council should “cultivate responsible freedom in regard to mass media as well as provide support for good journalistic practice” (CMM, 2020). To achieve these objectives, some of the council’s representatives have developed distinctive public profiles; for example, the Council for Mass Media’s chair has a blog, revealing the council’s position on the most controversial cases and professional challenges. In addition, an active online presence facilitates the promotion of the Council for Mass Media to the public.

In Sweden, the media ombudsperson engages in educational initiatives and participates in public debates on media ethics. Furthermore, the media ombudsperson provides free advice to individuals who consider themselves disadvantaged by a publication. According to the 2020 annual report, within the preceding ten years, the media ombudsperson had been interviewed 457 times, held 320 lectures, participated in 90 debates and 40 podcasts, and written 85 chronicles and 28 debate articles. This shows that some media councils are expanding their functions from arbitration to a social agent role, fulfilling both professional and public needs.

In the digital environment, some Nordic self-regulatory bodies evidently feel compelled to perform more public-oriented functions, calling for public input in debates concerning key ethical issues. As the cases of Finland and Sweden demonstrate, this can also take the form of media literacy campaigns and educational events that aim to combat the spread of mis- and disinformation and fake news (Heikkilä & Väliverronen, 2019). However, based on official documents and other available data, Icelandic and Danish media councils do not follow this pattern. In these cases, the councils’ activities tend to be restricted to a tribunal function, leaving public debate to journalistic unions.

Convergence

Convergence is a major consequence of the digital transformation of the media industry. The concept refers to the digitalisation of journalistic processes along with the transformation of professional practices and strategies derived

from the emergence of digital media (Kackman et al., 2010). Specifically in the Nordic countries, convergence has facilitated a rapid expansion of the media, both vertically and horizontally, and has led to the expansion of media channels (Syvertsen et al., 2014). A prompt switch to the online environment has created new challenges for media accountability systems, which have been forced to adjust traditional practices to the digital era.

Media accountability studies have identified two processes of adaptation in media councils: the internal restructurisation of press councils and the revision of the ethical codes (Eberwein et al., 2018, Fielden, 2012; Harjuniemi, 2013, 2014). In the Nordics, researchers have underlined a trend to transform press councils into media councils, as well as to expand the press ombudsperson's role in Sweden (Brurås, 2016; Guðmundsson, 2015; Harjuniemi, 2013, 2014; von Krogh, 2017; Lidberg, 2011). As a result, the coverage of Nordic press councils has grown from solely press to television and radio, and later to online media such as websites, Facebook pages, online blogs, and YouTube channels that publish journalistic content.

According to the Media Councils in the Digital Age project (2020), all five Nordic countries have confirmed that they deal with content published in different online formats. Denmark, Iceland, and Sweden specify that they consider digital channels only if they are defined as professional media channels by their ethical systems; however, there is no general agreement on what constitutes this. The same challenge persists for identifying a professional journalist on the web or determining which social media posts can be classified as journalistic content.

Corresponding amendments and precise definitions might potentially be included in the national codes; however, this process is complicated by two chief factors. First, it is technically problematic: Current codes have been established via a long-standing procedure that has targeted only traditional (in some cases, only printed) media. The case of Sweden shows that distinctions based on media type are not practical amid a general expansion of journalistic channels. Therefore, even with a focus on solely journalistic content, media councils express the need to distinguish between relevant varieties of journalistic work. The second reason follows: Concepts of agents, institutions, processes, and techniques involved in the journalistic process are too ambiguous. Without specific operationalisation, there is no certain way to define who and what ought to be added to the jurisdiction of media councils.

As a result, the ethical normative basis within the Nordic countries diverges, with variations in the frequency of code revisions. The ethical codes of Finland, Norway, and Sweden include the most recent adaptations: They have implemented guidelines related to digital media in 2014–2020. The Danish Media Liability Act has not been changed since its appearance in 1992, although the ethical rules were last reconsidered in 2013. At the time of the writing of this chapter, the Icelandic code has not been updated since 1991.

A report on the current digital challenges to ethical standards of journalism (Juntunen, 2022: 40) has emphasised a global need to revise the European codes: “the councils have to be adaptive to change and open to re-thinking their roles, procedures and principles to maintain their legitimacy in an ever-changing media landscape”. However, not all the countries support such changes, preferring to deal with more general and therefore flexible guidelines instead. The concise nature of the codes provides more space for interpretation and allows the councils to adjust to modern realities, relying on the trust from the professional community and public.

As an alternative to the codes, certain councils have published complementary guidelines in the form of additional statements. These statements are not parts of the main code, but they do provide more explicit information of good journalistic behaviour in a specific case. Some Nordic self-regulators suggest guidelines concerning digital publications derived from the convergence and expansion of media channels. The Norwegian code recommends informing the audience of interactive services in publications, ensuring a clear understanding of digital pre-editing for users, and moderating inserts that are not in compliance with the Norwegian ethical code. The 2011 Annex of the Finnish Guidelines for Journalists considers online-generated content. It demands the responsible editorial monitoring of websites, checks on privacy and human dignity violations, and a clear demarcation between public and editorial content. A small remark regarding online news exists in the Danish Ethical Rules: Sensitive or private information may be removed upon a request if deemed reasonable. Put differently, it is the only Nordic code that includes the right to be forgotten at the professional level of self-regulation. Alternatively, in its official statement, the Finnish media council has delegated this responsibility to editorial offices.

In total, the Finnish Council for Mass Media has published 21 additional statements regarding various topics – from surreptitious advertising to marking news automation. The same strategy is followed by the Norwegian Press Professional Committee, which provides the Editorial Poster – complementary rules regarding more explicit duties and responsibilities for editors. Nevertheless, the cases of Denmark and Iceland do not reflect a need for large updates. Considering their narrower tribunal function, we surmise that more general codes give these councils greater flexibility to interpret ethical guidelines based on the current professional climate.

New professional challenges emerging from the digital environment might potentially create new grounds for violations and change the nature of complaints. In this case, the update of the ethical codes would be motivated by new complaint requirements. However, most media councils have recently reported that incorrect or incomplete information has still been the most common violation. Currently, four Nordic media councils provide guidelines for factual accuracy and resolve complaints concerning factual errors. In the

case of Sweden, factual accuracy is not directly considered by the media ombudsperson, due to strict criteria for a complaint submission. In Sweden, the task is to investigate reports from individuals who feel personally damaged by the reported medium. Accordingly, an incorrect or incomplete factual statement may be considered only if it may have harmed a designated person. Therefore, updates concerning the format of the publication would not be necessary for the councils: Complaints regarding incorrect information would be dealt with in the same way regardless of the type of media. It correlates with the ideas that media councils should “keep the balance between keeping their core principles clear and stable to be applicable and acceptable and, at the same time, up-to-date, so they adequately reflect the prevailing reality” (Juntunen, 2022: 3).

Therefore, another method for lessening the workload is to delegate decisions to editorial offices. This practice put specific limits to the ethical framework addressed by the councils. With regard to the range of ethical violations, the scope differs significantly between the Nordic countries. For instance, the guidelines concerning journalistic behaviour are not a part of the media ombudsperson’s work in Sweden; rather, it is a task of the Swedish Journalistic Union. Additionally, if a publication does not personally affect the complainant, the complaint will be dismissed by most of the councils. Furthermore, in Finland, Iceland, and Norway, the complainant must indicate which part of the code has been violated.

Consequently, a complaint regarding the same matter could be accepted in one country but rejected in another. A focus on damages to individuals is not similarly curbed, but it potentially restricts legitimate complaints to cases of individual harm.

Technological development

The impact of digitalisation goes far beyond media convergence. In media studies, digitalisation as a social phenomenon has been analysed both in terms of technological innovation and social change (e.g., Castells, 1996, 1997, 1998; McLuhan, 2008). This ambivalence is also crucial for understanding the need for improvement: The reorganisation of media accountability instruments is not just a technical process; it leads to a multilevel transformation of professional culture. As another consequence of digitalisation, technological development leads to new professional practices that frame journalistic work. These practices also may determine the development of media accountability systems intended to ensure a responsible and accountable usage of digital technologies by journalists and media companies.

Technology is putting significant pressure on the concept of media accountability. This new reality raises pertinent questions concerning the reliability of journalistic information in the digital media age, the extent to

which algorithms influence journalism, and how emerging modes of social and automated communication reshape professional journalistic practices (Eberwein et al., 2018).

In recent years, media councils have highlighted the emergence of platformisation and augmented journalism (Lindén, 2017; Lindén et al., 2019) as focal points of discourse. Platformisation, which we touched upon in the previous section of this chapter, refers to the idea that regardless of the publication channel, journalists and news outlets bear responsibility for their content. Present policies by media councils demonstrate that they stay platform-neutral and cover all dissemination channels of journalistic content.

Clearly, in light of technological development, there are two primary approaches to enhancing the role of media accountability. The first approach, as pointed out by Eberwein and colleagues (2018), advocates innovative accountability instruments such as news websites, weblogs, and social media. The second approach entails the adaptation of already existing instruments to maintain their legitimacy within the digital age. From this angle, it is vital that media councils update their policies and complaint procedures.

In addition to pressures posed by new media platforms, media councils are being challenged by the growing influence of artificial intelligence (AI) on journalism. Although applications of AI in the media are still comparatively novel, many researchers have documented their profound impact on daily routines and even the philosophical foundations of the profession (Beckett, 2019; Diakopoulos, 2019; Lindén, 2017; Lindén et al., 2019; Sirén-Heikel et al., 2019).

The impact of AI has been visible within all stages of news production (Beckett, 2019). Vast datasets raise the question of their origin and uses: The audience must clearly understand “where information come from, how it is produced, and for what purpose” (Lindén, 2017: 71). Such issues often force media companies to improve openness and accountability to users in order to maintain public trust. As a result, the use of AI also affects principles of journalistic self-regulation.

Recent studies have reported that European journalistic self-regulators underestimate AI’s impact. Until 2020, there was no ethical code containing any directives about news automation, personalisation, or robotisation. Moreover, current complaint procedures are still not adjusted to the issues concerning AI (Haapanen, 2020b). Nonetheless, recent discussions indicate an increased interest among professional self-regulators to engage with AI-related matters in the near future.

The Finnish Council for Mass Media was the first professional body to put forward definitions of AI-based mechanisms in the media and to provide initial guidelines for their responsible usage. The initiative has been widely discussed at the EU level, and it has stimulated media councils to react and not leave the use of algorithms to state regulators or platform companies

(Haapanen, 2020a). Issued in 2019, the Finnish “Statement on marking news automation and personalization” (CMM, 2019) was the first decree in the world pertaining to the ethical implications related to the use of algorithms and AI issued by a national council. Although the statement did not provide a set of comprehensive regulations, it has been hailed as an important first step towards responsible use of AI in the context of journalism. In this respect, it constitutes one of the most tangible attempts to respond to new technological tools by a Nordic self-regulatory body so far. At the time of writing this chapter, no significant policy changes have been introduced by other Nordic countries.

Discussion

In the context of the media welfare state, which emphasises a high degree of editorial freedom and institutionalised self-regulation, media accountability stands as a cornerstone in the preservation and promotion of democratic values. In this chapter, we have examined how the Nordic media councils have addressed the challenges posed by global forces and adjusted traditional practices to the new environment. In this context, the role of media accountability systems has never been more pronounced, especially as journalism seeks to validate its societal role and survive in a rapidly changing media environment (Eberwein et al., 2018). Therefore, media accountability – “the lifeblood of independent democracies” (Eberwein et al., 2018: 8) – ought to play a key part in discussions of the media welfare state and its future.

In the preceding review, we have traced how the dimensions of public engagement and professionalisation, marketisation, convergence, and technological development have been addressed by the media councils of the Nordic countries. Our analysis has established that global challenges have not *yet* triggered radical transformations in the media accountability systems of the region. Accordingly, Nordic media accountability systems continue to be largely focused on their traditional – and arguably vital – role of safeguarding press freedom.

Still, it’s important to recognise that the Nordic models have had to adapt to the digital era. One trend indicates a shift from a traditional press-oriented council to a broader media council model. Still, this transition from “press” to “media” retains a strong journalistic orientation to news media. The national self-regulators we have examined tend to stay narrowly focused on journalistic work in accordance with the primary purpose of their operation. As a result, while Nordic media councils are becoming platform-neutral, covering all possible channels of news dissemination, their operations have so far remained exclusively journalistic in scope.

We have also registered some significant differences between the Nordic models. In broader terms, for each dimension examined above, the Nordic

countries have pursued distinct paths of development. The general trend toward expansion does not therefore imply a uniform Nordic approach to media accountability. While the Danish and Icelandic councils abide by their tribunal role and focus on complaint-handling tasks, the other countries are pursuing additional societal side functions, in particular striving to bring debate on media freedom to the public agenda. This tendency accords with the tradition of public representation in self-regulatory activities in Finland, Norway, and Sweden. Simultaneously, we can see a trend toward professionalisation, as several of the self-regulatory bodies now tend to elect chairpersons with journalistic backgrounds.

Convergence has sparked debates about general ethical codes. Some Nordic media councils (particularly the Finnish one) advocate comprehensive codes, aiming to leave no room for ambiguity. In contrast, other countries (especially Iceland) favour maintaining a higher degree of generality in their codes, allowing for greater flexibility in interpreting the guidelines.

While the process of convergence has led to an embrace of platform independence in the Nordic media councils, they remain cautious about expanding their reach to social media and are generally disinclined to include content that might not fit journalistic criteria. Moreover, some of the councils explicitly delegate decision-making authority to editorial offices, which purportedly have more knowledge and resources to deal with nuanced cases.

With regard to the near future, we can see two alternative scenarios. On the one hand, since a media council is typically understood as an agency for the evaluation of *what* has been published, not *how* it was published, the codes stay neutral regarding media platforms or new technologies, and alternative self-regulatory bodies might emerge to fill the gaps. On the other hand, the potential expansion of the media council may grow beyond professional journalism to social media and other forms of communication. However, current documents do not indicate that Nordic media councils even consider going beyond journalistic content.

In the literature, the effectiveness of media accountability systems is typically measured by their degree of institutionalisation. Thus, given that the Nordic states are leading in the number of institutionalised (and not institutionalised) media accountability instruments, they have been placed at the top of the first prototypic rating of media accountability in Europe (Eberwein et al., 2018). However, while a high number of instruments may demonstrate a commitment to accountability, it does not necessarily translate to tangible improvements in content quality, ethical standards, or audience trust. Our study has suggested that not all Nordic institutions demonstrate a similar willingness or ability to adjust to a rapidly changing media environment. In our view, institutionalisation tells only part of the story; and it may be an insufficient measure of “effective” self-regulation in the digital era. Accordingly, as editorial freedom remains one of the pillars of the media welfare state

concept, a more thorough qualitative evaluation of local media accountability instruments and practices may be needed. The self-regulatory models that we have examined exhibit significant differences as well as similarities – a fact that may call into question some of the purported underpinnings of the idea of a singular Nordic media welfare state.

Document analysis provides valuable insights into the current state of the Nordic media accountability models. Of course, if one is trying to determine the likely trajectories of the ongoing developments, much more is needed. Nonetheless, we expect that in the near future, the Nordic media accountability models will exhibit more differences than before: starting from the organisational structure of professional self-regulatory institutions to the contents and coverage of the ethical codes.

The divergence of the roles and responsibilities of journalistic self-regulatory bodies in the digital age challenges the assumption of homogeneity within the Nordic approaches to accountability. On the contrary, it reflects the unique sociocultural, political, and historical contexts of each country as well as variations in their current responses to global challenges. As these systems adapt to the complex demands of the digital era, we anticipate they will continue to evolve in different directions, each marked by a variety of distinct professional, organisational, and online instruments. Hopefully, these experiences will enrich the global discourse on media accountability and the principles of a media welfare state.

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Addressing the hate speech issue in the Nordic countries

A challenge for media welfare states or a chance for their revival?

REETA PÖYHTÄRI

FACULTY OF INFORMATIONTECHNOLOGY AND COMMUNICATION SCIENCES,
TAMPERE UNIVERSITY, FINLAND

ABSTRACT

Hate speech on digital platforms manifests itself in ways that need to be addressed both in practice and on a policy level, taking Nordic (media) policies into novel areas. For this chapter, I analysed and compared policy documents discussing hate speech from Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden, with a focus on how hate speech is defined, the perceived harmful functions of hate speech, and the suggested remedies. The analysis shows that hate speech is perceived to endanger societies' democratic functions, public debate, and freedom of speech. Hate speech targets specific minorities and especially those in public positions or participating in public debate. The suggested remedies correspond with media welfare state ideals: increased collaboration between all relevant parties, state support for both citizens and media, and adjustments of existing laws. The role of online platforms is crucial, but concrete measures to hold them responsible still wait for the implementation of the European Union's Digital Services Act legislation.

KEYWORDS: hate speech, policy, rights and values, Nordic countries, digital media

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Introduction

Hate speech, especially in the online sphere, has become a great concern within Europe in the past decade. Hate speech as form of communication attacks various minorities and is used, for example, to spread ideas of racism, religious hatred, misogyny, and homophobia, but also to attack those in public positions, aiming to delegitimise their power through silencing (see, e.g., Council of Europe, 2023; Van Sant et al., 2021). Furthermore, hate speech puts at risk the communication and democratic values held especially high in the Nordic context: freedom of speech, access to information, open society, and equality (see, e.g., Carlsson & Pöyhtäri, 2017). These Nordic values are also connected to the principles of the media welfare state, including the ideals of equal access to communication, institutionalised editorial freedom, and support for cultural media policies and consensual decision-making, all aiming at an inclusive and diverse sphere of public communication (Jakobsson et al., 2021; Syvertsen et al., 2014).

As much of hate speech today is produced online on digital platforms, hate speech has also become a specific media- or platform problem, raising questions about how to allow or limit hate speech, and how the online platforms themselves ought to take part in this effort. As the online sphere is dominated by international platform giants, a risk exists that the platforms are increasingly becoming the dominant definers of the public's communication values that are to be protected under their regulation (van Dijck et al., 2018), while states are losing their power to influence the values supported in public communication. Recently, the growing power of online platforms has been addressed by the European Union's Digital Services Act (European Commission, 2020), with a new set of requirements to control online issues such as hate speech and disinformation. Nordic countries have now also joined forces, and through the Nordic Council of Ministers, initiated a think tank that created recommendations to support Nordic democratic debate in the age of Big Tech: debate that is free, inclusive, and free from hate speech and disinformation (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2023).

These new developments show that especially online hate speech poses states with a new set of challenges, asking for greater clarity on a policy level, and therefore it is no wonder that already before the newest international efforts it has been an issue of Nordic (media) policies in recent years. Traditionally, strong media policies have been a central element of steering and governing the Nordic media welfare states. When faced with new challenges, the Nordic countries have been keen to use the tool of media policy – and hate speech has been no exception.

The Nordic research interest on these hate speech policies has until now been mainly of a legal nature (e.g., Bladini, 2017; Viljanen, 2019). In this chapter, I approach the policy papers from a wider perspective by analysing how the current hate speech issue and related challenges are perceived in the

Nordic countries. The purpose of the chapter is explorative and descriptive, and the main research questions are as follows:

- RQ. How have the Nordic states defined and addressed the challenge of hate speech on the policy level, and how could the principles of the media welfare state help or not help to deal with hate speech in the current digital media environment?

With these general research questions in mind, and following the hate speech conceptualisations by Brown (2017a, 2017b), I more specifically analyse Nordic hate speech policy documents ($N = 11$) with a focus on the possibly harmful functions of hate speech defined in the policies, the perceived victims of hate speech, what rights or values are perceived as possibly threatened and how, and finally, the suggested remedies or actions for the perceived hate speech issues. Special attention in the analysis is paid to the role of the online media sphere as the forum of hate speech and related solutions for the protection of public and communication values or rights in an age of digital media and platformisation, within the specific context of the Nordic media welfare states.

The chapter begins with discussion on how hate speech has been defined and experienced in Europe and the potential harms it creates, especially in the Nordic and digital contexts. This is followed by an analysis of the recent hate speech policy documents, and finally conclusions and a discussion. The chapter ends concluding that when being faced with new challenges such as online hate speech, the Nordic policies rely on remedies that are familiar to media welfare states: support for free and independent media as well as diversity of information, and striving towards equal possibilities for well-informed and media-literate citizens through digital media. International regulation and joint Nordic actions towards the platform giants, on the other hand, can offer concrete solutions for the future.

Defining hate speech

“Hate speech” lacks one standard international definition, but the general idea of the type of utterances the term refers to is well outlined by the following conceptualisation:

Hate speech is to be understood [...] as the advocacy, promotion or incitement, in any form, of the denigration, hatred or vilification of a person or group of persons, as well as any harassment, insult, negative stereotyping, stigmatization or threat in respect of such a person or group of persons and the justification of all the preceding types of expression, on the ground of ‘race’, colour, descent, national or ethnic origin, age, disability, language, religion or belief, sex, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation and other personal characteristics or status. (ECRI, 2015)

The above definition also illustrates the broad scope of targets and acts of hate speech. In Europe, the issue of hate speech has been persistent, and migrant, racial, ethnic, and religious minorities have been particularly targeted (e.g., Arcila-Calderón et al., 2022). The so-called European refugee crisis in 2015 caused a peak in hate speech directed at asylum seekers, which also affected other migrant populations in Europe (Berry et al., 2015; Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017; Pöyhtäri et al., 2019). This, as well as the Islamist terror attacks in several European countries from 2004 onwards, have incited hatred towards Muslim populations in general, adding to the political discussion on failed integration and multiculturalism (Vertovec & Wessendorf, 2010). The discussion has especially been fuelled by many populist and nationalist leaders in Europe, openly using anti-migrant sentiments and calling for restrictive migration policies (Tumber & Waisbord, 2020). In addition, many European countries have seen a rise in antisemitism and far-right movements (see, e.g., FRA, 2016.) Lately, the war on Ukraine has increased anti-Russian sentiments (Saresma et al., 2022).

Online misogyny has become a growing issue, targeting especially women in politics, journalism, research, and other public positions, but also women in general (e.g., Amnesty International, 2018; Article 19, 2020; Posetti et al., 2020; Van Sant et al., 2021). Similarly, gender- and sexual minorities have been reported to be severely attacked online. In an era of growing populism, conspiracy theories and “post-truth”, hate speech and online harassment are increasingly used to assault those in public and powerful positions, with the purpose of undermining their legitimacy (Tumber & Waisbord, 2020), hindering their work, or silencing them, which has also been a growing concern in the Nordic countries. For example, police officials, judges, other officials, politicians, journalists, researchers, and civil society activists have reported on increased online harassment, leading to increased support for these groups and inquiries into new legislation initiatives (related to Finland, e.g., Illman, 2020; Mäkinen, 2019).

In the summer of 2023, a heated debate on racism, hate speech, and online violence in Finland took place as some old, overtly racist social media messages of recently elected parliament members and ministers of the radical right Finns Party became public. The following public debate also demonstrated cases of coordinated online harassment of those who were critical towards the politicians. As a result, the government needed to publish an official declaration on equality, racism, and hate speech in August 2023. Sweden and Denmark have been under terrorist threat due to heated societal debate on freedom of expression and blasphemy, and the governments have needed to clarify their position in international fora. These examples show that the issue of hate speech is high on the public agenda and therefore also asks for political and policy attention.

As such, hate speech is considered an endangerment to the cohesion of democratic societies, the protection of human rights, and the rule of law, and it possibly enhances the risk of societal unrest and violence (see Council of Europe, 2023). In its most severe forms, hate speech violates the principles of international treaties such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (United Nations, 1966). These treaties recognise the rights of each individual to, for example, equality, personal dignity, security, and freedom of opinion and expression (UDHR, 1948: articles 1–3, 19), and they forbid all forms of discrimination in violation of those rights (UDHR, 1948: article 7). These rights need to be weighed against each other, and the right for freedom of expression does not allow an attack on other rights. These principles are also reflected in national legislations of the Nordic countries.

Within the Council of Europe, the European Court of Human Rights (www.echr.coe.int) monitors the application of the European Convention on Human Rights, including issues pertaining to freedom of speech and hate speech. Despite the described concerns on hate speech, protection of freedom of speech is strong within Europe, and convictions on illegal hate speech are generally rare. According to European Court of Human Rights case law, speech that is societally worrying or insulting is to be tolerated. There are, however, several charters and recommendations setting human rights standards and providing guidelines for the Council of Europe and European Union member states (in 2023, the Council has 46 member states and the European Union 27) to deal with hate speech and to support the victims in the European context. Moreover, both the Council and the European Union have dedicated measures in recent years to addressing the issue (see Council of Europe, 2023; European Commission, 2021 on hate speech; see also Pingen, 2022).

Beyond legal definitions, hate speech is more generally a phenomenon of the current, platformed and digital societies. It exists both online and offline, but in today's digital world, we most typically encounter it in the online environment, whether it concerns ourselves or others. In this more everyday sense, hate speech is usually defined broadly, and it contains various types of behaviours online, ranging from violent threats to discriminatory, derogatory, humiliating or otherwise harmful, uncivil, or disturbing speech that is nevertheless not illegal. In a broad definition, hate speech can refer to, for example, verbal discrimination or attacks against various non-ethnic minorities, political hate speech, misogyny, violent pornography, online bullying and harassment, trolling, or doxing – and it has also been referred to, for example, as cyberhate (Brown, 2018; Edelstein & Wolf, 2013), cyber violence (United Nations Broadband Commission, 2015), toxic speech (e.g., Amnesty International, 2018), or extreme speech (Pohjonen & Udupa, 2017).

As an online phenomenon, hate speech has become very mundane, and as such, difficult to avoid.

Altogether, this broad scope of behaviours and utterances possibly classifiable as hate speech complicates the everyday understanding of, or chance to reach, a general consensus on what constitutes hate speech. An unsettled debate concerns how we are to understand hate speech, what potentially can be regarded as an act severe enough to actually constitute (illegal) hate speech, which groups should be protected from hate speech, and whether in order for something to constitute hate speech, the harms caused should always be actual and direct, excluding societal and indirect harms (e.g., Article 19, 2019; Brown, 2017a, 2017b; Calvert, 1997; Udupa & Pohjonen, 2019).

Those advocating the most liberal viewpoints often claim that any restrictions on freedom of expression based on hate speech violate the basic right of free speech (e.g., Brown 2017a; Citron, 2014; Molnar & Malik, 2012). Differences in the perceptions are especially clear when comparing the European and American views on the matter, with the US representing a very liberal view and the European perspective stressing the ideals of the common good in addition to the freedom of expression. These differences have also been reflected in the debate on the responsibilities of online platforms (see, e.g., Horowitz & Nieminen, Chapter 4).

Theoretically, hate speech has also been approached as a discourse, a form of othering that does not necessitate that actual or overt hatred is expressed in words. Speech act or discourse can contain a covert expression of hatred, embedded in the specific context of the speech act, or it can be expressed, for example, by means other than words (e.g., Baider, 2020; Brown, 2017a, 2017b; Laaksonen et al., 2020 Pohjonen & Udupa, 2017; Saresma et al., 2022). Similarly, research on online hate and racism has discussed the covert forms of hate speech, textual, algorithmic and platformed practices that are not necessarily direct expressions of hate but that support the circulation of hate and are used to stir up hatred as well as support hate communities (Anat & Matamoros-Fernandez, 2016; Brown, 2018; Daniels, 2018). Such discourses do not necessarily have concrete, real-life consequences, but they contribute to the overall atmosphere regarding, for example, minorities. They are discourses connected to positions of power; individuals are often the targets of hate as representatives of a minority group (e.g., Brown, 2017a), but as we see today, targets can also be those perceived as powerful.

Discursively, hate speech has also been referred to as an umbrella or family resemblances concept, as it describes a set of phenomena that do all have a common denominator in some sense, yet are not exactly the same (Brown, 2017b). For the purposes of this chapter, it is useful to approach hate speech as such a broad, family resemblance concept that the relevant policy documents define in more detail (this approach is further specified under the Research material and methods section).

Hate speech thus remains an issue of disputed definitions and varied vocabulary. Beyond this, hate speech is also context-dependent, and as such, sensitive to societal and other factors (Brown, 2017a). Because of the contested and contextual character of hate speech, it is relevant to have a closer look at the recent Nordic policy definitions concerning the phenomenon to better understand what is at stake in the current Nordic hate speech debate and policies.

Hate speech in the Nordic countries

As in most other countries, “hate speech” as a concept is not defined in Nordic legislation. However, in all Nordic countries, certain verbal acts containing speech that can be categorised as hate speech have been criminalised. Such acts include, for example, defamation, illegal threats, persecution, and incitement to hatred. For the latter, the protected characteristics in Nordic legislations include race, skin colour, ethnicity, religion, nationality, and sexual orientation. The legislations vary in terms of other protected characteristics, but, for example, gender is in general not a protected characteristic – a deficiency that is now under scrutiny in all Nordic countries. In addition, basically all crimes can be investigated and convicted as hate crimes, if a hate-based motive can be demonstrated (see further on legislation, e.g., Bladini, 2017).

Besides possibly constituting a criminal act, hate speech can also be prohibited by other legislation, as is the case in, for example, Finland, where the 2004 Non-discrimination Act (Ministry of Employment and the Economy, Finland, 2010) and also the Act on Equality between Women and Men (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, Finland, 1986) define the type of discrimination and harassment that are illegal. Harassment is hereby understood as deliberate or de facto infringement of the dignity of a person based on a specific characteristic of that person, if a degrading or humiliating, intimidating, hostile, or offensive environment towards the person is created by that behaviour. This type of harassment can contain hate speech.

The Nordic countries – as signatories of the above-mentioned international treaties, and as members of the Council of Europe, the European Union, or both – are also bound to these charters and recommendations. Next to that, they also have shared cooperation in issues related to hate speech, especially through the fora of the Nordic Council and Nordic Council of Ministers, the formal bodies for inter-parliamentary and inter-governmental cooperation in the Nordic region. Recently, the Nordic cooperative bodies have discussed the issue of gender-based online hatred, threats, and harassment, as well as other types of cyber threats in times of the Covid-19 pandemic (Nordic Council, 2023). Especially in the area of (gender) equality, the cooperation has been ongoing and strong in the past years, with various reports and recommenda-

tions being published to discuss the problems of online hate and misogyny and to compare the related legislations and measures (e.g., Bladini, 2017; Dragsted Mutengwa et al., 2015; Mogensen & Holding Rand, 2020; Nikulainen, 2021). New recommendations for Nordic democratic debate on digital platforms, discussing disinformation and hate speech specifically, were launched by a working group in early 2023 (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2023).

Nordicom published a special issue of *Nordicom Information* in 2015, compiling current views from Nordic media (and other) research on the growing problem of hate speech and online harassment (Wadbring & Mølster, 2015). Lately, Nordic research on hate speech has also been approached with relevance to social media, disinformation, polarisation, the far-right, populism, and other online phenomena (see, e.g., Horsti & Saresma, 2020; Nikunen et al., 2021; Udupa et al., 2021).

In the Nordic context, hate speech is not only a threat to universal rights, it also endangers the normative preconditions of democratic culture, egalitarianism, and social inclusion that are inherent to the Nordic model. This model requires a well-functioning public sphere of open social and political deliberation (Engelstadt et al., 2017), enabled by equality, open society, and access to information (see Carlsson & Pöyhtäri, 2017). These values have also been supported by the ideal of the media welfare state through equal access to communication, institutionalised editorial freedom, supportive cultural media policies, and consensual decision-making, all aiming to support an inclusive and diverse sphere of public communication (Jakobsson et al., 2021; Syvertsen et al., 2014).

While hate speech on the one hand poses a challenge to this value system, which is perceived as specifically Nordic, the value system as such could on the other hand offer tools to resist the observed harms of hate speech. Therefore, in this chapter, I also look at how the suggested actions to address hate speech relate to the media welfare state ideals, or whether some new modes of action outside the media welfare state thinking are emerging.

Hate speech as a threat to rights and public values on online platforms

In the era of digital platforms and social media, hate speech is especially associated with the online environment (e.g., Alkiviadou, 2018; Brown, 2018; see also Horowitz & Nieminen, Chapter 4). Hate speech is not platform-specific in the sense that it can be found and observed on all types of online platforms, ranging from the comment sections of online newspapers to message boards, small online discussion fora, and the various social media platform giants, such as Facebook, Twitter (now known as X), Instagram, or YouTube. The users of various platforms are handy in finding and using

exactly those platforms and affordances related to hate speech that enable their planned actions the best, and therefore the manifestations of hate speech also vary per platform (see, e.g., Bucher & Helmond, 2018; Siaperá & Viejo-Otero, 2021). Additionally, the responsibilities, capabilities, and willingness of larger and smaller platforms to deal with hate speech vary.

With their platform policies, terms of use, and user guidelines, as well as the moderation practices performed, the platforms direct the actions that are allowed. In their platform policies, the platforms are *de facto* acting based on civil law and their privately created contracts between them and their clients, the platform users (see, e.g., Neuvonen, 2021). Experience shows that the contracts that the users sign with the platforms are anything but clear or transparent.

Next to these user contracts, platforms are also regulated by European and national legislations, which I do not discuss in all detail here. Article 14 of the European E-Commerce Directive (European Union, 2000), however, states that digital or online platforms are not legally responsible for hosting illegal content, although they are required to remove such material once it has been flagged, but this obligation only applies to specified content. In 2016, a European Code of Conduct on countering illegal hate speech online was signed by the European Commission and four major IT companies (Facebook, Microsoft, Twitter, and YouTube) in order to respond (on voluntary basis) to the proliferation of racist and xenophobic hate speech specifically online (European Commission, 2016). Later on, other Internet giants have joined the conduct, giving them responsibilities to remove illegal flagged content from their platforms. In the monitoring exercise of late 2021, 81 per cent of the flagged content was assessed by the platforms within 24 hours, and 62.5 per cent of the content deemed to be illegal hate speech was removed (in comparison, 40% and 28%, respectively, in 2016). Companies' responsibilities for illegal content, as well as more transparency on their actions towards the users, have been under scrutiny in the two major legislative initiatives by the European Commission since 2020, The Digital Services and the Digital Markets Act, now accepted by the European Parliament. These two acts aim for safer online space with a protection of fundamental rights for all users and will also necessitate changes to existing national legislations.

Most important to note for the purposes of this chapter is that, as actors, the platforms today are important guardians and implementers of public values, as pointed out by van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal (2018). "Public value" is the value that an organisation contributes to society to benefit the common good (Moore, 1995). Hereby, platforms are not the only contributors to these values, but in their actions and with the actions that they allow for, or require from, their users, they take part in the creation of the online spheres in which the social interaction takes place. These spheres can support human rights and public values – or they can work against them.

As several revelations and studies have in recent years made clear, the platform giants are currently making greater effort to maximise their financial profits, instead of supporting the public values enhancing the common good and really trying to solve the problems of hate speech and other harmful content (Pelley, 2021). Their algorithms have been found to support the spreading of hateful content and be biased in moderation. Further, next to spending money on lobbying for favourable legislation, the platforms are also making money by allowing advertisements related to hateful content (Dwoskin et al., 2021; Faife, 2021; Hindman et al., 2022; Lomas, 2022; Yin & Sankin, 2021). There is a real risk that by allowing and supporting such practices, the platforms are becoming the strongest definers of commonly accepted norms and values online, or the common good, whereas states are losing their power to stay in control.

Hereby, what is understood as a value or “the common good” is historically and ideologically variable, and they are defined through various collective actions and democratic debates about the foundations of a society. Ideally, this negotiation should be the shared responsibility of all societal actors – the Nordic countries being a well-known example of such collective negotiations, also in relation to the media specifically (Syvertsen et al., 2014). Traditionally, however, and in practice, public institutions have especially been the designated custodians of “the common good”, and the desired public values have been cemented into laws, regulations, and policy papers, with relevance to media (van Dijck et al., 2018).

The studied hate speech policy papers not only define the issue as such, but also the values to be supported and perceived as the common good. They also formulate propositions concerning the desired norms and actions related to hate speech in society, including the platforms.

Research material and methods

The research material for this study consists of Nordic policy documents ($N = 11$) related to hate speech and the digital media environment, dating 2016–2021. The policy papers were found through an online search on the governmental websites of Sweden (regeringen.se), Norway (regjeringen.no), Denmark (regeringen.dk), and the websites of various Finnish ministries between November 2020–January 2021 and April–June 2022. The search terms related to hate speech are further specified in Table 3.1. The studied policy documents were selected on the basis of relevance: First, hate-speech *specific* documents were included; if not available, those policy papers that discussed the related areas of free expression, media, or online-related matters encompassing hate speech were included. Also, some policy papers discussing hate speech faced by specific minorities were included in the selection, if these policies also related to matters of free expression and digital media.

This choice was made to keep the focus of the analysis on the current media environment, and not expand it too much into other areas of society (e.g., discrimination in school or workplace environments, or sexual harassment). The selection of documents affects the findings, of course, but the central research questions can be covered best with the selected data.

The method of study can be described as analysis of policy papers, in which the term “policy” is broadly understood as “a course of action (or non-action) taken by a government or legislature with regard to a particular issue” (Knill & Tosun, 2012: 4). Policies can be implemented through legislative processes, leading to the passage of ordinances. Hate speech policies can also be, and often are, implemented through various types of executive or agency actions, or through the work of independent commissions (Wolman, 2019). In this case, I was, however, not studying the actual policy actions taken by governments or other actors, but instead was interested in how the hate speech issue itself, and the desired course of action on the topic, are defined in the relevant policy papers.

The method of text analysis was inspired by discourse analysis, and I was interested in how the concept of hate speech was used, especially in terms of the harms it is considered to be causing. According to Brown (2017b: 567–573), potential functions that the concept of hate speech relates to in various discourses include at least, but are not limited to, the following:

- (1) highlighting forms of harmful speech [especially targeted at specific underprivileged groups in society], (2) flagging up socially divisive forms of speech [highlighting social cleavages in socially diverse societies], (3) identifying forms of speech that can undermine people’s sense of equality [e.g., through inciting discrimination], (4) articulating civility norms [in public speech], and (5) labelling up forms of speech that undermine democracy [causing threats to essential values in societies]. (Brown, 2017b: 573)

These functions are not fully inseparable, and they overlap each other. Yet, they provide a tool to analyse and discuss the discursive and actual variety of hate speech and the potential harms it causes. I track these functions in the policy documents by analysing whether and how they are mentioned in the policies.

The focus is furthermore on who the perceived victims of hate speech are, what rights or basic values in the Nordic context are perceived as threatened, and what the possible solutions to the issues are, especially with regard to the digital or online media environment.

Analysis: Hate speech as a threat to Nordic democratic values

The Nordic hate speech policy documents have been produced by several ministries or areas of governance, ranging from justice, interior issues, and equality issues to education and culture, or as a joint effort of the government (see Table 3.1). This also indicates the complexity of the hate speech issue that asks for a broad approach, but also the variety in placing the issue within the governmental structures in various countries. The policy documents found and analysed are products of the responsible ministries or the result of expert consultations. One of the Finnish documents was produced through citizen participation. Some of the policies discuss hate speech specifically, while others discuss it with relevance to democracy issues, freedom of expression, or IT and media. This also shows the variety of perspectives taken on the topic.

Despite this variance, the Nordic policies in general share an understanding of the hate speech issue. Hate speech is foremost perceived to undermine some of the basic functions and values of the democratic societies, especially freedom of expression and opinion, free public debate, and respect for human rights and equality. There is a shared view that no opinion should be left out in public debate and a great variety of free expression in the debate should be supported, but that the participants should respect each other. This is currently considered to be threatened by hate speech, threats, disinformation, and propaganda.

In all the countries studied, the current hate speech problem is analysed in the context of the digital era and online sphere. The policy documents discuss how the rise of social media and online platforms has not only provided people with new means for self-expression and participation, but also created multiple problems, including hate speech. The type of hate speech that the policy documents discuss as a problem does not refer to the general incivility of the public debate, as this needs to be tolerated and supported as part of free expression, no matter how disturbing it might be (see, e.g., Mäkinen, 2019). Problematic hate speech instead is characterised as truly harmful, partly illegal, and causing a variety of societal harms.

Harmful hate speech is linked with other harmful behaviours, such as threats and harassment. All the documents start their hate speech definitions with references to existing criminal (and other) laws, pointing to hate speech that attacks certain named qualities of persons and groups, thus especially minorities, such as migrant, ethnic, sexual, and religious minorities. These laws recognise the harms that these minorities are facing, yet the hate speech that the policy documents discuss in greater detail refers to public debate and freedom of expression, in which those that take part in this debate through their public position or profession are especially being threatened. Hate

speech is thus perceived as undermining democracy and its functioning in general through causing harms to public debate, democratic participation, and public institutions, even more than it is seen to be harmful to specific minorities (see Brown's hate speech functions 1 and 5 above).

Typical victims of the hate speech that undermines democracy and its functions include politicians, officials, representatives of local councils, journalists, writers, artists, and researchers. The concern for the threatened professionals, free speech, and other democratic values is strongly voiced in the Finnish and Swedish documents that concentrate on this issue, but it is also central in the Norwegian and Danish documents analysed (see, e.g., Ministry of Justice of Denmark, 2020b: 539–570). It can be stated that the focus of the hate speech problem has slightly shifted from purely intolerance-based hatred directed at certain minority groups, as defined, for example, in the above-mentioned hate speech definition of ECRI (2015), towards a more general, or democracy-orientated hate speech definition. This type of hate speech manifests itself in public debates on political or controversial issues, or in matters of public governance, and it mainly targets individuals based on their status or public role.

After the publication of the analysed policies, the Nordic countries have also re-examined their legislation related to online harassment (Finland), hardened the criminal sanctions for harassment (Denmark, Sweden), given more resources to the police to prevent and investigate harassment (Sweden), and created a website to support those in politics and other public functions facing harassment (Norway). Some of the policy papers have also been updated after mid 2022. These actions all indicate the perceived severity of the threats in public debate that hate speech and harassment create.

In addition, the hate speech issue is approached with a broad scope, acknowledging that it has its roots in various societal processes, such as growing differences in shared basic values, polarisation, growing segregation in societies in various areas, less support for diversity through the rise of populism and nationalism, the changing media landscape, and difficulties in the sustainability for quality journalism that creates grounds for disinformation. This is where the hate speech definitions in the policies touch upon the functions of supporting discrimination and social divisions, also addressed in Brown's (2017b: 567–573) categorisation of hate speech. Such social divisions are seen as a source of hate speech, as they help maintain societal inequalities and discrimination, but these divisions also manifest themselves through the hate speech uttered.

With reference to these social inequalities and divisions, the policy documents demonstrate a strong discourse on the democratic welfare-state and the idea that no one should be left behind: Everyone deserves to be a part of a functioning democracy with equal possibilities for freedom of expres-

sion and public participation (see especially Government Offices of Sweden, 2020). This thinking is paired with the values of freedom of opinion, free public debate, human rights, diversity, equality, and openness. These need to be protected and guaranteed by the state, in this case by tackling hate speech, but people in general can and should also do their share to make a well-functioning democracy and public debate possible.

It is also expressed that those who produce hate speech are somehow unable to function in the society: They have fallen victim to the current changes in both ordinary society as well as the current information societies, and they need to be assisted in finding the right path. For example, extreme thoughts can be prevented with social policies and education, working against segregation in society and through offering alternatives to youth (Norwegian Ministry of Children and Equality, 2015; Government Offices of Sweden, 2020).

Acknowledging the wide-reaching causes and effects of hate speech in society, the suggested remedies to hate speech also have a wide coverage, involving governance, officials, legislation, education, social policies, the perpetrators, the victims, users of online services, the media, and finally the online platforms. As the Swedish policies suggest, protecting a democratic society is everyone's responsibility. Central to this goal is to strengthen democracy through strengthening people's possibilities to resist disinformation, propaganda, and online hate, for example, through improved media and information skills (Government Offices of Sweden, 2020: 168–169), as well as through offering places for constructive meetings and debates (Norwegian Ministry of Children and Equality, 2015). This also protects society and the weakest groups from polarisation and extremism, as is stated in the Norwegian strategy against hate speech.

When it comes to expectations expressed towards the big international tech companies and online platforms, the policies do not appear very determined. The policies mention the general and ongoing developments within the European Union, especially the Digital Services Act, which was approved by the European Parliament in early 2022. The Digital Services Act aims to create stronger obligations and clearer guidelines for the governance of the practices and curation of content on online platforms, especially the largest ones. Much, however, will depend on the national implementations of the act in the coming years.

Beyond these European processes, there does not seem to be much hope or expectations for quick or definite solutions concerning platform regulation. The value most commonly called for in the policies is transparency towards the users of the platforms on the principles of online content moderation (the notice and take-down procedures defined, e.g., in the e-Commerce Directive). For example, compulsory user registration with real identity does not receive support, nor does extending the editorial responsibilities of large interna-

tional social media platforms (e.g., Ministry of Justice of Denmark, 2020b: 656–663). However, the fact that the platforms decide about and steer the democratic debate, information flows, and uses of user data is understood as a problem for democracy in itself. In Denmark, a specific policy document dedicated to making Big Tech companies more accountable and democratic was published in 2021 (Danish Government, 2021), but it did not offer any practical solutions. The same worry of platforms steering the course of democracy is expressed in the recommendations of the Nordic think tank on democratic debate (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2023).

More hope regarding the hate speech issue is put on the national media and platforms by discussing a need to clarify their position and responsibilities as online media through bringing the existing media laws up to date with the current digital media environment, and possibly stretching the responsibilities not only to national news media, but also to various types of national online media and platforms by ensuring that the laws throughout are technology-neutral (as suggested in Norway). All the hate speech policies analysed indicate the central role of free media in society and ask for more finances and other types of support for their work in order to enhance the public's access to free and objective information. Debates have also been ongoing with national online platforms, but a willingness to participate in the negotiations has not always translated itself into changes in the actual policies or practices of the platforms (as in Finland). As the policies seem somewhat powerless towards the private online companies or platforms, all policies and most suggested remedies involve governance measures, eventual legislation initiatives, civil society actions, and online users and their education.

The description of the hate speech issue per country is further summarised in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1 Hate speech issue in Nordic policy documents

	Finland	Sweden	Norway	Denmark
Documents	Ministry of Interior: Expert working group report: <i>Words are actions. More effective measures against hate speech and cyberbullying</i> (Mäkinen, 2019) Ministry of Justice: Recommendations of the "Against hate" project (Aaltonen, 2019) Ministry of Finance & Ministry of Justice: <i>Kansalaispaneeli sananvapaudesta. Kansalaispaneelin loppuraportti</i> [Citizen panel on freedom of speech. Final report of the citizens' panel] (Jäske et al., 2021)	Action plan: <i>Till det fria ordets försvar</i> [For free words defence] (Government Offices of Sweden, 2017) Report: <i>Det demokratiska samtalet i en digital tid</i> [The democratic debate in digital times] (Government Offices of Sweden, 2020) <i>Samlat grepp mot racism och hatbrott</i> [Joint grip against racism and discrimination] (Government Offices of Sweden, 2016)	<i>Strategi mot hatefulle ytringer</i> [The Government's Strategy against Hate Speech] 2016–2020 (Norwegian Ministry of Children and Equality, 2015) <i>The Norwegian government's action plan against racism and discrimination on the grounds of ethnicity and religion 2020–2023</i> (Norwegian Ministries, 2019)	<i>Ytringsfrihedens rammer og vilkår i Danmark, del I & II</i> [The framework and conditions of freedom of expression in Denmark, I & II] (Ministry of Justice of Denmark, 2020a–b) White paper: <i>Mod et bedre samfund med tech-giganter</i> [Towards a better society with tech-giants] (Danish Government, 2021)
Hate speech vocabulary (translated)	hate speech, nethate, online hate, assaults, crowd-sourced/organised attacks/dog whistling	hate crime, hate, threat, hate and threat, bullying, net bullying, nethate, insults, harassment, hate propaganda, hate rhetoric	hate(ful) expressions, hate talk, hate, incitement, net incitement, nethate, threats, offences	hate(ful) expressions, hate(ful) talk, illegal expression, hate, threats, harassment, online harassment, insults, hate offences
Functions of hate speech (Brown 2017b): What does hate speech relate to or threaten?	democratic values; harmful speech (minorities); discrimination; social division; civility norms	democratic values; harmful speech (minorities); discrimination; social division; civility norms	democratic values; harmful speech (minorities); discrimination; social division; civility norms	democratic values; harmful speech (minorities); discrimination; social division; civility norms
Who is the target or victim?	those in public positions (justice, police, journalists, politicians, researchers), minorities and other marginalised groups	those in public positions: especially journalists, people in public office (or position of trust), artists, researchers, civil society actors (also: youth, minorities)	especially minorities, but also those participating public debate	opinion leaders (politicians, journalists, artists), women, ethnic minorities (Muslims, Jews), sexual and gender minorities
What are the suggested measures towards tech companies and others?	Discussion and collaboration with the tech giants, especially through the European Union. Collaboration with smaller, national platforms. More broadly, education of police, justice, and a wide range of actors on media literacy, infrastructures of reporting and investigating hate speech cases, more support for victims.	Discussion with the tech giants, especially through the European Union. More broadly, social-policy, education (media literacy); involving police, justice, wide range of actors.	Re-analysing and modifying the existing media laws to better explicate the responsibilities in various types of media (incl. social media) on hate speech. More broadly, support for freedom of expression and equality; support for idea that work against hate speech, discrimination and extremism go hand in hand.	Suggestions for hardened responsibilities for users of illegal content; more transparency required from the online platforms in line with general European Union principles. More broadly, suggestions related to legislation and a wide range of actors.

Conclusion and discussion: Hate speech and the revival of the media welfare state?

Following the categories of hate speech according to Brown (2017b), hate speech manifests itself in the Nordic context as harmful speech directed at minorities, in acts that undermine democracy and its values, as well as a factor that creates a risk for further social discrimination and inequality. Instead, the civility norms of public debate are less addressed in the Nordic policy documents. The general incivility of public online debate is highlighted, but as such, it is not an issue that the Nordic policies aim to erase. On the contrary, freedom of speech in all its forms is protected and valued in the Nordic policies. It is only when the incivility takes on more serious forms that lead to societal harms, such as threats and harassment that silence debate, create inequality, or damage the democratic functions (such as people's right to take part in politics), that the hate speech policies call for action and restrictions on hate speech. Unlike how certain (often conservative or populist) voices in the debate claim, hate speech policies do not advocate for censorship or denial of critical debate; instead, they are an attempt to support freedom of speech and democratic participation rights for everyone in the society.

Altogether, the hate speech functions identified by Brown (2017b) seem to cover the hate speech issue in the Nordic policies well. The discursive and comparative approach on hate speech's functions also sheds light on the multiplicity of hate speeches, causing concern today. The focus on the hate speech issue in the Nordic digital media spheres no longer concerns only protected minorities, but also public functions and the people participating in the public debate. This shift can also be seen in the hate speech vocabulary used (see Table 3.1), which does not only discuss hate speech, but also other types of threats, hateful or disturbing expressions, assaults, organised attacks, and online hatred or bullying. Legally speaking, hate speech is no longer necessarily a group-targeted criminal act (such as incitement to hatred), but an individually targeted act (such as illegal threat or libel directed at a single person).

Discursively, it has been suggested that instead of discussing hate speech, other terms that better address the broad range of hate speech, its contextual-ity, and the variety of uses should be used. For example, the concept "extreme speech" (Udupa et al., 2021) contains two analytical parts: first, *exclusionary* extreme speech that is directed at vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in society to denote social inequalities and to reinforce them; and second, *derogatory* extreme speech, which refers to expressions that in a specific context are, for example, uncivil, provocative, and offensive and can be directed at both minorities and groups holding power, as well as institutions. The terms thus grasp both sides of the current hate speech debate, including both vulnerable and powerful targets. Furthermore, Udupa and colleagues (2021) have

distinguished *dangerous* speech that has reasonable risk to catalyse or trigger actual harm and violence. It can be debated which terms are the best to use, but based on this study, it seems highly necessary to define in each context, and for each separate policy or other action, the precise type of hate speech that is in question and whom it concerns.

With reference to Nordic values and their protection, it is obvious from the policy documents that hate speech forms a challenge that the Nordic countries are not (yet) equipped to tackle. Hate speech is a threat to democracy that is created especially by the digital media environment and platforms, which the Nordic societies cannot alone hold accountable for their actions. Also, the fact that the digital giants have so much power is outlined as a threat to democracy. In this matter, the Nordic community needs to rely on international cooperation and action. What the Nordic societies can do individually and jointly is try to address the challenges with the tools that have always been used: by creating media policies in support of the values of democratic societies, and by providing tools in various areas of society for its continued support.

All Nordic policy documents rely not only on the principles and values of democracy, but also on the elements of the Nordic media welfare states. States are seen to carry the main responsibility for the maintenance of a free, accessible, equal, and safe public sphere, and to support institutions, professional media, and individuals in this joint effort. The policy documents call for continued media support for independent media, diversity of information, and equal possibilities for well-informed and media-literate citizens through digital media. These and other, more concrete measures are also recently proposed in the outcome document of the Nordic think tank on democratic debate in the age of Big Tech (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2023). It expresses that if the Nordic countries want to steer the course of democracy now and in the future instead of letting the big tech or digital platforms do it on our behalf, the countries need to act jointly, based on the media welfare values that have worked well in the past.

The media welfare state ideal may be in crisis, but in such times when it is difficult to keep pace with the new developments, and new solutions are slow to appear, remedies can be found in what is established and known, namely media policies and other soft measures that do not fix the whole problem but do offer relief. Digital challenges such as hate speech ask, if not for the media welfare state's revival, at least for its reinspection and continuous reinvestments that can steer the path towards a future with more control on the type of platforms, public debate, and democracy we want to support in the Nordics.

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Communication rights and the Nordic epistemic commons

Assessing the media welfare state in the age of information disorder

MINNA HOROWITZ^I & HANNU NIEMINEN^{II}

^I MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION STUDIES, UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI, FINLAND

^{II} DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC COMMUNICATION, VYTAUTAS MAGNUS UNIVERSITY, LITHUANIA;
MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION STUDIES, UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI, FINLAND

ABSTRACT

Information disorder occurs when the fact-based, reliable, and professionally validated provision of information becomes confronted by information that attacks previously trusted media platforms, disputes the known or scientifically validated facts, or uses rumours and gossip as sources. Information disorder intensifies during turbulent times, as evidenced by the global rise of xenophobic movements, disbelief in science, and belief in conspiracies. Although Nordic countries fare remarkably well by many measures that assess democratic and robust communication environments, they also face these challenges. In this chapter, we view the Nordic media welfare state as ideally entailing an epistemic commons – a shared forum for trustworthy knowledge and culture – that supports citizens' communication rights of access to and availability of diverse content, as well as privacy and dialogical public communication. Based on these key principles embedded in the Nordic media welfare state model, we assess its present condition by employing the framework of communication rights as our analytical tool. We argue that rights-based approaches in policy and practice are essential if a Nordic digital media welfare state is to be realised and maintained.

KEYWORDS: information disorder, epistemic commons, communication rights, framework

Horowitz, M., & Nieminen, H. (2024). Communication rights and the Nordic epistemic commons: Assessing the media welfare state in the age of information disorder. In P. Jakobsson, J. Lindell, & F. Stiernstedt (Eds.), *The future of the Nordic media model: A digital media welfare state?* (pp. 95–116). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. <https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855893-4>

Introduction

In their seminal book, *The Media Welfare State: Nordic Media in the Digital Era*, Syvertsen and colleagues (2014) proposed the concept of the Nordic media welfare state, which covers media systems and the media environment in four Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden). The well-known model of the Nordic welfare state (e.g., Andersen et al., 2007; Nordic Co-operation, 2022; Pedersen & Kuhnle, 2017) is used in the book to argue that, in the construction, production, and reproduction of this model, the role of the Nordic media is much understudied and in need of recognition. Consequently, Syvertsen and colleagues analysed the relationship between the media and wider society in the Nordic countries. Adopting earlier research as their starting point, including Hallin and Mancini's (2004) influential analysis of different media systems in the West, and by using a great number of new empirical materials, they aimed to establish the active role of the Nordic media in the construction and continuing production and reproduction of the Nordic social welfare state model.

The media welfare state included four principles: communication services that underscore their character as public goods, measures to institutionalise press freedom, cultural policy that includes the media, and cooperation between main stakeholders (Enli & Syvertsen, 2020; Syvertsen et al., 2014; see also Schröder et al., Chapter 1). Underlying these principles is the Nordic tradition of the so-called epistemic commons, that is, the ideals of knowledge and culture as a citizen-centric, restriction-free shared domain that ultimately enables informed citizenship (Nieminen, 2014).

Still, there are growing concerns about the Nordic media systems being able to function as media welfare states, and, more broadly, about the Nordic democratic debate in the digital era. The worries do not only concern new and emerging technologies, foreign information interference, or media business viability challenged by global conglomerates (e.g., Nordic Council of Ministers, 2018, 2022). Lately, the discussions have also addressed the entire media systems and institutional manifestations of the media welfare states, such as public service media and media and information literacy efforts. For example, the Nordic Council of Ministers set up a Think Tank for Tech and Democracy (2022–2023) to suggest how to safeguard democratic debate in the Nordics. The preface of the final report of the Think Tank states the following:

The Nordic countries are exceptional.

We have incredible levels of trust in each other. We have a strong tradition of open public debate, where everyone can make themselves heard. We fiercely believe in the freedom of speech. And we have citizens who are generally well-informed and well-equipped to participate in public debate.

We have so much to celebrate and so much to preserve.

While social media hold great democratic potential, we have also, in recent years, seen how platforms not only enable democratic debate but also impact it negatively. The spread of false information online, whether intentional or not, threatens factual common ground. The use of offensive language prevents some groups in society from joining democratic debates. And opaque algorithms have spurred political polarisation.

(Bornakke, 2023)

Indeed, as also aptly summarised by Ala-Fossi, Lehtisaari, and Neuvonen (Chapter 5), a decade after Syvertsen and colleagues (2014) published the Nordic media welfare state analysis, the model is showing several cracks. One central challenge is how the Nordic media has responded to the changes brought about by digitalisation, especially in the form of increasing circulation of different types of false and harmful information (Enli & Syvertsen, 2020.) The ideal of the epistemic commons as a feature of the Nordic media welfare state is shrinking with what could be called information disorder, that is, all forms of false and misleading information created purposefully for profit or to provoke social conflicts (Benkler et al., 2018; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). The provision of both accidentally shared as well as purposely created and distributed dis- and misinformation intensifies during turbulent times, as evidenced by the global rise of xenophobic movements, disbelief in science (including climate change and vaccination), and belief in conspiracies (Swami & Furnham, 2014).

The term information disorder highlights the social and political structures, preconditions, and practices that produce and facilitate the circulation of disinformation, which make some societies, media structures in societies, and subpopulations in those societies vulnerable to false and misleading information (e.g., Horowitz, 2019). Information disorder occurs when fact-based, reliable, and professionally validated provision of information becomes confronted by information that attacks previously trusted media platforms, disputes the known or scientifically validated facts, or uses rumours and gossip as sources. This is closely linked with the processes and practices of platformisation, that is, the deep transformations that the continuing expansion of digital platforms has brought about in infrastructures, economy, administration, politics, and culture (see Poell et al., 2019). As is evident in several research efforts (e.g., Andreassen et al., 2021; Jørgensen, 2021; Sirkkunen et al., 2021), the power of the platforms in the Nordic communication environments challenges the structures, practices, and rights of the mass media era.

Today, information disorder expands globally, manifesting itself, for example, as online conspiracy theories, viral disinformation around Covid-19, and digitally enabled war propaganda by Russia about its attack on Ukraine. The spread of false, untrustworthy content is greatly facilitated by the functional

logic of the global social media platforms. This is another related development of the digital era that chips away at the foundations of the Nordic media welfare state. Both in its international and localised forms, information disorder has become a real challenge to Nordic countries (e.g., Astapova et al., 2021; Nordic Council of Ministers, 2018, 2022). In this chapter, we ask the following:

- RQ. How has the Nordic media welfare state, in its digital form, been able, in this context, to maintain an epistemic commons?

We assess the strengths and challenges of the Nordic countries in light of comparative empirical data, focusing on an essential foundation of the Nordic media welfare state, namely, with an analytical framework focusing on citizens' communication rights.

A communication rights approach to epistemic commons

To respond to the question of whether an epistemic commons is possible in today's Nordic societies, this chapter employs a rights-based framework to depict and evaluate the state of four Nordic countries – Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden – in the era of information disorder. The focus on rights is based on the policy debates and initiatives of recent years that have surrounded the role of global platforms in realising or violating principles such as freedom of expression or privacy, which are already stipulated in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (e.g., Zuboff, 2019). Various groups have made efforts to monitor and influence the global policy landscape, including the United Nations and civil society actors (e.g., MacKinnon et al., 2016). At the same time, nation-states are still powerful actors whose choices can make a difference in the realisation of rights (Flew et al., 2016).

From the perspective of the European Union, a rights-based approach has become increasingly central in supporting European democratic ideals, including democratic communication environments. In the European Union, the basic elements are already anchored in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (European Parliament, 2000). A 2021 Eurobarometer survey found that more than eight in ten respondents thought it would be useful for the European Commission (2021a) to define and promote a common European vision of digital rights and principles. A need to emphasise a rights-based approach founded on established human rights principles, and applied in different contexts, can also be seen in the recent European Union policy initiatives tackling information disorder (e.g., Hoboken & Ó Fathaig, 2021). These include The 2020 European Democracy Action Plan (European Commission 2020b; see also European Commission, 2020a), the 2018 Code of Practice on Disinformation (European Commission, 2022a) and

subsequent Guidance to strengthen the Code of Practice (European Commission, 2021b), the 2022 Digital Services Act Package (European Commission, n.d.), The European Media Freedom Act (a political agreement reached in 2024; European Commission, 2023) – and The European Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles (European Commission, 2022b). It should also be noted that while not all Nordic countries are bound by these initiatives, they are *de facto* adopting, or following closely, the European Union policy approaches. For instance, the non-member state Norway, discussed in this chapter, participates in various European Union initiatives that pertain to the Union’s digital agenda and takes part in the Body of European Regulators for Electronic Communications (Delegation of the European Union to Norway, 2021).

In this chapter, we employ a basic model that divides the notion of communication rights into four distinct operational categories (Ala-Fossi et al., 2019; Horowitz & Nieminen, 2016; Nieminen, 2014, 2019). These divisions differ from other categorisations (Couldry et al., 2016; Goggin et al., 2017) in that they specifically reflect the ideal of the epistemic commons of shared knowledge and culture. Communication rights, then, should both preserve, and remove restrictions, on the epistemic commons.

The framework focuses on citizens’ capabilities to participate in society in a highly digitalised environment and on the challenges and opportunities for key stakeholders to support those capabilities. The framework positions citizens’ rights towards information and communication, based on international human rights principles, at the centre of a democratic, sustainable digital media environment. These same rights are embedded in the ideal of the Nordic media welfare state, given that communication is considered central to citizens’ capabilities to foster their well-being. In today’s context, rights-based approaches to communication entail the need to diminish the harms of information disorder. According to the framework used in this chapter, communication rights include the following (Ala-Fossi et al., 2019):

1. Access: citizens’ equal access to technology and other means of access to information, orientation, entertainment, and self-expression.
2. Availability: equal availability of various types of content (information, orientation, entertainment, or other) for citizens; availability of truthful journalistic content.
3. Privacy: protection of every citizen’s private life from unwanted publicity. This also includes the protection of personal data against microtargeting and other information disorders.
4. Dialogical rights: the existence of public spaces that allow citizens to publicly share information, experiences, views, and opinions on common matters.

Communication rights, the Nordic epistemic commons, and information disorder: An empirical overview

At the outset, even if the realisation of the Nordic media welfare state has been approached with caution (e.g., Ala-Fossi, 2020; Jakobsson et al., 2021), the media welfare state still seems to be understood and supported (Lindell et al., 2021). To be sure, many indicators verify that these countries have preserved quite robust and pluralistic national media landscapes. Nevertheless, if the model of communication rights is used to assess the situation in the Nordics, these countries also face important challenges brought about by information disorder.

To discuss how communication rights of access, availability, privacy, and dialogicality are realised in the Nordic countries, and how they indicate resilience to disinformation (e.g., Frischlich & Humprecht, 2021), we deploy our rights-based model by analysing the level of implementation by the public sector, as manifested in the level of activity by both legacy media and communications technology providers and citizen-consumers. This multi-level analysis aims to depict the complex nature of the rights and often contradictory realisations at different dimensions. Both the strengths and risks of the Nordics are depicted in the following with empirical evidence, based on Open Access statistics and indices.

Public sector and legacy media: Robust structures

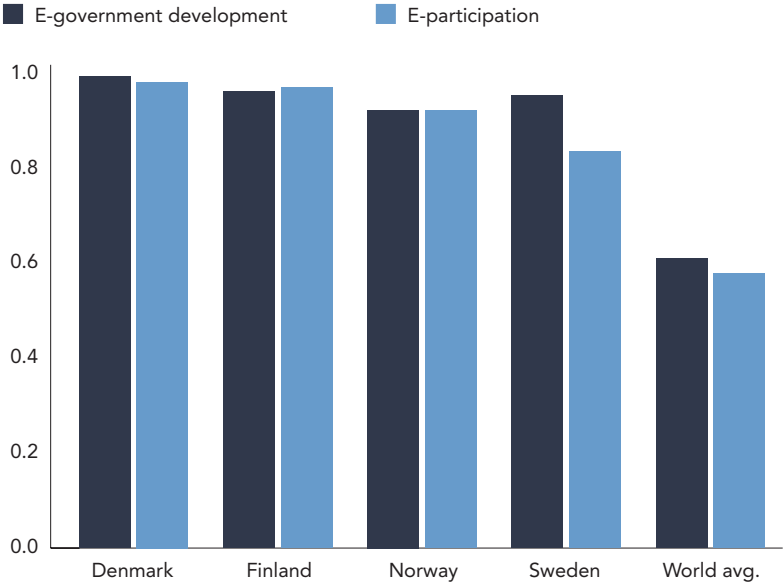
Nordic countries fare remarkably well with many measures that assess democratic and robust communication environments. In terms of *access* as a communication right, for instance, in 2022, the percentage of households with Internet access ranged from 94 per cent in Finland and 96 per cent in Sweden to 98 per cent in Denmark and Norway (Newman et al., 2022). This is coupled with avid use of mobile communication, with mobile phone subscriptions per capita ranging from 1.14 in Norway to 1.44 in Denmark (PST, 2020). This level of access is greatly due to national policies to enhance digitalisation (e.g., Syvertsen et al., 2014).

Regarding *availability*, Nordic countries are known for robust national media markets. Although they are challenged by the necessity of rethinking journalism and content creation business models and have faced a notable decline in advertising revenue due to the Covid-19 pandemic, these markets still feature strong national media outlets that are both highly consumed and trusted. Part of this is the national, policy-driven principle of supporting journalism and the media in the form of funding public service organisations, as well as by other support mechanisms. Accordingly, during crises such as Covid-19, audiences turn to the national media, especially public broadcasting, for trusted information (Ohlsson et al., 2021).

Another indicator of the robust availability is that the four countries in this study continuously occupy top places in the Press Freedom Ranking by Reporters Without Borders. In 2023, Norway took first place, Denmark third, Sweden fourth, and Finland fifth (RSF, 2023). The context of free speech is echoed in several rankings of the state of democracy, including measures of civil liberties and media freedom (e.g., Boese et al., 2022; EIU, 2022). Furthermore, according to the Digital Society Project (Mechkova et al., 2022), these countries also excel in online content diversity and are free from undue governmental influence on the Internet. As for *privacy*, all these countries regulate privacy in data protection, e-transactions, consumer protection, and cybercrime (UNCTAD, 2021).

In our framework, the idea of dialogical rights entails the premise of the ability to be heard and represented and to participate in common important discussions and decisions. This understanding of dialogicality implies the presence of trust in institutions, communicative possibilities, the information received, and one another. In the Nordics, institutional trust is strong: OECD (2022) data on the percentage of people who trust their governments indicates remarkably high global figures, ranging from 67 per cent in Sweden to 83 per cent in Norway. In terms of citizens' participation in society, the United Nations E-Government Development Index (UN, 2020a) and E-Participation Index (UN, 2020b) again illustrate a strong foundation in digital means of dialogicality between citizens and the state. The UN E-Government Index measures how information technologies are used to promote access and inclusion, whereas the E-Participation Index indicates how online services facilitate citizens' access to information dissemination, interaction, and engagement in decision-making processes. As Figure 4.1 shows, trust in abilities for societal participation and related opportunities in digital forms seem notably strong in the global context: The rankings place the Nordic countries in the top-20 of a total of 193 countries, with Denmark leading the e-government development ranking. Also according to the European Digital Economy and Society Index, the Nordic countries take most of the top positions as digital nations (Harrie, 2021).

Figure 4.1 United Nations e-government development and e-participation scores, Nordic countries and world average, 2020 (range: 0–1)

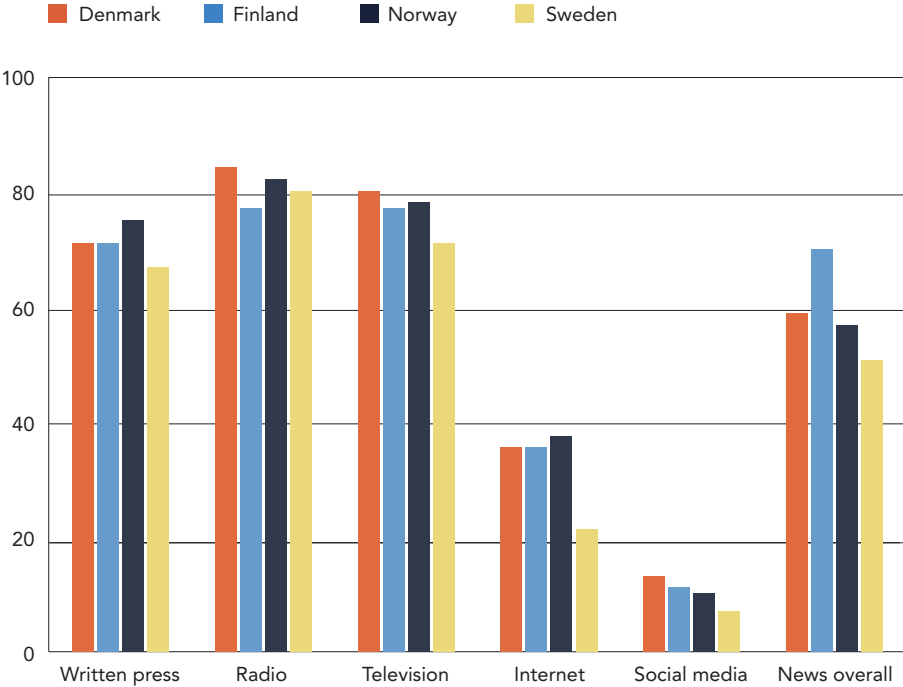


SOURCE: UN, 2020a, 2020b

Citizen-consumers: Robust trust

In addition to the policies and media structures that support the media welfare state, the Nordic countries embody trust in legacy forms of media as mediators of information and arenas of debate – even in the global context of diminishing societal and media trust. For example, in Europe in 2022, trust in television news ranged from 82 per cent in Iceland to a mere 26 per cent in Greece. The global average of trust in news in all media, based on 44 media markets, was 42 per cent in 2022. In contrast, in the Nordic countries examined in this chapter, it ranged from 50 per cent in Sweden to 69 per cent in Finland. Conversely, trust in social media and news via social media was remarkably low in the Nordic countries (see Figure 4.2). There was also very little variation between these countries, whereas in Europe, trust in social media ranged from 42 per cent in Poland to 7 per cent in Sweden (Eurobarometer, 2022).

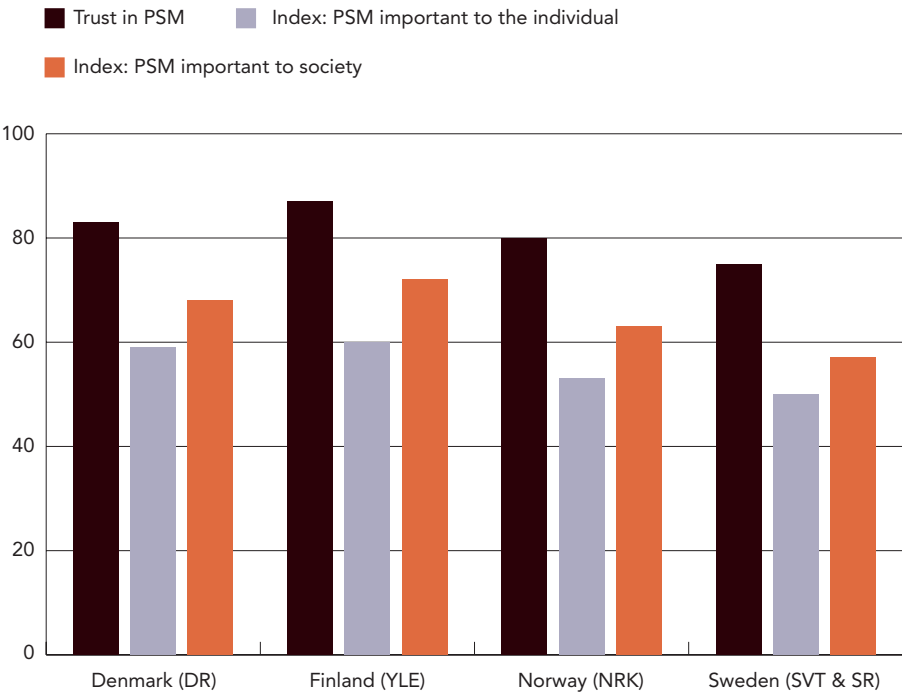
Figure 4.2 *Trust in types of media and news in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden, 2021 (per cent)*



SOURCE: Eurobarometer, 2022; Newman et al., 2022

Overall, in the Nordic countries, the levels of trust in news media have remained at a relatively high level and even slightly increased in Norway and Sweden from the mid-2010s to 2022 (Newman et al., 2022). Public service media are a key feature in these media systems and are the most trusted news brand in each country. Trust equals reach: Public service media organisations are among the most popular news, both online and offline (Newman et al., 2022). Yet another dimension of public service media in the Nordic countries is the high regard of the importance of public service media organisations in the respective societies. In a study of 19 countries around the world (Nielsen & Fletcher, 2023), Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden ranked the highest in terms of audiences’ trust and their perceptions of personal and societal importance of public service media (see Figure 4.3), and this suggests, as others have also argued, that these organisations support key normative foundations of media welfare in the Nordics (Jakobsson et al., 2023).

Figure 4.3 Trust in public service media and the net importance index (per cent)



COMMENTS: PSM = public service media. Net importance is the proportion (%) who answered public service media is important minus the proportion who answered it is unimportant (Nielsen & Fletcher, 2023).

SOURCE: Nielsen & Fletcher, 2023

All these statistics speak to certain similarities between the Nordic countries, at least in terms of the relative stability of the national media landscape and the broad culture of (mediated) trust. These findings are coupled with the cluster analysis of the annual Media Literacy Index (Lessenski, 2022) that combines press freedom rankings with the scores of the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), the proportion of the population with university degrees, statistics on interpersonal trust, and citizens' e-participation. The result is the same: Denmark, Finland, and Sweden, together with Estonia, receive the top scores, with the conclusion that these countries have the highest potential to withstand the negative impact of disinformation (Norway was not included in this analysis). Furthermore, the Mapping of Media Literacy Practices and Actions in the EU-28 report (EAO, 2017) and an analysis of Nordic approaches to media literacy in the Nordic media welfare states (Forsman, 2020) confirm that Nordic countries host a wide array of stakeholders, ranging from specific organisations with statutory responsibilities to audiovisual stakeholders, such as public service media organisations and numerous civil society actors and initiatives. These find-

ings of citizen-consumers' activities and competencies point to a prominent level of the realisation of communication rights and a functioning epistemic commons where those rights are exercised.

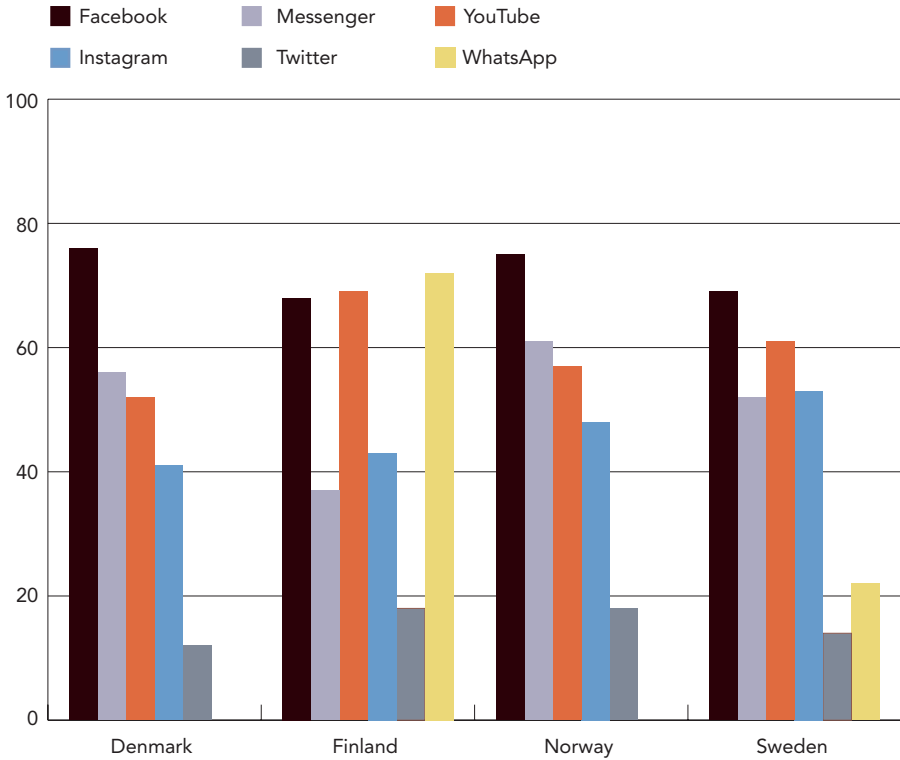
More generally, given the above figures, it is not unsurprising that a research effort to discover structural resilience to online disinformation in 18 countries (Humprecht et al., 2020) placed Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden among the most resilient. Based on seven indices constructed from various comparative statistics as indicators of political, economic, and media environments, the study found three clusters of countries: resilient, challenged/polarised, and extremely vulnerable. The Nordic countries have resilient, media-supportive environments defined by factors such as a relatively low degree of populism and political polarisation, robust public service media, a high amount of shared news content and online users in general, and a high degree of trust in news. Based on these indices, Finland and Denmark fared as the most resilient, whereas Norway and Sweden were in the middle of the list of the countries studied; still, all are part of the most resilient country cluster.

Challenges of information disorder

Given all the reassuring statistics, it might seem that communication rights are a part of the digital version of the Nordic media welfare state. Even so, as everywhere, digital and especially social media platforms are transforming the Nordic media landscape. The epistemic commons of shared knowledge and culture in these countries is now more easily accessible due to the platforms, but also increasingly fragmented: Platforms enable people to connect and debate, but also polarise official political discourses and challenge traditional advertisement-driven media business models. In addition, the platforms facilitate bad actors with goals of causing personal or societal harm by spreading false and harmful content – and can thus erode citizens' trust in society, all kinds of media, and in one another. While more resilient than many other countries, Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden are not immune to societal changes and global crises, such as the infodemic caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and the propaganda resulting from the war in Ukraine.¹

Alone, the prominence of social media platforms in people's lives in the Nordic countries suggests at least some degree of exposure and potential vulnerability to information disorder. As Figure 4.4 illustrates, several social media platforms occupy a significant space in these countries.

Figure 4.4 Six most popular social media platforms in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden, 2022 (per cent)



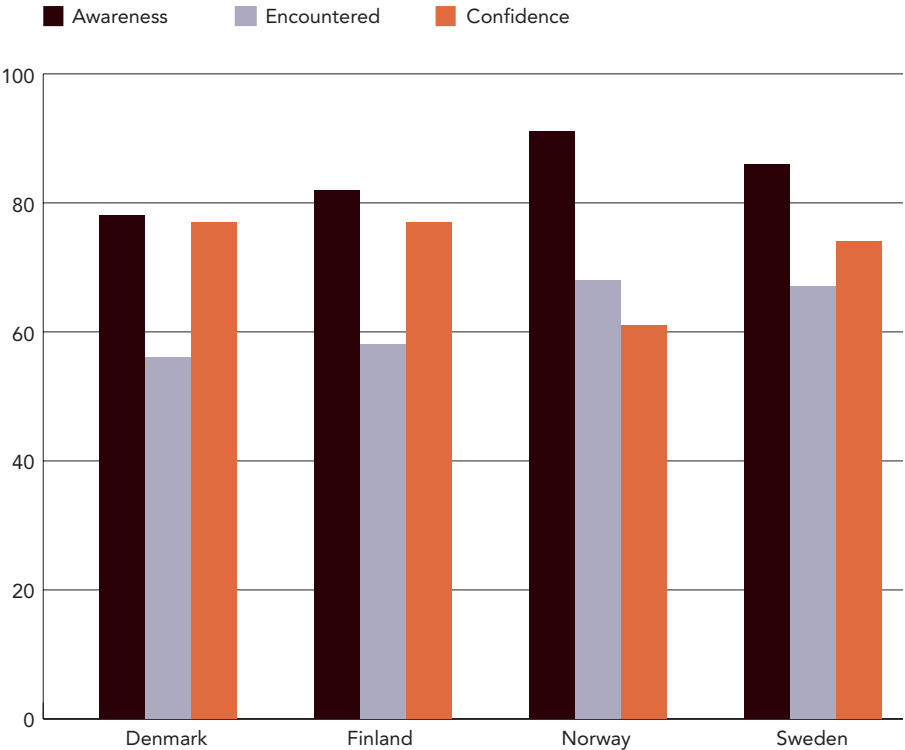
SOURCE: Newman et al., 2022

While Facebook was the most popular social media site in all countries studied in 2022, there were also some differences. Facebook Messenger was popular in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, but not as much in Finland. In contrast, Finns preferred the WhatsApp messenger service as much as Facebook. LinkedIn was among the top-six most used platforms in Denmark, and SnapChat had high penetration in Norway. Furthermore, these platforms are relatively significant news sources, although the prominence of Facebook as a source is clear: In 2022, the social network was used for getting news by approximately one-third of news consumers in each country. News is also shared on these platforms: 15 per cent of people in Denmark, 27 per cent in Sweden, 25 per cent in Norway and 29 per cent in Finland shared news via social media, messaging apps, and e-mail in 2022 (Newman et al., 2022).

Such prominence of social media in people's everyday lives, even when the platforms are not decidedly used as news sources, exposes audiences to potential harms, even if the tradition of the media welfare state is strong. As mentioned above, and in accordance with global developments, all Nordic

societies face increasing social and political polarisation, which coincides with the expansion of social media. Some studies suggest that Finns encounter disinformation significantly less often than Americans, Brits, or Spaniards and point to high awareness of online disinformation, social media filter bubbles, and the like (Horowitz et al., 2021). The Norwegian findings of the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021* highlighted that 45 per cent are concerned about false information in online news (Bjørgan & Moe, 2021). Covid-19 leads as a topic of false or misleading content, followed by climate change, or the environment, and politics. Facebook is considered a key source of disinformation. A Eurobarometer survey from 2021–2022 shows that a great majority of Nordic audiences see disinformation as a legitimate problem, that over 50 per cent in the four countries studied have encountered disinformation, but a majority also are confident that they are capable of identifying false information (see Figure 4.5).²

Figure 4.5 Awareness of disinformation as a problem, personal experience of disinformation, and confidence in detecting disinformation, 2021 (per cent)



SOURCE: Eurobarometer, 2022

In addition, a survey taken in ten European countries, including Sweden, suggests that disinformation is generally found around various topics and is sourced from politicians, corporations, and foreign actors (Hameleers et al., 2021). This study, as well as one on Finnish audiences (Horowitz et al., 2021), found warning signs in too much scepticism, which can lead to a general distrust of all news. The Finnish study in particular points to audiences' mutual distrust and doubts about others' media literacy skills in navigating the online environment. Some researchers are also concerned about people's tendency to overestimate their ability to detect false information and other fake content online (Kalsnes et al., 2021). Nevertheless, other challenges of literacy include the need to increase engagement with underserved language groups and other communities and to widen the understanding of the media and information needs of adults and older people, from practical digital skills to their ability to detect disinformation (see, e.g., Rivinen et al., 2021).

The most comprehensive comparative account of policy and regulatory media environments to date, the annual Media Pluralism Monitor of the European University Institute, assesses risk scores for the protection of the freedom of the media environment, diversity of the market, political independence, and social inclusiveness – all key aspects of a digital media welfare state and a resilient media and communications system. The in-depth analyses resulting in risk scores point to some challenges in Denmark, Finland, and Sweden. For all three countries, ownership concentration demonstrates a risk in terms of the diversity of the market due to the lack of limitations concerning the concentration of ownership (Färdigh, 2022; Mäntyoja & Manninen, 2022; Santos Rasmussen et al., 2022). A section of the study on Finland (Mäntyoja & Manninen, 2022) points out the growing risk of disinformation and the growing harassment of journalists, which, in worst case scenarios, may result in self-censorship (see also Hiltunen 2021). The Nordic reports also highlight the lack of data supporting evidence-based media policymaking.

Some comprehensive indications of the harms caused by information disorder can be found in the global Digital Society Project (Mechkova et al., 2022). Although the Nordic countries fare very well regarding the lack of domestic or even foreign interference in online communication, all countries showcase at least a moderate degree of polarisation in terms of views and debates in the media publicity. This reflects the wider challenges of societal polarisation that have caused concern regarding the ability of the Nordic digital media welfare state to support communication rights (e.g., Nieminen, 2019).

Discussion: Communication rights in support of the epistemic commons in the Nordic digital welfare state

The empirical overview indicates that the Nordics fare quite well in terms of access, availability, and, to a degree, dialogicality. All the Nordic countries also have robust privacy policies and regulations, and the European Union's

General Data Protection Regulation and the new Digital Services Act add protections for users and opportunities to flag harmful online activity. Even so, although the European policy framework offers strong support for the rights-based approach to disinformation, as well as concrete guidelines for some practices, the overview of information disorder in the Nordics suggests that to follow the ideal of the media welfare state in the digital era, Nordic-specific actions need to take place. From the ubiquity of social media and concentration of the markets, to hateful online speech targeting knowledge workers, and the growing likelihood of foreign interference due to the war in Ukraine, the evidence of threats is mounting: A Nordic digital media welfare state is not a guarantee.

It is clear that the potential of the Nordics to provide epistemic commons that secure citizens' communication rights is dependent on more than media and communications policies. The entire Nordic welfare state manifests contradictory trends. On the one hand, the Nordic countries tend to rank as the most successful societies in almost all areas: gender equality, education, public service media, social security, family policy, healthcare, and pension systems (Martela et al., 2020). On the other hand, despite being the world's most educated and informed people, Nordic societies are suffering from the same malaises as most other European countries: increasing inequality; growing social, political, and cultural polarisation; mounting criminality; racism and anti-immigration movements; and the rise of far-right political parties (Antonucci, 2019; Duina & Merand, 2020; SEPOS, 2019).

The above developments are inherently related to the validity of the Nordic welfare state as a concept. One often-mentioned explanation is that Nordic governments have followed the general European–Atlantic trend of neoliberal policies. As a result, they have given up the core principles on which the welfare state was established: universalism, equality, and solidarity (Greve & Kvist, 2021; University of Helsinki, 2019b). Furthermore, the less-critical voices have listed the challenges faced by the Nordic model, including an aging population, individualisation (declining solidarity), and the environmental crisis. According to critics, the Nordic model, as traditionally understood, will not be able to cover the rapidly increasing costs needed to tackle all these challenges (University of Helsinki, 2019a). From the viewpoint of the media, it will be a paramount task to uphold and defend social welfare values, including citizens' communication rights, when such ideals are not only questioned but potentially even discarded as well.

These developments underline that, while the European Union policy initiatives are significant in battling information disorder, the Nordic context, specifically, warrants serious consideration of communication rights as a policy imperative. As noted by the report of the Think Tank for Tech and Democracy: “We have so much to celebrate and so much to preserve” (Bornakke, 2023: para. 3). The Nordic legacy, the urgent need to address information disorder in these countries, and the unique opportunities within the Nordics

to counter related challenges are effectively recognised by various Nordic stakeholders. For example, interviews with an array of Nordic policymakers, journalists, fact-checkers, and media literacy experts (Horowitz, 2022) highlight that different national actors in the Nordics often lack a common understanding of information disorder, including its roots, manifestations, and possible cures. The countries embody different levels of fact-checking activities, from small-scale activities in some countries, like Sweden, to established actors like those in Norway.

Furthermore, the interviews reveal that, although the long history of strong media literacy policies and practices is recognised by all stakeholders, there exists the fear that such a reliance on the discourse of excellent literacy levels is a catch-all solution that overshadows the new educational and emancipatory needs of the digital age. Finally, even the concept of media and information literacy is in flux and understood differently by different actors in the context of information disorder. There are also calls for collaboration in these activities that, to an extent, address similar challenges in many countries. The framework of four communication rights could offer a basic, common scheme for digital information literacy, one that would cover central challenges and capabilities related to each right and aid in creating systematic processes of evaluating literacy activities.

Even more generally, when assessing the state of the Nordic media and its resilience in facing information disorder and platformisation, it is useful to remember that societal resilience is in the end related to institutional trust. Longitudinal studies have shown that even when trust in the government and politicians is low – as has been the case in most European countries in recent years – trust in the political system and democracy has remained stable (see OECD, 2022; Warren, 2017). In a global comparison, the Nordic countries fare very well here. The same concerns people's trust in media: Although there is pronounced distrust in media in general, the news media – seen as an institutional source of information – tend to receive high trust scores (see Eurobarometer, 2022; Newman et al., 2023), especially in times of crisis when there is an urgent need for topical and reliable information, as in the cases of the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. According to the OECD, the main obstacle in building trust today is inequality and people's perceived lack of political influence (OECD, 2022). The Nordic welfare state is historically built on the premises of equality, in all its social, political, and cultural dimensions. Although these premises have been tested and questioned in recent decades (Greve & Kvist, 2021), Nordic countries still stand globally as examples of equality and high-trust societies. This could be a remarkable outcome and partly due to the strong legacy of the media welfare state – even in the current climate of polarised politisation and liberalisation of Nordic media policymaking (see Schröder et al., Chapter 1).

All these findings are reflected in the recommendations of the Think Tank for Tech and Democracy that include demanding and implementing demo-

cratic principles for how tech giants influence societies and democracies – in the Nordics, Europe, and globally; protecting the digital well-being of children and youth; promoting democratic online discourse through innovative means; collaborating in media and information literacy efforts; supporting national independent fact-checking; and enabling public service broadcasters to develop new digital content and services to curb information disorder and empower citizens for democratic debate. All these policy and action interventions are, more implicitly or explicitly, features of a digital media welfare state, prerequisites of a Nordic ideal of epistemic commons, and as such, also measures to support communication rights. The recommendations seek to, among other things, support such future visions as “a united [Nordic] tech-democratic region”, with “thriving and digitally literate citizens” who have “access to diverse and credible digital platforms and communities” and participate in “open and informed public debates” (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2023).

The above lofty visions are, at the moment, curbed by information disorder. At the same time, they symbolise what the legacy of the media welfare state model could mean for the future. Nordic media have played an elemental part in building Nordic success and will potentially continue to do so. Fully assessing the realisation of communication rights, as well as the potential future challenges of information disorder in the Nordics, requires a more thorough and multi-dimensional empirical outlook than that presented in this chapter. As argued in a study on the Scandinavian context of false news and journalism (Kalsnes et al., 2021), we need more studies about the scale of disinformation in the Nordic region; the different types of disinformation and propaganda in the Nordic countries; peoples’ abilities to distinguish facts, opinions, and fakes; and new methods for digital source criticism and digital information literacy in general. In this chapter, we posit that we need to know more, particularly how Nordic societies protect, and further develop, citizens’ rights in the digital era.

Nevertheless, one finding from the comparisons in this chapter gives particular hope but also demands action by policymakers, the media, and scholars alike: Citizens in the Nordic countries seem to trust that their rights are looked after in their digitalised societies. A Eurobarometer (2021) survey on digital rights and principles revealed that Danes, Finns, and Swedes are the most optimistic in the European Union about their digital future. Their biggest concerns, in the end, are not forms of information disorder as such, but cybercrime and forms of inequality that digitalisation may bring about. These sentiments speak further to the ongoing ethos of Nordic welfare states in the digital era. In the end, we argue that a rights-based approach is not only worth adopting, but a necessity in order to create a true epistemic commons for Nordic digital media welfare states.

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Endnotes

¹ While there are no comparative data at present (2023) to show the extent of disinformation circulating in these countries, fact-checkers in Denmark (www.tjekdet.dk), Finland (www.faktaaari.fi), Norway (www.faktisk.no), and Sweden (<http://www.kallkritikbyran.se>) routinely debunk false information.

² It should be noted that the Eurobarometer survey was conducted a few months prior to the beginning of the war in Ukraine and the decision of Finland and Sweden to apply for NATO membership. It is not certain that these figures would have changed drastically even in early 2022: There are no strong indicators that national media landscapes changed drastically (see, e.g., Färdigh et al., 2022; Mäntyoja & Manninen, 2022).

Public service without broadcasting?

Conditions for abandoning terrestrial television in Finland

MARKO ALA-FOSSI,^I KATJA LEHTISAARI,^I & RIKU NEUVONEN^{II}

^I FACULTY OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND COMMUNICATION SCIENCES, TAMPERE UNIVERSITY, FINLAND

^{II} FACULTY OF MANAGEMENT AND BUSINESS, TAMPERE UNIVERSITY, FINLAND

ABSTRACT

Finnish Yleisradio (Yle) has been one of the most innovative public service broadcasters in Europe. The new tax-based funding system and broad remit have allowed the company to shift its focus from broadcast television and radio to online services without jeopardising its relevance or resources. Now Yle has set preconditions for the future availability of its online television in case digital terrestrial television (DTT) would be switched off and all ultra high frequencies reallocated. This is not because Yle would want to focus only on growing video audiences online, but because the Finnish spectrum policy favouring mobile industries could endanger Yle's capability to fulfil its public service remit. We argue that Yle's conditions for abandoning television broadcasting on DTT are so tight they might never be met by the Ministry of Transport and Communications. In this chapter, we also examine what consequences public service without broadcasting could have.

KEYWORDS: public service broadcasting, spectrum policy, regulation, Finland

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Introduction

In September 2020, the Finnish public service broadcaster Yleisradio (Yle) wrote an open letter to the Ministry of Transport and Communications suggesting a new media policy decision on television distribution, which could be used as a foundation for outlining the reallocation of additional ultra high frequencies to 5G mobile use. In addition, it proposed that the Ministry should also prepare new regulatory decisions that would guarantee the availability of Yle television content over broadband for the entire population, even at the peak hours of network use and in the most remote areas. In return, Yle would be ready to support, both nationally and internationally, the Finnish government's proposal for the World Radiocommunication Conference in 2023 (WRC-23) about reallocating the entire ultra high frequency spectrum for mobile use (Yle, 2020).

A nationwide newspaper representing the Central Union of Agricultural Producers and Forest Owners, *Maaseudun Tulevaisuus*, interpreted the letter as Yle's appeal to the Ministry to pave the way for a DTT switch-off as soon as possible. This would have been bad news for quite a few people living in the countryside, as it entailed being dependent on DTT and mobile broadband only, so Yle was soon publicly criticised by some politicians for even planning such a reform (Runsten, 2020). The irony in this public debate was that Yle had only a few months earlier signed a ten-year-long agreement on terrestrial television broadcast delivery with the network company Digita, and in June 2020, Yle DTT channels were made available nationwide in high definition. As Yle pointed out in its answer and correction, as a public service media company, it had no intention to eliminate DTT any time soon, but would instead keep it for at least one more decade (Yli-Äyhö, 2020).

So, the main reason Yle proposed a regulatory reform for ensuring Yle television content distribution on broadband was not determined by a company policy to get rid of broadcasting: On the contrary, it should be interpreted as a defensive action. This incident is actually a part of an increasing competition and confrontation between the policy principles of the so-called Nordic media model – the media welfare state (Syvertsen et al., 2014) – and the official Finnish media policy dating back to the 1990s, which pushes Finland in the direction of a competition and market approach (Ala-Fossi, 2020). The contradiction between the Finnish national spectrum policy emphasising the economic value of the ultra high frequency band, and more traditional, culturally oriented Nordic media policy protecting the resources and conditions vital for the national public service broadcaster to fulfil its legal obligations, is far from exclusive (Ala-Fossi, 2020), but it may be the most visible case internationally.

In 2015, Finland openly and intentionally challenged the Nordic and European spectrum policy by being the only EU member state to vote for a quick reallocation of the entire ultra high frequency broadcast band for

mobile use at the World Radiocommunication Conference (WRC-15) of the International Telecommunications Union. Despite a landslide victory for the “stagnant” European policy, the Finnish Ministry of Transport and Communications did not adjust its ultra high frequency spectrum policy goals accordingly (Pursiainen, 2015). In 2019, as always before the general election, the Ministry published a memorandum written by Permanent Secretary Harri Pursiainen and other leading civil servants to suggest important issues for the next government programme. Among other things, the memorandum proposed a transition of all broadcast television to broadband distribution in Finland right after the end of the current licensing period in October 2027. This would result in a total DTT shutdown. And because the memorandum also suggested providing as much spectrum for 5G and 6G as possible, clearing the ultra high frequency band for mobile broadband could then begin as soon as the spectrum reallocation could be agreed on at the international level (Ala-Fossi & Bonet, 2018; MINTC, 2019).

This was the context for the Yle spectrum policy initiative in the form of an open letter to the Ministry in 2020. Other than the public debate described earlier, there has not been much discussion around this issue. However, after promoting a more dynamic and mobile-friendly spectrum policy for 15 years in a row, Permanent Secretary Harri Pursiainen decided to retire from the Ministry of Transport and Communications prematurely in 2021, only a month after applying for another five-year term. At the time of writing, there are only a few months left until WRC-23, where the use of the ultra high frequency spectrum in the International Telecommunications Union Region 1, including Europe, will be reviewed. As the only action on this issue by the Ministry has been two commissioned reports about television delivery over broadband (Omnitele, 2022; Avaava, 2022), it seems that the Yle letter has so far had the intended impact on Finnish media and communications policy.

Our study is based both on our earlier research as well as analysis of more recent policy documents, statements, and reports: No interviews have been conducted. The theoretical basis of this chapter is in political economy (Jessop, 2002/2005), in combination with historical institutionalism (Galperin, 2004), which emphasises the analysis of historical developments and (economic) power relations between institutions, including informal ones. From this perspective, the flagrant and yet delicate spectrum policy dispute between the Ministry of Transport and Communications and the national public service broadcaster Yle, under the auspices of the Ministry, described above, leads us to ask the following research question (Syvertsen et al., 2014; Ala-Fossi, 2020):

- RQ1. Would public service media be able to maintain the public service content delivery that is so vital for the media welfare state if the state would be actively aiming to shut down a structure for universal media content delivery as a public good and to replace it with a different structure?

In addition, we also aim to examine whether the new policies and regulatory measures suggested by Yle could be sufficient to ensure online delivery capacity and the priority position for public service media in Finland.

In the European countries, public service media is usually a crucial part of the national ecosystem of terrestrial broadcasting, which also delivers commercial broadcast television as well as terrestrial radio in both analogue and digital formats. Thus, our second multi-part research question is as follows:

- RQ2. If the public service broadcaster would withdraw from broadcasting and all the network expenses would fall on the commercial sector, what should we expect would happen next: What are the likely scenarios? How much money and how many DTT services would it take to keep the system alive and running? And finally, if public service media would no longer be broadcasting, would it still be protected by the Amsterdam protocol? Or could such a transition result in a new series of complaints to the European Commission?

Media policy and the media landscape in Finland

Finland is a relatively sparsely inhabited country with 5.5 million inhabitants, and it has been commonly considered one of the Nordic media welfare states, together with Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. It shares the same tradition of independent printed press, subsidised from public funds, as well as strong public service broadcasting protected and funded by the state. But certain national distinctions have usually been neglected when emphasising the similarity of media policy and media development in the Nordic countries (Syvertsen et al., 2014).

For example, in Finland, the Ministry of Education and Culture has nothing to do with the spectrum policy or public service broadcasting, as they are both administered by the Ministry of Transport and Communications. In the last three decades, this distinction has turned out to be very important. The mobile phone as a ubiquitous means of communication has spread from the Nordic countries throughout the world while the Nordic societies – with Finland as a frontrunner – have gradually transitioned from the welfare state model towards the competition state model. At the same time, the radio spectrum has been transformed from a national resource for national purposes into a public resource that is allocated to the highest bidder for the highest possible economic reward. In this setting, one Ministry in Finland has all the power to evaluate the social, cultural, and political content transmitted as well as the economic value of the spectrum use (Ala-Fossi, 2020).

Media ownership concentration in Finland is now higher than in the other Nordic countries, and the national broadcast infrastructure (Digita), for example, has been sold abroad to private investors. While the volume of the mass media market has been alternately declining and growing during the

last decade, it is noteworthy that the share of electronic media has grown at the same time that the share of the print media has diminished. The growth in electronic media advertising has happened primarily online, while commercial television has been struggling, as the number of operators and channels has increased at the same time as television advertising income has diminished. Even the largest commercial television broadcaster, MTV, was already near bankruptcy in 2015. The company was sold to Swedish-owned telecom operator Telia in 2019, and it has remained unprofitable under the new owner (Ala-Fossi, 2020; Ala-Fossi et al., 2023; Grönlund & Lehtisaari, 2021; Yle, 2023).

Although more than half of all Finns are already using the Internet as the main source of their news, especially the sites provided by traditional media, broadcast television remains a crucial part of their daily media diet. The overall position of the television as the second most important source of news has been steady, and among the older population, it is still the most important. On a weekly basis, nearly 80 per cent of residents follow news via the Internet, printed newspapers, television, or radio (Reunanen, 2021; Reunanen et al., 2022).

Public service television and spectrum policy

Throughout the 1990s, Yle was led by two men with backgrounds as professional journalists. Both the last general manager, Reino Paasilinna (1989–1994), as well as the first CEO, Arne Wessberg (1994–2005), started their career at Yle as television journalists. But their successor, Mikael Jungner (2005–2010), represented not only a different generation but a completely different professional paradigm, as he was a former director of information society relations at the Microsoft Corporation. The determined development of Yle's online services started during Jungner's term, but the importance of broadcasting was not challenged. In 2005, Yle and the major commercial television broadcasters in Finland agreed that there was no need for any spectrum policy changes before the completion of the digital switchover of television broadcasting in 2007. Even after the switchover in 2008, there was a consensus about the priority of television broadcasting on the ultra high frequency spectrum band (Ala-Fossi & Bonet, 2018).

However, in 2012, Yle decided to no longer oppose the reallocation of the upper ultra high frequency spectrum (700 megahertz) for mobile use, unlike the Finnish commercial television broadcasters and national media associations. One of the main reasons for this deviation was that Yle's Board of Directors decided in 2010 to not renew the contract with Jungner, but instead appointed a former European Union lobbyist for the Nokia Corporation, Lauri Kivinen, as the new CEO. There is no doubt about Kivinen's stand in this issue: He had signed an official public statement supporting the quick

release of the ultra high frequency spectrum for mobile use as the Head of Corporate Affairs at Nokia Siemens Networks already in 2008. By signing the new Yle statement in 2012, Kivinen proved that, although he had changed company and position, his views on spectrum policy as adopted in the mobile industry had remained practically unchanged (Ala-Fossi & Bonet, 2018).

They were also in line with the Finnish government and its new Communications Policy Program for Electronic Media (MINTC, 2012), which aimed, among other things, to release more ultra high frequency spectrum from broadcasting for mobile use. Within Yle, internal planning as well as public strategies reflected this shift from a focus on broadcasting to new media and online services. In addition, Yle started to seriously consider telecom networks and mobile broadband as alternatives for broadcast delivery (Yle, 2015; Ala-Fossi & Bonet, 2016). After the introduction of a new tax-based funding system in 2013, Yle was also no longer dependent on television licence fee income, which further increased the company's possibilities to gradually reduce the resources devoted to broadcasting.

When Finland challenged the European spectrum policy consensus on the future of the ultra high frequency band in 2015, Yle was the only European broadcaster to support additional ultra high frequency spectrum release for mobile use. All the other Nordic public service media companies, like Swedish Television (SVT), the Danish Broadcasting Corporation (DR), the Icelandic National Broadcasting Service (RÚV), and the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK), supported the European Broadcasting Union and common European Union position at WRC-15 (Ala-Fossi & Bonet, 2018). In the end, Finland was left alone in Europe, and the remainder of the ultra high frequency band below 800 and 700 megahertz remained in broadcast use. It was also agreed that the use of the ultra high frequency spectrum would be reviewed at the WRC-23 (Ala-Fossi, 2016). According to a European Broadcasting Union survey, a clear majority of countries ($n = 123$) would still like to keep the current amount of ultra high frequency spectrum in broadcast use, while 13 countries would like to increase it. Finland was one of the five in favour of releasing more ultra high frequency spectrum for mobile use – once again, the only European country in this group (EBU, 2020).

Unlike his predecessor, Lauri Kivinen had a permanent contract as the Yle CEO, but he decided to leave Yle prematurely, after eight years, in 2018. The current CEO, Merja Ylä-Anttila does not have a technology background but considerable experience as a broadcast television news journalist and editor-in-chief. She was also CEO of MediaHub, a subsidiary of the large commercial television broadcaster MTV3. During her 36-year-long career in broadcasting, she has inevitably become familiar with the ultra high frequency spectrum policy issue and its importance for broadcast delivery. This is also the most likely reason why the Yle letter – personally signed by Ylä-Anttila and sent to the Ministry of Transport and Communications in 2020 – revealed

a new approach towards the national ultra high frequency spectrum policy. While Yle's support for the Finnish government's initiatives to release additional ultra high frequency spectrum for mobile is no longer unconditional, the Ministry is expected to first ensure that Yle will have all the means and resources needed to fulfil its remit (Yle, 2020).

Although the release of 800 and 700 megahertz bands for mobile use was eventually a relatively painless process in Finland (Ala-Fossi & Bonet, 2016), the digital upgrade of terrestrial television from DVB-T standard to the more advanced DVB-T2 has turned out to be more difficult than expected. The original goal agreed by all television companies in Finland in 2016 was to switch to DVB-T2 by the end of March 2020, but this was not met because of an unexpected dispute over Yle's procurement procedure for high definition television broadcasting on DVB-T2. Although the disagreement between Norwegian-owned telecom operator DNA and Yle was solved already in 2019, the television broadcasters have not yet been able to set any new date for the switchover, and households have not updated their home receivers as quickly as expected. Almost 50 per cent of Finnish households with television still receive their television via DTT – and one-fifth (20%) of those households that depend on terrestrial networks still lack so-called high definition receivers for DVB-T2 reception (Traficom, 2023).

Challenges for public service without broadcasting

In a densely populated and small country with an already existing alternative broadcast delivery network, switching off the DTT system and meeting the public service broadcasting remit is by no means impossible. It can be done, and it is even possible to save some money by doing so, as in Belgium (2018) and Switzerland (2019). To begin with, the primary distribution technology for broadcast television in both countries was already cable, and the share of DTT-dependent households was very low (less than 5%, about 200,000 households). After the cable networks were digitised and complemented with IPTV over broadband, the cost of maintaining the DTT network was simply considered too high by the broadcasters (Lombardo, 2018).

Finland is a very sparsely inhabited and large country – over ten times larger than Belgium and with only half of the population – with a relatively high dependency on DTT, as cable is unavailable in the countryside. In addition, Finnish households are also exceptionally dependent on mobile broadband (43%), which is widely available for a relatively low and fixed monthly fee, while high-speed fixed Internet connections are available to only 60 per cent of Finnish households. This makes Finland one of three European Union countries where fixed broadband services are available to less than 90 per cent of households (Traficom, 2022a). Finland has now scored the highest points in the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) four times

in a row (2019–2022), but the digital leader of the European Union has its weak point in connectivity. Interestingly enough, all this is largely due to earlier Finnish policy choices favouring mobile industries and investments in mobile broadband networks (Ala-Fossi, 2020).

This is why mobile networks would play a crucial role if television delivery in Finland would be moved over to broadband networks. And if the remaining ultra high frequency broadcast spectrum would be reallocated for 5G and 6G services, as the memorandum of the Ministry civil servants also suggested, in practice, the same spectrum would be used for television delivery but with a different technology. However, the existing mobile broadband networks in Finland have not been designed or built to carry such a big load of data, especially at the peak hours. According to Yle's CTO, Jyrki Yli-Äyhö, former manager of broadband services at Telia Finland, currently only 10 per cent of Yle's content consumption happens over broadband, while broadcast television and radio are still at about 90 per cent of consumption. A tenfold increase in television delivery over broadband would simply not be possible over the current networks (Yli-Äyhö, 2020, 2022). Omnitele (2022) has estimated that 270 million euro of new investments and an additional 30 million euro of annual maintenance costs would be needed to provide comprehensive nationwide television coverage on mobile networks in Finland. But even this would not guarantee an uninterrupted nationwide television delivery at all times, because of the nature of mobile technology.

The daily patterns of Finnish media consumption have remained rather similar despite the ongoing transition from one delivery platform to another. The peak hours for broadcast television consumption are still between 20:00 and 23:00 (Brun, 2020), and the peak hours of daily Internet traffic in Finland are exactly the same (Tianen, 2020; Vironen, 2021). This is not very surprising, as an increasing amount of television content and television consumption is moving online, but as video streaming takes the most bandwidth, there is already a continuously increasing demand for additional network capacity, especially at peak hours. Building extra capacity just for the daily peak would not be cost-effective, because most of the time, most of the capacity would sit idle while the expense of maintaining it would stay the same. This is why the total network capacity is usually slightly below full peak-time demand, and there is usually a need for some Internet traffic management at peak hours (BEREC, 2012).

The overall coverage of mobile broadband in Finland is quite satisfactory, but the actual speed of the service depends on the local conditions. Despite the mobile industry's objection about the extra expenses associated with a network upgrade, the minimum speed of universal service broadband connection for every household was finally increased from 2 to 5 megabits per second in 2021, eleven years after 1 megabit Internet access was first made a universal service in Finland. In March 2022, fast 4G covered 90 per cent of

households, and fast 5G covered 82 per cent, but at the same time, they had only an 18 and 7 per cent geographic coverage in Finland, respectively. The fastest version of 5G especially requires a very dense base station network, which means that is not cost-effective outside of main roads and the most densely inhabited areas. If 5G were to be built on commercial terms only, it is likely it would never reach the same universal population coverage as DTT (99.96%) (Traficom, 2022b; Ala-Fossi et al., 2018).

Broadcast stations must be well prepared for problems with the availability of electricity. To meet such obligations, at every DTT transmitter site in Finland there must be a diesel-powered generator in reserve so that broadcasting may continue in case of a blackout. When compared to broadcasting, all mobile communication systems have a much denser network of transmitter sites, and the sheer number of these base stations effectively prevents investments in high-capacity back-up power. It has been estimated that it would require at least 350–600 million euro to build a back-up generator for each of the more than 10,000 mobile network base stations in Finland (Kankare, 2015). Currently, at least 30 per cent of the main base stations for non-5G mobile communication systems should have back-up power for at least four hours, while the new 5G base stations are required to operate only 15 minutes after a possible power outage (Traficom, 2020). Part of the reason for this is that even though the 5G system is more energy efficient than 4G (watt/byte), its actual power consumption is much higher due to the huge amounts of data transferred over 5G (Dongxu, 2020; Harjaluoma, 2021).

In general, the power consumption of data transfer in mobile networks is also higher – by as much as a thousand times more – compared with fixed fibre networks, not to mention broadcast networks. It has been estimated that streaming two hours of 4K video – for example, one movie online over a mobile network – would consume as much electricity as a 20-kilometre drive with an electric car, and this calculation does not include the power consumption of the end terminal, data centre, or the Internet backbone (Manner, 2022; Tamminen, 2022). So, replacing all broadcast television delivery with mostly 5G mobile broadband would significantly increase the energy consumption of the telecommunication industry, simply because the amount of data transferred in a high-energy consuming system would be multiplied. Electricity is already the largest item of expenditure for telecom operators, and the increases in the price of energy were expected to cut down their earnings for 2022 (Solvik, 2022).

In this context, it is obvious that the Finnish Ministry of Transport and Communication would have a difficult time forcing the 5G mobile operators to provide any “TV-proof” subscriptions that would work at peak times and in sparsely populated areas, as Yle suggested in its letter. It would be unlikely that those same operators, which objected to upgrading 3G and 4G networks in the most remote areas in Finland for better universal service broadband,

would ever build a high capacity 5G network in the same areas. It would not be an economically rational or viable business. That would also be the case with reserving a large idle capacity just for the peak-hour demand. Moreover, any new national regulation that would give Yle content priority status in telecommunications networks and guarantee its availability over broadband at all times, including the peak hours, would be an exception from the network neutrality principle. This would most probably make all the telecom operators, as well as the private media companies, object fiercely and file complaints.

Even if all this could somehow be implemented in Finland, perhaps by using both approaches – regulatory stick and carrot together with large public investments in both fixed and mobile broadband networks – the broadband alternative to terrestrial broadcast television would at the same time be more vulnerable and less cost-efficient to use. By forcing all the eggs into the same basket of online delivery, Finland would decrease the resilience of society at a time of possible crisis and increase the environmental and economic problems caused by the growing consumption of energy. In addition, it is unclear whether the regulatory measures suggested by Yle would be sufficient to secure its position in the new environment. The problem is that the public service broadcasters, as well as their remits, were born and raised in the broadcast domain within national borders over 100 years. While the Internet-based network systems with global platforms have their own affordances, they do not match very well with the needs of the public broadcasters online (Ala-Fossi & Lax, 2016).

Worst-case scenario for the broadcast ecosystem

Only a couple of years ago, some public broadcasters like the BBC and Yle, as well as the British communications regulator Ofcom, predicted a sunset for DTT already by 2030 (Ala-Fossi & Lax, 2016). However, in August 2021, the British Government decided to extend the DTT multiplex licences of Freeview services until 2034. This was largely because the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport discovered that the DTT network is still an important tool for fulfilling the public service broadcasting remit in Britain, providing universal and free availability of public service broadcasting content throughout the nation. Freeview has about 99 per cent coverage across the UK, and it is also the only television platform for almost 40 per cent of British households (DCMS, 2021). This is quite similar to the current situation in Finland, although the UK is slightly smaller in size with a population over 11 times larger (61 million).

The Nordic countries have not yet made a similar re-evaluation of the life expectancy of DTT services or the timespan of the possible next licensing term. In Finland, Digita has a DTT delivery contract with Yle until the end

of 2029 and six multiplex licences, all currently valid until October 2027. The Norwegian national DTT operator NTV has a multiplex licence until December 2030 (NTV, 2022), and in Denmark, the multiplex licences granted by the Agency of Culture and Palaces are valid until July 2030 (ACP, 2022). In Sweden, the spectrum use for the DTT network is regulated by programming licences only, so the state-owned network company Teracom does not have any multiplex licences; the current licensing term for both public (SVT) and commercial television will end by the end of December 2025, but according to the Swedish Press and Broadcasting Authority, the licences for the next term will become available in 2025. However, the licensing term (2026–2033) will be binding only for SVT, while the commercial channels will be allowed to withdraw prematurely (SPBA, 2022; P. Björkman, personal communication, April 11, 2022).

In practice, for all the public service broadcasting companies, the use of DTT is always both a political and economic decision. They will continue, as long DTT remains a cost-efficient instrument for fulfilling the public service remit and serving the audiences – and as long as they do not have any other rational tools for doing their job, which they could both justify politically and afford economically. On the other hand, the commercial television operators can be expected to continue on DTT so long as it remains profitable for them, that is, the commercial revenue from broadcasting is higher than the expenses for DTT distribution. There are national differences, but in general, the habits of media consumption in Europe are changing in that direction, which is not too favourable for DTT. For example, Finns under 45 years of age are already watching more broadband than broadcast television. The older generations are still very loyal television viewers, but the greatest potential for developing growing audiences and larger commercial revenues is in the broadband and video- on-demand services (Brun, 2022). Soaring energy prices mean higher expenses for broadcast networks, which will result in increasing prices for broadcast delivery. It is likely that at some point, the cost per broadcast viewer for certain channels becomes higher than the ad revenue per viewer, which leads to withdrawals of DTT delivery.

The departure of some smaller or niche commercial DTT channels should be understood as business as usual – and that has already happened. However, if in a geographically large country like Finland the biggest commercial channels with the largest coverage or the national public service broadcasting company would decide to leave DTT, this could have severe consequences for the entire broadcast ecosystem. Germany is only slightly larger than Finland, but its population is more than 15 times bigger (84 million). After the German reunification in 1990, satellite television became the most important means of television delivery for the entire nation, and DTT has from the beginning been only the third most important television platform after cable. In 2013, the largest commercial television broadcaster in Germany, RTL, seriously

considered stopping DTT delivery instead of introducing any new high definition services on DVB-T2. Ulrich Reimers (2013) predicted that this could be the beginning of the end for DTT in Germany. Standard definition quality picture with a smaller selection of channels would make the remaining DTT viewers flee to satellite or cable, which would in turn further decrease the economic viability of DTT delivery for other commercial broadcasters, as well as public service television broadcasters like ARD and ZDF.

According to Reimers, the final death blow for the German DTT service would be the withdrawal of the public service broadcasters. This is partly because they are paying for the most comprehensive coverage, while commercial channels may focus only on the most densely populated regions. This in turn would mean serious problems for terrestrial radio broadcasting, as in Germany, like in Finland and many other countries with large geographical areas, nationwide radio shares most of the broadcast infrastructure, like transmitter sites and towers, with television. Without any economic help from television broadcast delivery revenues, national radio would have to carry the full cost of the network alone and perhaps reduce its broadcast services or close down entirely (Reimers, 2013).

Eventually, RTL did not withdraw from the German DTT, and new high definition services have been successfully introduced on DVB-T2. But if we look closer at Belgium and Switzerland, which only a few years later ended up closing their DTT networks, it was the public service broadcasting decision (consequently by VRT and SRG SSR) to withdraw from DTT, which led to closure (Lombardo, 2018). So, we have hard evidence that Reimers got his worst-case scenario at least partly right – although neither in Belgium nor in Switzerland has the DTT closure, at least not yet, had any significant impact on terrestrial radio broadcasting.

Would non-broadcasting public service media be eligible for state aid?

The so-called Amsterdam protocol of 1997 is rather specific when it refers to public service media only as “public broadcasting” and “broadcasting organisations”, which is quite understandable in the context of the time when it was written. In the late 1990s, broadcasting was a firmly established mainstream form of communication with no comparable alternatives in electronic media. As noted by Ala-Fossi and Lax (2016), the European Commission has later also emphasised a close association between the broadcasting and online services of public service media. On the other hand, a 2009 Commission Communication about state aid rules accepts all public broadcasting services eligible for state aid, but any significant new services must first pass an “ex ante test”. So, what would happen if there would be a European public service media with no traditional broadcasting activities at all, just “new services”?

At the moment, we do not have any case examples because even in Belgium and Switzerland, VRT, RTBF, and SRG SSR all continue broadcasting television on cable and radio on a terrestrial network.

A recent complaint about the use of state aid in Finnish public service media reveals how literal an interpretation the European Commission can make. In 2002, the Finnish Parliament made the remit of the public service broadcaster Yleisradio broader than before by allowing additional and supplementary services in all telecommunications networks, not just in broadcast systems. However, no direct reference to text content was made then or in later revisions of the remit. In 2017, the Finnish Media Federation filed a complaint about Yleisradio's web journalism to the European Commission, claiming that Yleisradio's text content online with no direct connection to public service audio or video content violates European Union state aid regulations. As a result, the Act on Yleisradio was amended in 2022. Yleisradio now has a separately defined right to publish text online, but only in relation to audio or video, with few exceptions. It would be very interesting to know how the use of a more than 2,000-year-old technology – the Latin alphabet – for the online publishing of text was considered by the Commission as a “new service”, but the correspondence between the Commission and the Finnish Ministry of Transport and Communications remains confidential.

So far, most of the studies on public service broadcasters' transition towards becoming public service *media* in the European context have focused on examining the legal justification for new services, which have been introduced in addition to broadcasting. However, they may also offer broader perspectives on what the most relevant issues are when evaluating public service. In their recent legal study, Neuvonen and Kuusela (2022) have argued that the justification of public service media provision cannot be based on the use of any particular system or technological platform, like broadcasting. This is because the Commission is committed to the technological neutrality principle, which is also included in European Union Information Society policy. On the other hand, both the Council of Europe and the European Parliament have encouraged public service media to be active and develop ways to fulfil their remit with new technology and new platforms (Neuvonen & Kuusela, 2022).

More relevant than any choice of technology is that the content and services offered would meet the obligations of the national public service remit, including the provision of universal access – as it is described in the Commission Communication about state aid rules (European Commission, 2009: Recital 84): “State aid to public service broadcasters may be used for distributing audiovisual services on all platforms provided that the material requirements of the Amsterdam Protocol are met”. Also, the Resolution of the Council and the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States (European Council, 1999) confirms that the member states unanimously want to emphasise the mission of public broadcasting; thus, the provisions of the Treaty

establishing the European Community do not limit the competence of the member states to finance public broadcasting, as far as funding is granted to national broadcasting companies to fulfil the mission of the public service given, as defined and organised by each member state. This right to adjust the public service provision according to changes in a dynamic market environment has also been confirmed in a European Parliament resolution on Concentration and Pluralism in the Media (European Parliament, 2008). All this together means that, at least from the legal point of view, public service without any form of broadcasting included should be eligible for state aid in the European Union, although this has not yet been confirmed by the Commission or the European Court of Justice.

Conclusions

In a competition state, public service media may still enjoy many traditional regulatory protections and priorities, but it should also be ready to compete over vital public resources in case of conflict of interest. The case discussed in this chapter is especially interesting because the conflict was within the domain of one single ministry controlling all spectrum use in Finland, and not between public and private institutions or between two ministries administering parts of the same domain. When the sheer economic value of spectrum was emphasised too much, the Ministry had to be reminded about the social, cultural, and political value of the spectrum use.

However, our first research question regarding whether the Finnish government would have taken the advice of the civil servants and started to prepare a DTT shutdown right after 2027, public service broadcaster Yle would not have been able to get enough broadband network capacity for a truly universal nationwide television delivery to meet its remit – not in that timeframe and most likely not later, either. The most obvious problem is economic, because additional network capacity would be necessary, and that would require large investments. Another small problem is that Finland cannot just release any part of the ultra high frequency spectrum from broadcast use to mobile use unless the changes have been accepted internationally – and at the moment, the odds are against Finland winning the Region 1 vote at WRC-23.

It is not possible to give here an exhaustive evaluation of whether the new regulatory measures suggested by Yle in case of a DTT shutdown would be sufficient to guarantee a universal nationwide television service on broadband. It might be better to ask whether it would have been possible to get all these new regulations favouring and prioritising Yle content in the online environment politically accepted and confirmed. They would require a wide parliamentary consensus and much political will, and in the current context of the Finnish parliament restricting Yle's activities online, there would be absolutely no guarantee of achieving this. And even if there would be parliamentary support, it is almost sure that complaints and court cases would follow.

Based on the real-world European case examples and simple calculations, it seems rather obvious, regarding our second research question, that the nationwide DTT system revenues would collapse if the national public service media did not pay part of the expenses, especially for operating transmitters in more sparsely inhabited regions. However, an estimate of the critical number of DTT channels needed to cover the network expenses would require additional studies. But, for example, the future ability of the commercial television broadcasters in Finland to continue traditional advertising-financed free-to-air broadcasting should be examined, because all the television operators would benefit from having as many channels as possible on air and collecting revenues to cover the network expenses.

As we have noted earlier, terrestrial broadcasting as a technology or a means of delivery is not an existential question for public service media in Europe from a legal perspective. A completely different question is how well Finland could then meet the national public service media remit and provide truly universal service without broadcasting with the limited amount of funding available. For the last hundred years or so, it has in most cases been the most cost-effective way to arrange free and universal services nationwide. When its reliability and energy consumption are now compared to broadband, especially Internet-based services used over the mobile networks, broadcasting remains socially responsible, resilient, and sustainable.

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Cracks in the foundations?

Shifting consensual relations in two media fields in Norway

LARS JULIUS HALVORSEN^I & PAUL BJERKE^{II}

^I FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCE AND HISTORY, Volda University College, Norway

^{II} FACULTY OF MEDIA AND JOURNALISM, Volda University College, Norway

ABSTRACT

An important characteristic of the Nordic media model is consensual relations between state and industry stakeholders. However, recent studies indicate that these relationships have become less consensual in some Nordic countries. In this article, we investigate the developments and current situation in the Norwegian media and literary field through a comparative case study of the print news media and the book market. In both industries, the regulatory schemes were developed, while democratic corporatist solutions were widespread. Despite large political transformations in other societal sectors, we find that the most important parts of the two systems are still intact, while the state remains predominantly supportive. In the field of news media, intra-industry relations are largely intact, enabling the field to protect their privileges from outsiders and unwanted political initiatives. In the more heterogeneous and less organised field of literature, tensions between actors are rising, and this poses a threat to the Norwegian literary welfare state.

KEYWORDS: media support schemes, cultural policy, sociology of markets, cultural fields, collective action

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Introduction

The concept of the media welfare state (Syvertsen et al., 2014) emphasises how the Nordic media model reflects the general Nordic governance model. The Nordic countries are characterised by 1) strong public service media, generous subsidies, and other support schemes; 2) relatively egalitarian patterns in news consumption; 3) a high level of public trust in the news media; and 4) consensual relations between the media stakeholders (see Schrøder et al., Chapter 1; see also Ala-Fossi, 2020; Hallin & Mancini, 2004).

However, in a recent study of Sweden, Jakobsson and colleagues (2021) found that the consensual relations between media companies and the state no longer characterise the Swedish media market (see also Baeten et al., 2015). They argued that the relationship between stakeholders in the Swedish media system has been far less “consensual” than Syvertsen and colleagues (2014) seem to have assumed. Already in the 1970s, there was open disagreement between leading industry actors and the state about the system of tax on advertising revenues, which redistributed income from rich to economically weaker newspapers (Engblom et al., 2002). The disagreements have increased in later years, and one outcome of this conflict has been the removal of the tax on advertisers.

In this article, we therefore study the consensual relations in the Norwegian media system and ask the following questions:

- RQ1. Has the relationship between state and industry stakeholders changed?
- RQ2. Has the relationship between the various industry stakeholders changed?

Since the 1990s, the traditional Scandinavian corporatist model, characterised by consensual democratic governance and a strong and active presence of interest groups, has been subject to growing pressure (de la Porte et al., 2022). Engelstad and colleagues (2017: 65) concluded in their review that

even if global trends are noticeable in the Nordic region, salient issues indicate that the specificity of the Nordic model is by no means irrelevant. (i) The Internet as a global phenomenon has a considerable influence on the structure of the media in all Nordic countries, but it does not nullify the specific traits of the Nordic region in relation to the strong position of public service broadcasting and public support for the press. (ii) The field of arts and culture is becoming more influenced by market forces and private support. Nevertheless, broad public subvention and national arts councils significantly affect the funding of cultural life.

In the Norwegian variant of the Nordic media welfare state, there are two strong and long-lasting institutions: the regulation of the print news media

and the regulation of the book market. Our investigation focuses on these institutions, the reasons being 1) they by far are the two most important written cultural genres in Norway, and 2) both schemes were established in the 1960s, have been evaluated several times, and each evaluation concludes that the policies have been successful. They have largely contributed to their objectives: a differentiated daily press (Norwegian Government, 2017) and strong, Norwegian-language literature (Bjerke et al., 2022). The evaluations also conclude, in line with Syvertsen and colleagues (2014), that broad support within the relevant fields has been an important prerequisite for their success (Halvorsen et al., 2020).

The two institutions were developed when the Norwegian social democratic reign was at its height, and the literary policy that emerged was strongly influenced by the democratic corporatist model (Bjerke et al., 2022; Halvorsen & Bjerke, 2023; Rønning & Slaatta, 2019), and both institutions have been under pressure from a liberal political narrative, as well as digitalisation and globalisation. It may be said that the news media and book market regulations in Norway represent the most “extreme” version of the Nordic media welfare state model when it comes to the consensual relations between the media stakeholders; therefore, it is of strategic research interest.

Theoretical approach

There is a long tradition within the sociology of culture to approach cultural production as a meso-level social space with autonomy from other societal domains (Bourdieu, 1993, 2000; Escarpit, 1971). In recent years, the same approach has spread to the sociology of news (Lowrey & Sherill, 2019: 247). These approaches assume that markets are organised social spaces situated between the individual agency and the state level, where the social arenas are generally defined by actors, roles, positions, social relations, and shared logics. Field theory is one of these approaches, and it serves as the analytical starting point for our investigation. An important assumption in this perspective is that fields are characterised by both conflict and consensual relations. While conflicts are motivated by competition over scarce resources, consensual relationships develop from a shared interest in a mutually beneficial social order (Bourdieu, 1993; Fligstein, 2001; Fligstein & McAdam, 2012).

A field consists of a hierarchy of privileged and less privileged positions. The dominant actors, or incumbents, hold the most important (and prestigious) positions and wield an unproportional authority over the field. In contrast, the challengers occupy less privileged positions in the field and wield little influence over its operation. They are able to articulate alternative visions of the field and their position in it, but they typically abide their time, conform to the prevailing order, and limit their opposition to jockeying for some improvement in their position (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012: 13).

According to Fligstein (2001: 32), stable market interaction requires four types of institutions: property rights, rules for exchange, governance structures, and conceptions of control. Property rights and rules for exchange are defined by state laws. The governance structures, on the other hand, consist of both laws and informal practices. In many fields, internal governance units are established, “charged with overseeing fields rules and, in general facilitating the overall smooth functioning and reproduction of the system” (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012: 13–14). The conceptions of control are general agreements between the actors about the architecture of the hierarchy within the field and a shared understanding of how to conduct business (Fligstein, 2001: 32). Both the internal governance units and the conceptions of control tend to represent the interests of the incumbents and aid them in maintaining their position in the field hierarchy.

The development within a specific field is both affected by local agency and the field’s relationship to adjacent fields (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012: 18). The state support for news media and literature makes a field dependent on the field of politics. According to Geir Vestheim (2012), in the cultural industry, this creates an overlap between culture, politics, and the market, in which competing logics strive (see also Halvorsen et al., 2020), and in a recent article, Per Mangset (2020) asked if cultural politics has come to an end. In such situations, internal governance units might play an important role as liaisons between the incumbents and the field of politics (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012: 14).

Depending on the distribution of power between and within fields, different market configurations and interaction patterns can emerge. Firms and the state alike tend to seek stability in the market interaction, and stable market conditions favour mutual beneficial cooperation and a low degree of tension. According to Ostrom (2005), institutional frameworks governing collective goods – for example, support schemes and privileges such as exemptions from competition laws – work best (and perhaps only) if they have broad support in the field, so that the schemes are not deliberately exploited by field actors.

Changes in the political field could change the fields of news media and literature. According to Fligstein (2001: 46–47), the market dynamic in welfare states, such as the Nordic countries at the height of social democratic reign, was characterised by the state as a very active market actor and frequent direct state interventions. State interventions in markets, with a standoff between workers and capitalist interests, as exemplified by Norway post-1981, are typically less frequent and more dependent on the relative strength of different interest groups. In this situation, the stability of the fields of literature and news media could be expected to depend more on the internal coordination and consensual relations between local stakeholders. Conception of control represents “local knowledge” of how to act in a field, which could be watered down by the entrance of large numbers of new actors.

Digitalisation and globalisation have opened the field of media and literature to new players who previously operated in other markets. However, the new actors do not necessarily act in accordance with the field's internal rules of action. Thus, their entrance could threaten field stability, yet stability might be maintained through state support or joint defence of the field logic and institutions by established field actors.

Fligstein has stressed the central position of the state, which has “considerable and generally unrivaled potential to impact the stability of most Strategic Action Fields” (Fligstein, 2013: 44). And a way to keep such stability is to create “consensual relations”, which, according to Syvertsen and colleagues (2014: 19), has been at the core of the media welfare state:

At each crucial moment in media history, we see a preference for consensual and cooperative policies, rather than clean-cut statist or market-led solutions [...]. Nonetheless, cooperation does not mean that private companies are overly restricted in their operations or that the interests of state and industry merge. As we have noted, the Nordic states have always had relatively open economies, allowing Nordic companies to take advantage of global market opportunities, while at the same time benefitting from protective policies intended to defend domestic media from the twin pressures of marketization and globalization.

Market stability also depends on the market's relations to other markets. Field transformations are often the result of an invasion of new actors from other markets with different logics, which could lead to a larger offset of the social order. Fligstein (2001: 84), for instance, described situations in which field rules and unity are at stake, as episodes of contention.

Methods and data

In this article, we want to investigate the developments and characteristics of the market interaction and governance of the literature and news media. The research strategy partly draws on the tradition of historical media research. According to Dahl (2000: 60), an important part of historical media research is contextualisation:

In a media historical study, there is hardly any context around the research object that can be taken for granted, in the same way that other media research can take the environment for granted. One must establish the meaningful environment as part of the survey, which other media researchers most often avoid.

We have tried to contextualise the historical background of the news media and literary welfare state of Norway, using relevant literature, such as Fidjestøl's (2015) history of Arts Council Norway and Hjeltne's (2010)

history of the Norwegian press. These volumes have served as a point of departure for studies consisting of books, research articles, governmental and parliamentary documents, and newspaper articles. In the second part of our investigation, we take the findings from part one and analyse recent development traits after 2010, leading up to the present situation. This part of the analysis is based on interviews with three senior cultural politicians, as well as key actors in the various stakeholder groups. Within the field of literature, we have interviewed decision-makers in 27 publishing houses; prominent literates within different genres; librarians and other decision-makers within the library sector; representatives of Arts Council Norway; and representatives of the main associations in the literary field and book market.

In the field of print and digital news media, our informants include all the important interest organisations and governance units in the field, the editors of a variety of Norwegian news media, and the Norwegian Media Authority. All interviews are what Kvale and Brinkmann (2015) referred to as factual interviews, where the interviewees have provided actual information and their own assessments of real and hypothetical issues. All the interviews have been conducted in accordance with the principle of informed consent.

The emergence and development of the Norwegian media and literary field, 1965–2010

The support schemes for news media and literature both consist of two elements: direct financial support on the one hand, and tax exemptions and other privileges on the other. The “packages” of support schemes were both introduced in the mid-1960s by a social democratic government (literature) and non-socialist coalition (press support), respectively, with the industry’s bodies as driving forces. The incumbents in both fields perceived a “crisis situation” and successfully turned to the authorities to get help to resolve it, appealing to national and democratic concerns. The support scheme for literature was introduced in 1965 after a long political process where the future of Norwegian language and national culture was the dominant concern (Fidjestøl, 2015), while the support schemes for the press were introduced from 1969 on the basis of a perception of the fear of breakdown concerning the “diversified newspaper system” (Olsen, 1998; Sletten, 1979).

Both support packages consisted of VAT exemptions and direct support to field actors. Economically weak newspapers received supportive grants. For literature, an automatic purchasing system was established, in which the state bought 1,000 copies of all Norwegian fiction books from the publishers and distributed them freely to public libraries. The publishers, bookstores, and authors were also allowed to negotiate collective prices and fees.

There was broad agreement in both the relevant fields and the political field that these situations required action, but in both cases, there were dis-

agreements about what kind of measures were best suited. In the parliament, the Conservative Party voted *against* the production support (Halvorsen & Bjerke, 2023) and accepted only under strong doubt the purchasing scheme. Crucial to the Conservative Party's support for the latter was that, in principle, *all* fiction publications should be purchased, so that the state could not in any way control the policy of the established publishers (Bjerke et al., 2022).

The press support schemes were made as “objective” as possible. VAT exemption applied to all newspapers and books. The “quality” of the product was not assessed. All number-2 newspapers (newspapers not being the largest in their municipality) published at least twice a week, a circulation of 2,000, and that had broad, current content with an emphasis on politics, culture, and society could receive production grants. In addition, number-1 newspapers with a circulation of less than 6,000 also qualified for support.

Both the news media and the literature support schemes were designed and established in close cooperation with the stakeholders in the field (Freihow, 2001; Halvorsen et al., 2020; Hjeltnes, 2010; Ringdal 1993). New internal governance units, in which the field's organisations had a central position, were established (Halvorsen et al., 2020).

Jakobsson and colleagues (2021) described how the Swedish press support scheme was partly set up as an internal redistribution system within the field of news media. The redistribution of wealth represented a manifest conflict of interest among the industry actors. As a result, the Swedish incumbents opposed the system from the beginning. In Norway, the leading Social Democrats “learned” from the Swedish discussions and avoided this kind of internal redistribution systems for the newspapers (Olsen, 1998: 34ff).

The Labour Party “returned” to office in 1971 and ruled most of the 1970s. During this period, production support significantly increased (sevenfold in real value from 1971 to 1979). This increased support was particularly in favour of the Labour Party's own newspapers (Halvorsen & Bjerke, 2023).

In the 1980s, the political landscape changed from a worker–state coalition to a standoff between parties representing capitalist and worker's interests (Fligstein, 2001: 46). In the following two decades, the political interests and direct intervention in the various cultural fields dropped. As a result, direct support was gradually scaled down by different ruling coalitions over the next twenty years. Still, the main features of the system prevailed. The press support scheme and the VAT exemption were retained. Another consequence of the reduced political interest in the field was that the development of the support scheme practices was left to the field actors and the public administration. Thus, the incumbents were able to exercise control over the field through the interest organisations and field-specific conceptions of control, such as the idea that the press should be independent from the state and that the editor should have unrestricted power (also from their owners) over the content of their publication. In the field of literature, the view was that the

publishers alone should decide which books deserved publication (and thus be purchased by the state). In addition, there was a widespread perception that the purchasing scheme was working well, was necessary, and should not be changed.

During this period, some important changes were made to both schemes, but in all instances, they served the same purpose: to include deserving challengers in the scheme in an order that contributed to ensuring the stability and legitimacy of the governance system. In 1989, production grants were opened to the smallest local newspapers. The circulation limit was reduced from 2,000 to 1,000, and the requirement for the number of releases from two to one per week.

In the same period, the book purchasing scheme was also extended to new types of literature: first to children's and youth books, then to translated literature, and finally in 2005, to non-fiction. The path to the inclusion of new literature was far less harmonic, however. The situation during the last part of the 1990s can be characterised as an episode of contention (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012), with at least three field-disrupting conflicts taking place simultaneously. Two of the conflicts concerned prize formation and followed the vertical chain in the book industry. The authors, publishers, and bookstores were allowed exemptions from the anti-monopoly laws of competition, and their interest organisations could negotiate binding agreements on fees and prices. Disagreement between the parties resulted in open conflicts, both between the bookstores and the publishers, and between the publishers and the authors.

The third line of conflict was horizontal, between different literatures. The non-fiction authors had for many years demanded access to the fiction scheme, but several proposals from the non-fiction organisations to use part of the pot for non-fiction had been defeated by the incumbent organisations in the field of literature. The fight became quite fierce. In 2001, Den Norske Forfatterforening (the fiction authors' union) described the demands from their non-fiction colleagues as a "declaration of war" (Fidjestøl, 2015: 24). This conflict among authors was only solved when the government established a scheme for non-fiction literature *in addition to* the existing fiction literature scheme (Bjerke et al., 2022). The result was a resettled and, for the time being, unified literary field.

Developments in the news media field, 2010–2022

In the years around 2010, three important changes in the surroundings of the two fields occurred. First, both fields were affected by digitalisation. The news industry lost their distribution monopoly through print and broadcast and had to see revenue from both ads and subscriptions drop dramatically. The revenue shortfall meant that the established media houses had to reduce

staffing, and most of them solved the problem by narrowing the coverage areas both geographically and thematically. Thus, geographical and thematic “blind spots” arose, which were partly covered up by new actors (Halvorsen & Bjerke, 2023).

In the literature field, a completely new digital product, the audiobook, distributed as a streaming service, entered the book market.

Secondly, the sectors were internationalised, and thirdly, the industry-controlled “internal governance units” were weakened as politics in these fields changed in favour of classical Weberian governance based on legal principles (Østerud et al., 2003).

Still, the period up to 2010 was characterised by few changes in news- and literary policy. The VAT exemption, and the main features of the press support and the purchasing schemes, prevailed. There were proposals for significant changes from within as well as from outside the field, but they were effectively countered in each of the two fields by their unified, well-organised internal governance units. On the other hand, it was evident that the incumbents were more efficient in defending the status quo than enacting change. Most attempts to increase the scope of the grants or extend the schemes to nearby genres failed.

In 2013, the conservatives won the national parliamentary election, and the Conservative Party and the Progress Party formed a government. Both parties have historically been sceptical towards state governance and funding of the cultural and media field. Thus, the stability in each of the two fields relied more than ever on the consensual relations between industry stakeholders. In the following, we discuss whether these external changes, in combination with the internal developments in the media policy, led to internal tensions and the weakening of “consensual relations” in the field of the news media.

Unlike what happened in many other countries, the incumbents in the news field were able to defend their position as the main news providers on the new Internet. The tabloids *VG* and *Dagbladet*, the public service broadcaster NRK, and the broadsheet *Aftenposten* have been the most important and most visited news websites throughout this century, where *VG* has over three million unique daily users as of 2022 (Olsen et al., 2021; Medietilsynet, 2021).

However, the two key public support schemes, the VAT exemption and the production grant, remained print based. VAT exemptions for digital editions were introduced as late as 2020. The industry was unified in their appeal to the authorities and claimed that the digital VAT was an important obstacle to innovation and the adaptation of new technology. A leading Schibsted official put it this way: “It has perhaps been the biggest victory the industry has achieved and has been very important for our ability to develop good solutions for digital subscriptions” (Interview with authors, 2021).

It is estimated that during 2010–2020, the major digital platforms took over 5 billion Norwegian kroner (approx. 438 million euro) in advertising

revenue from the Norwegian news media (Olsen et al., 2021). The Norwegian media field found a “common enemy” and appealed to the authorities to intervene against this enemy in the form of taxation or other regulations. At this point, however, the Norwegian media owners have so far achieved nothing but non-binding goodwill from changing governments. The head of the National Association of Media Companies typically put it this way:

Decisions made in Silicon Valley have democratic consequences for Norway and are totally exempt from democratic control and that affect our competitiveness. [...] I think the [authorities] have done an all-too-bad job. There are discussions in other European countries [...] that are much more aware of the issues between, for example, Facebook and the media. (Interview with authors, 2021)

Until 2013, The direct support schemes were also print based. The extent of the support was based on paid print editions and the number of printed editions per week.

The incumbents also lobbied for a long time to include the digital newspaper versions in the press support scheme. To achieve their goal, they appealed to the Norwegian authorities’ enthusiastic policy for digitalisation (Allern & Bjerke, 2018). After a consultation in 2012, the production support for newspapers was made “platform neutral”.

Platform neutrality created a potential threat to the privileged media firms. To prevent outsiders from the trade press qualifying for support, the requirement for content diversity was tightened. Still, old support practices trumped the wording of the regulations. Thus, certain niche media may qualify.

Due to changes in the income structure, the Norwegian trade press improved their relative strength vis-à-vis the mainstream news media. The heterogeneous group consists of around 1,500 titles, and 234 of them are members of Fagpressen [The Trade Press] with a total circulation of 3.9 million (Aker & Bjerke, 2023). The Trade Press has spent its resources on achieving VAT exemptions in line with the mainstream news media. This was partly catered for in 2020. Their new target is to be included in a support scheme for innovation. Still, despite their increased relative strength, their hope of being included in the production support scheme is modest. The chairman of The Trade Press, Per Brikt Olsen put it this way: “I think this scheme is so heavily rooted in custom, although if you look at the original you can start to question where it is now in many ways” (Interview with authors, 2021).

Until now, all recipients of direct support have been nationally controlled. The first non-Norwegian player to seek production grants was *Dagbladet*, which in 2013 was bought by the Danish weekly magazine group Aller. *Dagbladet.no*, like other national online newspapers, has a business model where most of the content is free, while some specialty material is put behind the paywall. *Dagbladet* has, as the only player with this model, applied

for production grants for the behind-paywall content. The application was rejected by the Media Authority, and Aller (*Dagbladet*) received almost no backing in the field for their attempt to gain support.

A new tendency is evolving political interest in the press support scheme. Based on a white paper on media policy, the allocation for press support was increased in 2020 such that support for the smallest local newspapers increased from 580,000 to 850,000 Norwegian kroner (approx. 51,000 to 74,000 euro) per publication per year. When the Ministry proposed a further strengthening of the smallest newspapers in 2022 at *the expense of* the so-called number-2 newspapers in the major cities, the field-wide agreement unravelled.

For now, however, it seems that these are the most important common perceptions: VAT exemption for the large productions and targeted subsidies for the small. The big actors accept production subsidies for their competitors because it ensures the legitimacy of their own VAT exemption and because they do not compete head-to-head with the support recipients. The strongest incumbent Schibsted said:

In this small country with a limited population base, there will be some thematic and geographical blind spots if one is not willing to spend state money on it, so we have a relatively pragmatic relationship to it. What we're most concerned about is that you don't just think about filling up in uncovered niches. It must also be borne in mind that direct press support for some selected titles can have a competitive effect. It's not a good thing in the long run. (Interview with authors, 2021)

The field consensus appears strong enough to thwart policy changes it does not support. Still, a unified performance is not necessarily enough to establish new privileges for the press. A committee was appointed by the government in 2015 and mandated to analyse the situation in the news media and propose measures. Seven of nine committee members worked in press or television. The committee drew up a rather dramatic crisis scenario for the news media and unanimously backed four proposals for a new support scheme. Of these, the most offensive was to remove employers' national insurance contributions (10.2%) temporarily for four years, and it was almost immediately shot down by politicians and not followed up on when the government presented a white paper the following year. The committee chairman, Knut Olav Åmås, stated:

The more we worked with the press support scheme, the more excited many of us became about what we saw – that in fact in these decades it has helped create a rich newspaper flora and media diversity in newspaper Norway. So that's why the conclusion we were left with, which was so disappointing for H [the Conservative Party] and FRP [the Progress Party], was that the press support is a success. It must continue in a modernised form. The modernisation we proposed was then to set the ceiling for the

largest beneficiaries, phased down to a maximum level over four years. This would go hand in hand with a general exemption from employer's national insurance contributions, which then had no impact. We probably had no idea there wasn't much realism in it, but we wanted to try. [...] In sum, we wanted to increase press support, but with a redistribution we believed would strengthen the legitimacy of the schemes. (Interview with authors, 2021)

In the white paper, the evolving interest in the field manifested itself in a proposition to establish an independent media support council that would determine the distribution of media support. The industry itself should *not* be represented (Norwegian Government, 2019). This proposal met fierce, unified opposition from the field, and the government later withdrew the proposal: "The input from several of the media actors themselves, the media field, media researchers and the interest organizations have been that this is something they do not want and something they believe is not necessary. We have chosen to listen to that", said liberal culture minister Abid Raja as he conceded (Aarli-Grøndalen, 2020).

This demonstrates that the unified news media field remains strong enough to prevent dramatic changes to regulation and support schemes, but they are not necessarily strong enough to establish new schemes, even in a situation with broad support for understanding the crisis. The consensual relations, both between the state and the industry and the intra-industry relations in the news media field, are still in function.

The literary field, 2010–2022

As discussed previously, the actors in the literary field solved their largest conflicts and reached a settlement in the early 2000s. A new standard agreement between the authors and the publishers was in place, while the non-fiction literature was incorporated into the purchasing scheme. Because of the newly won unity, most parts of the literary field took part in the defence of the purchasing scheme towards perceived threats around 2006. The Book Treaty also stood firm, and by the end of their reign, the Labour Party had even proposed replacing it with a new Book Act. In 2013, the Labour-led government was replaced by a Conservative-led government, which, in changing government constellations, would remain in power the following eight years. One could imagine that this would pave the way for neoliberal reforms in the book industry as well as in literary policy.

The change of government had two immediate consequences. The process of establishing a Book Act was stopped, and the budget to book a purchasing scheme was reduced by 10 million Norwegian kroner (approx. 876,000 euro). However, the governing parties did not make any important changes to the existing Book Treaty. Further, the budget cut represented less than 4

per cent of the total literature budget and was by no means dramatic. Several informants described it as a symbolic act, more than a change in the literary policy. One major reason for the small changes was that the parliamentary basis for the conservative-led government, which included the Christian Democrats and the Liberal Party, did not allow for fundamental changes to the cultural policy.

Instead, the strongest attack on the Book Treaty came from the anti-trust-oriented Norwegian Competition Authority. Its main argument was and still is that the system of fixed prices on new books reduces the competition in the book market. In 2020, the Norwegian Competition Authority warned that it was considering imposing fines totalling 502 million Norwegian kroner (approx. 44 million euro) on four major publishers and the open book database company, Bokbasen, for having shared information about future book prices and the timing of book releases. This move could be interpreted as part of a major shift in the governance of literary policy.

In 2018, the government coalition was expanded to include the Liberal Party. The newcomer was awarded three state secretaries, including the Ministry of Culture, which was occupied by the party leader Trine Skei Grande. In an interview with Grande on 8 June 2021, she largely downplayed the significance of the Competition Authority move:

The Norwegian Competition Authority has been opposed to the Book Treaty since it was established. If you look at the history, one of the first things they attacked was the Book Treaty. Some believe that the Competition Authority was only established because of the Book Treaty. But they have always lost. I've participated in these recent negotiations. There's nothing that suggests they're about to win.

The secretary of culture also denied that any significant liberalisation of the literary policy had occurred during the period with a conservative-led government:

No, I don't see any sign of that. I think the Competition Authority thinks what they have always thought about this, but in vain. I have personally given the new minister of trade and industry [the outspoken conservative and experienced politician Torbjørn Røe Isaksen] a basic course in the Book Treaty. We drafted the proposals for a new Book Treaty together, with Torbjørn Røe Isaksen as minister of trade and industry and me as minister of culture, which we have sent to the stakeholders for consultation. I do not think this proposal represents changes in the logic of the literary policy. If you look at the consultation draft, both ministers have signed it. And we did it while the [populist] Progress Party was a part of the government.

Grande's description in this statement is supported by other sources.

In October 2021, the conservative-led government had to hand over government power to a new Labour Party-led government. In 2022, the new secretary of culture, representing the Labour Party, resumed work on replacing the current Book Treaty with a Book Act. Thus, we find that the policy towards, and regulation of, the book industry and other parts of the literary policy have changed little during this period.

On the other hand, another long-term trend in the Norwegian public administration – a stronger element of classical Weberian governance based on legal principles (Østerud et al., 2003) – has had some impact. In the field of literature, the changes occurred in small but steady footsteps. Since the 1990s, Arts Council Norway has evolved from being a council, deeply embedded in the field of art, to conducting typical administrative tasks on behalf of the government (Mangset & Hylland, 2017: 223). In the long term, this has given Arts Council Norway a character of being a cultural directorate (Fidjestøl, 2015). One informant with knowledge of the process describes the development as follows:

No one referred to the Arts Council Norway as a directorate 15 years ago, or even used the term directorate. Then someone started using the term directorate with “quote signs”, then more and more did it, and also without “quote signs”. Today we refer to ourselves as a directorate in writing as well as in daily speech.

There is more than semantics to this change. The distribution of support for literature (and other arts) has historically been made by stakeholder-appointed committees consisting of authors, publishers, and other field actors, who use artistic judgement of quality as their main assessment criterion. This model conflicts with a Weberian management logic that emphasises impartiality in member appointments and transparency in the form of criteria-based allocations. In 2015, several changes were made to the procurement schemes that reflect this logic. Most importantly, three criteria for literary quality were formulated while the literary organisations lost their right to appoint the members of the literary committees. In addition, members of the Publishers Association lost some of their previously held privileges compared with non-members.

The new management logic also improved the conditions for a new player in the book industry. In 2018, the Guild in the form of the Norwegian Writers' Association faced competition from the Norwegian Writers' Union. While the Writers' Association considers itself as a custodian of Norwegian literary quality, the Writers' Union works to improve the working conditions of all authors. Supported by the legal logic, the new trade union was able to get a substantial share of the state library compensation funds at the expense of the other literary organisations.

While the literary policy changed little during the period of conservative government, there were significant changes in the relations between the actors

in the field of literature. An important driving force was digitalisation, which provided a new product in the form of the e-book, with a large but far from realised commercial potential.

More importantly, digitalisation has provided the possibility of streaming audiobooks. The result is that a product, until recently only sold on CDs, gained a big boost. Streaming e-audiobooks is a market with strong growth, and it creates friction between the incumbent publishers Aschehoug, Gyldendal, and Cappelen Damm and many of the other actors in the field.

Aschehoug and Gyldendal owns the Norwegian streaming services Fabel, while Cappelen Damm owns the competitor Storytel. The competitive relationship between the two platforms represents one line of conflict. In addition, a conflict of interest has developed between the platform owners and the public libraries, which are prevented from buying many of the titles for library streaming. The conflict between publishers and public libraries has not yet been resolved.

In addition, there is a conflict between the platform owners and the other challenger publishers about the remuneration for streaming their literature. A similar conflict has developed between the authors and the publishers concerning the immaterial rights to digital publishing. The conflict among the platform owners, and between the platform owners and the other publishers, has resulted in many titles not being offered for streaming (Bjerke et al., 2022: 194).

The relationship between the platform owners and the authors is not sufficiently regulated in the standard contracts negotiated between the Norwegian Publisher Association and the Norwegian Writers' Association. This contractual grey area has resulted in episodes in which authors feel that they are being pressured by the publishers. Thus, authors are reluctant to enter into agreements with the publishers concerning the digital, immaterial rights to their books.

The transactional challenges coincide with a general tendency towards weakened relations between publishers and some authors. It has manifested itself in opportunistic behaviour from both sides. In some cases, publishers have paid authors a lesser part of the book sales than the contracts dictate, while a group of authors recently reclaimed their commercial rights to stream their older titles, on the grounds that the signed standard contracts oblige the publishers to release the book on [the obsolete] CD format.

In addition, new publishers are entering the book market with a predatory competitive mood. Some of them have recruited highly successful authors from incumbent publishers. Some of the most successful, such as the undisputed Norwegian bestseller Jørn Lier Horst, have even been rewarded for the “transfer” with ownership shares in their new publisher.

Even if the literary policy was remarkably stable during the conservative-led reign, the literary field is now facing a new episode of contention. There

are ongoing conflicts between the incumbent publishers and several other stakeholders in the field. Arguably, the field institution is far more contested today than it was during the last episode of contention around the turn of the millennium.

Discussion

The review above clearly demonstrates important similarities between the public support schemes for news media and literature, respectively. They were both introduced at approximately the same time, a time when democratic corporatist solutions were widespread and both fields were organised in close cooperation between the state and stakeholders in the field. News media and literature were both part of what Syvertsen and colleagues (2014) has called the Nordic media welfare state.

More than fifty years later, the most important parts of this system are still intact. Thus, the current situation in Norway differs from Jakobsson and colleagues' (2021) findings from Sweden: that the "consensual relation" between media companies and the state no longer characterises the media market. In Norway, the relations between the state and the companies seems relatively stable and predominantly supportive. On the other hand, intra industry tensions are rising, especially in the field of literature.

Both industries have VAT exemptions, the literature purchasing system exists with the same basic features proposed back in 1959, and it has also been expanded to new literary genres. The production subsidies for news media are still in function with the same purpose: to promote a varied press structure with the same basic structure. The scheme is adapted to digitalisation, and the emphasis of the political *rationale* has shifted from ideological diversity to geographical diversity. Eight years with bourgeois majority in the national parliament and various centre-right-wing governing coalitions have only led to marginal changes. Both fields have been able to comply with external proposals. The fields' incumbents and organisations still have a strong influence on the design and practice of the scheme, even though modern management logics with requirements for transparency and equal treatment are emerging. The incumbents in both fields have managed to defend privileges but to a lesser extent expand them.

Digitalisation has hit both industries with some disruptive consequences and allowed for the entrance of newcomers. In both fields, this poses a threat to the incumbents as well as the fields' stability. The two fields have responded very differently to the challenge. The established actors in the news media have closed ranks and managed to protect their privileges from outsiders and unwanted initiatives from the field of politics. The actors in the field of literature, on the other hand, face internal struggles that leave the field more vulnerable to newcomers and unwanted policy changes.

Our data demonstrate that the intra-field relations play an important role in creating these differences. While consensual relations remain intact in the field of news media, we find emerging cracks in the relational foundations of the literary field.

One important reason is that the book purchasing scheme has from the beginning favoured some types of literature (fiction) at the expense of others. In this aspect, the book purchasing scheme has some similarities with the Swedish system of redistribution, in which some newspapers were burdened with higher taxation (Jakobsson et al., 2021). Thus, both support schemes contain a manifest intra-industry conflict of interest.

Most importantly, the news field is more homogeneous and strongly institutionalised than the literature. This social order makes it easier to maintain intra-field consensual relations. The news media field is ideologically and culturally dominated by a strong journalistic profession with several unifying conceptions of control. The profession has two important professional organisations, Norsk Journalistlag [Norwegian Union of Journalists] and Norsk Redaktørforening [Association of Norwegian Editors]. Both organise close to 100 per cent of the country's journalists and editors. The Norwegian Union of Journalists is also part of the heavily instituted Norwegian system for industrial relations. The counterpart is Mediebedriftenes Landsforening [The National Association of Media Companies], which is a member of the joint Norwegian employers' organisation, and the relationship between the parties is regulated by a 100-year-old agreement, which in turn is part of the stately regulation of industrial relations through the Labour Disputes Act. Among other things, the act calls for a *duty of peace* except for annual wage negotiations, which are in turn overseen by a state-run national mediator. These relations are consequently part of a "governmental structure". Professional questions are left to the professional organisations and policy issues to the industry; the employer organisation is almost always completely aligned with editors and journalists. Typically, the National Association of Media Companies and the Association of Norwegian Editors have submitted almost identical consultation responses to the Government's proposal for changes to press support in 2022. Their responses were to a significant extent incorporated in the new support scheme.

According to a new Law of Press Support, the parliament in late 2022 also accepted a four-year stability plan for media regulations.

In the field of literature, the situation is quite different. The relationship between the literates and the publishers are not an ordinary worker-employer relation governed by the Labour Disputes Act. The authors are in principle self-employed individuals who enter into a trade agreement with the publishers. The negotiations between the Writers' Association and the Publishers' Association are conducted within an exception from competition legislation. This literary field is therefore more dependent on stable "consensual relations".

But this is made more difficult by the fact that field of literature is fragmented. It has far more organisations than the news media field: The Norwegian Association of Writers, The (new) Authors' Association, The Publishers Association, The Norwegian Translators' Association, the Norwegian Non-Fiction Writers and Translators Association, the Norwegian Association Translators, and two organisations for visual literates. Every one of these sub-fields has a different subculture; there is a great distance between the art dominate logic of the Writers' Association and the journalist-dominant logic of the non-fiction field (Halvorsen et al., 2020). Streamed audiobooks bring in a new art element (the actual reading of the text), a new genre, and a completely new kind of distribution. A less institutionalised field with many, partly competing organisations with different valuation hierarchies was subjected to a "shock" of digitalisation, and it seems obvious that the "conceptions of control" (Fligstein 2001: 32) have so far been too blurred and weak to make the field capable of resolving the issue.

A tentative conclusion is that the press support system will survive, while tensions in the more heterogenous and less organised field of literature pose a threat to the Norwegian literary welfare state.

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Iceland's media policy and the Nordic media welfare model

A fragile support and uncertain future

BIRGIR GUÐMUNDSSON^I & VALGERÐUR JÓHANNSDÓTTIR^{II}

^I FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES, UNIVERSITY OF AKUREYRI, ICELAND

^{II} FACULTY OF POLITICAL SCIENCE, UNIVERSITY OF ICELAND, ICELAND

ABSTRACT

The Icelandic media system shares many characteristics with the media systems of other Nordic countries. In a Nordic comparison, however, the state has until very recently been less active in the media market, and the consensual characteristic of the Nordic media welfare state model has been largely absent. The media market in Iceland has been in turmoil for over a decade, and most news media companies have been run at a loss or with meagre returns for years. This has led to a fundamental but hotly debated shift in media policy, introducing press subsidies for the first time. It has thus been argued that in Iceland, a market libertarian approach to media policy has been challenged by the Nordic media welfare state model. Findings from an analysis of the legislative debate about the media policy change indicate that support for a Nordic media welfare state model is unstable in Icelandic politics, thus its future is uncertain.

KEYWORDS: Iceland, media system, media policy, media support, democracy

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Introduction

In May 2021, the Icelandic minister of education and culture introduced in the parliament a bill which constituted a major change in the country's media policy. The bill proposed public support for private news media and signalled a much greater state involvement in the media market. Previously, support had been limited to public service media while private media, it was thought, were best “left to themselves” (Karlsson, 2004: 228). The proposed change was highly controversial, not least within the government itself, and it was not until the third attempt that the minister succeeded and the bill was passed. However, in the parliamentary process, a two-year sunset clause was added (Parliament of Iceland, 2021). At the end of the parliamentary session in early 2023, the support scheme was prolonged for another two years, underlining the lack of consensus for a permanent support system for the media, most notably within the government itself.

The media industry, not least the Journalist Union (Auðunsdóttir, 2021), has been pressing the government to address the “crisis situation” that the industry is facing in a globalised, digitalised, and platformised media world. The Icelandic media market has been in turmoil for over a decade: Mergers, takeovers, and bankruptcies have been frequent, and most of the news media companies have been run at a loss or with very meagre returns for several years (Jóhannsdóttir et al., 2021).

In this chapter, we aim to look particularly at the impact that changes in the Icelandic media market have on media policy. We look at the expression of an apparent policy shift towards a Nordic media welfare system that is being fought out within the sitting governing coalition (and the previous one). To do this, we analyse the parliamentary discourse, and the research question guiding our endeavour is the following:

- RQ. How is a shift from an essentially libertarian-market “not so Nordic” media policy to a Nordic media welfare policy reflected in parliamentary discussion?

A “not so Nordic” media system

Jakobsson, Lindell, and Stiernstedt note in their Introduction to this volume that the media system in Iceland stands out in a Nordic comparison in many respects. Iceland was not a part of Hallin and Mancini's (2004) or Brüggeman's (2014) studies, and Icelandic scholars have argued that the country's media system is better described as a hybrid or mixed case in relation to these models and Syvertsen's and colleagues' concept of a media welfare state (Ólafsson & Jóhannsdóttir 2021; Guðmundsson, 2015, 2018, 2021b; Jóhannsdóttir, 2019).

The state has, until very recently, been far less active in the media market in Iceland than in the other Nordic countries (Ohlsson, 2015), and the

consensual practice characteristic of the Nordic media welfare state model (Syvertsen et al., 2014) has, for all intents and purposes, been absent in the Icelandic system (Guðmundsson, 2018). There are also indications that political parallelism and instrumentalisation are stronger, and the level of journalistic professionalism lower (Ahva et al., 2016; Guðmundsson, 2013, 2021a; Jóhannsdóttir, 2019; Karlsson & Broddason, 2018). Ohlsson (2015: 16) posits that state funded subsidies were introduced by “parties eager to secure the survival of aligned newspapers”. Political parties in Iceland had no less a hold on the media than did their Nordic counterparts, but the dominant position of the Independence Party might have lessened the interest in press subsidies because newspapers with ties to the party were the most read and financially strongest (Jóhannsdóttir, 2019; Karlsson, 2004). *Morgunblaðið*, for example, which was informally affiliated with the Independence Party for most of the twentieth century, overshadowed the market and did not need subsidies to survive. The centre and left-wing papers, on other hand, struggled from the start and were dependent on their parties for survival. They “never managed to be as successful among readers as their parties were among voters” (Hardarson, 2008: 79). It has been argued that the historical proximity of these media–political relations has carried over into the present media system, or at least so it is perceived (Guðmundsson, 2021a). Measurements of perceptions among politicians both at a local and national level, as well as perceptions of voters, show a high degree of perceived political parallelism. Politicians and voters to the right perceive certain media outlets as leaning towards the left, neutral, or with no political leanings. At the same time, politicians and voters to the left are of a completely reverse opinion about the same outlets. A continuation of older trends can be detected in that those media that politicians and voters of the right wing consider neutral and without political leanings are typically the bigger ones that have not – until recently – been in grave need of financial support. An important exception is the public service media organisation RÚV, which is more favoured by the left as neutral and without political leanings than by the right (Guðmundsson, 2013, 2021b).

Ohlsson (2015) also noted that, in the other Nordic countries, there were concerns over local monopolies, and press subsidies were aimed at ensuring the voice of so-called second newspaper, to prevent the monopoly of one paper. In Iceland’s weak local media market, that was never a realistic option (Guðmundsson, 2004; Hardarson, 2008). The state monopoly of broadcasting was abolished in 1986, and commercial broadcasters have not been subject to extensive regulation, as have their Nordic counterparts (Ohlsson, 2015). Apart from running a public broadcasting media, Icelandic governments have, for the most part, considered the role of state concerning the media as one of ensuring free competition in the field (Karlsson, 2004). As a result, private media in Iceland has been one of the least regulated in Europe. It has not been burdened with public-service obligations regarding programme content and

has enjoyed more liberal regulations concerning ownership compared with most West European countries, although amendments to the 2011 Media Law have sought to introduce some framework for ownership limits (Parliament of Iceland, 2013, 2021).

Times of change

In the years that have passed since Iceland experienced the financial melt-down in 2008, dramatic changes have occurred in both media and politics in Iceland. After the banking system crumbled, an unprecedented social unrest followed, and the so-called pots and pans revolution signified turbulence that has ever since deeply affected social and political relations in the country (Önnudóttir, 2021). Parallel in time, social media increasingly gained ground and significantly impacted the media and political landscape. Political fragmentation, a shift in the control of the information flows in society, and other characteristics of a new media logic mixing with traditional media logic and forming a hybrid media system have thus characterised Icelandic media and politics (Chadwick, 2017; Guðmundsson, 2019, 2021a; Jóhannsdóttir, 2019). The combined response to the crisis and the changed media logic can be seen as manifestations of the worldwide international trends of technological innovation and (neoliberalistic) commercialisation in a small economy.

Pickard (2020) has posited that the discourse about media policy in the US is constrained by libertarian assumptions, and we argue that the same has applied to a large extent in Iceland. Iceland shares many of the characteristics associated with the Nordic media welfare state (see the Introduction to this volume), but there has been a long-standing consensus across the political spectrum for a market libertarian approach towards private media in Iceland (Karlsson, 2004). This consensus has been challenged by recent changes in the political and media environment: the poor financial performance of most media companies caused by a decline in subscriptions and advertising revenue; an apparent widely accepted deterioration of working conditions for journalists working in private media and the commercialisation of content, particularly in online media (Jóhannsdóttir, 2020; Guðmundsson, 2015); the impact on journalistic professionalism (Guðmundsson & Kristinsson, 2019); and finally, a powershift away from political and media elites towards ad hoc loosely organised groups of the public that accompany the emergence of a hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2017). We now briefly address these factors and link them to a faltering political consensus towards the “hands off” approach to the media system.

A losing game

The Icelandic media landscape can be said to be dominated by a few relatively large media companies. In the print media, only one daily newspaper has a

national distribution, after the publishing company Torg went bankrupt in April 2023 (Daðason, 2023). Torg ran a few online sites, a television channel, and *Fréttablaðið*, a free door-to-door paper, which was the most read newspaper in the country. In this bankruptcy, almost 50 journalists lost their jobs, or close to 10 per cent of working journalists in the country (Grettisson, 2023). The only surviving newspaper, *Morgunblaðið*, is a subscription paper published by *Árvakur*, which also runs an online news site and a radio channel. In broadcasting, the public service media, RÚV, dominates the scene. However, an amalgamation of broadcasting and telecommunication currently characterises the private media sector, with two companies being the most prominent. The former national telecom company, Síminn, is an important player, primarily in broadcasting and streaming services of entertainment and sports. Another private telecom company, Sýn, is also a major player in broadcasting and runs the only private television channel with a news desk, as well as one of the country's most popular news sites, *visir.is*. The other most read news site, *mbl.is*, is run by *Árvakur*. Other players on the media market are much smaller, although some small web-based news sites, run primarily by journalists, are also influential in social, political, and economic discourse.

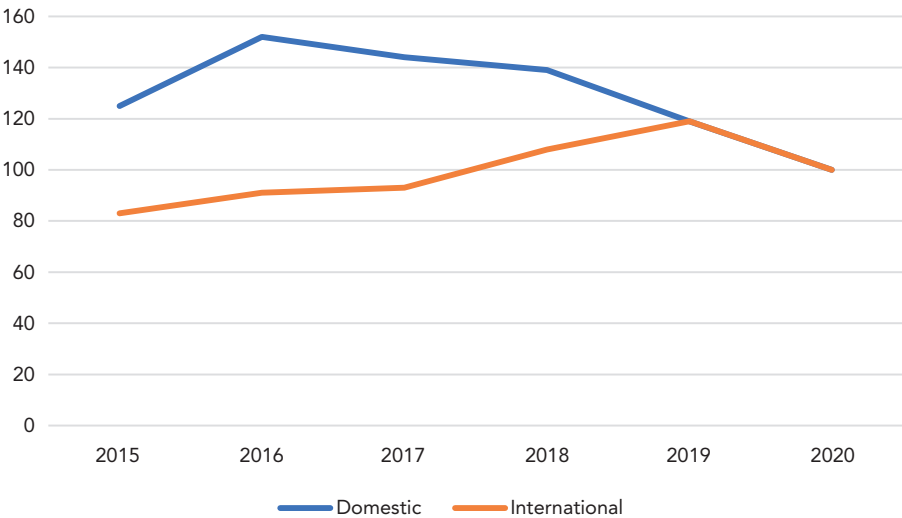
All the major news media organisations have been losing money in the face of shrinking advertising revenues and declining subscriptions. The financial situation of *Árvakur*, the publisher of *Morgunblaðið*, has been difficult. After the financial meltdown in Iceland, new owners took over the company in early 2009, and although there have been some changes in the composition of the group of owners, they have all had significant connections to the fishing industry, and have several times contributed new capital to meet losses – about 2.5 billion Icelandic krónur (approx. 16.9 million euro) since 2009 (Júlíusson, 2022). The operation of *Árvakur* was still in the red in 2021, but linked companies, in particular the printshop, Landsprent, have produced positive returns, yielding an overall plus for the conglomerate as a whole. In 2019 and 2020, however, *Árvakur* lost 210 million and 245 million Icelandic krónur (approx. 1.4 million and 1.7 million euro), respectively (Morgunblaðið, 2022; Júlíusson, 2022).

As mentioned above, the third major player on the news media market, Sýn, is both a traditional media company and a telecommunications company that has been dealing in telecommunication infrastructures and has placed emphasis on being a streaming service. In 2021, there was a big shift in operational results as the company delivered 2.1 billion Icelandic króna (approx. 14.2 million euro) profit, while there had been a loss in the two preceding two years. However, the main reason for this turnover was the selling of some of the company's infrastructures (Sýn, n.d.). Rationalisation and reorganisation have been high on the company's agenda, including the media part. In early 2021, Stöð 2 [Channel 2], the main television outlet of the company, became fully behind a paywall, and in early 2023, a business section of *visir.is* followed suit.

Declining advertising revenues

Advertising revenue of the Icelandic media has been decreasing for some years at the same time as competition for advertisements has grown more intense. Ohlsson and Facht noted in 2017 that foreign advertising platforms appeared to have a more limited influence in Iceland than in the other Nordic countries. However, foreign advertising has clearly picked up its pace, as shown in Figure 7.1. The latest statistics available (Statistics Iceland, 2022) clearly highlight an unfavourable trend for the domestic media, as an ever-increasing share of the total amount spent on advertising in Iceland goes to foreign companies – the lion’s share to Facebook and Google. In total, Statistics Iceland estimates that about 40 per cent of all advertising money spent in Iceland goes to foreign companies. That is lower than in the other Nordic countries, according to Ohlson and Facht’s (2017) analysis. There was a small decrease in the total ad revenue between 2019 and 2020, which can be attributed to the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Figure 7.1 Advertising revenue index of all domestic and international media



SOURCE: Adopted from Statistics Iceland, 2022

Diminishing advertising revenues in domestic media have not been countered by increased user-based revenue, although those revenues have increased somewhat. This decline in income has hit different media types disproportionately, the printed press being hit the hardest while other media platforms, such as television and online services, have fared better. This can be explained with a change in patterns of media use, where the readership of newspapers has been declining dramatically. *Fréttablaðið*, which was founded in 2001,

entertained a readership of around 65 per cent among the general population at its peak in February 2007, but it fell to 28 per cent in December 2022. Comparable numbers for *Morgunblaðið* were 43.6 per cent in February 2007 and 17.8 per cent in September 2022. *Morgunblaðið* appears to have gained some ground among readers after *Fréttablaðið* ceased publication, and it was read by 22.5 per cent of the general population in August 2023 (Gallup, n.d.). All in all, since 2015, the total income of domestic media has diminished by 4 per cent (Statistics Iceland, 2022).

A small media system and RÚV

This development should be considered in the context of the small size of the Icelandic media system. In the scholarly discussion of small media systems, there are variations in definitions and emphasis, but there are also common threads. Among those are limited resources when it comes to a skilled workforce, the possibility of advertising revenues, and a vulnerability in relation to globalisation and commercialisation (Puppis et al., 2009; Ólafsson, 2020). These are indeed elements that are strongly at play in Iceland. The limited and shrinking amount of advertising in general greatly enhances competition for what revenue there is. Thus, in the absence of large-scale support for private media, commercial concerns and competition between companies has become intense. This commercial and competitive environment is then enhanced by the competition from the public service broadcaster, RÚV, which competes with private media not only for audiences, with 5.3 billion Icelandic krónur (approx. 36 million euro) in public funding, according to the budgetary plans for 2023 (Parliament of Iceland, 2022), but also in the advertising market, receiving some 17 per cent of domestic advertising revenues in 2020 (Statistics Iceland, 2022).

Impact on journalists

This competitive and commercialised condition has had its effect on media professionals and indeed media content. Pressures and awareness among journalists about the operational conditions of media companies have been increasing, both in terms of journalists' awareness of commercial interests and competition. Moreover, the interests of the companies they work for are now felt to a greater extent, according to Worlds of Journalism Studies conducted in 2012 and 2021 (Jóhannsdóttir, 2022). Not surprisingly, these pressures are felt more intensely in the private sector compared with public service media RÚV. This is demonstrated by the fact that, in the 2021 Worlds of Journalism Studies survey, some 84 per cent of RÚV's journalists wanted to be in journalism in five years' time, while this was true for only 66 per cent of journalists in private media. Similarly, 27 per cent of RÚV's journalists feared they might lose their job in the next year, compared with 32 per

cent of other journalists (Jóhannsdóttir & Ólafsson, 2022). In their analysis of journalistic professionalism in Iceland, Guðmundsson and Kristinsson (2019) suggested that there is an attempt by the Journalistic Union to push for more traditional occupational professionalism, while the media organisations have assumed the power to define formal journalistic principles to fit their own interests. Their conclusion was that in Iceland, “occupational professionalism is in defence and organizational elements grow stronger – partly because of special Icelandic conditions and partly because of the global forces of commercialization and technological change” (Guðmundsson & Kristinsson, 2019: 1700).

Shift of agenda-setting power

Furthermore, it can be argued that the commercial pressures have influenced the editorial content in the media with a higher proportion of soft news and human-interest stories, particularly on the online news sites (Jóhannsdóttir, 2020). This is partly due to classical click-bait tactics and partly because this type of content is more likely to make motion on social media. Reaction on social media has not only become an important element both for direct commercial and advertising purposes, but also for journalistic news values in determining the type of content there is demand for (Guðmundsson, 2015). Here, an example of the shift in power structures that Chadwick (2017) points out as part of the hybrid media system manifests itself, since important parts of the agenda powers of journalists (and politicians) is transferred to loosely organised groups on social media, typically reacting to issues that stir up emotions or are of an ethical nature. In addition, the group polarisations generally associated with digitalisation (Sunstein, 2017) have been seen to have impacted polarisation and fragmentation in the Icelandic party system since the 2013 elections (Guðmundsson, 2021a, 2013; Hardarson, 2016). The shift in agenda power and the plurality of political parties inevitably change the media–political relations, eventually paving the way for new initiatives in media policy. Indeed, Guðmundsson (2021a: 49) has argued that the logics of hybrid media impacted Icelandic political fragmentation:

It would be too much to suggest that new central cleavages have emerged as a result of the advent of new and changed media logics, but the new logic can be seen to have, in combination with other social, political and economic factors, highlighted and brought forward cleavages and unresolved issues that have been underlying in the political system at least since the 2009 parliamentary elections onward.

Fragmentation of the party system

There has emerged a transformed party system in Iceland since the 2013 elections, as the number of parties standing has been unusually high compared

with prior periods. Before 2013, the four main parties of the political system had received most of the popular vote, over 90 per cent in all elections from 1999 to 2009. However, in 2013, the voting share of the old four parties fell to 70 per cent, and even to a little over 60 per cent in 2016, 2017, and 2021 (Statistics Iceland, n.d.). Because of this fragmentation, and several political scandals that became viral through an interaction between social media and legacy media, which forced themselves on the political agenda by way of what Chadwick (2017) described as “news assemblages” (see also Guðmundsson, 2021a), political instability shook politics. This is, for example, expressed in the downfall of two government coalitions that brought on early elections in 2016 and 2017. In the name of political stability – among other things – a coalition was formed across the political spectrum with three of the four old parties joining forces: the Left–Green movement, the centrist Progressive Party, and the moderate-right Independence Party. It is this ideologically diverse coalition, which managed to renew its mandate in the 2021 election (Hardarson & Kristinsson, 2022), that placed a transformation of media policy on the agenda. Other parties in the Althingi (the Icelandic parliament) are the Centre Party, the Pirate Party (an unconventional centre-left alternative), the People’s Party (a semi-populist party with a diffuse left–right profile), the Reform Party (a centre-right liberal Euro-friendly alternative), and the Social Democratic Alliance (Helgason et al., 2021).¹

Thus, a variety of factors contribute to an attempt to bring about a major change in media policy in Iceland. Changes in the economic models of legacy media and operational difficulties, coupled with intense commercialisation and competition, a small and shrinking advertising market, foreign tech giants, perceived deterioration of quality and professionalism, and last but not least different relations and perceptions between media and politics, all contribute to a political situation where, after decades of disinterest, some high-level Icelandic politicians are seeking to adopt a Nordic-style media policy.

Methodology

To answer our research question, we conducted a qualitative document analysis (QDA) of the parliamentary debate about the new media policy during two sessions in the Icelandic parliament in 2019–2021. In this chapter, we set out to analyse the discourse with a focus on what is explicitly or implicitly represented as the problem the new policy is meant to solve, the main threads, the conflict, and what is considered unproblematic or not addressed.

The documents analysed are transcripts of the debate in parliament about two government bills proposing public support for private media: 58 speeches and 129 short back-and-forth exchanges between members of parliament (MPs). As the legislative debate is in Icelandic, the quotes that are presented in the findings have been translated to English; they are referenced with “Althingi” to distinguish this empirical material from supporting sources.

The list of cited empirical material, all accessible on the parliament's website, can be found after the reference list. The documents were imported into the MAXQDA software, which enabled us to conduct both a quantitative and qualitative analysis. The documents were first skimmed (open coding) and then thoroughly examined, and general patterns, themes, conflicts, and silences were identified and coded (targeted coding). The reading was informed by the research question and theory, and we coded, for example, what was considered the problem, what was said to be the cause of it, and its solution. We also looked for mentions of the role of the media, media ownership, the arm's length principle, journalistic professionalism, and the effects of technological changes and development. MAXQDA enabled us to analyse the discussion by the MPs' party affiliation and their positions as government or opposition MPs.

Findings

In this section, we present the five main themes found in the analyses of the discourse in the Althingi about the proposed media policy. The five themes are as follows:

1. The media's democratic importance
2. The media's financial hardship
3. The private media's competitive position in the media market, which had two subthemes:
 - a. Global competition
 - b. The public service media
4. A party-political rift that cuts across the government coalition ranks
5. Silence or issues left unaddressed

A pillar of democracy

The media's importance for democracy emerged as a baseline in the debate. It was not discussed at any length or depth yet was never questioned. The minister (of the centrist Progressive Party) initiating the policy proposal said the aim was to make the media more capable of fulfilling its role in a democratic society:

The media not only reports on affairs of the day, but they are important for the exchange of views about societal matters. They contribute to an open and informed debate, which is very important for decision-making. (Althingi, 2020)

Other MPs concurred. An MP from the opposition (Reform Party) said the media's role was "clear to us all" and of fundamental importance for democracy (Althingi, 2021a). Another opposition MP (Social Democratic Alliance)

referred to the media as “one of the pillars of democracy” (Althingi, 2021b). A government MP from the Left–Green movement stated that democracy itself was “under threat” with the weakening of media capable of informing and analysing the societal debate (Althingi, 2019a). The democratic importance of local media was also emphasised by a few MPs, notably by those from rural constituencies.

Something must be done

Another baseline that emerged from the analysis was the consensus on the financial hardship of the private media. An MP from the Independence Party said the business of private media companies was in the worst shape it had been in for decades:

[The] mainstream news media as we know it, and there are not many privately owned left, maybe three that amount to something, they are all run at a huge loss, more loss than we have seen in a long time, for years. (Althingi, 2021c)

Another MP from the Left–Green movement stated public support “was a matter of life and death for many private media companies” and added that something had to be done as soon as possible (Althingi, 2021d). An MP from the opposition (Social Democratic Alliance) said that the business model of most private media, at least the smaller local ones, seemed to have collapsed (Althingi, 2019b). There emerged a broad political consensus that the situation required action, but that consensus collapsed when it came to discussing what kind of measures were best suited.

Unfair global competition and the elephant in the room

MPs across the floor largely agreed that the cause of the Icelandic media’s financial troubles was unfair competitive position in the media market. The main reason or cause of this unfair position, however, was much disputed.

In her introductory speech, the minister (of the Progressive Party) explained the private media’s grave situation by referring, on one hand, to the “ever bigger share of advertising revenue going to foreign companies and on the other hand the great supply of free content” (Althingi, 2019c). Other MPs did not dispute the effects of global competitors. An MP from the Independence Party said the competitive position of private media companies in Iceland was distorted by foreign companies, that “do not pay any taxes and have no obligations” (Althingi, 2021e), and another Independence Party MP said the foreign companies were not only vacuuming up the advertising revenue, “but also the editorial content from the private media companies” (Althingi, 2021f).

Most of the MPs that participated in the debate, however, appeared to regard the public service media organisation, RÚV, as the main or at least a major cause of the private media's problems. It was the single most dominant theme found in the analysis. A simple word exploration, for example, revealed that RÚV was mentioned 439 times (compared with democracy, mentioned 104 times) in 187 speeches analysed. As expected, the most controversial issue was also the most discussed – and those opposing the proposed media policy were more active in the debate than those supporting it. Throughout the debate, RÚV was often referred to as “the elephant in the room”, as it was not a part of the government's new media policy proposal. An MP from the Independence Party said this was the bill's main flaw, and that it was “completely irrational and even futile to discuss the financial situation of private media without taking the public service media into account” (Althingi, 2019d). A fellow MP from the Independence Party said this was “a laughing matter if it wasn't so utterly sad” (Althingi, 2021g). Yet another MP from the Independence Party said that private media didn't stand much of a chance against the “privileges the legislative, Althingi, has awarded a state-run company in the media market” (Althingi, 2021h). An opposition MP from the Centre Party said the phrase “the elephant in the room” had probably never been more appropriate than in this debate, with RÚV, publicly funded and dominant in the advertising market, being the most influential actor in the media market yet not mentioned in the bill (Althingi, 2021i).

Even MPs more supportive of RÚV's existence thought it was unavoidable to tackle its position in the media market before – or at least at the same time as – introducing public support for private media. An opposition MP from the Reform Party said she supported a good public service news media, but that did not mean that she accepted that the private media should suffer for it. Both aspects needed to be addressed at the same time “to heal the wounds in the media market [...], rather than putting a band-aid on it” (Althingi, 2021j).

Defending the bill was left mostly to the minister responsible and an MP from the Left–Green movement. Both emphasised that the new policy followed the example of the other Nordic countries, which had employed public support for private media for decades with good results. And they emphasised that public service media in the other Nordic countries was not on the advertising market, yet private media in those countries were also suffering from a loss of revenue due to global competitors. The Left–Green MP criticised his fellow MPs for talking endlessly about the public service media:

Why? This bill is not about RÚV. Stop making it all about RÚV. Face it, honourable members of parliament, the situation of private media is very serious, complicating things by debating a comprehensive review of RÚV [...] increases the danger of private media companies going under. (Althingi, 2019e)

The left–right cleavage

Another notable theme was the prominence of the traditional left–right (or state vs. market) ideological rift that was very apparent throughout the debate. It is, of course, not much of a surprise that there is party-political disagreement in the legislative chamber, but what is interesting in the discourse about the media policy change is that the disagreement is not reflected in the usual pattern of government versus the opposition. As noted above, the government at the time (and the present one) was an unusual coalition of ideologically heterogeneous parties, spanning the left–right spectrum (Helgason et al., 2021).

MPs across the floor agreed that it was necessary to find ways to tax global companies, but MPs right of centre also thought it unavoidable to restrict RÚV's presence in the media market (or remove it altogether), as it was the main or major cause of the private media's problems. MPs from parties right of centre also favoured levelling the playing field by lowering taxes and easing or removing some of the public service media's obligations and restrictions placed on the private media (e.g., the obligation in broadcasting to translate content into Icelandic and a ban on advertising alcohol). MPs left of centre, however, preferred the Scandinavian model of direct subsidies.

MPs right of centre were in general opposed to increased state involvement in the media market, and the ideological rift was also reflected in the discourse about media independence. An MP from the Independence Party said:

One wonders about the government's vision of the future of the media and the media system. Here, media we sometimes call independent media, are to be made dependent on the state. [...] that is not much of an independence in my view. (Althingi, 2021k)

Another Independence Party MP said the “so-called fourth estate should not have to come to the legislature each year for money” (Althingi, 2021l). MPs from the Independence Party described that as an “unhealthy” and “abnormal” relationship between state and media and asked how the media was supposed to fulfil its watchdog role, while at the same time “being fed by the state”. An opposition MP from the Centre Party agreed, using the familiar phrase “you don't bite the hand that feeds you” (Althingi, 2021m). MPs left of centre were, however, more concerned about wealthy people investing in private media to promote their own interests, of which there are many examples in the Icelandic media market. A left-wing opposition MP from the Social Democratic Alliance called for actions to tackle ownership concentration and said:

We have shocking examples of the fishing industry running an unsustainable media for its self-interest. More and more media companies are directly or indirectly owned by financial forces, private investors, or

big companies in their local area or nationally. That is also a dangerous development. (Althingi, 2021n)

The party-political clash and disagreement within the government coalition is also evident in the parliamentary processing of the policy proposal. The bill that was introduced in December 2019 (Parliament of Iceland, 2019–2020) did not pass the committee stage. Killing bills in a committee rather than in plenum is “the standard method” in the Icelandic parliament (Kristinsson, 2011: 234), but it is an unusual fate for government bills. The legislative agenda is, in practice, dominated by the cabinet, and it effectively controls which bills survive the committee stage (Helgason et al., 2021). The debate itself was also unusual in that MPs in government took to the floor more often than members of the opposition. A study by Helgason and colleagues (2021: 445), on speechmaking in 34 legislative sessions from 1991 to 2018, found that opposition MPs were “roughly twice as likely to take the floor as government MPs”. In this debate, however, two-thirds of the 60 speeches were by made by MPs in government. Party cohesion is strong in the Icelandic parliament, and Kristinsson’s (2011: 243) study indicates that it is “greater among parliamentary groups when they are in government than when in opposition” and strongest in the Independence Party. The most vocal MPs in this debate, however, were members the Independent Party: Six individuals from the 16-member strong Independence Party parliamentary group took the floor, but from the other two parties in the coalition only the minister (of the Progressive Party) sponsoring the bill and one from Left–Green movement took part in the debate.

The bill placed before the parliament in December 2021 (Parliament of Iceland, 2020–2021) went through the three required parliamentary readings and was passed in May 2021. MPs’ participation in the first reading indicates that the Independence Party leadership had managed to discipline its MPs. None of them took part, and it was left to the minister and the one MP from the Left–Green movement to fight the opposition in this first round. In the second and third reading of the bill, the participation by MPs in both government and opposition was more equal, but far from the pattern found in Helgason and colleagues’ study (2021), as 40 per cent of the speeches were delivered by MPs in government. Just as in the debate in the previous legislative session, the Independent Party’s MPs were the most vocal. The bill was passed with 34 votes for, 11 against, and 12 abstentions (see Table 7.1).

Table 7.1 Support for private media, by parliamentary groups

	Party	Yes	No	Abstention
Government	Independence Party	11	1	3
	Left–Green Movement	9	0	0
	Progressive Party	8	0	0
Opposition	Centre Party	0	9	0
	Pirate Party	0	0	5
	People’s Party	0	1	0
	Reform Party	0	0	4
	Social Democrats	6	0	0

COMMENTS: 6 absent MPs are not included in the table.

Table 7.1 shows that the voting did not altogether reflect the government majority but rather the left–right political composition of the Icelandic parliament. The government majority had agreed on some changes at the committee stage – the most notable one being the inclusion of a two-year sunset clause – and MPs from the Independence Party made it clear that otherwise they would not have approved the bill. One of them said that the sunset clause was foremost meant “to send a clear message that direct support from the state to private companies is not given, and it’s not permanent but a reaction to a certain interim situation” (Althingi, 2021o).

Silence and issues unaddressed

The impact of globalisation and digitalisation on the media market is foremost framed as a business problem, as foreign companies were said to deprive the domestic private media of advertising revenue and audiences. The only exception was a speech by an MP from the Pirate Party:

The big problem is how the distribution of information is controlled, which does not serve democratic debate, I assume, me and rh. 5. MP. of Reykjavík south,² do put likes and clicks on different parts of the Internet, and therefore get different information. The debate we should be involved in therefore never takes place. (Althingi, 2019f)

The effects or risks posed to democracy by information disorder or misinformation was only mentioned a few times in passing, but the quote above is the only example of concern over echo chambers. Questions or concerns about the possible impact of increasingly globalised and privatised infrastructures (see and Flensburg & Lai and Sjøvaag & Ferrer-Conill, Chapters 8 and 9, respectively) on the media market or the public sphere were never raised. Changes in audience behaviour were rarely addressed. Some MPs mentioned

that younger generations have abandoned the old platforms (print, television, radio), but no MP voiced concern over the possibility of media use becoming more polarised and unequal, like Jakobson and colleagues (2021) found to be the case in Sweden.

One opposition MP (Social Democrats) emphasised that journalism was a profession, and a calling: “[To] seek the truth and attest to the truth and report what the journalist knows to be true in every issue” (Althingi, 2021p). However, the effects of the changes in the media environment on journalists’ practice or professionalism was not discussed. Challenges brought on by technological developments, such as the use of automation or artificial intelligence, were never mentioned. It is also worth noting that when discussing the role of RÚV, it was foremost in relation to its importance for the Icelandic culture and language. The value of public service news media for democracy was hardly acknowledged.

Discussion

Public support for private media in Iceland marked a significant change in the country’s media policy. However, the way this shift is reflected in the political discussion in parliament reveals uneasy support for this important part of the Nordic media welfare state model. MPs across the political spectrum clearly consider the media an important pillar of democracy; it is not discussed in depth, but rather taken as something so obvious that there was no need to dwell on it. MPs also agree that private media in Iceland is in peril, and political intervention of some sort is necessary. Pickard (2020: 58) has argued that narratives about the media’s crisis often evolve around the future of news organisations and miss the big picture, that the crisis is “about the viability of public service journalism”. The parliamentary discussion frames the crisis foremost as a business problem. Private media is subject to an unfair competitive position, and the solution is to level the playing field. Thus, it can be argued that the political discourse about the media policy changes had a rather narrow focus. The effects of digital technology were discussed in the context of global companies disrupting the domestic media’s business model but hardly mentioned a “threat to the integrity of news and information system” (Pickard, 2020: 4), with one notable exception. The Icelandic news media companies are all very small in an international comparison, and as Lindberg (2022: 5) has noted, the digital logic favours big businesses with “sufficient financial resources to develop advanced digital technology”. Nevertheless, the importance of supporting innovation and development of digital products and solutions in the news media was only mentioned once, by an opposition MP.

There was no discussion about the challenge posed by the globalisation of the audience and advertising market and powerful global players like Google and Facebook, nor the state’s jurisdiction over the media market

(see Flensburg & Lai, Chapter 8). Further, no questions were raised about the possible impact of increasingly globalised and privatised infrastructures (see Sjøvaag & Ferrer-Conill, Chapter 9), even though selling the two biggest telecom companies' infrastructure was imminent at the time (and is now a matter of fact).

In a recent study of whether and how public media systems contribute to democracy, Neff and Pickard (2021; 19) concluded that “high levels of public media funding, coupled with strong regulatory protections for public media’s independence exist in a virtuous circle relationship to democratic health”. In the political discourse in the parliament, the impact of the public service media organisation RÚV on the media market was the most debated issue, but the value of public service news media for democracy was hardly mentioned, and the debate indicates that there is substantial support for reducing RÚV’s presence.

To some extent, this discussion echoes that which occurred in Norway about support for private media in the mid-1970s, as described by Halvorsen and Bjerke (Chapter 6). Here, stakeholders in the field perceived a crisis and turned to the state. As noted above, media policy in Iceland has been characterised by a market libertarian approach, and the fact that there is widespread political support for state intervention of some kind signals a change. One might ask whether that change is, at least to some extent, related to the fact that the difficulties have impacted large mainstream media companies. As pointed out above, traditionally, the media affiliated with the right wing was stronger in Iceland than the left leaning media (Hardarson, 2008; Karlsson, 2004). The right leaning media had the lion’s share of users; their size was their strength and therefore they did not need a support system, whereas the media on the left was much weaker (Hardarson, 2008). This heritage of the party-media system has survived into the present era, as the before-mentioned measurements of perceived political parallelism have shown (Guðmundsson, 2021b). Thus, a challenge to the very existence of private media is to a considerable extent a challenge to media, perceived by politicians to be right or centre-right media. In other words, the ideological cleavage that appeared in the analysis of the debates is reinforced by the sense that the political right feels it is possibly harming media that is perceived to have a more favourable ideological leaning. These would also be the larger media, and support through the tax system would in most cases be more beneficial to larger companies than that of direct subsidies. In a similar vein, the criticism of RÚV can be seen to have a political undertone, as the measurements of how politicians perceive the ideological leanings of different outlets demonstrate that those of the right and centre-right had a clear tendency to categorise RÚV to the left (Guðmundsson, 2021b).

The act passed in 2021 constituted a major change in Iceland’s media policy. However, our analysis of the legislative debate about the policy change

reveals that support for the Nordic media welfare state model is fragile in Icelandic politics. It appears that the market libertarian approach towards private media that has hitherto characterised Iceland's media policy still has the upper hand in the Icelandic parliament. The minister for media declared in a conference in Reykjavík in February 2022 that she wanted to implement the "Danish way" in Icelandic media policy (Ingólfsson, 2022a). Press subsidies are an important part of the "Danish way" – and of the Nordic media welfare state model in general (Ingólfsson, 2022b). Although the media subsidy act was prolonged until end of 2024, the government majority stated in its committee report that whilst it was important to support private media, it should be done indirectly through taxes and by increasing their revenue possibilities. In future arrangements, the public service media presence in the market should be restricted, and direct subsidies should be abandoned, as they contradicted the medias' watchdog role (Parliament of Iceland, 2022–2023).

It seems likely that Iceland will continue to be an outlier in the digital version of the Nordic media welfare state model, as it has been in the past. The fragmentation of the party system with eight or even nine parties being represented seems to be the reality for the near future, calling for broad coalition governments based on many compromises. It is, of course, possible that an agreement on a Nordic-type media policy might be negotiated within a future coalition. But is also possible that it will not. What that means for the future of the Icelandic news media is uncertain. The media's situation is of grave concern, and at present, a more burning question is whether it will survive rather than thrive in the digital future.

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Endnotes

¹ In the 2017 Election in Iceland, voters ranked the parties in the following way on the left-right continuum where 0 = furthest to the left and 10 = furthest to the right: Left-Green Movement = 2.3; Social Democratic Alliance = 3.5; Pirate Party = 3.6; People's Party = 4.7; Progressive Party = 5.7; Centre Party = 6.1; Reform Party = 6.3; Independence Party = 8.4.

² Referring to the right honorable member of parliament representing the constituency of Reykjavík South (there are two constituencies in Reykjavík: South and North).

PART II

BEYOND THE NORDIC MODEL

Public goods and private property

A waltz between Big Tech and the Nordic welfare states

SOFIE FLENSBURG & SIGNE SOPHUS LAI

DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION, UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN, DENMARK

ABSTRACT

The Internet's evolution into a critical societal infrastructure has reconfigured the material conditions for communication and led to the emergence of a wide range of new media and communication platforms. Yet, media system analyses continue to focus on legacy media institutions rather than on the broader digital ecosystem that these are embedded in and increasingly come to rely on. In this chapter, we suggest a new path for analyses of the power structures and dynamics that shape contemporary digital communication environments. Foregrounding the material resources that enable and constrain Internet-based communication, we explore how digital infrastructures are organised and controlled in the four largest Nordic countries. We thereby provide an alternative basis for discussing the mutual influence of the welfare state and the increasingly globalised and commercial communication system, and we conclude that the four media welfare state pillars suggested by Syvertsen and colleagues are theoretical ideals rather than empirical realities.

KEYWORDS: Internet infrastructures, datafication, Big Tech, political economy, digital communication systems

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Introduction

The Nordic region is one of the most digitalised in the world, with nearly universal Internet coverage, high-speed broadband connections, and substantial usage of all kinds of digital services (Randall & Berlina, 2019). Over the past decades, the Internet has evolved into a critical societal infrastructure that supports an ever-growing range of everyday activities and key societal functions, while simultaneously disrupting a multitude of established institutional arrangements. Yet, studies that investigate digital market structures and regulatory arrangements beyond the sphere of legacy media are few and far apart, meaning that the state of established welfare institutions and policies are rarely assessed in the context of the broader digital ecosystem. To address this dearth of research, in this chapter, we ask the following:

- RQ. How does the rise of the Internet as a common and increasingly dominant infrastructure for communication influence the structural arrangements and dynamics that surround mediated communication in Nordic welfare states?

In approaching this complex and broad question, we stress the interplays and conflicts between welfare state institutions and global Big Tech companies, probing into how they mutually shape the structural arrangements of contemporary Nordic communication environments. More specifically, we challenge persistent analytical approaches to studying media systems and welfare states (Syvertsen et al., 2014), arguing that they overemphasise (continuing) ideological and institutional logics while omitting (changing) material and infrastructural conditions.

This chapter is structured into four main sections. In the first, we briefly review existing studies of digital media systems in the Nordic region, arguing that researchers need to re-adjust their epistemic practices and analytical approaches if they are to address urgent questions about contemporary communicative power structures and modes of governance. We then move on to analyse and discuss how key components of the Internet infrastructure are owned and controlled across the four largest Nordic countries. Building on this, in the following sections, we consider why our findings speak to and challenge the four pillars of the media welfare state as theoretical ideals rather than empirical realities. In the concluding section, we suggest ways forward for research and regulation alike.

Continuities and changes

Existing studies of (digital) media structures in the Nordic region often emphasise the perseverance of democratic corporatist modes of governance (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Humprecht et al., 2022) and the continuation of established and historically engrained welfare principles and policies (Enli

et al., 2018; Syvertsen et al., 2014). As Jakobsson, Lindell, and Stiernstedt outline in the Introduction of this volume, Syvertsen and colleagues (2014: 2, 120) have pointed to four fundamental pillars that “continue to be present in the 21st century” and find a “high degree of continuity regarding the empirical realities of how the media systems operate”. Other studies challenge this emphasis on continuity and path dependencies, arguing that the economic crisis of the press, the broken ties between media institutions and the political system, and the fading positions of public service media are evidence of a decline of the welfare-oriented and democratic corporatist model (Hjarvard & Kammer, 2015; Ohlsson, 2015).

Common for most studies of media and communication structures in the Nordic region is, however, a persistent focus on legacy media such as newspapers and broadcasters as analytical units of analysis for investigating market developments and regulatory arrangements. It is unclear whether – and how – they include non-native so-called new media (social media, streaming services, and other digital platforms) in their definition of a national media system (see also Hardy, 2010). They also tend to neglect the fact that even national legacy actors, when venturing online and distributing their content over the Internet, become embedded in a global digital ecosystem, where the underlying infrastructures that they depend on are controlled by other market actors, regulatory schemes, and modes of governance, which all go well beyond those included in established analytical frameworks. As a result, studies that apply the variables and dimensions used to analyse analogue media systems see contemporary digitalised communication environments “in the rear-view mirror” (Ala-Fossi, 2020: 146).

Digital communication systems

Based on an analytical framework revolving around the key concept of digital communication systems (Flensburg & Lai, 2019; Lai & Flensburg, 2023), this chapter provides an alternative to the mediacentric approaches described above. Theoretically anchored in the broader concept of a communication system (Jensen, 2015, 2022; Jensen & Helles, 2022), this epistemic and analytical shift in perspective emphasises both the material and the institutional arrangements that enable and constrain communication as well as how these diverge and develop across historical periods and societal contexts. Moving beyond the national, legacy institutions that served as gatekeepers for communication in the analogue age, this approach encourages researchers to take a step back and ask *how* peoples’ mundane digital communication activities are controlled, by *whom*, and under *what* regulatory conditions.

Rather than an a priori focus on particular institutions (such as news media), this entails identifying the underlying infrastructural resources that support *any* kind of digital communication, mapping out the market actors

owning and controlling them, as well as the forms and degrees of state regulation that apply to them. In doing so, we recast the underlying material infrastructures as an independent and essential analytical dimension for understanding institutional arrangements – but we also acknowledge that technological developments, especially in the early stages, are highly dependent on the economic and political characteristics of their evolutionary contexts (Hughes, 1994). In other words, we set out to investigate the mutual influences of material technologies and political economies in shaping communication environments.

Digital communication systems then refer to societies where the Internet comprises a common and dominant infrastructure for communication *and* the institutional arrangements that shape – and are shaped by – it. To be able to empirically map, analyse, and compare digital communication systems, we distinguish between four layers of Internet infrastructure: 1) access networks that allow individual users to access the Internet; 2) backbone infrastructures that enable individual access networks to connect and exchange data globally; 3) applications that provide interfaces for communicating digitally; and 4) data that flow through and between networks and applications. By mapping the technological characteristics, ownership structures, and regulatory conditions of each layer, we can compare different contexts and highlight differences and similarities in the ways digital communication is organised and controlled.

Applying this approach, this chapter builds on an empirical and comparative analysis of Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden (see Lai & Flensburg, 2023) that investigates the endurance and continued presence of the four institutional “pillars” in contemporary Nordic societies, where the Internet constitutes a common and increasing dominant infrastructure for communication. In doing so, we argue that the epistemic and analytical adjustments outlined above disclose power structures and institutional arrangements that are invisible to classic media system analyses.

Digital infrastructures and political economies in welfare states

This section provides a brief rundown of the infrastructures and political economies that shape digital communication systems in the four largest Nordic countries. In comparing the four contexts, we emphasise both the similarities – or what we might refer to as the characteristics of a Nordic digital communication system – and the differences between the countries as they relate to, for instance, varying geopolitical conditions, market arrangements, and regulatory approaches.

The last mile

When mapping the technologies and political economies that support Internet-based communication, the last mile (or first, depending on how you consider it) of the Internet's infrastructure – namely the access networks that connect individual users to the global network of networks – is an obvious place to start. High-speed broadband connections and extensive mobile networks constitute an essential foundation for the comprehensive digitalisation of the Nordic societies and the everyday lives of the people who live there. The capital regions of Denmark, Finland, and Sweden hold the highest shares of daily Internet users in the European Union (more than 95% of adults) (Eurostat, 2021), while even the sparsely populated Northern areas of Finland, Norway, and Sweden are, by all comparisons, well-connected (European Commission, n.d.). However, when zooming in on the technologies that allow Nordic citizens to access the Internet, the countries' infrastructural paths to reach these levels of digitalisation differ in important ways.

Norway and Finland especially stand out due to their predominant reliance on, respectively, fixed and mobile broadband connections. While 90 per cent of all Norwegian households have a fixed broadband connection, only 30 per cent use mobile broadband (see OECD, n.d., for national and comparative information on broadband technologies). In Finland, the situation is the reverse: 91 per cent of Finnish households have a mobile broadband connection and just 57 per cent connect via fixed networks. We also see that Denmark, to a large extent, relies on historical telecommunications infrastructures, while Sweden has invested heavily in new high-speed fibre-optic networks (Forzati & Mattsson, 2014).

These infrastructural characteristics are closely related to both economic and political factors and serve as important backdrops for making sense of the political economy of access networks in each context. Taking the Danish incumbent telecommunications operator, TDC, as an example, the company's historical ownership of significant landline copper wire and cable television networks has been a clear advantage in the rollout of early broadband, which partly explains both the high reliance on these technologies and TDC's strong position in the Danish Internet service provider market. In contrast, Finland's reliance on mobile broadband has led to a more even competition between the three main operators – Elisa, Telia, and Telenor – reflecting the fact that mobile spectrum is allocated by state authorities and divided between competing market actors.

Looking at the ownership structures, legacy telcos with strong ties to the welfare states of the twentieth century continue to dominate this last mile of Internet service provision. The partly state-owned incumbents Telenor (Norwegian) and Telia (Swedish) hold an especially significant market share in all four countries (Nordic-Baltic Tele Statistics, 2020). The Danish and Finnish equivalents, TDC and Elisa, are both dominant in their home markets, but

less so in the wider Nordic market and beyond, reflecting varying degrees of commercial success that are also evident in the companies' revenue levels. For instance, TDC has reduced its yearly income from approximately 400 million euro in 2010 to just 20 million in 2020 (TDC, 2020), while Telenor, after a period of decline around the mid 2010s, has managed to regain and even enhance its economic strength through expansions outside the Nordic region (e.g., in Asia, see Telenor, 2022).

As hinted at above, fixed and mobile broadband is regulated quite differently, with the state playing a more active and facilitating role in the establishment and organisation of mobile networks and a more reactive and regulating role when it comes to fixed networks. All four countries have provided public funding for establishing fibre networks in rural and other non-profitable regions. Sweden led the way in this by giving the municipalities tax breaks worth of 310 million euro to develop local access networks, and providing 252 million euro for regional network planning (Forzati & Mattsson, 2014). The Swedish municipalities thereby played a key role in the early establishment of broadband infrastructures, while being obliged to make their network capacity available to external service providers to avoid local monopolisation (Hansteen, 2005). In contrast, broadband policies in Denmark and Norway have focused on stimulating the demand rather than supplying the infrastructures (Hansteen, 2005; Henten & Falch, 2014). Public digitalisation strategies in the late 1990s and early 2000s favoured the project-based funding of digital applications and services for public administration purposes, education, and so forth, which were seen as engines of digitalisation and something that could stimulate the demand for broadband build-out. However, the Norwegian government has also invested significantly in co-funding broadband projects in areas with no existing offers (OECD, 2008). Since 2016, similar support has been given in Denmark, albeit on a smaller scale, with the state allocating 13 million euro per year to (fixed) broadband projects in sparsely populated areas (Falch et al., 2016). Finland also funds the laying of fibre-optic networks (Nieminen, 2013).

While fixed broadband regulation is, as such, relatively similar across the four countries, mobile policies differ, with Finland being a clear outlier (Ala-Fossi & Bonet, 2018). The high prevalence of mobile broadband in Finland is directly related to the country's allocation of frequencies at relatively low costs that has served as an "indirect public support for telecom operators' mobile businesses [...] making it easier for the operators to invest in mobile networks [and] investments in fixed networks less attractive" (Ala-Fossi, 2020: 137). In contrast, mobile frequencies in Denmark, Sweden, and Norway have been auctioned off at high prices, making it more expensive for operators to build and run the mobile networks.

To sum up, the characteristics of the welfare state model are clearly present at the level of access networks. All four countries have taken signifi-

cant measures to ensure universal access to the Internet, and public funding schemes have guaranteed high coverage and high-capacity broadband. Legacy telecommunications companies with strong ties to the welfare state have established themselves as dominant Internet service providers utilising their existing market positions, economic muscle power, and technological expertise to roll out extensive broadband networks across the region.

While global Big Tech companies dominate vast parts of the remaining ecology (especially app and website provision and data collection and processing, as outlined later in the chapter), legacy providers continue to gatekeep this last mile of the Internet in the Nordic region. However, it is also important to note that the positions of national telcos in the broader communication system have changed, despite their persistent dominance in the access network market. While they continue to run the access networks, their former position as key providers of communication services (telephony, SMS, and television distribution) is diminishing as a result of over-the-top services (supplied by global platforms) offering the same functions at the price of just one broadband connection.

Backends

Moving on from the well-known and regulated sphere of access networks, we now turn to what is often described in vague and obfuscating terms such as “the cloud”. The Internet’s backbone is made up of extensive networks, exchange hubs, and data centres located beyond the last mile of access network provision, making the *Internet* what it essentially is – a network of networks. For this chapter, we focus on two components of the backbone – submarine fibre-optic cables that connect terrestrial networks (e.g., linking the Nordic region and the US) and Internet exchange points that enable the exchange of data between local access networks.

In exploring the evolution of digital backbone infrastructures and political economies, the geographic differences between the four largest Nordic countries are key background variables: Their positions, either in the centre or the periphery of Northern Europe, as well as their varying terrains, sizes, and population densities serve as backdrops for explaining each country’s role in the global Internet infrastructure. For instance, Denmark and Norway’s western coastlines make them ideal hubs for data traffic crossing the Atlantic, while Sweden and Finland are home to important terrestrial exchange points enabling data to travel between the northern and southern parts of Europe – and not least between the east and west of the continent.

A significant number of the submarine cables that land in the Nordics were established in the 1990s as a precondition for the growing use of global digital applications and services (see TeleGeography, n.d.-b). That is, in order for users to connect to servers located in, for instance, San Francisco,

connections must be made between the Nordic access network suppliers and their American counterparts. While the earliest cross-Atlantic Internet routes were based on satellite – one of the first with a node in the Norwegian town, Kjeller (NORSAR, 2020) – the introduction and success of killer applications such as e-mail and the world wide web called for increasing capacity in the form of submarine fibre-optic cables. The growing data traffic and expansion of local access networks and distribution systems, in turn, created a need to ease the exchange of data between network operators.

The early phases of backbone development were generally led by welfare state institutions with legacy telcos collaborating in large consortia on submarine cable projects, and the Nordic universities hosting the earliest Internet exchange points. However, recent years have seen a significant growth in both the number of submarine cables and Internet exchange points initiated and funded by other types of market actors. In Norway, the national real estate and infrastructure company Bulk has, for instance, made extensive investments in submarine cables, such as the planned Leif Eriksson that is to connect the shores of Norway with Canada in 2024 (see TeleGeography, n.d.-b). GlobalConnect is another example of a large Nordic company establishing national and regional routes, while the cross-Atlantic Havfrue [Mermaid] cable connecting Denmark and Norway to the US is funded by Google's and Facebook's parent companies, Alphabet and Meta, Bulk Infrastructure, and Aqua Comms (TeleGeography, n.d.-b). The Internet exchange points in the Nordic region are also owned by a mix of national stakeholders and international market actors operating from, for instance, Russia, the Netherlands, and the US (see TeleGeography, n.d.-a).

While backbone infrastructures constitute the essential and critical components of the global Internet, this part of the digital ecology is highly unmonitored and, thus, unregulated (the above is based on information harvested from commercial databases). Official policies and legislation are generally inconclusive in terms of describing the conditions and requirements that submarine cable projects, Internet exchange point providers, and other backbone operators and hosting facilities are subject to. Submarine cables landing in the Nordic region, for instance, follow a total of eight European Union directives and conventions, all of which relate to environment issues including protection of the seabed, wildlife, and reduction of waste (Raha & Raju, 2021). However, no regulations target submarine cable *markets*, concentration, ownership structures, and so forth, making submarine cables an “orphan” of international law (Matley, 2019). Recent suggestions calling for national submarine cable agencies and official state registries to monitor submarine cable developments (Raha & Raju, 2021) have, to the best of our knowledge, not been heeded in the Nordic region.

Questions about the degree of direct and official state involvement in backbone developments and market structures are, thus, in one respect relatively

straightforward to answer: It is more or less non-existent. In another sense, it is also important to note that backbone regulation – as a result of the global nature of the Internet – cannot be reduced to questions of nation-state legislation and national government policy. International bodies as well as global Big Tech companies also govern the Internet’s backbone in both formalised and less formalised manners: The Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers has established policies for coordinating the Internet’s naming system, and the regional Internet registries maintain registers monitoring the development of autonomous systems. Yet, state involvement in the form of official policies is difficult to come by.

Rounding up the backbone layer, the heritage of analogue media welfare states is seen in the central, albeit decreasing, position of legacy telcos that continue to control large parts of the Nordic Internet backbone (also when we look at terrestrial cable routes; see, e.g., NORDUnet, n.d.; Weissberger, 2020). As argued in broader global analyses, “U.S. internet companies are important but subordinate players within consortia that are dominated by a mix of private- and state-owned national carriers as well as some relatively new competitors” (Winseck, 2019: 112). However, we do see signs of a tilting power balance in the Nordic region where the more recent waves of backbone build-out are funded by commercial and global enterprises and, in part, by fortunes made on supplying digital services, harvesting user data, and selling ads.

The massive digitisation and datafication of the Nordic communication systems has created a need for strengthened network connections to transport high-capacity content to the end-user or ever-growing amounts of metadata in the opposite direction, feeding large algorithms, extensive ad networks, and so forth. They also serve as preparations for high-capacity innovations of, for instance, the Internet of Things, blockchain technology, virtual reality, and artificial intelligence. Strategically positioned countries such as Denmark and Finland are currently experiencing a heightened interest from global Big Tech, while the degree of welfare state involvement is generally higher in contexts where legacy actors have a strong position in the national (and international) market, like in Norway and Sweden.

Over-the-top services

Moving from the backend to the frontend of the digital infrastructure, we now shift our gaze to the multitude of digital services that send and receive information over the Internet. Over the last decades, the Nordic region has experienced an extensive digitalisation of a wide range of sectors and societal functions grounded on the evolution of the web architecture and later the introduction of smartphones and mobile app technologies. As a result, a wide range of over-the-top services have come to substitute former, dedicated, and

specialised communication technologies (think of online voice calls replacing telephony, online message services replacing SMS, streaming replacing broadcasting, etc.). If we are to understand contemporary digital ecosystems, we, in other words, need move beyond analyses of the digitalisation of legacy media outlets (e.g., online newspapers or digital public service media) and study the websites and apps that are central to Nordic Internet users' mundane media repertoires (Hasebrink & Domeyer, 2012).

Even though activities at the applications layer, such as logging into Facebook, launching the Netflix app, or sending an e-mail through Microsoft Outlook, are what most people associate with “being online”, our knowledge about what websites and apps are used in the Nordic region is surprisingly limited. Aside from ratings of Internet traffic on selected *national* websites and apps (e.g., national news media outlets), there are no official top-lists gauging actual user patterns in and across the Nordic countries and beyond national applications. That is, official monitoring and regulation suffer from the same bias towards national, legacy media that established media system studies do, making it difficult to empirically assess the actual competition structures on the web and app market.

When approaching these questions, we therefore rely on notoriously unreliable commercial web and app measurements (Dieter et al., 2019; Taneja, 2016) that pop up, shut down, and change their terms and conditions in unpredictable ways (Venturini & Rogers, 2019). For this chapter, we use top-lists of the 50 most used websites and mobile apps in the four countries as reported by Similar Web's public statistics (see Lai & Flensburg, 2023). These are by no means perfect data sources, as their actual construction process is opaque, and they also provide a very limited view of the longtail of websites and apps used in the Nordic countries. They are, however, at least for now, *as good as it gets*, especially if we want to make comparisons between countries.

The websites and apps featured on the top lists are owned by a wide range of market actors, cutting across the hyped “tech giants” and national legacy actors originating in the welfare systems of the twentieth century. For instance, the top-50 websites are almost evenly distributed between national and international market actors, with legacy media holding relatively strong positions, especially in Norway, and national actors being less represented in Denmark. The Norwegian media mastodon Schibsted is the second largest supplier of websites across the Nordic region, while Microsoft comes out as the largest web actor due to its array of popular software packages and online resources. Public service media, along with public authorities supplying e-government services, also appear in all top-50 web lists, and legacy actors (as opposed to digitally born companies) generally dominate the nationally supplied sites.

The national variations are nearly a washout when we look at mobile apps, where Alphabet, Meta, and Microsoft by far outnumber national actors,

including Bonnier, Alma Media, and Schibsted, in all four countries. While the share of nationally owned websites on the top-lists is pushed upwards by the strong presence of national legacy news outlets (especially in Norway), news apps are nearly non-existent on the countries' app top-lists. Zooming in on streaming services, we see a similar pattern, where one-fourth of the *websites* are nationally owned by legacy media companies, like the public service broadcasters or before mentioned Schibsted, while only one in eight streaming *apps* is offered by national actors – among which, companies that have obtained a regional or global presence, including Nordic Entertainment Group (Viaplay) and Spotify, dominate.

Legacy media are, in other words, struggling to compete with global Big Tech companies, especially when people turn to their smartphones and other mobile devices. When launching mobile apps, national media companies furthermore depend on – and often pay for – being available in app stores owned by, most prominently, Apple and Alphabet, who provide the dominant mobile operating systems (iOS and Android). With the Nordic app market being significantly more concentrated than the web market, the rise of mobile apps as a dominant applications infrastructure seems to embody a shift from Nordic companies having a larger presence in their national contexts as well as across the region to a more globalised market, where international corporations increasingly dominate and outnumber classic welfare institutions. The Nordic welfare states do, however, continue to have a significant presence in the applications sphere, just not in the sense of a *media* welfare state. Instead, their presence lives on in the many public digitalisation strategies, bringing with them an array of digital public services such as apps for communicating with authorities, healthcare, transportation, and digitalised identification systems.

The declining impact of legacy media is interesting, since regulatory initiatives have generally focused on adapting existing media policies to include digital news outlets and broadcasting services. Various initiatives have been taken to sustain the view of media as sociocultural institutions that are to be protected against, for instance, the economic threats of the platform economy (Knudsen et al., 2017; Sirkkunen et al., 2021), while fewer actions have been taken towards regulating the platform economy itself. The rise of digital communication services that cannot be comprised within the scope of traditional “media” but hold increasingly powerful positions as key gatekeepers for digital communication has, thus, created a wide range of responsibility gaps exemplified in recent discussions about information curation and censorship on Facebook and YouTube or the national content responsibilities of Netflix. The rise of over-the-top applications thus constitutes a still largely unresolved regulatory crisis, where existing policies and regulatory frameworks – developed in and for the analogue media system – influence a shrinking part of the political economy of the actual digital communication system.

In recent years, a growing demand for the regulation of otherwise highly unregulated aspects of communication and everyday life has appeared, and disparate initiatives have been taken to encourage Big Tech to take on local responsibilities in terms of content production and curation (Meyer, 2020), union rights (Heikkilä, 2020), and so forth, but without much effect. Despite the fact that most of these companies gained their positions in the digital market by supplying web services such as search engines, social media, streaming platforms, online stores, and so on, the applications layer remains largely unmonitored and, in effect, unregulated (Flensburg, 2021).

Summing up, we find that the web ecology, more than that of apps, to some degree mirrors the “old” media systems of the Nordic countries, where national news and public service media share the top-lists with online shopping outlets, e-government services, porn sites, social media platforms, and various types of e-mail and work-related services. The rise of mobile and app-based communication, however, means that the towers of control have been relocated. Apps largely reside inside walled gardens, where a duopoly consisting of Alphabet and Apple currently dominate all parts of the mobile value chain – from operating systems, over app stores and app provision, to the third-party services that facilitate various commercial aspects of apps. This dominance of digital newcomers in the app ecosystem creates an unequal power balance that challenges the corporatist dynamics otherwise associated with media welfare states.

Follow the data!

With data being one of the most valuable assets in the contemporary digital economy, the organisation and control of the infrastructures that collect, store, and process data provide important insights into the digital power structures and dynamics in the Nordic region. As with the applications layer, digital data collection and distribution is notoriously black-boxed, complicating research interventions as well as attempts to regulate the data market. To analyse the Nordic data infrastructures, we here rephrase the classic economic strategy “follow the money” (DeFleur, 1971; Ettema & Whitney, 1994) to “follow the data”, and investigate how data are continuously being harvested and exchanged – and by whom (Flensburg & Lai, 2023).

To identify third-party services operating in the Nordic countries, we again focus on the top-50 websites and apps in each country using the open access tool WebXray (2022) for the websites and the non-profit open access database Exodus Privacy (Exodus, n.d.) for the (Android) apps (there is currently no publicly available data on the use of third-party services in iOS apps). As with the top-lists, neither of the methods are unflawed, and to use them, we must accept a wide range of methodological uncertainties, meaning that the results presented are indicative rather than exact accounts of Nordic

data infrastructures and markets. For this chapter, we focus on identifying the *presence* of different third-party services and market actors, rather than calculating their exact market shares.

The use of third-party services is closely related to the functionalities and underlying business models of the websites and apps in question. Across both websites and apps, news applications, for instance, connect to a high number of third parties, reflecting the fact that ads make up a significant part of the business model for news media – not least when the content is published free of monetary charge. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, the large platform services (think of social media, search engines, etc., that are known for building their business on collecting and reselling user data) connect to very few third-party services. The reason for this is that while these companies are powerful *third* parties for other sites and apps, they are *first* parties when it comes to their own services – meaning that they have the tools to collect and process data in-house and thus do not need external service providers.

With the exception of a few Nordic and European actors, the data layer is by far the most globalised and commercial compared with the access network, backbone, and applications markets. Through its swarms of web services (e.g., Gstatic, Google Tag Manager, Google APIs, Google Analytics, and DoubleClick), Alphabet comes out as the number-one third-party provider across both websites and apps, having a presence on more than two-thirds of the top websites and apps. In Norway and Finland, established media companies such as Schibsted and Alma Media also appear as third-party service providers for websites, while this does not seem to be the case in Denmark and Sweden (at least not when we look at the top-50). As for the applications layer, however, the rise of the mobile data market seems to erode the national differences, creating a more homogeneous and globalised data ecosystem in the Nordic region, where national legacy actors are pushed to the periphery or bought up (Binns, Zhao, et al., 2018).

This points to the uneven power balance between Nordic and global (primarily American) companies, where the former depends on the latter for their technical and commercial functions. In other words, if, for instance, a Nordic media company wants to launch a streaming app to prevent their users from drifting to, say, YouTube, it will most likely use the services supplied by one of Alphabet's child companies to collect and process user data, thereby feeding their largest competitor. Mobile market giants such as Alphabet thus not only gain their powerful position in the digital ecosystem through the massive success of their own services, but also by continuously extending their activities and assets both horizontally and vertically, making other actors dependent on them *and* using this position to improve their own products and strengthen their market positions.

Turning to the political initiatives taken to regulate the booming data economy, Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden are all in the global

top-five when it comes to protecting users' privacy online (BestVPN, 2023). As a recent pushback against commercial datafication and third-party data vendors, various legislative initiatives have been taken, most notably targeting the web cookie infrastructure, and all four countries have adapted their political frameworks to comply with the European Union's e-Privacy directive – in popular terms, the Cookie Directive (European Parliament & The Council, 2009) – and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (European Parliament & The Council, 2016).

Accompanying these legislative frameworks, Nordic data protection bodies have recently launched investigations into third-party data infrastructures (Datatilsynet, 2022a, 2022b; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, 2021; Swedish Authority for Privacy Protection, 2020; Norwegian Consumer Council, 2020). These actions do not compare in scope to initiatives in other European countries – for example, the French data regulator fining Google, Facebook, and Amazon for violating the e-Privacy rules as well as the GDPR (Braun, 2022), or the German Bundeskartellamt (2019) prosecuting Facebook and Amazon for antitrust violations and breaches of privacy rules. Yet, they are testimonies to shifting political attitudes and an increased awareness of datafication as an essential policy concern.

Despite this increasing regulatory attention, enforcements of competition law on global data infrastructures and markets are limited, and individual consent declarations continue to legitimise data-based business models and monopolistic market structures. This regulatory vacuum is particularly evident when zooming in on the market for *mobile* datafication, where rules like those enforced by the cookie directive, as of this writing, do not apply to the use of third-party services in apps (Binns, Lyngs, et al., 2018). That is, while more and more forms of communication – interpersonal, networked, public, and private – move to mobile platforms, data harvesting moves back into the shadows, since established frameworks are designed for the web. In the current state of what seems to be a political momentum that could potentially alter the basic conditions for the digital ecology and economy as we know it, it is difficult to forecast the future. For instance, the recently passed Digital Services Act sets out to increase user protection and transparency around the collection of data and thus aims to follow up on the shortcomings of the GDPR (European Commission, 2022).

All in all, the institutional arrangements and logics of the media welfare state have for the moment a very limited influence on this last infrastructural layer. The current organisation of data infrastructures is almost entirely commercial, and it is difficult to see any signs of data being organised as a public good. In fact, even the comprehensive datafication of key welfare services (public healthcare, education, social security, and so forth) feed the business models and power of Big Tech by relying on these companies' services and infrastructures (Andreassen et al., 2021). This leads to an indirect commer-

cialisation of the welfare state and “embeds social welfare within an ecosystem that endlessly perpetuates this reconfiguration” (Dencik, 2021: 160).

The dominance of Big Tech companies in the data layer also sparks developments in the three previous layers, as the access to user information can be used to advance the companies’ own applications, and the terms and conditions for using third-party services influence the conditions of other website and app suppliers. Furthermore, platform companies’ recent ventures into the global Internet service provider market (Nothias, 2020), as well as massive backbone investments, are all built on the fortunes made from, primarily, data.

The resilience of the Nordic model

The analysis presented above provides an alternative basis for assessing how digital communication is organised and controlled in the Nordic region and what role welfare state institutions and logics play in these institutionalisation processes. In this section, we discuss the four pillars of the media welfare state (Syvertsen et al., 2014) one by one, asking how the current configurations of Nordic Internet infrastructures and political economies match the characteristics found when focusing on legacy media.

Pillar 1: Communication services as public goods?

As for the first pillar, which points to traditions of universality and the institutionalisation of communication technologies as public goods, we find clear evidence of path dependencies at the level of access networks. The extensive use of high-capacity networks and the political prioritisation of various forms of broadband funding in many ways mirror Syvertsen and colleagues’ (2014: 131) argument about egalitarian and common media usage, universal service obligations for Internet service providers, and public ownership of broadcast media. Through public digitalisation strategies, the four welfare states of Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden have played key roles in ensuring equal access in non-profitable areas and stimulating the development of publicly available digital services.

However, we also see that the broader Internet ecology, beyond the last mile of access networks, is subject to less public involvement and is largely reliant on commercial incentives and logics. It seems that the transition from analogue to digital distribution has entailed a fundamental shift, where Nordic welfare states no longer find it essential to control the underlying infrastructures (e.g., the distribution networks that public broadcasters depend on for their streaming services). Global Big Tech companies such as Alphabet, Amazon, and Apple have, in other words, become important gatekeepers who essentially govern Nordic communication environments by establishing

and dictating the conditions that most digital service operators must comply with – while themselves being subject to no formal monitoring or obligations.

Pillar 2: Institutionalised self-governance?

As for the second pillar, Syvertsen and colleagues (2014: 17, 131) pointed to a “range of measures used to institutionalize freedom from editorial interference and self-governance in day-to-day operations”, exemplified in the consideration of access to information as a basic right, well-functioning self-regulation of media institutions, and independence from the state. Focusing more broadly on how digital communication is governed, it is evident that the Internet, in some senses, has increased editorial freedom and independence from the state by decentralising information flows and making individual Internet users independent from former editorial gatekeepers. At the same time, this reconfiguration of the basic organisation of public communication has also destabilised the underlying logics – and efficiency – of existing forms of institutionalised freedom of expression.

As long as newspapers and broadcasters largely controlled the information gateways to the public, the (self- and co-)regulation of these institutions served as proxies for regulating public debate and information dissemination. With the rise of new platforms and services that do not fall within the historic definitions of *media* – nor wish to submit to the responsibilities that this entails – it is not entirely straightforward to declare self-regulation as “well-functioning”. The list of clashes between the cultural norms and values of the Nordic region and the US-based platforms that to a wide extent curate the public spheres is long: Alphabet banning the Danish public service broadcaster’s children’s app because of the use of candy in the shape of tobacco pipes in a television programme (Hilstrøm, 2020); Facebook censoring the Norwegian *Aftenposten* for its republication of the iconic image of a naked child from the Vietnam War (Larsen, 2016); and a wide range of controversies around the spread of information about Covid-19. As such, while measures are surely still taken to ensure free and thriving mediated communication environments and public spheres, the rise of digital communication systems has also entailed a significant and fundamental challenge to the ways these values can be – and are – ensured in practice.

Pillar 3: Cultural policies & regulation?

The third pillar, emphasising the tradition of cultural policies to extend “to the media in the form of content obligations and support schemes that aim to secure diversity and quality” (Syvertsen et al., 2014: 131) is, according to Syvertsen and colleagues, seen in a continuation and adaption of various types of media policies. For instance, they have pointed to reforms of press support schemes aimed at sustaining media diversity and the view on media

and communication as “vehicles to enhance democratic and cultural involvement and participation” (Syvertsen et al., 2014: 131).

The Nordic welfare states have without a doubt made great efforts to continue and adapt the policy schemes developed for legacy media to the digital age. As discussed above, the effects of these policies on the broader communication environment have, however, decreased considerably alongside the declining position of these institutions in peoples’ everyday lives. If we consider how the most used applications and services, as well as their underlying infrastructures, are influenced by existing content obligations, quotas, and so forth, the role of the welfare state is, to say the least, minor. It is fair to argue that the continued support for national news outlets and public service media do provide important *alternatives* to social media and other non-regulated content providers. Yet, the fact remains that people’s mundane information flows and communications are influenced less by democratically founded cultural policies than the Internet.

Pillar 4: Consensual and cooperative solutions?

Finally, the last of the pillars is related to the idea of Nordic media systems as clearcut examples of the democratic corporatist model (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), characterised by “[a] preference for consensual solutions that are durable and involve cooperation between main stakeholders: the state, media and communication industries and the public” (Syvertsen et al., 2014: 131). Again, the endurance of this characteristic is linked to the continuation of public–private partnerships around broadcasting and news distribution, and the continued state-ownership of access network providers, especially in Norway and Sweden, could also be seen as a sign of exactly that.

However, the massive position of global platforms also forces us to ask if communication environments really are consensual and cooperative when actors such as Meta can potentially close down Facebook in the Nordic region (as it did in Australia); when Alphabet at any time can close down any Nordic app (as it did with DR); and when Amazon can terminate the cloud services that host the majority of digital content (as it did under the US capitol riots of 2021). Small-language areas such as the Nordics are (and have always been) particularly sensitive to monopolisation and concentration of power as their markets, despite economic resourcefulness, are relatively small and hold minor positions in the global economy. This creates uneven power balances between the national institutions that rely on the external provision of services and infrastructures, and Big Tech companies that can move their business elsewhere if the conditions in particular contexts become too restrictive. These structural conditions were important justifications for the Nordic welfare states’ involvement in the supply of, for instance, broadcasting, and their economic support of newspapers. Digitalisation, however,

has complicated the material basis of the regulatory logics that (analogue) media welfare states were built upon.

Conclusions and perspectives

In this chapter, we have argued that the assessment of Nordic welfare states' role in the digital age depends on one's analytical perspective. By focusing solely on the sustainment of legacy media, welfare discourses, and attempts at reforming existing (media) policies, we may confirm existing notions of the Nordics as being prime examples of democratic corporatist systems or media welfare states. If we turn to consider the *efficacy* of existing political frameworks and the implications of relying on externally provided digital infrastructures, our assessment of the adaptability of the welfare regime is the opposite.

This turn of perspective raises critical questions about how the increasingly globalised and privatised infrastructures align with the notion of communication technologies as public goods; how effective institutionalised frameworks are for ensuring editorial freedom in a communication environment where public debates and information dissemination largely take place on platforms that are unaffected by national cultural policies; and how traditions for consensual and corporatist governance can live on in a world where global Big Tech can pull the plug on entire communication environments. Based on our analysis of the current organisation and control of the Internet infrastructure in the four largest Nordic countries, we argue that the media welfare state is more of a theoretical ideal than an empirical reality.

When making this argument, the national variations are important to take into consideration. While especially Denmark constitutes a highly globalised and disrupted context where Big Tech holds powerful positions across the digital value chain, Norway exemplifies a “land of legacies”, where national market actors such as Schibsted and Telenor have successfully transferred their historical business models into the digital age, and state agencies seem to be more actively involved in the data market.

Furthermore, a broader comparison of countries that would include other types of regimes might sensitise us to distinctive features of the Nordics that mirror former typologies and historical path dependencies. Ongoing public debates about the contemporary digital economy can potentially result in public infrastructure projects (Zuckerman, 2020), break-ups of anti-competitive market actors (Taplin, 2017), or bans against surveillance-based business models (Zuboff, 2019). Recalling that the Nordic countries, in the past, have been known for solutions that combine consumer needs and commercial interests (Castells & Himanen, 2002), these countries have the potential to be first movers in providing effective regulation and non-commercial alternatives to the highly commercial infrastructures of today.

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Digital communication infrastructures and the principle of universality

Challenges for Nordic media welfare state jurisdictions

HELLE SJØVAAG & RAUL FERRER-CONILL

DEPARTMENT OF MEDIA AND SOCIAL SCIENCES, UNIVERSITY OF STAVANGER, NORWAY

ABSTRACT

This chapter examines to what extent the digital communication infrastructure of Norway is subject to regulation of the Internet's physical infrastructures. To assess how communicative power is distributed, we map the ownership of access networks and backbone infrastructures to ascertain how the Norwegian infrastructure regulation is legally geared to protect universalist principles in media welfare states. Included in the mapping are backbone networks (fibre cables, Internet exchange points, content delivery networks, and data centres) and access networks (broadband wire and electromagnetic radio frequencies). Our findings reveal that backbone infrastructures are essentially unregulated and increasingly controlled by foreign companies and energy companies. This implies an uneven jurisdictional reach of Norwegian legislators, leaving an open gate for large multinational companies to establish infrastructures that generate, store, and distribute data. The result is a potential loss of data sovereignty and communicative power by Norwegian citizens.

KEYWORDS: digital infrastructures, universality, data sovereignty, welfare state, media regulation

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Introduction: Communication infrastructures

A founding principle of the media welfare state is universal access to open channels of communication. While not always visible, these channels are supported by a wide range of digital infrastructures. Here, we agree with Parks and Starosielski's (2015: 6) argument that "capitalist societies generally educate people to appreciate the 'conveniences' and 'choices' of modern consumer technologies, but to remain blind to the infrastructures that support them". Communication infrastructures are the technologies that support and facilitate the exercise of free speech and information rights, whereby communication and debate take place. In the Nordic countries, communication infrastructures are, in regulation, designated as telecommunications and broadcasting spectrums licensed by the state. However, the expanding landscape of actors at the platform and backbone levels of the media system challenge the definition of what exactly entails infrastructures in today's communication ecology. The increasing ownership of digital communication infrastructures by global players such as Google, Facebook, or Microsoft effectively surrenders the control of these strategic networks of communicative power and threatens the data sovereignty that the Nordic media model tries to retain (Hummel et al., 2021). While data sovereignty is a complex, multidimensional concept with a wide range of potential connotations, in this context, it refers to the level of independence, autonomy, and control that states have over digital infrastructures (Couture & Toupin, 2019). Furthermore, as these ecologies become digital, the concept of data sovereignty means that information stored in digital binary form is subject to national rules and regulations. In this chapter, we therefore ask the following:

RQ. To what extent is data sovereignty protected by infrastructure regulation in Norway?

We address this question by critically interrogating how the principle of universality is retained within an expanding infrastructure ecology. The empirical foundation for the discussion is drawn from a mapping of the technical backbone networks of digital communication systems in Norway and their access networks (see Flensburg & Lai, 2020). As these backbone infrastructures (content delivery networks, Internet exchange points, and submarine cables) are increasingly controlled by foreign companies, their operations fall largely outside the purview of state regulatory power, challenging the jurisdiction of welfare states over communication infrastructures. Jurisdictional power is further challenged by the expansion of actors involved in infrastructural control, particularly by the energy companies that assume larger and larger shares of backbone infrastructures and access networks (broadband, 5G, and data centres). To that end, the boundaries of communication infrastructures expand towards sectors whose regulation lies outside the jurisdictional reach of media regulators, raising questions as

to the future of universalism and freedom of speech in the Nordic welfare states. We argue that if data are a resource that supports free speech, the infrastructures that support the broad distribution of data as capital among citizens should be a priority in democratic societies (see Fischli, 2022). The contribution of this chapter is thus to expand the definition of communication infrastructures to account for how communicative power in welfare state societies is distributed among the actors involved in its infrastructures. Following Flensburg and Lai's overview of the Nordics in their contribution to this volume (Chapter 8), our aim is to take a closer look at how Norway is legally geared to assert data sovereignty and protect universalist principles through digital infrastructures as the network of actors in the media ecology expands. Norway, as a "land of legacies", is particularly interesting because incumbents play a large part in the communications infrastructure, and it is unclear whether foreign multinationals are making ground in infrastructure capture to the same extent as in other countries.

The Nordic context

Freedom of expression in the Nordic states is predominantly positively regulated: Overall, Nordic states are responsible for ensuring a civil sphere (Engelstad & Larsen, 2019). In law, communication infrastructures should provide a means for expression, debate, and information. In liberal media systems such as the US, expression is largely negatively defined: Here, the state should only ensure that no measures serve to curtail free expression. Reversely, welfare states render governments responsible for providing citizens with the means to exercise citizenship and free speech. The means by which democracy can be exercised are manifested as communication infrastructures – hence the so-called infrastructure demand in the Norwegian constitution that makes the government responsible for facilitating an open and informed public debate. This translates to state intervention, ownership, and investment in infrastructures that ensure content delivery to all households and universal access to services such as the Internet, telecommunications, and broadcasting (Ala-Fossi, 2020).

Nordic states thus actively support communication institutions, providing the infrastructure for a liberal public sphere through the arm's-length principle. This means that media have established systems of self-governance and self-regulation beyond state interference that essentially ensure that journalism can criticise the state while still retaining public funding (Hjarvard & Kammer, 2015). Communication services are therefore understood as public goods (Ala-Fossi, 2020), regulated to guard against market failure, which can occur when the market is unable to provide important goods and services that citizens need (Pickard, 2017). Publicly owned and regulated communication infrastructures have thus been thought of as "cultural and informational safety nets [that can serve as] vehicles for active social trans-

formation” (Syvertsen et al., 2014: 44–45). While public service institutions have been instrumental in building digital infrastructures in the Nordics, for example, through the development of digital terrestrial television and digital radio, broadband, Internet, and mobile technology have followed more market-led developments, where state involvement has been limited to securing efficient services and defining minimum standards. Beyond these infrastructures, backbone networks such as submarine cables, content delivery networks, and data centres remain largely unregulated, introducing a host of new actors into the communication ecosystem, including very large online platforms (European Union 2020a, 2020b), regional energy companies, and global technology giants. This development has therefore raised concerns over how this new layer of “networked gatekeeping” (Barzilai-Nahon, 2009) challenges traditional media operators.

Two complicating factors in how these infrastructures are regulated concern the definition of relevant technologies and the reach of cultural policy. In the Finnish, Icelandic, and Norwegian constitutions, the infrastructure demand is technology neutral, while the Danish and Swedish constitutions specify protected media technologies, which make them somewhat vulnerable to technological developments (Norwegian Government, 2019). Moreover, the technical infrastructures that support content delivery and access are often beyond the reach of media policymakers and hence the principles of democracy, diversity, and inclusion that regulate media actors and content. For instance, the regulation of the mobile spectrum is designated to the Ministry of Transport and Communication in Finland, while broadband is regulated by the Communications Authority in Norway, which falls under the purview of the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development. In Denmark, digital infrastructures are regulated by the Agency for Digital Government, which reports to the Ministry of Finance. In Sweden, the Post and Telecom Authority is independent of any particular Ministry, and the Electronic Communications Office of Iceland regulates the sector under the Ministry of Infrastructure. The regulation of communication infrastructures thus involves authorities in the field of finance, competition, transport, and regional development – jurisdictions that lie well beyond the auspices of media and cultural policy.

This raises new questions about the scope of actors involved in the communication infrastructures, the dependencies that arise for national players as the media landscape shifts towards datafication and platform alignment (Nieborg & Poell, 2018), and how these developments impact on the principle of universality that aims to ensure freedom of information and expression. The question of how communicative power is distributed in society thus reaches beyond the scope of media infrastructures and media regulators to include a range of new actors and technologies that shape the infrastructure for free speech in the Nordic region.

Universalism

The principle of universality means that all citizens are equally entitled to the services and benefits provided by the state (Kildal & Kuhnle, 2007). In essence, according to Esping-Andersen (1990), it serves to emancipate individuals from the negative consequences of market and class mechanisms. Universally allocated services are distributed evenly, available to all, adequate, and used by the majority of citizens. Eligibility and entitlement to universal services are defined as rights, and the rules associated with the service apply to all beneficiaries. Universalism is often mobilised in social services to promote equality, participation, and social rights, and therefore generally applies to public goods (Anttonen & Sipilä, 2014), which are goods that benefit society beyond the economic transaction itself – goods that society needs, but consumers tend to undervalue. States tend to support goods of this nature to ensure citizens have access to beneficial goods and services that would otherwise not survive on market terms alone (Allern & Pollack, 2019). States can therefore exercise their sovereignty in such domains to protect citizens' individual and collective interests (Chapdalaine & McLeod Rogers, 2021).

Anttonen and Sipilä (2014) have asserted that universalism is intimately tied to the democratic nation-state, its jurisdiction, and the rights and legal status of its citizens. Universalism can therefore only be provided by the state, and the legitimacy of public funding is based on liberal principles of representation and the rule of law. While the literature points towards a myriad of uses and definitions of the term, it is mostly applied in the social sciences to issues concerning the redistribution of taxes and policymaking at the state level. In philosophy or theology, universalism reflects the notion that some ideas have universal application, that there is a universal truth, or that there is a fixed essence to human nature that enables us to live by universal principles, reflected, for instance, in Sustainable Development Goals or the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Benhabib, 2007). In the context of relativism, globalisation, and postmodernism (see, e.g., Benhabib, 1994; Gunaratne, 2009), universalism functions more like a justification strategy, or a defence of rationality, understood in juridical terms as entitlement to rights that also acknowledges the capability of communicative freedom in others. Communicative freedom in turn requires the reciprocity, equality, and agency that play out during political deliberation (Benhabib, 2007). In the context of freedom of information and expression, then, the Norwegian infrastructure demand reflects the core tenets of universalism in that it presupposes equal rights, inclusion, and reciprocity. Moreover, it presupposes that these infrastructures enable agency in communicative action, rendering unto citizens the communicative power needed to legitimate state power. As power also materialises through infrastructure, the material and territorial aspects of infrastructure contribute to shaping communicative action through data ownership and control (Musiani, 2022). As a result, data sovereignty in

the Norwegian context should encompass the hallmark of Nordic modes of deliberation and representation that purposefully include the widest variety of stakeholders.

Universalism has thus been a founding principle for the development of communication infrastructures in the Nordic countries (Syvertsen et al., 2014). This pertains to the postal service, telegraph and telephony, broadcasting, and Internet access. In fact, according to Enli and colleagues (2018), universalism or equal access is a key legitimator of state intervention, particularly in cases where states step in to regulate commercial markets where private vendors operate public goods. This happened in the case of the telegraph, radio, and cinema. In the Nordics, the state has therefore acted as both proprietor and operator of communication infrastructures. Lately, however, the state has moved somewhat away from ownership and shifted more towards regulation. Despite this trend, noted Syvertsen and colleagues (2014), universalism has been one of the key factors in making the Nordic countries world-leading in Internet access and broadband coverage. To that end, they wrote that the principle of universalism “is strongly reaffirmed with the commitment to universal access to digital infrastructure” (Syvertsen et al., 2014: 121). However, while the principles behind universalism justify state intervention, this does not seem to extend to the backbone infrastructures of the Internet. As the Nordic states move from being proprietors to acting as regulators, the question becomes what jurisdiction states have over Big Tech platforms that operate as “territories” of their own, where data flows, algorithms, and protocols shift data sovereignty away from the state and towards the private realm (Cohen, 2017). We contend that communication infrastructures should include all the physical and material infrastructures that enable communication to take place. Moreover, we argue that the communicative power of citizens relies on these infrastructures, and that as a result, they should be included in the infrastructure demand under universalist principles.

Communicative power

The concept of communicative power is foundational to Habermas’s (1996) theory of democracy, as it derives political power, and thus legitimacy, from the communicative power of citizens and their capacity to engage in political debate (O’Mahony, 2010; Reunanen & Kunelius, 2020). Here, “communicative” refers to normative ideals of communicative action, while “power” refers to the empirical potential of making a difference in decision-making (Reunanen & Kunelius, 2020). Communicative power thus serves as a resource against economic and administrative power and is the “expression of citizens’ political autonomy” (O’Mahony, 2010: 53). How society enables public discussion, and the norms that guide that discussion, is what generates communicative power (Flynn, 2004). Hence, it necessitates the free processing

of information, collective exercise through shared beliefs, and a non-coercive space. As Kreide (2016: 484) noted, communicative power “is the power to question”. As communicative power translates into political power through law, according to Flynn (2004: 435), “the exercise of state authority through administrative power is only legitimate if bound to this discursively generated communicative power”.

While the concept of communicative power has mainly been discussed in political and deliberative theory related to the media (e.g., Reunanen & Kuneilius, 2020), it has also been mobilised in research relating to communication infrastructures, primarily through two vantage points – in questions regarding the potential of social media to enhance deliberation and participation in democratic processes (e.g., Loader & Mercea, 2011; Sormanen & Dutton, 2015), and research on how sociotechnical systems influence society (e.g., Bohman, 2010; Dutton et al., 2004; Ross & Chiasson, 2011). Research here has considered to what extent social media allows users to bypass powerful and established institutions to form effective social movements (Sormanen & Dutton, 2015), and how to develop democratic information system processes and technologies (Ross & Chiasson, 2011). To some extent, this research finds that technology systems and platforms tend to shape the rules and norms that govern communicative action, posing limitations either through functionalities, in the case of information systems, or restricting legitimacy, as in the case of Facebook “slacktivism”. Moreover, the concept of data power introduces new dimensions of sovereignty and control to communicative practices that need to account for the impacts of datafication on the material infrastructures of media systems (Kennedy & Bates, 2017).

Theoretically, accounting for communicative power in platformisation processes has demonstrated how social and technical subsystems shift systemic power through functionalities that work according to their own logics by controlling resources (cf. Nieborg & Poell, 2018). Communicative power is thus expressed through institutional design and is only enabled when incorporated into institutionalised processes of decision-making (Bohman, 2010). What is important for communicative power, according to Dutton and colleagues (2004), is how networks are designed and configured to facilitate access and the distribution of knowledge and proficiency to use technology. While Dutton and colleagues were talking about broadband and Wi-Fi Internet access in the early 2000s, their assertion that choices about technology reconfigure communicative power still resonates in terms of what technology means today, particularly as its regulation involves a range of interests and stakeholders.

The concept has, therefore, mainly been mobilised in the literature to evaluate the introduction of new technologies and platforms, such as broadband or social networking sites. As of yet, however, the question regarding the distribution of communicative power has not been considered much in research

within the so-called infrastructural turn that considers the expanded ecology of communication infrastructure on the ability of citizens to participate in democracy (Van Dijck et al., 2018). Nor has communicative power been related to the principle of universalism that supports the regulation of communication infrastructures in the Nordic region. As we aim to demonstrate, however, the two concepts are closely intertwined, to the extent that universalism provides the principle means to enable participation in democracy.

Data and method

Our research design is based on the work of Flensburg and Lai (2020) and their mapping of the digital communication system in Denmark. While Flensburg and Lai included devices and access networks, backbone networks, platforms, and content in their mapping of the infrastructures needed for users to access content (i.e., on their mobile phone), our concern is mainly to investigate physical infrastructure, to which we designate the technical backbone networks of the communication infrastructures in Norway and their access networks. Our key aim is to identify the technologies involved in the communicative infrastructure, the actors involved through ownership, and the legal jurisdictions to regulate them. Backbone networks are operationalised as fibre cables, Internet exchange points, content delivery networks, and data centres. Access networks are operationalised as broadband wire (copper, coaxial, and optical fibre) and mobile broadband or electromagnetic radio frequencies (4G and 5G). The justification for limiting our mapping to these infrastructures is that they lie beyond the purview of established media regulation. The aim of the mapping is thus to highlight the range of infrastructure actors and networks considered within the parameters of communication infrastructures, with particular attention paid to issues of ownership and control over essential communication services.

The method applied to our study is primarily document analysis. The analytical procedure for document analysis includes finding, selecting, appraising, and synthesising data found in documents (Bowen, 2009). As documents come in many forms, sense-making and cross-referencing information found in documents are key to the analytical procedure, especially in surveying fast-moving markets such as the technology sector. For this research process, which hinges on identifying and locating technical infrastructure and the actors involved in their ownership, operation, and regulation, we mobilised three types of document searches. First, we searched relevant government reports and white papers to map the policies, responsible agencies, and key sectoral players. These documents were key to identifying the actors involved in the backbone infrastructures and access networks. This document analysis was supplied by a general web search to locate players that have emerged in the content delivery network, Internet exchange point, data centre, and

broadband sectors since the publication of relevant government reports. Importantly, the web search revealed that many official reports were less detailed in their overview of key actors than was necessary for our mapping. A database was established to systematise this data, using a basic Excel spreadsheet. Second, we used a database search (regnskapstall.no) to trace the ownership control of each company listed in the database. To ascertain foreign ownership, we again had to use web search, by which the data was primarily obtained through financial news sites or stock trading sites. And third, we surveyed the industry trade press and mainstream news media to track ownership and policy developments over time. The database was then used to analyse the distribution of backbone and access network technologies, ownership (foreign or domestic, and private or public), and legal jurisdiction. There are inherent limitations to this method, the most significant being that the rapidly shifting landscape under study only enables a snapshot of an ecology under development.

Findings

The analysis reveals two aspects of particular relevance to the question of universalism, communicative power, and sovereignty: 1) that while access networks (broadband) are subject to regulation, backbone infrastructures (content delivery networks, Internet exchange points, and submarine cables) are unregulated and increasingly controlled by foreign companies, and 2) that energy companies are assuming more and more control across access networks and backbone infrastructures (broadband, 5G, and data centres). This implies an uneven jurisdictional reach of Norwegian legislators, leaving an open gate for large multinational companies to establish infrastructures that generate, store, and distribute data. The result is a potential loss of data sovereignty and communicative power by Norwegian citizens.

Backbone infrastructures

Included in backbone infrastructures are submarine cables (see Table 9.1a), content delivery networks (see Table 9.1b), Internet exchange points (see Table 9.1c), and data centres (see Table 9.1d). Submarine cables are optical fibre cables that carry Internet signals between continents; there are currently 14 submarine communication cables connected to Norway. Six of these are owned by Norwegian energy companies, most of whom are regional players (e.g., Lyse, BKK, Eidsiva). National players Telenor and Statnett own three of these nationally controlled cables. A further two are owned privately by Norwegian Internet companies (Bulk, N0r5ke fiber). One is owned by Google and Facebook together with Bulk and Aqua Comm.

Content delivery networks are geographically distributed groups of servers that work together to deliver fast Internet. These networks do not host con-

tent but act as caches to speed up the delivery of content at the edges of the network. As such, they hold strategic positions as gatekeepers of content quality for the end user. There are currently eight content delivery network providers in Norway. One is owned by Telenor, where the Norwegian state is the majority shareholder, while the rest are foreign-owned, six of which have ownership registered in the US. Among the main providers are Akamai, Azure (owned by Microsoft), and CloudFront (owned by Amazon).

Internet exchange points are physical locations where Internet service providers (such as Telenor) and content delivery networks connect. There are currently 11 Internet exchange points in Norway. Six of these are owned and operated by the University of Oslo. Of the remaining, all are privately owned, the largest actor of which is the technology company Bulk.

Data centres are physical structures that provide networking, computing, and storage. They consist of servers that need large amounts of energy to run and cool the farm. This sector is difficult to map, due in part to definitional looseness, but there are approximately 20 data centres in Norway at the time of mapping, most of which are colocation facilities. Many of these data centres are owned by primary industries (fishing, mining, and energy companies), or they are private- or family-owned. Since 2020, foreign owners have moved in to acquire seven of these centres.

Overall, the backbone infrastructures of the communication system in Norway is rapidly expanding. Norwegian-built data centres are attracting interest from foreign-based, commercial investors and technology companies. The ownership structure is complicated, with actors entering and disappearing from the scene. Most of the private actors in this sector are owned by holding companies, making it difficult to map and trace key actors and stakeholders. In essence, this is an opaque and unregulated space. The only jurisdiction that applies to this realm is general competition law, while issues pertaining to this sector range across competition, consumer, and data protection law (Konkurransetilsynet, 2021). As the Norwegian Competition Authority notes, this market is dominated by large, international players. While the Competition Authority has expressed concern regarding the extent to which Big Tech companies move in to acquire sectoral actors before they grow large enough to create competition, their jurisdiction has so far only been applied to national players. Moreover, the European Union telecommunications sector regulator BEREC (2022) has pointed to growing interdependencies between sectors in the Internet ecosystem, particularly between telecom and content delivery network markets, noting the overall heavy influence of platform players like Alphabet, Apple, Meta, Amazon, and Microsoft.

Table 9.1a Submarine cables

Actors	Owners	Owners' owners	Private/ public	Country
Andøya-Longyearbyen	Space Norway	Government of Norway (100%)	Public	Norway
Bodo-Rost Cable	Telenor	Government of Norway (53.96%), Folketrygdfondet (4.71%), State Street Bank and Trust (1.88%), JP Morgan Chase Bank (1.09%), Other (38.35%)	Public	Norway
Celtic Norse	NTE Marked AS (33,33%) Eidsiva Energi AS (33,33%) TrønderEnergi AS (33,33%)	Nord-Trøndelag Elektrisitetsverk AS (100%) Hafslund Industrielt Eierskap AS, (50%), Innlandet Energi Holding AS (49.40%) 15 Municipalities + Kommunal Landspensjonskasse Gjensdige forsikring (13.32%)	Public	Norway
EuroConnect1	Altibox (Lyse AS)	Stavanger Municipality (45.73%), Sandnes Munic. (19.53), Sola (8.74%), Time Minuc. (5.83%), Klepp Munic. (4.22%), Hå Munic. (3.78%), Randaberg Munic. (3.27%), Eigersund Munic. (2.95%), Strand Munic. (2.53%), Other (3.42%)	Public	Norway
Eviny Digital	Eviny AS	Statkraft Industrial Holding AS (43.42%), Bergen Municipality (37.75%), Alver Munic. (3.45%), Øygarden Munic. (3.42), Askøy Munic. (2.48%), Sunnfjord Munic. (2.27%), Tysnes Kraftlag AS (1.70%), Other (5.50%)	Public	Norway
Havfrue AEC2	Aqua Comms Bulk Google Meta	Digital 9 Infrastructure PLC (100%) Peder Nærbø (100%) Alphabet (100%) Mark Zuckerberg (13,6%)	Private	US
Havsil	Bulk	Peder Nærbø (100%)	Private	Norway
NO-UK	NO-UK Com AS	Altibox Carrier AS (37.43%), Haugaland Kraft AS (26.27%), Eviny Digital AS (20.74%), Jakob Hatteland Holding AS (8.1%), Polysys AS (4.69%), Green Mountain AS (2.01%)	Public	Norway
N0r5ke Viking	N0r5ke Fibre AS	N0r5ke Communication Services (100%)	Private	Norway
Polar Circle Cable	KystTele	Kjell Ivar Hansen Røsnes (100%)	Private	Norway
Skagenfiber West	Altibox (Lyse AS)	Stavanger Municipality (45.73%), Sandnes Munic. (19.53), Sola (8.74%), Time Munic. (5.83%), Klepp Munic. (4.22%), Hå Munic. (3.78%), Randaberg Munic. (3.27%), Eigersund Munic. (2.95%), Strand Munic. (2.53%), Other (3.42%)	Public	Norway
Skagerak 4	Statnett	Government of Norway (100%)	Public	Norway
Svalbard Undersea Cable System	Telenor	Government of Norway (53.96%), Folketrygdfondet (4.71%), State Street Bank and Trust (1.88%), JP Morgan Chase Bank (1.09%), Other (38.35%)	Public	Norway
Tampnet Offshore FOC Network	3i Infrastructure plc (50%) APC (50%)	3i Group plc (30.2%) Government of Denmark (100%)	Private	UK, Denmark

Table 9.1b *Content delivery networks*

Actors	Owners	Owners' owners	Private/ public	Country
Akamai	Akamai	Publicly traded	Private	US
Azure	Microsoft	Publicly traded	Private	US
BunnyCDN	–	Dejan Pelzel	Private	Slovenia
Cloudflare	–	Publicly traded	Private	US
CloudFront	Amazon	Publicly traded	Private	US
Fastly	–	Publicly traded	Private	US
Lumen	–	Publicly traded	Private	US
Telenor CDN	Telenor	Norwegian State (53.96%), Folketrygdfondet (4.71%), State Street Bank and Trust (1.88%), JP Morgan Chase Bank (1.09%), Others (38.35%)	Public	Norway

Table 9.1c *Internet exchange points*

Actors	Owners	Owners' owners	Private/ public	Country
Bergen Inter- net Exchange	Oslo University	Government of Norway (100%)	Public	Norway
CE-CIX Nordics	Deutsche Com- mercial Internet Exchange	Eco- Association of the Internet Industry	Private	Germany
DigiPlex Norway	Infrastructure Norway AS	Infrastructure Nordics 2	Private	Luxem- bourg
FIXO Free Internet Exchange	Bulk	Peder Nærbø (100%)	Private	Norway
FIXO Kristian- sand	Blix Group AS	Erik Hjelle Blix (100%)	Private	Norway
FSIX Free San- defjord IX	Terrahost	Epik Holdings INC (100%)	Private	US
NIX Oslo 1	Oslo University	Government of Norway (100%)	Public	Norway
NIX Oslo 2	Oslo University	Government of Norway (100%)	Public	Norway
Tromsø Inter- net Exchange	Oslo University	Government of Norway (100%)	Public	Norway
Trondheim Internet Exchange	Oslo University	Government of Norway (100%)	Public	Norway
Stavanger Internet Exchange	Oslo University	Government of Norway (100%)	Public	Norway

Table 9.1d Data centres

Actors	Owners	Owners' owners	Private/ public	Country
AQ Compute Hønefoss	Aquila Capital	Investment firm	Private	US
Basefarm OSL3 & OSL5	Orange	Government of France (13.4%)	Private	France
BlueFjords	Bluefjords AS	Fjordane IT AS/Iteam 10 (18.87%), Enivest AS (17.63%), Arne Myklebust AS (13.95%), Øystein O. Høyheim (6.849%), Snøtun AS (1.721%)	Private	Norway
Bulk NO1 Campus & OS-IX	Bulk	Peder Nærbø (100%)	Private	Norway
Datafjellet	Berger Toresen Holding (65%), Bårdsen Holding (35%)	Rune Berger Toresen, Åge Bårdsen	Private	Norway
Digiplex Ulven, Rosenholm, Fetsund	IPI Partners	Investment firm	Private	US
Green Mountain DC1 & DC2 OSL1, OSL2 RJU1, SVG1	Azrieli Group	Investment firm	Private	Israel
Kryptovault	KV Group	Investment firm	Private	Norway
Lefdal Mine	Ameriprise Financial	Investment firm	Private	US
Lerøen Datapartner	FSN Capital Partners	Investment firm	Private	Norway
Microsoft Stavanger & Oslo	Microsoft	Publicly traded	Private	US
Terrahost DC1-DC2	Terrahost	Epik Holdings INC	Private	US
Troll Housing 1& 2	Naas Kalksteinsbrudd	Naas Family (100%)	Private	Norway
Troll Mountain	Naas Kalksteinsbrudd	Naas Family (100%)	Private	Norway
Storespeed		John Ragnar Amundsen	Private	Norway

COMMENTS: Table 9.1a–d list the actors involved at each level of the infrastructure, their owners, and the major companies that own the owners (as of June 2023). Ownership share is noted where this is known and up to 1 per cent. Private/public refers to whether the actors have majority ownership within the private sector or public sector (the state).

Access networks

Access networks enable end users to, through their devices, access the global Internet. These consist of DSL broadband (see Table 9.2a), cable television broadband, fibre broadband (see Table 9.2b), and mobile broadband

(see Table 9.2c). These networks are considerably more stable than backbone infrastructures, primarily because they constitute scarce and valuable resources such as ground cables and electromagnetic frequencies that need to be physically put in the ground (in the case of cables) or are auctioned by the government (in the case of 4G and 5G mobile broadband frequencies). Due to the regulatory history of the Norwegian telecommunications sector, broadband infrastructures in Norway are largely regionally affiliated cooperative networks that are commercially operated but owned predominantly by public institutions through local municipalities or the state.

DSL broadband consists of a mix of technical solutions, but ultimately, this is a digital subscriber line broadband that uses copper-based landlines for Internet access. As Telenor plans to discontinue its copper wire in 2025, this technology will soon become obsolete. There are eleven broadband operators in Norway, most of which are owned by telecom companies (Telia and Telenor), energy companies (e.g., Lyse and Eidsiva), and private individuals, but the state and municipalities also own DSL infrastructure. Two foreign-based companies operate in this market.

Cable television broadband is comprised of coaxial or hybrid fibre cables that deliver television and Internet to homes. Typically, the cables to homes are connected to fibre cables in the street. As with DSL broadband, ownership here is dominated by legacy telecoms (Telia and Telenor), energy companies, and municipalities, as well as some private and family ownership. Broadband infrastructures are thus predominantly regional with control flowing from infrastructure development in local communities, led particularly by local and municipal-owned energy companies with the technical and engineering skills to run cables, facilitating entry into the telecom markets. The fibre broadband structure follows more or less the same logic; however, in this market, there are many more operators (over 70), most of which are regional structures that connect to the main cables owned and operated by Altibox, a subsidiary of Lyse.

Mobile broadband is Internet delivered to your mobile phone. Mobile broadband is licensed infrastructure, primarily because this is part of the electromagnetic radio frequency spectrum that is considered a scarce resource and thus administered by the Norwegian Communications Authority. The 4G and 5G bandwidths are owned by Telenor, Telia, and Lyse. This market is thus dominated by publicly owned companies.

Access networks are regulated under the Norwegian Communications Authority and are subject to the Electronic Communications Act (LOVData, 2004). The Act pertains to the electromagnetic frequency spectrum and its physical infrastructure. Provisions are based on principles of universal service, security, transparency, and fair pricing. Contrary to backbone infrastructures, then, access networks are highly regulated under detailed legislation that largely conforms to European Union directives. As Flensburg and Lai

note (see Chapter 8), the Norwegian digital access structure is dominated by legacy players more so than other Nordic countries. There is therefore a certain path dependency to access regulations inherited from spectrum regulations pertaining to old communications networks in radio and telephony.

Table 9.2a *DSL broadband*

Actors	Owners	Owners of owners	Private/ public	Country
Altibox	Lyse AS	Stavanger Municipality (45.73%), Sandnes Munic. (19.53), Sola (8.74%), Time Munic. (5.83%), Klepp Munic. (4.22%), Hå Munic. (3.78%), Randaberg Munic. (3.27%), Eigersund Munic. (2.95%), Strand Munic. (2.53%), Other (3.42%)	Public	Norway
Eidsiva Bredbånd	Eidsiva Energi AS (90,05%)	Hafslund (50%), Innlandet Energi Holding AS (49.4%)	Public	Norway
GlobalConnect	GlobalConnect	Investment company	Private	Sverige
NextGetTel	Kistefos Venture Capital AS	Christen Sveaas (100%)	Private	Norway
VEV Romerike	–	Høland og Setskog Elverk (100%)	Private	Norway
Sandefjord Bredånd	–	Sandefjord Municipality (100%)	Public	Norway
Sigdal Bredbånd	Lyse AS	Stavanger Municipality (45.73%), Sandnes Munic. (19.53), Sola Munic. (8.74%), Time Munic. (5.83%), Klepp Munic. (4.22%), Hå Munic. (3.78%), Randaberg Munic. (3.27%), Eigersund Munic. (2.95%), Strand Munic. (2.53%), Other (3.42%)	Public	Norway
Telenor	Telenor	Government of Norway (53.96%), Folketrygdfondet (4.71%), State Street Bank and Trust (1.88%), JP Morgan Chase Bank (1.09%), Other (38.35%)	Public	Norway
Telia	Telia AB	Government of Sweden (39.5%)	Private	Sweden, Finland
Telio	Telecom Holding 3 AS	Christen Sveaas (100%)	Private	Norway
Via Bredbånd	BigBlu Broadband	Publicly traded	Private	UK

Table 9.2b Cable television broadband (hybrid fibre coaxial net)

Actors	Owners	Owners of owners	Private/ public	Country
Altibox	Lyse AS	Stavanger Municipality (45.73%), Sandnes Munic. (19.53), Sola (8.74%), Time Munic. (5.83%), Klepp Munic. (4.22%), Hå Munic. (3.78%), Randaberg Munic. (3.27%), Eigersund Munic. (2.95%), Strand Munic. (2.53%), Other (3.42%)	Public	Norway
ATMCom	–	Svein Reidar Olsen (60.89%), Harald Tuen (26.22%), Christ-Henning Ljosheim (6.66%), Ann Jorid Aspen (4.88%), Øyvind Fjærn (1.33%)	Private	Norway
Bardufoss kabel-TV	Homenet AS	GlobalConnect AS (100%)	Private	Norge
Hammerfest Energi Bredbånd	Hammerfest & Hasvik municipalities	Hammerfest Municipality (90%), Hasvik Munic. (10%)	Public	Norway
Modum Kabel-TV & Ringnett	Cosan AS (100%)	Arve Andersen (100%)	Private	Norway
NEAS	Near Konsern	Kristiansand Municipality (39.73%), Kommunal Landspensjonskasse (33.33%), Averøy Munic. (9.8%), Aure Munic. (6.93%), Tingvoll Munic. (5.73%), Smøla Kommune (4.46%).	Public	Norway
Nokab	Nokab Holding AS	Nielsen Family (94.99%), Per Runar Furuseth (5%)	Private	Norway
Telenor	Telenor	Government of Norway (53.96%), Folketrygdfondet (4.71%), State Street Bank and Trust (1.88%), JP Morgan Chase Bank (1.09%), Others (38.35%)	Public	Norway
Telia	Telia AB	Government of Sweden (39.5%)	Private	Sweden, Finland
Signal Bredbånd	Lyse	Stavanger Municipality (45.73%), Sandnes Munic. (19.53), Sola (8.74%), Time Munic. (5.83%), Klepp Munic. (4.22%), Hå Munic. (3.78%), Randaberg Munic. (3.27%), Eigersund Munic. (2.95%), Strand Munic. (2.53%), Other (3.42%)	Public	Norway
Sognernett	Sogn Service Holding AS	Tor Ellefsen (100%)	Private	Norway
Sortland Elektro	Sortland Elektro Eiendom AS	Erik Endresen (50%), Tor Endresen (50%)	Private	Norway
Årdalsnett	Årdal kraftlag (66%)	Årdal Municipality (100%)	Public	Norway
	Eninvest AS (33,96%)	Eviny AS (52.51), Sogn og Fjordane Energi (38.74), Eviny Digital (3.6%), Tussa IKT (2.15%), N Helgheim AS (1.73%)		

Table 9.2c *Mobile broadband (4G and 5G)*

Actors	Owners	Owners of owners	Private/ public	Country
Altibox	Lyse AS	Stavanger Municipality (45.73%), Sandnes Munic. (19.53), Sola (8.74%), Time Munic. (5.83%), Klepp Munic. (4.22%), Hå Munic. (3.78%), Randaberg Munic. (3.27%), Eigersund Munic. (2.95%), Strand Munic. (2.53%), Other (3.42%)	Public	Norway
Telenor	Telenor	Government of Norway (53.96%), Folketrygdfondet (4.71%), State Street Bank and Trust (1.88%), JP Morgan Chase Bank (1.09%), Other (38.35%)	Public	Norway
Telia	Telia AB	Government of Sweden (39.5%)	Private	Sweden, Finland

COMMENTS: Table 9.2a–c list the actors involved at each level of the infrastructure, their owners and the major companies that own the owners (as of June 2023). Ownership share is noted where this is known and up to 1 per cent. Private/public refers to whether the actors have majority ownership within the private sector or public sector (the state).

Discussion

Access markets in Norway fall under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development. This is highly regulated infrastructure, expressly subject to the principle of universality to ensure fair and equal access to all citizens. As a result, this is a transparent sector, subject to the jurisdictional reach of national authorities. While the backbone infrastructures of the Internet fall under the general purview of competition law and are thus monitored by the Norwegian Competition Authority, they are subject only to laws intended to curtail the abuse of market power. Universality does not apply here. Furthermore, while the definition of “carriage” applies to all providers of Internet access under the Norwegian Electronic Communications Act, overseen by the sector regulator the Norwegian Communications Authority, the law only pertains to open traffic, exempting content delivery networks and private submarine cables.

Legally, however, the field is about to shift somewhat, with the adoption of the European Union’s Digital Markets Act and the revision of the Norwegian Electronic Communications Act. While the Digital Markets Act is a competition law intent to ensure fair digital markets, it will significantly increase the transparency of the sector. The Digital Markets Act pertains to intermediation services such as online marketplaces and app stores, search engines, social networking sites, video sharing platforms, number-independent interpersonal electronic communication services, operating systems, cloud services, and advertising services and networks. The proposed amendment to the Electronic Communications Act suggests extending the act to include number-independent services such as WhatsApp and Messenger under its jurisdiction. It also proposes to include data centres that host cloud services,

primarily for reasons relating to data security (NKKom, 2021). Per the suggested new definition, electronic communication services will likely be expanded to include services that also transmit signals between systems, such as machine-to-machine communication, which, depending on interpretation, could include data centres, cloud services, and content delivery networks. These amendments would thus bring some of the backbone players in under telecom regulations, and thus under the principle of universalism.

The laws pertaining to telecommunications are founded on universalism and thus recognise the common good characteristics of these infrastructures for enabling communication, albeit under the purview to ensure fair competition. Infrastructures for communication are key to enabling citizens to exercise the communicative power they need to question authority and thus make that authority legitimate (Flynn, 2004; Kreide, 2016). We can ask, then, how and to what extent the infrastructures analysed here – the backbone and access networks of the Internet – enable distributed communicative power as they are currently regulated. In the Nordics, the commitment to a sound digital infrastructure (Syvertsen et al., 2014; see also Norwegian Government, 2021) first and foremost associates universalism with access and is thus regulated at the access point of the Internet – with broadband. As of yet, then, backbone Internet infrastructures are not considered to be communication infrastructures. However, the proposal suggests that lawmakers are certainly beginning to think of sites for data processing and storage in this way, or at least to see them as markets where power can be exercised to curtail competition.

As universalism is typically extended to services that intend to release citizens from the undue effects of unbalanced power relations (Esping-Andersen, 1990), the backbone infrastructures that enable the Internet to be accessed by citizens should constitute a collective interest (Chapdalaine & McLeod Rogers, 2021), not least as these infrastructures control the highways and junctures where data flow. The protocols and algorithms that platforms design and operate ultimately shape the norms and rules of this infrastructure (see Musiani, 2022). The physical infrastructure of the Internet therefore entails sociotechnical systems that influence the rules and norms that govern data, and thus communicative action (Bohman, 2010; Nieborg & Poell, 2018; Ross & Chiasson, 2011). The data that run through these systems increasingly drive not just competition in a market, but also decision-making (c.f. Kennedy & Bates, 2017; Van Dijck et al., 2018). The choices that stakeholders in this realm make about technology impacts the distribution of power within the system (Dutton et al., 2004). The kind of stakeholders that are involved therefore matters, as the makeup of stakeholders will shape the government's strategies to retain and sustain data sovereignty. Moreover, the kind of regulators that are involved matters. When backbone infrastructures remain essentially unregulated, it suggests that these crucial services are not

to be considered as public goods – that they play no part in enabling agency in communicative action.

Perhaps the reason for this is that competition regulators have yet to see concerns raised within these industries that would warrant them to consider legislation. Such omissions reflect a weakness in competition regulation, as authorities are largely reliant on input from public and private actors to evaluate competitive practices in particular sectors. The fact that the technical infrastructures of the Internet are beyond the comprehension of most citizens suggests that backbone infrastructures are indeed not universalist, as their legitimacy cannot be tested through common use. To that end, nor can it be ascertained to what extent they enforce the equal rights, inclusion, and reciprocity principles that enable communicative power (Benhabib, 2007). If universality is the means to emancipate and protect citizens from market mechanisms (Esping-Andersen, 1990), the concentration of the backbone markets should be a cause for concern. The entitlement to rights that universality presupposes presumes that infrastructures should enable agency in communicative action. The ways in which this agency is facilitated or curtailed is up to the actors that own and operate these basic services that are increasingly central to the digital governance of welfare states. This reality displays a crucial weakness in competition regulation for welfare state purposes. Competition law is only intent on ensuring fairness in competition. The Electronic Communications Act pertains specifically to communication infrastructures because this market should also be governed by universal provision, not just fair competition. Some markets trade in public goods that are susceptible to market failure and should be regulated with public interest in mind. However, if data are a resource that supports free speech, the infrastructures that transmit, store, and process this data should come under the sovereignty of the welfare state.

Conclusions

Our results show that, at this point, Norwegian actors are the main participants in the country's data infrastructures, with the exception of content delivery networks, and to a lesser extent, data centres. This implies that in the lifecycle of data, data storage is the weakest link in the risk of losing data sovereignty. This is problematic because, while the physical distribution of data seems to be within the grasp of national and local players, data require storage facilities that allow public access. When the value chain has a link that is overwhelmingly external, it can put at risk the capacity of small nations to control data flows and nationwide data access. Furthermore, we also see an increase in strategic purchases by international big actors in recent years. This confirms a trend in infrastructure capture similar to that of other countries (Zuboff, 2019). Moreover, energy companies play an increasing role at the

data layer of the communication infrastructure. The actors involved in the infrastructure that supports public communication are thus expanding, to the point where multiple stakeholders contribute to shaping the material and institutional logics that will govern data sovereignty in the future.

Our concern is that if Norway's regulation and governance of the data lifecycle (production, storage, and distribution) struggle to keep up with the expansion and changes of data demanded by industries and citizens, the communicative power of citizens might be at risk of losing its universal aims. If data storage infrastructure falls predominantly under foreign ownership, the whole structure may be less robust. With regard to the backbone and access network ownership, we see global changes, but Norway seems to have a slower pace of change. This should be considered good news, as Norwegian policymakers may have more time to react to the global trend of infrastructure capture.

Limitations and further research

This chapter is an exploration-based analysis of a descriptive dataset at a specific point in time (June 2023). As such, we depend on a cross-section of available information. The major limitation of this approach is that we do not have data on the evolution of ownership of these infrastructures. Hence, we cannot assess past or future changes in the market. In such a changing environment, it is impossible for us to make predictions. Instead, we rely on what we consider potential challenges in the future based on the current situation in Norway and the global trend. Other than previously reported indicators, we have few means to explain why our findings look the way they do, and while we do not claim any causal inference, it is also a limitation to address in further research. Future studies should focus on how and why different clusters of infrastructures seem to evolve differently, and what the real outcomes of such a diverse reality are. More research is also needed to assess how changes in the data infrastructure market affect the data experience of citizens, and whether the risks and challenges we identify in this chapter actually result in reduced communicative power.

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Who owns the owners?

An analysis of ownership patterns in the Norwegian newspaper market

NINA KVALHEIM

DEPARTMENT OF MEDIA AND SOCIAL SCIENCES, UNIVERSITY OF STAVANGER, NORWAY

ABSTRACT

This chapter concerns the structure, and particular ownership patterns, of the Norwegian newspaper market. Newspapers constitute an important part of the Nordic media system, and the press has mostly adhered to the principles of the concept of the media welfare state. The state of the press is thus of importance to the state of the Nordic media system. By analysing the Norwegian newspaper market, I aim to answer the following research question: Who are the owners behind the Norwegian media companies, and what is the relationship between these owners? This is important because it illuminates the hidden power structures that exist behind the most prominent media companies in Norway.

KEYWORDS: ownership, newspapers, power, networks

Introduction

This chapter concerns the structure, and particular ownership patterns, of the Norwegian newspaper market. Newspapers constitute an important part of the Nordic media system, and the press has to a great extent “reflected the principles of the Media Welfare State” (Syvertsen et al., 2014: 47). The state of the press is thus of importance to the state of the Nordic media system. The basic premise of this chapter is that ownership matters for the content published by the newspapers. Though most owners may not interfere directly in editorial decisions, they nevertheless have some power, in terms of resource allocation, strategy development, and so on (Humprecht, 2019). Murdoch (1982) called the power to make such decisions allocative control. It is thus important to know who the owners are and what ownership structures look like. Several studies have discussed the role of owners. Research on media ownership has focused on the degree of ownership concentration in a given market (Iosfidis, 2016; Vizcarrondo, 2013; Winseck, 2008); the effects of ownership concentration on product markets, specifically related to questions of diversity (Badr, 2021; Blidook, 2009; George, 2007; Rennhoff & Wilbur, 2012; Sjøvaag, 2014a; Trappel & Meier, 2022); regulation (Sjøvaag, 2014b); and the practice of media ownership (Ohlsson, 2012). However, most of these studies have focused on the owners of the media outlets – that is, the large media corporations.

With a few notable exceptions, the owners of the owners have to a lesser extent been explicitly subject to analysis. One exception is Crain (2009), who, in an analysis of takeovers of media companies by private equity firms in the US, discussed the possible challenges following from this type of ownership. Benson (2016) argued that different ownership types (and thus different owners) promote different types of content, while Picard and van Weezel (2008) discussed the possible consequences of different types of ownership. Likewise, Achtenhagen and colleagues (2018) discussed the corporate governance of foundational ownership, and Abernathy (n.d.) discussed the role of ownership for local news. Noam (2018) lifted the discussion to the media system level and argued that what he calls outside ownership takes different forms in different types of systems. Despite these efforts to address the owners of the media owners, Dunaway (2013: 28) has argued that there is a need for studies that examine “the structural characteristics of their [the local news outlets] (or their parent company’s) ownership”. With this study, I aim to answer to that call. By analysing the Norwegian newspaper market, I aim to answer the following research question:

- RQ. Who are the owners behind the Norwegian media companies, and what is the relationship between these owners?

This is important because it illuminates the hidden power structures that exist behind the most prominent media companies in Norway.

The main argument of this chapter is that to fully understand the role of ownership in the production of media content, it is important to have knowledge about the owners *behind* the owners of media companies. Further, the second main argument of this chapter is that ownership structures are also important for the prospects of the media welfare state. Therefore, I first relate media ownership to the overall principles of the media welfare state (the four pillars as proposed by Syvertsen et al., 2014) before going on to discuss media ownership in more detail.

Media ownership and the media welfare state

Media ownership constitutes an important, yet somewhat hidden, part of the media welfare state. On the one hand, media ownership influences the media system, and on the other, ownership and ownership structures are influenced by the principles of the system. First, one can argue that media ownership affects the availability of communication systems (pillar 1 of Syvertsen et al.'s 2014 model). One central aspect of the media welfare state has been to make sure everyone has access to all types of communication systems. This has traditionally been regarded as a state issue, among other things taken care of in policy measures related to broadcasting development and Internet infrastructure (Syvertsen et al., 2014: 18). It is possible, however, to argue that universally available communication services also means having news media available wherever you live. Since the newspaper market is purely a commercial one, the owners decide which newspapers are to survive. Research has shown that some types of owners are more inclined to shut down newspapers and create so-called news deserts (Abernathy, n.d.). Identifying who and what type the newspaper owners these are is thus of utmost relevance to the media welfare state.

Second, ownership might also affect the editorial freedom of the media (pillar 2). One important part of the scholarly discussion concerning media ownership has been related to the power the owners have to interfere in editorial decisions. Different media systems have different traditions for this (see, e.g., Hallin & Mancini, 2004). In Norway, the relationship between owners and editors is regulated by a joint declaration, signed by both the Association of Norwegian Editors and The Norwegian Media Business Association. This declaration states that the owners are free to decide the ideal purpose of the newspaper, and it is also their privilege to appoint the editor. They cannot, however, interfere in the day-to-day editorial decisions made by the editor (Association of Norwegian Editors, 2011). The cultural background of the owners is thus also important for the media welfare state.

It is further possible to argue that the media welfare state itself also has an impact on ownership structures. This is particularly related to pillar three, which concerns the policy measures of the media system. The aim of media

policy has been to “modify the influence of market forces” (Syvertsen et al., 2014: 18), and one important objective of Norwegian media policy has been to safeguard and maintain diversity, both in terms of content and in terms of geographical orientation (Syvertsen et al., 2014: 54). In this, media ownership plays an important role. According to Doyle (2002: 172), “diversity of ownership of the media is generally seen as one of the essential conditions for sustaining political and cultural pluralism” and restrictions of ownership to prevent ownership concentration has been regarded as important policy measures to reach this objective (see, e.g., Østbye, 2000: 90ff). Having a pluralist media system is seen as vital for democracy, and ownership diversity is a means towards that aim.

Media ownership is also important in relation to the fourth pillar, although on a more abstract level. The media welfare state is characterised by consensual policymaking, where all stakeholders agree on the basic principles. The large, private media companies have also embraced this consensus, and according to Enli and Syvertsen (2020: 43) there is a “welfare state of mind” among CEOs of private media companies. They are concerned with public interest values; they are satisfied with their cooperation with policymakers; and they are positive towards public service media. An important question then is whether this is also true for the CEOs of the owners of the owners.

Media ownership and its structures can thus be regarded both as a prerequisite for, and as a result of, the principles of the media welfare state. Being present in all four pillars, media ownership therefore constitutes an important, although somewhat hidden, part of the media system. The system, then, to some extent rests upon media ownership and on the structure of the owners, and its robustness is thus to a large degree dependent on who the owners are and on how they are related to each other. Getting an overview of the ownership structure of the media welfare state is thus important for understanding the system.

Changes in media ownership structures

Ownership structures have changed significantly over the last 50 years. In Norway, the party press was the dominant mode of ownership until well into the latter half of the twentieth century. The newspapers were owned by the different political parties, and the newspaper was regarded as the main organ of that political party. In this system, the press and the party were “two sides of the same coin [translated]” (Bastiansen & Dahl, 2019: 163). This changed in the 1970s. Liberalisation and deregulation brought along a commercialisation of the newspaper business, and the parties were replaced by other companies as the owners of newspapers (Bastiansen & Dahl, 2019). In Norway, the three largest newspaper companies in this period were Schibsted, A-pressen [the press of the labour movement], and Orkla Media (Ottosen et

al., 2002: 207ff). This structure – with three large media companies dominating the newspaper market – to a large degree remains today, but who the three are and the constellation of the owners of these companies has changed over the last 30 years. Also, internationally, there has been a change in who the owners of the media are. In the US, there has been a tendency that investment entities, such as hedge funds and private equity firms, have replaced the old media owners, such as Gannet and Knight-Ridder. Abernathy (n.d.: 31) called these investment entities “The media barons of the 21st century” and argued that these owners have “transformed family-centered media businesses into diversified, highly leveraged investment entities that prioritize shareholder return over producing all the news that’s fit to print or publish online”. Likewise, Noam (2018) has argued that what he labels outside ownership – that is, media owners from outside the media business – is characterised by portfolio diversification, where cross-ownership takes place through investors rather than conglomerates. In this, he argued, media properties are “merely one category of asset among many others” (Noam, 2018: 1106). They are held to the same benchmarks as any other commercial good (Abernathy, n.d.: 37). According to Noam (2018), this also influences the media system of countries with a large share of outside ownership, which he has argued are investment-model driven. Type of ownership is therefore of direct interest for the media system.

Addressing ownership issues in relation to the media welfare state is thus important for two reasons. First, ownership and ownership structures are challenged and changed by the societal factors influencing the system. Market consolidation, commercialisation, deregulation, and globalisation have altered the rules and brought new players to the market (e.g., Jin, 2008). One argument lifted forward by Hallin and Mancini (2004) was that increased commercialisation and globalisation would bring the different media systems closer to each other. An analysis of the American (Nechustai, 2018) and European (Brüggeman et al., 2014) systems, however, shows that the media systems instead have become more polarised and differentiated, due to the same forces. Discussing the Swedish media system, Jakobsson and colleagues (2021) introduced the concept of the neoliberal media welfare state to describe how processes related to privatisation, marketisation, and deregulations have altered the system. For media ownership in Norway, this is particularly evident through the change of the policy measures directed towards media ownership. Here, media ownership was earlier explicitly regulated through the Media Ownership Act (Lovdata, 1997). The main purpose of this act was to prevent one, or a few, owners from obtaining too much market power. The argument was that ownership diversity is related to content diversity, and the act was designed to facilitate a diverse and pluralist media landscape. However, in 2016, the Media Ownership Act was replaced by the Act on Transparency of Media Ownership (Lovdata, 2016). This indicates a politi-

cal reorientation from considering media ownership as something that must be regulated in order to reach the desired goal (which is a pluralist media system), to regarding it as sufficient for the sector to simply be transparent. This might further indicate a reorientation of the organisation of the welfare state towards a more liberal system. Moreover, globalisation and marketisation have introduced new players to the market. One of the main fears that surfaced when the British media company Mecom acquired the Norwegian media company Orkla Media in 2006 was that the new British owners might interfere in editorial decisions in ways the Norwegian media is not used to (Kvalheim, 2009). Foreign ownership, with different ownership cultures, might thus be a challenge to the second pillar of the media welfare state.

Secondly, addressing ownership issues – with a particular focus on the owners of the owners – in relation to the media welfare state is important because political regulatory measures, such as ownership restrictions, mainly regulate the direct media owners. Analysing the owners *behind* the owners might provide a picture of who the *real* gatekeepers are and indicate where possible political action should be taken.

Why ownership matters

The basic premise of this chapter is that the owners of the owners have some sort of influence on the content that is being produced. The assumption is that even though owners are not *explicitly* influencing the content production, they still, indirectly, do. A related premise is then that the owners of the owners have some power over the companies they own, and that decisions made at this level might also affect content production in the smaller units. The question then is, what does this power look like?

For media companies, the purpose of the ownership is important when discussing the power of the owners. “All capital comes with conditions”, Picard and van Weezel (2008: 23) have argued. Therefore, it is reasonable to argue that the content of the media reflects the interest of the owners (Sjøvaag, 2020: 109). Some owners are involved in the media business for purely commercial reasons; some owners wish to use the media to spread a specific ideological message; and some owners are involved in the media business to contribute to a more enlightened society (see, e.g., Sjøvaag, 2020: 199). While the two latter, political and societal influence, will give the owners incentives to interfere in matters related to the ideological slant of the media company, the first type of owner is more preoccupied with the prosperity of the media company, and if interfering in matters related to content choices, it will be on a commercial premise. Hence, the interest of the owners might affect the media, and ownership matters because it is assumed that the content produced is influenced by the money financing it.

For ownership to be relevant, we must assume that owners have some sort of power in or over the media organisation. The question of ownership

thus concerns where the power to make decisions for the companies resides. Murdock (1982), building on Pahl and Winkler (1974), distinguishes between allocative and operational control when discussing control in organisations. Having allocative control entails controlling the overall strategic questions, such as formulation of strategy, decisions related to expansion and cutbacks, decisions related to financial policy, and decisions related to the distribution of profits (Murdock, 1982: 118). According to Murdock, allocative control resides in the hands of the owners. Operational control, on the other hand, concerns the organisation's short-term or day-to-day activities and is positioned in the hands of the managers of the company. Because most owners will not directly interfere in the media content *per se*, the allocative control is important for understanding the role of the owners in the media business. The owners of the owners may not have direct allocative control, but they might have an impact on decisions made at the allocative level. For instance, Noam (2018) argued that institutional investors might influence media companies in terms of priorities related to short-term performance and buy-and-sell decisions. It is reasonable to assume that the pressure on the maximisation of shareholder value and getting returns on the investment is larger in publicly-owned and traded companies than in family-owned or foundation-owned companies (see, e.g., Benson, 2016: 31). The commercial pressure might thus be high in this type of company, which in the end might have an impact on content decisions (Kvalheim & Barland, 2019).

The extent to which owners are involved in the running of the company is further also related to the type of owner involved. For instance, Picard and van Weezel (2008) distinguished between privately owned companies, publicly owned companies, foundations, and employer organisations when discussing the relationship between capital structure and control. They argued that private ownership entails a high degree of control, and public ownership means limited control for those who generate the money, while those who manage the capital may “have significant influence on the firm” (Picard & van Weezel, 2008: 23). For foundations, the owners have some influence, but not that much direct control, while employer ownership “may or may not” (Picard & van Weezel, 2008: 23) have an influence on the firm. Likewise, when discussing institutional investors, Brickly and colleagues (according to An et al., 2006) identified three different ownership types: pressure-resistant, pressure-sensitive, and pressure-indeterminant. Pressure-resistant owners include public pension funds, mutual funds, and foundations, and they are active in monitoring the companies in which they have invested. Pressure-sensitive owners, on the other hand, are more closely related to the business they have invested in and are therefore more reluctant to interfere in the company. Owners of this type include banks, insurance companies, and nonbank trusts. Third, the pressure-indeterminant owners, including companies such as corporate pension funds and investment counsel firms, have

certain ties to the companies they own, but these ties are weaker than those of pressure-sensitive companies, and they are unlikely to interfere in the companies they own (An et al., 2006: 121). In line with this, when analysing foundational ownership, Achtenhagen, Melesko, and Ots (2018: 129) found that foundations do not have a physical person as owner, and that “the control function [...] is replaced by foundation’s charter, which stipulates the aim of the foundation’s business activity”. They are thus often object driven rather than commercially driven, and they have a long-term commitment to the newspaper (Achtenhagen et al., 2018). The type of firms that own media companies might thus also indicate how active they are in their control of the company. Knowing who the owners of the owners are, then, is crucial for understanding the condition of the media welfare state, and analysing the owners of the owners provides useful insight in this respect.

Ownership and pluralism

On a more overall level, ownership matters also in terms of pluralism and diversity. As argued above, one of the basic premises of media policy in the media welfare state has been to maintain and safeguard a pluralist media system. In this, media ownership, and the regulation of media ownership, has been important. One policy measure in this respect has been regulation to avoid concentrated ownership. Concentrated ownership is often regarded as a threat to a pluralist media system, and the main starting point for discussions of concentrated ownership is the extent to which concentration and conglomeration leads to less content diversity (Doyle, 2002). The argument is that economies of scale and scope, which are often the objectives behind the establishment of media chains, will lead to coordinated content production, cutbacks in staff, and so on, which will further lead to a less diverse content sphere (Doyle, 2002). One of the first to address this issue was Ben Bagdikian (1983) in his well-known book *The Media Monopoly*. Here, Bagdikian warned about the consequences of ownership concentration and argued that such concentration might harm media independence. Since then, many studies have followed in his footsteps, discussing the relationship between ownership and news diversity (see, e.g., Herman & Chomsky, 1988; McChesney, 1999; Sjøvaag, 2016; Trappel & Meier, 2022). One recent example is Hendrickx and Ranaivoson (2021), who examined the effect of the establishment of the Belgian media house Mediahuis on content diversity in the Flemish news market. They found that after the founding of Mediahuis, the number of recycled articles between the newspapers owned by this media house increased; the number of journalists was reduced; and a content management system that allows for copy-pasting across newspapers was introduced. Further, there is a concern that concentrated ownership will lead to increased bottom-line pressure (Croteau & Hoynes, 2019: 84). Increased focus on money entails increased commercialisation, which might further lead to an increase in soft

content – that is, content the newspaper assumes people are interested in reading and thus also paying for (see Kvalheim & Barland, 2019). Ownership concentration is thus often, but not always,¹ regarded as a threat to diversity and to the nature of the content published.

The power of networks

In addition to who and what type the owners are, the relationships between them is also interesting. Network theory offers useful insights into the importance of social networks (see, e.g., Borgatti et al., 2009). By drawing on Granovetter's (1985) argument that "economic action is embedded in structures of social relations", in this chapter, I argue that to understand the role of ownership for content production, it is also necessary to understand the networks in which ownership is embedded. Granovetter (1985) argued that the economy cannot be understood as separate from the rest of society, and how the economy is embedded in the rest of society is important for understanding economic actions. Because it is possible to argue that the purpose of media ownership among the companies listed on the stock exchange is, at least partially, economic gain, it is also possible to understand the actions of these companies as economic actions. The media is often regarded as an institution in its own right (see, e.g., Cook, 1998/2005), with its own rules and norms. Because institutional isomorphism makes the organisations within the institution more homogenic (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), the relationship between the media owners is important. Who the holders of the power to define the norms and rules of the institution are is important for how the media operates, and thus also for the media welfare state. In this, the strength of the weak ties (Granovetter, 1973) is important. Granovetter argued that weak ties, your acquaintances, offer information, insight, and perspectives. Following this, if one holds a central position in the network, it is reasonable to assume that they are central in the exchange of information, and thus also have considerable power. Contrarily, if one is positioned at the outskirts of the network, they may neither receive much information nor provide much information to the network themselves.

Methodology

In this chapter, I discuss ownership structures by having the Norwegian search engine investor.dn.no as a data source. This is a service provided by the newspaper *Dagens Næringsliv*, where it is possible to track the owners of companies that are listed on the Oslo Stock Exchange. This search engine provides information about the companies that a specific company owns or is owned by (or both), and the percentage of the ownership, the type of shares they own (a, b, or c), and so on. This way, it is possible to get detailed information about the relationship between different companies. For

this study, the six largest newspaper companies in Norway in terms of their share of the total newspaper circulation were selected, and their relationship with other companies were registered into an Excel sheet. For the network analysis, this information was further imported into Gephi, where a network map was created using the Yifan Hu network layout.

By mapping the owners of the owners of Norwegian newspapers, I seek to provide an overview of who the owners are, where they come from, how they relate to each other, and so on. This will provide insight into the ownership structures of the Norwegian newspaper market and serve as a useful entry point to discuss the prospects of the Nordic media model and the media welfare state.

Findings

Who are the owners behind the owners?

One central question in this chapter is who the owners of the owners are, where 71.5 per cent of the Norwegian media market is controlled by six large media groups (medietilsynet.no): Aller Media, Amedia, Mentor media, NHST media, Schibsted, and Polaris. Combined, they are involved in the ownership of approximately 125 newspapers. The pressing question then is, who own these six large media companies?

From Table 10.1 we can see that the direct owners of the media groups are a diverse group. They include foundations, investment companies, mutual funds, pension funds, employer organisations, banks, religious organisations, other media companies, and private persons. Among these, there are twelve foreign companies. Three of the media companies – Aller Media, Amedia, and NHST Media group – have only one direct owner each: the Carl Aller Etablissement (foundation), Avishuset Norge AS (foundation), and NHST Holding (holding company), respectively. The three other media companies, Mentor Medier, Schibsted and Polaris media have a more varied direct ownership, which includes several of the above-mentioned company types. What is interesting to note is that the owners to some extent reflect the media companies in which they are involved. For example, *Vårt Land* is a newspaper with a religious editorial profile, and the owners of this newspaper include one religious organisation, one church, three religious foundations, and one religious management company. Likewise, Schibsted, which is an international and commercially successful company, is owned by several international banks, which might indicate that Schibsted is an interesting company to invest in. It is also interesting to note that only two of the owners of the owners are directly involved in more than one media company. These two are Amble Invest, which is an investment company owned by a private person, and NWT Media AS, which is a Swedish media company. This indicates that the owners of Norwegian media companies are a varied group, both in terms of types of owners and in terms of the specific organisations involved.

Table 10.1 The six largest newspaper companies in Norway and their owners, 2020

Media group	Newspapers (% owned)	Owners (type)
Aller Media	Dagbladet (100%)	Carl Aller Etablissement (100%, Foundation)
Amedia	80 local newspapers	Avishuset Norge ← Amediastiftelsen (100%, foundation)
Mentor medier	Vårt Land (100%)	Amble investment (18.06%, Investment company)
	Morgenbladet (95.29)	Polaris media ASA (13.62%, Media company)
	Mediehuset Dagsavisen (79.60%)	Pingst förvaltning (8.57%, Management company)
	Sulaposten (39.42%)	Stiftelsen Vårt Lands bladmisjon (6.46%, Foundation)
		Opplysningsvesenets fond (4.18%, Fund)
		Norges Bank (3.89%, Bank)
		Erik Wahlstrøm (3.72%, Private person)
		Stax Capital (3.15%, Investment company)
		Redaksjonsklubben Vårt Land (2.55%, Employer organisation)
		Normisjon (2.49%, Religious organisation)
		Svenska Handelsbanken (2.09%, Bank)
		Odd Reidar Øie (1.96%, Private person)
		Det norske diakonhjem (1.78%, Religious foundation)
		Kari Haaland Osberg (1.5%, Private person)
		Metodistkirken i Norge (1.3%, Church)
		Felleslegatet (1.26% Religious foundation)
		Swedbank (1.1%, bank)
NHST Media Group	Fiskeribladet (100%) Dagens Næringsliv (100%)	NHST Holding (100%, Holding company)
Schibsted	Vestnytt (100%)	Blommenholm industrier (25%, Foundation)
	Bygdanytt (100%)	Folketrygdfondet (8.55%, Pension fund)
	Askøyværingen (100%)	State Street Bank and Trust Company (2.85%, Bank)
	VG (100%)	Alecta tjänstpension omsäsidigt (2.28%, Pension fund)
	Stavanger Aftenblad (99.99%)	The Bank of New York Mellon (2.18% Bank)
	Bergens Tidende (99.99%)	Morgan Stanley & co. int. plc (1.8%, Finance company)
	Aftenposten (99.99%)	State Street Bank and Trust comp (1.5%, Bank)
	E24 (49%)	NWT Media as (2.21%, Media company)
Polaris Media	approx. 30 local newspapers	Schibsted ASA (29.49%, Media company)
		NWT Media (26.83%, Media company)
		Must invest (14.69%, Investment company)
		The Bank of New York Mellon SA/NV (5.13%, Bank)
		J.P. Morgan Bank Luxembourg S.A. (4.84%, Bank)
		ABBH AS (1.90%, Holding company)
		Gyldendal ASA (1.89%, Media company)
		Stiftelsen Kistefos-Museets (1.4%, Foundation)
		Sofell (1.34%, Investment company)
		Amble Investment (1.17%, Investment company)

SOURCE: The Norwegian Media Authority, 2022

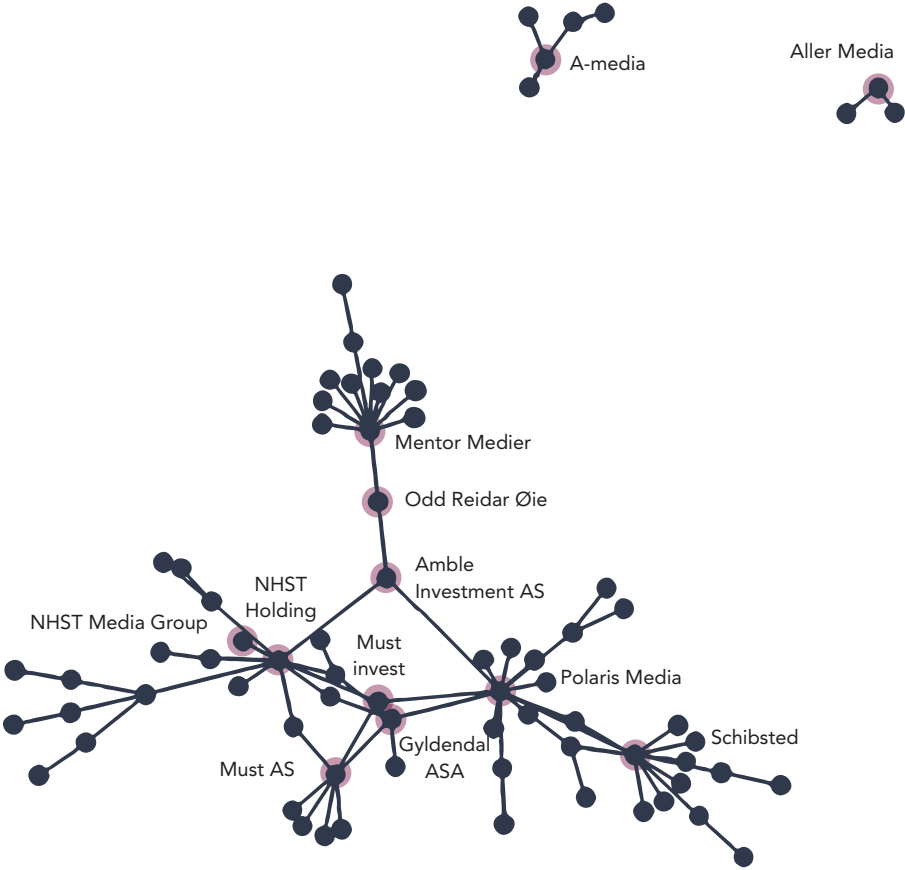
Related to this, when looking at the type of companies involved on the ownership side of Norwegian media companies, it is reasonable to assume that they own media companies for different purposes. As Sjøvaag (2020) has argued, companies are involved in the media business for several reasons, and often with an ideological, political, or commercial purpose. For the companies included in this analysis, it is reasonable to understand the involvement of religious organisations, churches, and so on, as based on an ideological premise. They want to promote or support a specific worldview and see the newspaper as a possible means for doing so. Likewise, the foundation Blommenholm industrier is a foundation established specifically to promote the societal mission of the newspapers (Blommenholm industrier, n.d.). As argued by Achtenhagen and colleagues (2018), this type of owner has ideological rather than commercial objectives. Although these owners cannot directly interfere in editorial decisions, they can, for example, affect the purpose of the newspaper in the direction of their own worldview.

On the other hand, there are also several owners involved in the Norwegian newspaper market that we might suspect are involved in the newspaper business for purely commercial reasons. This includes the investment companies, the holding companies, the banks, and so on. As discussed earlier in the chapter, different types of institutional investors have different traditions for involvement in the companies they own. While mutual funds, such as Opplysningsvesenets fond, are understood to be quite active in monitoring the companies they own, investors such as banks and non-bank trusts are more reluctant to interfere in the companies they own. In the sample of owners on which this analysis builds, there are examples of both these types. The point is that when discussing ownership, it is important to distinguish between different ownership types, both in terms of ownership purpose and how active the owners are assumed to be.

How are the owners related to each other?

Above, I argue that the owners of the owners of Norwegian newspapers are a rather varied group, and that only two of the owners are involved in more than one company. It is, however, interesting to also examine how the newspapers, media companies, and owners are related. As described above, network position is important because it indicates that some actors are more influential than others. Because economic actions take place within networks of social relations, these ties are important. How these relations look are thus also important in understanding economic actions. To get a full picture of how these different actors are related, the owners of the owners of the owners are also included in this analysis.

Figure 10.1 Overview of the owners behind the six largest Norwegian media companies



COMMENTS: To be able to include A-media and Aller media in the picture, the figure has been slightly edited.

Figure 10.1 gives an overview of how the six largest newspaper companies in Norway, and their owners, are related. There are at least two interesting aspects of this figure. First, we can see that many of the companies are clustered together. Both Mentor Medier, NHST Media, Polaris and Schibsted are to some extent related. Amedia and Aller media, on the other hand, are positioned at the outskirts of the network. This may indicate that there is a closer relationship between Mentor Media, NHST Media, Polaris, and Schibsted than with the two others. The actual ties of the physical persons within these companies, for example, through board membership, have not been subject to analysis, but it is nevertheless plausible to assume that closeness in ownership also entails some sort of relationship. Drawing on the theory of the strength of weak ties, this might indicate that some of these media companies and their owners have the power to define the rules of the institution.

Looking even closer at the network, we also see that three of the large newspaper companies, Mentor medier, NHST Holding, and Polaris Media are related through one node only, Ambel invest. This indicates that this investment company, and its owners, have a quite central position within the network, and thus potentially holds significant power. Also, Must invest plays an important role in this respect. This node is central for the connection between Polaris Media and NHST Holding, which owns NHST Media group. Adding the owners of the owners of the owners to the analysis, the node Odd Reidar Øie is revealed as quite interesting. While being one of the direct owners of Mentor medier, he is also the person behind Amble investment. This puts him in a position where he might have knowledge about things that are going on in several corners of the network, something that further makes him and Amble investment even more central to this network. As institutional theory predicts, news organisations mimic each other and form an institution by developing common norms and rules. The nodes with central positions within this network might play a central role in defining these norms and rules.

Discussion and conclusion

The main questions of this chapter are who are the owners of the newspaper owners, and how are these owners related? This concerns the structure of the newspaper market, and the main idea is that this structure is also related to the media welfare state.

The above analysis has shown that there are several different owners involved in the Norwegian newspaper market. Some of these are foundations with an ideological, societal, or religious purpose for owning media companies, while some of them are more commercially orientated with an economic purpose for owning media. These types of owners might interfere in the media companies they own in different ways, but it is reasonable to assume that while the foundations and the other media companies may enter the media market with the social mission of the newspaper in sight, the investment companies are in it for the financial gain – they see media companies as any other asset they may invest in (Noam, 2018). One possible consequence of such commercial pressure on the media companies is that it might lead them to choose the easiest accessible content, which may further result in the newspapers becoming quite similar. Content diversity might thus be reduced. Another possible consequence is that newspapers that are not financially viable will be closed. The closure of newspapers might create so-called news deserts (Abernathy, n.d.), which will have a direct impact on the media welfare state system, where universal access to media is central (see Sjøvaag & Ferrer-Conill, Chapter 9). A third possible consequence is a reduced lack of trust in the media system. According to Noam (2018: 1109),

one of the main worries related to institutional owners is that of “absentee ownership” – ownership at a distance. He has argued that this type of owner may have a “lack of sensitivity and concern” for the locality where the media outlet is positioned (Noam, 2018: 1109). This might further harm the journalistic mission. “Strong local journalism builds trust in democratic institutions, and it builds strong communities”, Abernathy (n.d.: 89) argued. A rhetorical question is, then, can local journalism be strong if its owners lack sensitivity for the local? The analysis further shows that some nodes are more central in the network of owners than others. Several of these nodes are examples of what Noam (2018) has called outside-owners – owners not stemming from within the media business. Because of the central positions of these nodes within the network, they have the power to influence the rules and norms of the institution and are therefore worth paying attention to in order to understand the future of the Nordic media system.

Another worry regarding ownership in the Norwegian newspaper market has been the entrance of foreign owners who may not share the same editorial principles as Norwegian owners have up until now. Based on the result of this analysis, however, there does not seem to be any reason to be concerned about international ownership at the moment. As the media authorities state, there are a limited number of international companies present in the Norwegian media market (Norwegian Media Authority, 2022). Schibsted, Polaris, Aller, and Mentor Medier all have international companies as owners, but their total control in terms of number of stocks controlled is limited. However, these are among the largest media companies, both in terms of turnover and in terms of the number of newspapers they own, which means that the decisions these companies take may affect quite a few newspapers. It is reasonable to understand the involvement of international banks in Norwegian media as purely commercial and with a focus on the return on the investment. It might thus be that they will get involved if the results of the companies are unsatisfactory. One of the main principles of the media welfare state and the Norwegian declaration of editorial independency is editorial freedom and no interference by owners in editorial matters. It might thus be wise to pay attention to the amount of foreign ownership, and their involvement in the companies they control.

Noam (2018) argued that outside owners might change a country’s media system. Keeping an eye on who these owners are and how they are related is thus crucial for understanding the prospects of the media welfare state.

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Endnote

¹ Ownership concentration is sometimes also regarded as beneficial for the newspaper owned by the media company. See, for example, Doyle (2002) or George (2007) for a discussion of this.

The dark side of the media welfare state

How media policy ignored consumption and climate change

HALLVARD MOE^I, GUNN ENLI,^{II} & TRINE SYVERTSEN^{II}

^I DEPARTMENT OF INFORMATION SCIENCE AND MEDIA STUDIES, UNIVERSITY OF BERGEN, NORWAY

^{II} DEPARTMENT OF MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION, UNIVERSITY OF OSLO, NORWAY

ABSTRACT

This chapter revisits the concept of the media welfare state, a term we coined a decade ago (with fourth author Ole Mjøs). The concept highlighted how welfare state principles influenced media policy in the Nordic countries and how policymakers used regulatory measures to correct negative implications of state and market governance. In this chapter, we consider how policymakers responded to a trend we did not previously discuss: the media's contribution to overconsumption and environmental damage. Based on an empirical discussion of three phases of Norwegian media policy – early television, early broadband, and early data centre policies – we argue that in facing these challenges, politicians have been less willing to use policy measures to reduce harmful consequences. Instead, there is a tendency towards unquestionably labelling media and digital platforms “a green industry”.

KEYWORDS: sustainability, climate change, media history, document analysis, Norway

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Introduction

The media sector – from gaming and social media to audiovisual streaming and journalistic news – is energy- and resource-demanding. What is often seen as a virtual activity is, in fact, a global industry of planned obsolescence, with hardware and production systems exploiting limited natural resources and contributing to carbon emissions (Cubitt, 2017; Maxwell & Miller, 2012; Starosielski & Walker, 2016). Linked to a general “techclash” (Smith, 2018), the environmental critique of media and digital platforms is becoming more prominent. Although environmental issues are hardly new, they have to a limited degree been present in scholarly discussions of Nordic media policy. The reason can probably be found in the fluctuating interest in the environment that has characterised the last half a century: As Hansen (2019: 21) has shown, based on longitudinal studies, media and public interest in environmental problems have varied tremendously from the beginning in the 1960s and 1970s until the resurgence in the 2000s.

While policy is clearly not immune to the zeitgeist, neither is research. Arguably, Hallin and Mancini’s (2004) seminal analysis of media systems appeared in a period of concern about Americanisation and cultural homogenisation. In a similar vein, our work on the media welfare state (Syvertsen et al., 2014) emerged in a context with heightened attention to Nordic politics, culture, and media (Booth, 2014; Economist, 2013; Kinsella, 2015; Kristensen & Riebert, 2017; Ohlsson, 2015; Waade & Hansen, 2017). Aiming to contribute to this body of research, we examined how critical characteristics of Nordic media related to societal features in the region. We characterised the media welfare state as based on four pillars: universal access, liberal press freedom, cultural policies for the media, and pragmatic and consensus-oriented policy development. An essential perspective in our book was that Nordic media historically had represented, and in the 2000s still reflected, a philosophy and ideal of public enlightenment as well as a social democratic project for increased equality. Lately, we have in our research paid more attention to media resistance, disconnection, and intrusive digital media (Moe & Madsen, 2021; Syvertsen, 2017; Syvertsen & Enli, 2019), a perspective which includes criticism of “fast” media and overconsumption.

In this chapter, we revisit the concept of the media welfare state with a perspective more attuned to environmental problems. By emphasising the media’s negative impact on nature and the environment, we shed light on a dark side of our original construction of Nordic media welfare states. By “dark side”, we do not mean to imply evilness or the opposite of “God’s light”, which is held as the original meaning of the expression. More in line with its use in psychology, where the shadow is the dark side of the personality, we literally think of certain sides of the media welfare state as needing direct light, aiming to make visible aspects neglected and obscured in the original description.

In *The Media Welfare State: Nordic Media in the Digital Era* (Syvertsen et al., 2014), we stressed the potential for national policymaking and the power of political decision-making. We demonstrated how Nordic politicians have been willing to compensate for negative tendencies through policymaking and interventions – within the framework of collaboration, pragmatism, and mutual respect between the political and media systems. In the book, we argued that Nordic politicians were willing to use media policy measures to reduce or counter four main societal trends: authoritarianism, marketisation, globalisation, and societal fragmentation. In this chapter, we emphasise a fifth trend, which is also held as problematic: the media’s contribution to a capitalist consumption industry enforcing a high level of energy usage and the production of luxury goods; polluting and producing waste; and destroying habitats and natural resources. Based on an empirical discussion of three phases of Norwegian media policy – early television, early broadband, and early data centre policies – we argue that in facing this fifth challenge, politicians have been less willing to act by using policy measures to reduce the harm caused by the media.

In what follows, we first elaborate on media studies’ interest in environmental perspectives, specifically contributions from political ecology (Benjaminsen & Svarstad, 2019; Devine, 2019) which we build on in our empirical discussion. Next, we briefly describe our research question, design, and methods used in the historical analysis. On that basis, we turn to the three phases before concluding with a discussion of how environmental perspectives have been treated in Norwegian media policy.

Environmental perspectives in current media research

Currently, there is increasing academic interest in how the media and Internet content and infrastructures damage the environment (Cubitt, 2017; Devine, 2019; Maxwell et al., 2015; Starosielski & Walker, 2016). It is helpful to separate three strands of research.

First, a body of literature focuses on problems related to a capitalist over-consumption economy. The media system stimulates sales of consumer goods, for example, by being dependent on income from advertising, e-shopping, and promoting an appealing lifestyle. Relevant here is the concept of fast capitalism (Agger, 2004), which describes a new stage of social life characterised by the acceleration of production and consumption and the compression of time and space. Fast capitalism implies rapid industrial production and consumption cycles and resonates with trends such as fast food, fast travel, fast fashion, and fast tech – processes that are energy-consuming and waste-producing. The rapid evolvment of the Internet and digital communication sustains and facilitates fast capitalism. Against this, various forms of “slow movements” have emerged, inspired by the 1989 Italian slow food move-

ment, focusing on slowing down consumption and utilising repair, reuse, and more sustainable production patterns. The call for a “slow tech” movement in 2014 (Patrignani & Whitehouse, 2014) is one such case, arguing for a more proactive attitude in computer ethics to combat premature obsolescence and waste (see also Widdicks et al., 2018). Similarly, there are calls for a “slow media” movement (Rauch, 2018) to combat the highly accelerated production, transmission, storing, and consumption of media content and digital devices.

A second strand of research focuses on planned obsolescence and e-waste and argues that the media system is a force of overconsumption by constantly upgrading “new generations” of terminals and devices. Smartphone production, for instance, leaves a significant footprint and exploits precious metals and minerals, and when replaced by new devices, they create waste and pollution, which are often difficult to recycle (Junge & van der Velden, 2018; Proske et al., 2016). Similarly, manufacturing one desktop computer exhausts more than 500 pounds (approx. 227 kilograms) of fossil fuels as well as 50 (approx. 23 kilograms) pounds of chemicals and 3,300 pounds (approx. 1,497 kilograms) of water – around the same volume of resources used to make a car (Rauch, 2018).

The third strand of research deals with unsustainable energy consumption, documenting an explosive growth in media volume and data traffic, requiring enormous amounts of energy for production, distribution, and storage, and pinpointing the consequences of the development of land for data centres, and so on, by replacing cultivated land and habitats (Burrington, 2015; Holt & Vonderau, 2015). Several international organisations monitor the energy use of electronic media, or data centres and digital infrastructures. A much-quoted Greenpeace (2017: 4) report claimed, “the energy footprint of the IT sector is already estimated to consume approximately 7% of global electricity”. In 2020, another report singled out China’s data centres as consuming more electricity than all of Malaysia (Greenpeace, 2020).

In some works, these different strands are brought together by the perspective of political ecology. Devine’s (2019) book on the political ecology of music can serve as a helpful illustration. Arguing that we need a musicology without music, he undertakes a historical analysis of the recording industry. His analysis shows how geopolitically and environmentally, the material extraction and processing, manufacturing, consumption, and disposal of recorded music have always strained natural and human resources (Devine, 2019). Whether it was farmers in the Southeast during the era of shellac records, oil from the Middle East during the era of vinyl, or electricity, rare minerals, and Far East labour in the digital era – the music industry has always taken its toll on human as well as natural resources, and focusing on the industry and its technology, rather than the content or texts, helps bring such tolls into focus.

The perspective of political ecology can let us adjust our attention when we study media policy. Rather than emphasising the media as content producers, cultural institutions, or distributors, political ecology invites us to view the media chiefly as technology for consumption or as a business. In this chapter, we do not aim for a fully-fledged analysis of the political ecology of television or online communication. Our primary research questions are as follows:

- RQ1. How have the environmental problems caused by media and digital platforms been addressed in Norwegian policy debates?
- RQ2. To what extent and how have policymakers instigated measures to mitigate these problems?

As part of the analysis, we are interested in how media-technological developments are conceptualised in the debates. To what extent are the debates characterised by technological determinism, a perspective which sees technological developments “as the central causal element in processes of social change” (Croteau et al., 2022: 33)? While technological determinism rarely appears in crude form in scholarly work; it is often prevalent in political and business discourse to indicate material and infrastructural constraints (Gillespie et al., 2014). Furthermore, we are interested in how globalisation and the international competitive situation are used as arguments to support certain developments. As Croteau and colleagues (2022) have pointed out, the borderless nature of the Internet combined with free trade agreements makes it difficult to impose regulation on the national level, while at the same time, there is intense pressure from global media conglomerates to expand their markets.

In sum, this can amount to a form of political realism, which we can use as a vernacular term to describe a political sentiment. This is a sentiment that expresses the difficulty individuals, groups of actors, and political bodies in small countries experience in restricting major technological developments due to factors grounded in materiality, globalisation, economy, and culture.

In this edited volume, and over the last decade, the concept of the media welfare state has been discussed, amended, and criticised. Our purpose here is to contribute to this discussion as we have done in the past (see also Enli & Syvertsen, 2020; Enli et al., 2018). Our goal in this chapter is to illustrate how different *zeitgeists* spur different research questions and illuminate how alternatives not chosen and questions not asked also significantly impact media and social systems (Freedman, 2010). With this in mind, we turn to our empirical cases.

Research design, methods, and empirical data

In *The Media Welfare State*, we drew on historical and contemporary studies and surveys conducted by others and ourselves. We emphasised broadcasting

policy, particularly the regulation of television and digitalisation, examining how different policy and regulatory regimes developed, what perspectives were present in the public and the political debates, and what choices were made in those contexts.

In this contribution, we re-examine some of the original material, searching for moments in media history when decisions were made with crucial environmental impact. Periods are selected when new media technologies were high on the policy agenda – when their positions and roles are unsettled and up for debate (Marvin, 1988). We selected sources from two phases of media history, each representing a debate about new technological phenomena: 1) Early television policy (1960–1972) and 2) early broadband policy (1995–2005). To put these historical cases into perspective and to explore more recent policy debates, we added a third case closer to the present: 3) early data centre policy (2010–2022). The motivation is to enable comparison with the more well-known cases and to bring our argument on par with the ongoing issues of today. The analysis is tentative and limited to Norwegian media history in line with our main objective, which is to introduce a new perspective.

The three cases allow us to start with a debate at the core of cultural policy, with media technology (broadcast television) firmly defined within the realm of professionally produced mass media. In case two (broadband networks), we step into a debate where media production, content, distribution, and reception mix with other forms of digital communication in a phase often described by the buzzword “convergence”. Finally, when turning to our third case (data centres), we expect the debate to cover an even wider territory in terms of societal domains (e.g., banking, national security). The analysis, then, should also consider how this assumed move relates to the issues of environmental impact.

The empirical data are mainly official documents (such as documents of political debates in the parliament, governmental white papers, and proposals), in addition to media coverage and letters to the editor in the local and regional press in Norway. We use these texts as sources, assuming they “somehow reflect the interests or actions of their authors or in some other way represent the facts of the policy process they refer to” (Karppinen & Moe, 2012: 185). By analysing the documents, we aim to bring out political interests or forces and “determinants behind policy developments” (Karppinen & Moe, 2012: 185). As the three cases rely on three datasets, we refer to primary and secondary sources. Given that the two first cases represent revisits of previously studied policy processes, we include references to our previous work where relevant. All quoted material not originally in English has been translated.

Analysis: Consumption and pollution in policy debate in three phases of Norwegian media history

The early phase of television (1960–1972)

The history of broadcasting, and particularly the development of television as a mass medium, has had a crucial importance for what we today might interpret as sustainability and environmental challenges for the media system. Norwegian media history is unique, but also closely related and influenced by international television history (Smith, 1998). What was unique about the Norwegian debate on the introduction of television was that it lasted for a decade, included a variety of political arguments, and involved several debates in the parliament. Accordingly, Norway became among the last countries in Europe, and the Nordics, to launch television.

The international influence included, on the one hand, reports from American television and how it created a culture of passive watching, with politicians generally fearing a decay of social and cultural public life (Enli et al., 2013). On the other hand, the politicians argued that even though they wanted to postpone the launch of television in Norway, they had no other choice unless they wanted to become “technologically backward” compared with other countries (Enli et al., 2013: 215). In addition to the cultural debate, there was also an economic debate, which included both arguments for broadcast television as a new industry with the potential for economic growth and workplaces, and those against television, which described it as an “unnecessary luxury in a time of scarcity” (Enli et al., 2013: 215).

The establishment of television in Norway in fact represented a cultural change and played a central role in the growth of consumer goods after World War II. The expansion of television supported the sales of a variety of new products, which required energy and resulted in pollution and waste problems. Research on waste management has documented the enormous pollution caused by the consumption of television around the world. Getting rid of all the television sets every time a new generation replaces the old is a tremendous waste problem, not least because many of them were carelessly dumped, and because the sets include polluting minerals which are difficult to recycle (Singh et al., 2016).

The expansion of television also resulted in the production of a huge amount of secondary and associated consumer goods. For one thing, the television sets came in protective packaging with products such as Styrofoam, rapidly producing a waste problem (Stokes et al., 2013). Second, the new medium’s popularity, with its prominent place in the living room, also represented a new market for related add-on products (Spiegel, 1992). Illustrating the entangled role of media in this kind of development, the press promoted television-related consumerism by giving expert advice on how to place the television set in the living room, the ideal distance to the sofa for watching,

as well as suggesting that viewers should invest in equipment such as wooden legs and shutter doors because “a dark screen outside broadcast hours is not a pretty sight” (as cited in Enli, 2001: 243).

Private businesses also used the popularity of television to develop new television-related products, which were heavily advertised in the newspapers. Typical new products included “TV-outfits for the housewife, TV-slippers, and the TV-jug” (as cited in Enli, 2001: 248). This shows that, in addition to the television sets, which were also heavily advertised, related industries also saw business opportunities in the TV age (Enli, 2001).

Accordingly, revisiting the political debate about launching television in Norway, we find no explicit discussions about overconsumption or waste problems, rather the contrary: It was regarded as positive to use the television for expansion and growth by showcasing important national industries such as agriculture or fisheries, as well as to guide consumers through the new reality of the consumer society, with an increasing abundance of products (Norwegian Parliament, 1957).

Moving on to the 1970s and the debate about colour television, it seems like the zeitgeist had already started to shift, as we notice more critical perspectives related to overconsumption. The international, as well as the national political agenda becomes increasingly attuned to environmentalist challenges. For example, *The European Conservation Year 1970* was a campaign initiated by the Council of Europe to alert Europe to the importance and necessity of protecting the environment and its natural resources. Such international political trends influenced the Norwegian political scene, and just a few years later, in 1972, the Norwegian Ministry for Environmental Affairs was established, followed by the Climate and Pollution Agency in 1974.

The debate about and resistance against colour television is often interpreted as moralistic and even an example of Norwegian backwardness (Norwegian Parliament, 1957). A closer inspection, however, shows that the resistance was mainly based on critical perspectives surrounding consumption. The political debates, as well as much media coverage, emphasised the capitalist economy of consumption which colour television represented. Examples include debates and news stories about the cost of colour sets, and how poor people and low-income families could not afford such investment. These debates took place against a backdrop of a constant push from electronic industries to increase sales. An illustrative example is a page in the paper *Arbeidets Rett*, which both includes advertisements for new colour television sets by the well-known brands Tandberg and Phillips, and an interview with four male respondents, presented with photos and quotes, all arguing that colour television is too expensive for ordinary people (Enli, 2001). The price was around 700 euro (Enli, 2001), which equals about 6,000 euro today.

The criticism also pinpointed how the capitalist system depletes the environment and contributes to increased pressure to consume more goods in rich

countries, while poor countries get hurt by pollution, resulting in a damaged environment. The politicians who wanted to slow down the colour television transition aimed to limit the growth in private luxurious consumption. The centrist liberal party, Venstre, stood out with a strong engagement for the conservation of nature and a programme explicitly opposing colour television, while warning that we are heading towards a “catastrophe” and urging policy to “shield ourselves and future generations against the destructions of the waste from modern society concerning plant and animal life, air, water and soil” (Venstre, 1969).

A similar framing can be found in a newspaper debate (Enli, 2001), with colour television being held as emblematic of human conduct that will deplete the Earth’s resources and make it uninhabitable for coming generations.

However, the environmentalist perspective was not limited to the critics, as the supporters of colour television also used such arguments to defend the new technology. A central politician representing the Labour Party, Einar Førde, who later became a minister and director general of the Norwegian public service media organisation NRK, argued that an expansive television development would *benefit* the environment, urging “parliament to encourage production which does not gobble up energy and pollute” (Norwegian Parliament, 1971–1972: 1697).

Even though these arguments were met with scepticism (see Norwegian Parliament, 1971–1972: 1699), and others did not pick up the idea, two opposite perspectives on what best benefits the environment were established. On the one hand, the media and electronics industry was portrayed as “clean and green”, while on the other, the media system was regarded as a driver towards overconsumption and a luxury lifestyle that drains the Earth’s natural resources. This focus on technological development driven by market imperatives was voiced by opposing politicians, for example, Versto (Labour) in comparing the politicians as “continuing to dance around the golden calf without really getting control on the development”, and warning that such lack of political control led to “a pure private-capitalist view always winning” (Norwegian Parliament, 1971–1972: 1700).

Yet, these arguments were primarily dismissed as moralism. In a much-quoted speech from the parliamentary debate, Førde (Labour) diagnosed much opposition against colour television as “psychological”. He claimed that critics saw the new apparatuses as “unnecessary toys”, with colour television unwarrantedly having come to represent “the evilness and irrationality in our economic system”. He claimed the opposition had “strong elements of puritanism”, and scornfully caricatured the opponents as thinking that “we have to accept that sin has come to Earth, but we don’t want it in colour” (Norwegian Parliament, 1971–1972: 1696).

Key elements in the debate were technological determinism and realism. Central players supported colour television because the industry was moving

in that direction, and it seemed like the natural next step. If it resisted the tide of change, the Norwegian public service broadcaster could be excluded from international broadcasting collaboration, and much content was already produced in colour. The realist position was broadly accepted, also in press coverage and among the retailers of television sets (Enli, 2001). The realism is also evident in that both sides in parliament agreed that “it makes little sense” to discuss *whether* Norway will introduce colour television, but *when* this should happen (Norwegian Parliament, 1971–1972).

In contrast to the dominant realism, politicians in the minority refused to accept the technologically deterministic position. They criticised the majority for being irresponsible and avoiding the obligation to mitigate international and technological pressures at a crucial historical moment.

To summarise, during the early years of television in Norway, the environmentalist challenges were debated concerning the consumption economy, planned obsolescence, and waste. However, against this, a new argument, even though only budding, was on the rise: “green industry”. This argument compares the media sector to other industries and claims it is polluting less. Supported by this new argument, the dominant view takes growth for granted, and technological determinism and realism win: We have no choice.

The early phase of broadband (1995–2005)

Moving into the period around the turn of the millennium, we encounter a different zeitgeist. The politics of digitalisation became an international megatrend, with the Nordic countries among the key players, and with limited discussion about the environmental consequences of digitalisation. This might be explained by climate and environmental engagement being erratic and decreasing during the 1990s. In his timeline for public interest in the environment, Hansen (2019: 22) pointed out how interest receded throughout the 1990s and did not experience a resurgence until the first decade of the 2000s. While the United Nations Millennium Development Goals were launched in 2000, it was not until the Sustainability Development Goals in 2015 that the climate perspective gained serious agenda-setting status. Climate engagement had then been boosted by events such as Al Gore’s 2006 documentary film *An Inconvenient Truth*, and the 2009 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen, often regarded as a starting point for the widely engaging mobilising climate movement. It was not until the middle of the first decade of the 2000s that systematic research documented the severe climate footprint of digitalisation (Berkhout & Hertin, 2004; Zurkirch & Reichart, 2000).

With this as a backdrop, we focus on the debate about the development of broadband distribution networks for television and digital media and limit the period, starting around 1995 when the digital distribution technology

started to take off in the Nordics up until about 2005 when the focus in the media sector moved on to web 2.0 (popularised from 2004, see Mjøs et al., 2014). We study this phase because digitalisation was heavily debated and processes were launched to increase digital transformation. The Norwegian debate was related to structural change in the media sector, including a liberalised broadcasting sector, with new commercial players and a forceful and optimistic digitalisation discourse, as well as a focus on possibilities of convergence between broadcasting, telecom, and Internet and communication technologies, both for the industry and the authorities (Moe, 2003; Storsul & Stuedahl, 2007; Syvertsen et al., 2014).

Yet, the debate was also driven by a fear of being left behind and an ambition to be included in the international digital expansion. In this ambition, the state and the private companies had overlapping interests and wanted speedy processes. Thus, implicit technological determinism is more evident than in earlier periods, and the debate becomes more concrete and directed towards broadband.

From 2000, the Labour government organised work on digitalisation across societal sectors as “eNorway” white papers, inspired by the European Union’s eEurope initiative, headed by the Norwegian Ministry of Trade and Industry (2000b). The overarching aim for policymaking was to facilitate and stimulate competition, but also secure fairness: “The development proceeds at a tremendous pace. If Norway is going to remain at the forefront, we need to stimulate quick construction and good access to broadband networks and services. We have no time to lose. The future is now!” exclaimed the Minister of Trade, for the occasion re-titled as “eMinister”, in an action plan for broadband communication in 2000 (Norwegian Ministry of Trade and Industry (2000a).

An environmental perspective can be found in these plans, on the level of slogans and headings: The overarching aim for the government was to create “a green knowledge economy and an information society for all” (Norwegian Ministry of Trade and Industry, 2000b: 1). In a later plan from 2001, this is formulated as “a holistic policy for a sustainable knowledge society, based on environmental information, increased use of telecommunications as substitute for transport, a green product policy and green public procurements” (Government of Norway, 2001).

Beyond such headings, neither overconsumption nor environmental issues are prevalent in the discussion. Rather, the basis for the debate is the need to strengthen the media and communication industries. In parliamentary debates (in May 2000 and May 2001), the focus lies on trade in general and opportunities for rural areas to profit, as well as the role of policy to facilitate commercial growth. A conservative representative, for instance, drew on then-current success stories in neighbouring countries:

If Norway is going to have any chance of succeeding and develop an IT industry where both small IT companies and industrial engines like Nokia and Ericsson have the opportunity to succeed, Norway has to appear as an attractive country for investments and development of new ideas and enterprises. (Gabrielsen, 2001: 2972)

Although environmental problems were not at the forefront of the discussions, two critical aspects do relate to the impact of media digitalisation. First, there was a debate about how to deal with waste. The debate did not, however, address how to decrease consumption, only how to compensate for its consequences. Information provided to the public about the environmental challenges was seen as essential and came hand in hand with the reassurance that in Norway, regulations and contracts (pointing to future regulation of e-waste deposits) were in place to allow for the secure handling of discarded equipment (Government of Norway, 2001).

The second critical aspect is voiced by the Socialist Left party, touching on the environmental consequences for land and habitats in its support for more state intervention, namely that a lack of regulation could lead to several overlapping, competing networks being built, also entailing more waste and unnecessary claims of more land. This perspective does not get traction in the debate, and we do not find substantial traces of strong oppositional voices in the media debate or coverage of this phase of the digitalisation of media in Norway (Moe, 2003).

To summarise, two problematic aspects are mentioned in the debates: the problem of electronic waste and the perspective that the media system exhausts land and natural resources. Beyond these aspects, which are put forth by the minority opposition, the perspective is deterministic across the political spectrum, based on the understanding that new media technology is vital to competing internationally for trade and industry investments. The potential that commercial media growth will further stimulate overconsumption with negative consequences for pollution and climate change is not mentioned.

Early data centre policy (2010–2022)

The processes surrounding Norwegian data centre policy are evolving in a context of predominant ideas and expectations of a “green transition”. The term itself has become frequently used in policy debates, embraced by both politicians and industrial leaders. In 2015, green transition was coined as the “new word of the year” by the Norwegian Language Council. The same year, the so-called Paris Agreement marked a shift as the first-ever universal, legally binding global framework to limit global warming.

In Norway, global zero-emission ambitions became linked to the ambitions for the green transition, but as seen elsewhere (e.g., Söderholm, 2020), the debate focused on how economic growth and technological development

can facilitate the transition, and continued growth was taken as a given. The policy debate about data centres is particularly striking because it is dominated by one perspective: An interpretation of data centres as a *green industry* yielding *green jobs*. This is striking given the growing public interest in the environmental impact of data centres (Brevini, 2020; Burrington, 2015; Cubitt et al., 2017; Maxwell & Miller, 2020) due to their energy consuming operation. In fact, they are characterised as “one of the fastest growing consumers of energy and are expanding rapidly” (Holt & Vonderau, 2015: 82).

The contrast between the idea of a green industry and its environmental impact is obvious, but “green” remains the dominant perspective supported across the political spectrum, as well as by principal lobbyist organisations for private enterprises (NHO, n.d), who urge for “a technological development and deployment of climate solutions on a big scale which both cut emissions and create jobs, activity, growth and welfare” (see Ortar et al., 2023, on the comparable case of Iceland). The only contrary argument has come, unsurprisingly, from environmentalist organisations, which call for policy measures, such as a transition from Norway’s massive production of fossil fuel (UN, 2020; Fisher, 2022).

Data centre policy debate in Norway is influenced by the shared interests of politicians at the national and local level, and it was local initiatives that started the process and encouraged national policy. In 2016, opposition politicians, speaking for their constituencies in rural areas, spurred the government to produce an action plan for data centres to seize the potential for growth in competition with other countries (Norwegian Parliament, 2016). On one level, political agency is emphasised because political measures are needed to develop a green industry. On another level, however, the view is deterministic in that digitalisation is imagined as necessary for a “green transition” and the premise that digitalisation demands data centres. Digitalisation is only considered a part of the solution to the climate crisis, not a part of the problem. In this frame, the critical argument for attracting data centres to Norway is that it will help lower global emissions since Norway offers a cool climate, renewable energy, and available building sites (Norwegian Parliament, 2016).

The process that led to the establishment of one of the first data centres in Norway, later known under the brand Green Mountain, a name which gives associations to green rhetoric of corporate social responsibility, started with a local initiative from the municipality of Rennesøy and a local real-estate developer. When they requested to rent derelict NATO facilities deep inside a mountain for a planned data centre, the project was received with enthusiasm, goodwill, and future optimism in the local press and by local politicians. The vision was labelled a “green super data centre” since

the environmentally friendly [aspect] of establishing data storage inside “mountain halls” is that there is plenty of space [...] a stable climate which reduces the need for cooling [...] cold fjord water for cooling [the

servers] close by, and easy access to clean energy [from hydroelectric power plants]. (Berentsen, 2010a: 6)

However, “free cooling” locations are business calculations, as lower temperatures outside provide significant cost savings inside, as at least half of a data centre’s energy footprint has historically come from the energy required to keep the servers cool (Brevini, 2020; Holt & Vonderau, 2015).

Typically located in rural areas, data centres like Green Mountain’s industrial expansion means claiming land previously defined for agriculture, wildlife, or nature. Rather than a fundamental question about long-term priorities and holistic consequential planning, the need to expropriate areas for buildings and infrastructure was handled in regular procedures to grant permission like any industrial development in the past (Berentsen, 2011a). Only later, in 2018, did critical voices against re-regulation of the agricultural land surface (Berentsen, 2018a, 2018b). Beyond this issue, local opposition is limited to isolated citizens who blame the local politicians for “only pleasing the capital” when allowing for an expansion of the road to facilitate infrastructural requirements but failing a promise to build a pavement (Berentsen, 2013). Nevertheless, such voices appear weak, far between, and unheard (cf. Ortar et al., 2023: 150ff).

The national policy documents refer extensively to Green Mountain Data Centre as a successful frontrunner. The government strategy document *Norwegian data centres – sustainable, digital power-centres* (Government of Norway, 2021) includes material from Green Mountain, texts describing how the company contributes to local industry, and images portraying the beautiful nature. As argued in Holt and Vonderau’s analysis of Google’s representational strategy (2015: 76): “The main foci of the images are the expanse of sky and land surrounding the buildings. In effect, the data centers are visible but rendered practically inconsequential by the surrounding spectacle of natural vistas and wide-open spaces.”

The strategy for Norwegian data centres is presented as green and sustainable, referring, for example, to how the industry is willing to adjust to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and highlighting an aim to become a “sustainable and circular economy”. Bolstering the argument, the government strategy claims data centres will contribute to a “circular economy” by citing Green Mountain as a source for ad-hoc plans to re-use waste heat in raspberry cultivation and on-land lobster farming (Government of Norway, 2021).

A key message in the policy documents is that Norway aims to be attractive for international data centres, and three strategies are suggested: First, the government wants to intensify the promotion of Norway as a data centre nation, for example, with the ad, “Could Norway be your next data centre location?” (Government of Norway, 2021: 48)

Second, the documents suggest that taxation is reduced and regulations simplified to make it attractive to choose Norway as a location (Government of Norway, 2021). These policy measures align with the message from local politicians in Rennesøy already in 2010, who argued that the taxation on electricity consumption threatens growth. Around 2010, momentum was built across political divides to reduce the taxation to attract the new kind of industry, resulting in a removal of the tax (Berentsen, 2011b, Øvregaard & Nådland, 2010b for support from the social left party).

A third strategy is a rhetoric of “greenwashing”, which ignores negative aspects of growth in the communication sector while claiming that investments in data centres in Norway are, per definition, climate-friendly (e.g., Ihlen, 2009).

To sum up, the debates locally and on the national policy level surrounding data centres show a willingness to use political measures, but not to reduce energy use or tackle the consequences of rapid growth in the media and communication sector. Rather, measures should increase economic growth and trigger new investment. The perspective on developments threatening agricultural land is present, but only as a minor opposition. However, the problem with the enormous need for energy to feed the data use is not present – neither is the very premise and opportunity for new industrial growth.

Conclusion

This chapter has addressed aspects of the media industries that have previously not received much attention within media policy and media systems research, namely the media’s contribution to overconsumption and environmental problems. Our main aim has been to introduce this perspective, inspired by recent work on the political ecology of the media. We approached the issue with our previous work on the Nordic media systems as a basis, with three debates on new media technologies in Norway as empirical cases. Based on the studies of early phases of television, broadband, and data centre policy debates, we asked to what degree critical perspectives on the media and communication system as an environmental problem could be found in Norwegian policy debates, and whether policymakers instigated measures to mitigate these problems.

The discussion demonstrates a historical development from the introduction of television to the recent debates about data centres. The material indicates an absence of environmental and climate perspectives in the first debates about launching broadcast television in Norway, mainly because the dominant perspective embraced the new consumer culture and television’s role in informing sensible consumers. However, as the debate later turned to colour television, a critique of overconsumption and perspectives on environmental global justice was prevalent in some political quarters. The critique was

dismissed as moralist and reactionary, though, losing ground to a dominant perspective that framed media and electronics as a promising future industry.

Rather than gradually becoming more prominent, the perspective on over-consumption and environmental effects of media expansion retreated again in the debate about broadband, which we describe as uncritical towards the digitalisation-boosted consumer explosion. Still, some compensatory measures were instigated, especially a scheme for reducing e-waste. In our most recent case, the environmentalist perspective returned to the agenda during the debate about data centres, but not as a critique of the environmental harm of digital services. Instead, the dominant framing was that data centres were valuable investments and necessary to realise ambitions for green industries. Hence, the construction of data centres became a political poster case for “the green transition” and was not seriously discussed in terms of its effects on consumption, waste, and emissions. Although adverse consequences for farming, habitats, and high energy use were acknowledged, these aspects are limited and weakly represented.

The discussion reflects how political debates relevant to the environment have been characterised by technological determinism and the view that a small nation-state like Norway can do little to counter technological and global market forces. We found that in the first debate about introducing television, policy measures were used to reduce the negative consequences for culture, but not for nature and the environment, as there was no room for such perspectives in an optimistic reception of new technology and growth in consumer products. In the debate about colour television, policy measures were seriously debated, and a group of politicians (in the minority) wanted to delay the transition to colour to avoid increased consumer pressure. The debate on broadband demonstrated a more prominent political willingness to deal with the negative consequences, first and foremost, by discussing how to handle the waste problem. In the debate on data centres, the dominant perspective is that Norway should do its utmost to be a winner in the global race. Rather than reluctance to establish data centres, the political decisions are geared towards providing opportunities for a new industry, which is unquestionably termed “green”.

Overall, we have argued that politicians have been less willing to act by using policy measures to reduce the environmental harm caused by the media – compared with the historical examples central to the development of the media welfare state (Syvertsen et al., 2014). To make sense of this finding, we first need to remember that the policy debate about data centres is ongoing, and that policy responses might appear clearer in hindsight. That said, the policy issues we have analysed take us from within the core of cultural policy to general technology and economic policy, as digitalisation brings media content providers into the realm of general communication infrastructures. This entails a change in policy aims, stakeholders, as well as valid arguments

in the debates. In *The Media Welfare State*, we argued that policy measures were responses to forces of authoritarianism, marketisation, globalisation, and societal fragmentation. In a sense, countering these forces through media policy aligned with the welfare state project and measures to build and maintain such a societal system. With the force of media contributing to (over) consumption and environmental crises, the picture is not as clear-cut: Curbing developments might seem to put core components of the welfare state at risk if it entails less economic growth, fewer jobs in rural areas, lack of renewal of the Norwegian technology industries, and so on. This entails a potential change for our future conception of the media welfare state, and it also points to a challenge for future work.

The Nordics are often heralded for healthy relations between the media and the political system, with a strong legacy press, editorial independence, and substantial media policy interventions at an arm's length distance, including through trusted and strong public service broadcasters. The merit of a perspective inspired by political ecology, as applied to this context, is the ability to see the Nordic media from a different angle, to highlight other aspects of their role in society and the world, both in historical analyses and moving forward.

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From media welfare to data welfare

Broadening the scope of digital media welfare

ANNE KAUN^I & HELENA LÖFGREN^{II}

^I MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION STUDIES, SÖDERTÖRN UNIVERSITY, SWEDEN

^{II} SWEDISH NATIONAL CHINA CENTRE, SWEDISH INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS, SWEDEN

ABSTRACT

This chapter engages with the notion of the data welfare state, extending the discussion of digital media welfare. Our main aim is to address the shifts in welfare provision under the paradigm of datafication. This primarily conceptual contribution puts forward the normative ideal of the data welfare state as a point of departure from the media welfare state. In the chapter, we highlight the current limits of data welfare and outline the prospects of the data welfare state by drawing on two empirical case studies of data-based technologies implemented by 1) a Swedish municipality to automate social benefit applications, and 2) a smart-sensor project of a public housing company to improve public safety. The case studies serve as an illustration of the conceptual arguments being made while shifting the focus from traditional media institutions to broader welfare infrastructures that are increasingly being datafied. To develop a better understanding of data welfare, we suggest revisiting the concept of mediation in the context of the data welfare state, in which the process of datafication is becoming a major way of mediating the social good.

KEYWORDS: data welfare state, datafication, smart sensor, mediation

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Introduction

As this edited volume illustrates, discussions of the (digital) media welfare state are vivid today. Previous research in the field has focused on questions of how to organise a media system to ensure a “good” life for as many as possible (see the introduction to this volume; Jakobsson et al., 2022b; Syvertsen et al., 2014). This has taken different, specific shapes, including the investigation of media policy (Jakobsson et al., 2022a; Kammer, 2016), public service broadcasting (Freedman & Goblot, 2018; Syvertsen et al., 2014), and emerging challenges with digital media platforms (Ala-Fossi, 2020; Andersson Schwarz, 2015). Contributing to this research realm, we argue that the digital media welfare state needs to be considered in broader terms. Not only are the conditions and the structure of public service broadcasters changing with digital media, but also welfare provision more generally. Consequently, we consider digital media as part of the broader system of the welfare state that is, in the Nordic countries, based on normative ideas of universalism, equality, and decommmodification (Jakobsson et al., 2022b). Grounded in these normative principles, arguments for the welfare state as facilitating social cohesion, balancing risks, and preserving human dignity are put forward by Jakobsson and colleagues (2022b). While the media system is an important factor in the welfare system, digital media platforms and technologies also play important roles in other welfare sectors and should be considered as part of the digital media welfare state. Accordingly, in this chapter, we shift the focus from public service media and media proper towards other domains of the welfare state that are equally affected by changes implicated by digital media technologies. In doing so, we aim to answer the calls to bring the fields of media and communication studies closer to welfare research (Syvertsen et al., 2014). Conceptually, we suggest engaging with the notion of the data welfare state to achieve this broadening of (digital) media welfare research. According to our understanding, the data welfare state generally concerns two core areas: first, the data-based automation of public administration, for example, automated decision-making on social benefit applications; and second, the data-driven automation of broader communal infrastructures, for example, digitalisation projects in the realm of smart city initiatives.

We illustrate the conceptual argument on the data welfare state with examples for each area that are representative of the general development. Ultimately, we argue that practices of datafication expand from the commercial realm into these areas of the welfare state, and, by extension, fundamentally change the premise of welfare provision. The data welfare state further relates to practices of value-creation, which the use of smart technologies generate. Furthermore, aspects of data ownership, and how data are used, emerge concerning an ownership that is separate from those who create it. Citizens as data producers are in many cases not even aware of the under-

lying data-based infrastructures, nor do they have the possibility to opt-out. Hence, we explore the following question:

- RQ. What implications does algorithmic automation, with the help of digital technologies, have for how welfare is conceptualised and delivered in the long run?

This needs to be considered when conceptualising the welfare state beyond the provision and regulation of media content proper.

From media welfare to data welfare

The relationship between questions of welfare and different kinds of media technologies has been studied in diverse fields and from a broad range of perspectives. The approaches that are of relevance here can broadly be distinguished into three interrelated fields studying the nexus of (digital) media technology and welfare: first, studies of the media welfare state and its extensions, focusing on the data(fied) welfare state; second, studies of the digitalisation of the welfare state; and third, studies of welfare technologies.

The first subfield emerges within media and communication studies. Here, the notion of the media welfare state focuses on the question of how to organise the media system to facilitate communication and encourage living a good life (Syvertsen et al., 2014). Media policy promoting a strong public service tradition, for example, in the Nordic countries, has been especially important here. Jakobsson and colleagues have recently engaged with the normative foundations and motivations of media welfare. Furthermore, investigations and conceptualisations of the media welfare state have moved into an exploration of whether and how discussions of the premises of media welfare are still valid in a digital media ecology (Ala-Fossi, 2020; Enli & Syvertsen, 2020).

Relatedly, scholars have started to engage with the question of how the process of datafication is changing the organisation of the welfare state and the idea of welfare itself, particularly its specificities in the Nordic countries (Andreassen et al., 2021; Dencik, 2022; Dencik & Kaun, 2020). These explorations extend the earlier work on media welfare as they consider the implications of datafication for the broader welfare sector and include studies of, for example, social scoring mechanisms and automated decision-making in public administration (Kaun, 2021).

The second subfield emerges out of sociology with a focus on welfare policy. Here, a growing research field is engaging with the broader trends of the digitalisation of the welfare state (Busemeyer, 2022). Special emphasis is put on welfare policies to meet the challenges of platform economies and increased automation that influence the development of the job market.

Lastly, the subfield of welfare technologies focuses on devices that are employed primarily in the care sector, including care robots and sensors in

the home of caretakers (Kamp et al., 2019). This field emerges out of science and technology studies as well as other technology-oriented disciplines, such as human–computer interaction.

Lina Dencik argued that the datafied welfare state is based on two logics: first, an actuarial logic that individualises the risks of social problems; and second, a logic of rentierism, which refers to the underlying economic model that reinforces the production and circulation of data. This, she argues, leads to a re-configuration of social powers that undergird the welfare state. Following her proposal, we discuss examples of the data welfare state and slightly shift the focus from the digital media welfare state to capture broader changes in welfare provisions and the networks of institutions with the responsibility of promoting the economic and social well-being of citizens. To do so, we rely on the adaptation of the media welfare state model towards the data welfare state, as suggested by Andreassen and colleagues (2021). The model adapts the original four pillars of the media welfare state as proposed by Syvertsen and colleagues (2014) to include broader processes of datafication, but at the same time, it follows the normative foundations of the media welfare state. Namely, it is based on universalism, equality, and decommodification, motivated with arguments regarding social cohesion, risk exposure (externalisation of risks), and human dignity, as discussed by Jakobsson and colleagues (2022b).

To conceptualise the data welfare state, Andreassen and colleagues (2021: 208) engaged with the notion of datafication, which refers to the “the process of using data – mainly from digital environments – to understand sociality and social behaviour”. The process of increasingly turning aspects of social life into data is, according to José van Dijck (2014), built on the ideology of dataism, which describes an undivided trust in the superiority and neutrality of digital data. The process of datafication in turn allows for anticipatory practices of prediction and prognosis on a new scale. For example, social media data are considered as objective traces of social action facilitated by large-scale platforms that act in neutral ways (van Dijck, 2014). The ideology of dataism is also reflected in what Nick Couldry and Ulises Mejias (2020: xiii) have termed “data colonialism”, namely an emerging order “for the appropriation of human life so that data can be continuously extracted from it for profit”. According to Couldry and Mejias (2020: xiii), “this extraction is operationalised via data relations, ways of interacting with each other and with the world facilitated by digital tools”. These data relations, which increasingly form an important way of generating profits, link our social actions intimately with capitalism and contribute to a continuous surveillance and monitoring of our behaviours and interactions. This has led to the decreasing autonomy of individuals while a rapidly growing commercial social quantification sector has emerged that, among other things, includes social media platforms as well as smart-home appliances, and increasingly, domains of the welfare state.

Andreassen and colleagues (2021) have suggested rethinking the ideals of the media welfare state that encompasses the four pillars mentioned by Syvertsen and colleagues (2014) – namely, universal access, editorial freedom, content diversity, and durable policy solutions – which are posited as ways to safeguard the media welfare state. In modifying these four pillars, Andreassen and colleagues (2021: 210) considered the following:

- 1) justice and non-bias in processes of datafication; 2) decommodification, that is, freedom from commercial logic; 3) data diversity acknowledging different needs of citizens and residents; and 4) transparency on the datafication process providing sustainable and meaningful information for citizens and residents.

In linking datafication to the welfare state, it becomes clear that in many ways, data have become a proxy for the ability to distribute welfare and mediate the social good. It is therefore especially urgent that scholars of media and communication studies turn to the question of how the data welfare state can and should foster capabilities for human flourishing, a question that must be at the heart, and not the margins, of the discipline. Considering the datafication of welfare as a form of mediation implies that data are contributing to a transformative process “in which the meaningfulness and value of things are constructed” (Silverstone, 2002: 761).

Table 12.1 *Adaptation of four pillars of the media welfare state to the data welfare state*

Media welfare state	Data welfare state
Universal access to information	Justice and non-bias in processes of datafication
Editorial freedom	Decommodification
Content diversity	Data diversity
Durable and consensual policy solutions	Transparency and sustainability

SOURCE: Andreassen et al., 2021

The contours of the data welfare state: Core welfare services and communal infrastructures

The contours of the ideal data welfare state developed above are in the following discussed towards the background of two case studies, namely a study of the Trelleborg model for fully automating the processing of applications for social benefits and a smart-sensor project implemented by the public housing company, Uppsalahem. For the case studies, we conducted interviews with project managers, case workers, developers, as well as representatives from a matching platform that aims to bring together the public sector and start-

up companies. In the case of the Trelleborg model, we draw on interviews with the project manager of the automation project and a caseworker that was part of the pilot. In addition, we have analysed policy and strategic documents that detail the automation project in the municipality. In the case of Uppsalahem, we have interviewed the business developer at the housing company, a property manager, as well as a technician and a janitor. Beyond representatives from Uppsalahem, we have interviewed a business developer at Ignite Public, a matching platform for the public sector and the start-up scene. We have also interviewed the CEO of Collactivate, the start-up company that has developed the smart sensors. Beyond the material generated through the interviews, we draw on official presentations and documentation of the pilot project implementing the sensors in two housing complexes in a suburb of Uppsala.

Justice and non-bias in the process of datafication

The first ideal of the data welfare state promotes justice and non-bias as values. That means that data and automated decisions based on those data should adhere to the principle of justice and non-bias, meaning that they should not discriminate against certain populations or privilege certain groups before others. The smart-sensor project highlights that vulnerable populations often emerge as testing grounds for new technologies. The sensors in this and similar projects are mainly installed in areas that have been identified as problematic or, in official Swedish terminology, vulnerable [utsatta områden] or extra vulnerable [extra utsatta områden]. Understandably, these areas emerge as excellent contexts for sensors that supposedly help to efficiently fight vandalism, which is assumed to lead to more serious crime. At the same time, the sensors also gather additional and more systematic data on forms of disobedience, which are strategically used to negotiate the investment of further resources regarding safety and surveillance in the area.

As Uppsalahem's business developer argued:

I think the better evidence you have the more you can make and change... If you can show numbers, you can show that "we've had 40 different deviations in this area and it's because of this" then people start to understand "okay, we have to do something". It becomes another thing... Yes, but I feel that we will be able to use this to... It will be a much better basis to make a change. And just that "it's messy". It's such a vague thing to say. "Tenants feel it's unsafe. It's messy". Yeah, but what is it? "When was that? What happened?" We can't really answer this. So that now it gets pretty razor sharp, 40 anomalies, that's at night. "Well, what is it?" "Well, but it's people staying up in the stairwell". "Okay". Yes, but then we can frame the problem a bit more like that and then do something. (Interview 4 – Uppsalahem)

In a sense, the strategic and systematic datafication of safety work reinforces the status of the residential areas as *problematic*, while similar forms of disobedience go unnoticed in other areas. At the same time, the work with sensors does not address the root causes of the identified problems, such as vandalism, but treats symptoms, often simply dispersing the deviant behaviour to other places. The public housing company Uppsalahem is, of course, aware of this fact, and they argued that they are also taking other, broader precautions to solve long-term issues, for example, by engaging in larger collaborations with the municipality and police as well as projects with youth and civic centres. However, it is much more difficult to measure and provide evidence for the success of these long-term strategies (Interview 4 – Uppsalahem).

Similarly, the focus on introducing digital technologies in public administration to increase efficiency often concentrates on services geared towards vulnerable populations, including welfare beneficiaries and long-term unemployed persons. One example here is an automation project by Trelleborg municipality that has been running since 2017. Trelleborg municipality, with roughly 46,000 residents, has introduced fully automated decisions for social benefits applications. The municipality prides itself as being at the forefront of automation efforts, leading the piloting innovation programme from Rebel to Model (Rakar, 2018). More specifically, the automation system is based on a rather simple decision-tree model that cross-checks certain variables in re-occurring social benefit applications with databases from, for example, the Tax Agency, as well as income or payments from the state health insurance. People affected by the automated decision-making system are residents in the municipality who are applying for economic support [ekonomisk bistånd], including welfare benefits [försörjningsstöd], which either fully or partially cover costs such as housing, food, clothing, telephone, and Internet access. Hence, it again involves a group of especially vulnerable citizens who are affected by the piloting and introduction of automating welfare technologies.

Decommodification

The second ideal of the data welfare state refers to decommodification, namely that services should be provided to citizens based not on the principles of the commercial logics of profit maximisation, but rather the ideal of contributing to dignified life for everyone in society (Jakobsson et al., 2022b). Like many other projects that are based on partnerships between public and private entities, the involved companies aim to capitalise broadly on the technological solution, as the representative of the start-up providing the sensor technology in Uppsala made clear:

Everything with start-ups is really about... Right now it's the, if you will, the Trensor, which is the main product that we're selling right now. Then

we're looking at broadening our portfolio of products and services. So for example... Now we're looking at lighting, for example. Can we monitor street lighting in a better way? (Interview 1 – Collactivate)

At the same time, the public sector has more generally emerged as an important and increasingly interesting area for investment and commercial returns for the tech industry, leading to what, among others, Lina Dencik has called rentierism (2022: 157). As part of this move, the matching consultancy platform Ignite Public contributes with training start-ups on how to deal efficiently with public sector partners, but first and foremost, they debunked what they consider a long-running myth that collaborations with the public sector are notoriously slow:

We thought in the beginning that it would be much faster to match private large companies with start-ups, that it would be faster to get them into the pilot. But if we put enough time in the mobilisation stage, then it's very fast to go to pilot with the public sector. If there is general support, mandate, and budget we often go to pilot within two, three months. And then it's up and running. In some cases, it's only been a few weeks before it's up and running. So that's a little myth that I think can be busted. It takes a long time if you haven't mobilised, if there's no mandate and anchoring and budget, then it can take a very long time. (Interview 5 – Ignite)

Most of the tech-focused and digitalisation projects, such as the automated decision-making project in Trelleborg and the smart-sensor project in Uppsala, are implemented as pilots. Generally, Ignite Public recommends piloting in principle, as it is possible to work with public sector entities via direct public procurement without an extended application process. Moreover, a contract can be signed directly with one company. The full project budget is, however, limited to 615,000 Swedish kronor (approx. 55,000 euro) per year and is not allowed to run for longer than two years. The handbook for start-ups by Ignite Public further specifies that the projects should be presented as research, namely experimental or development initiatives within the framework of the Public Procurement Act [LUF – Lag om upphandling inom försörjningssektorerna]. Initially, this means that the contract is not for profit and does not affect subsequent competitive tendering. At the same time, the pilot project allows one to develop a new product that is later acquired by a public sector actor. To ensure this, Ignite Public also recommends immediately claiming secrecy for the product under the trade secret paragraph of the Public Access and Secrecy Act [OSL – Offentlighets- och sekretesslag]. This also allows for its later commercialisation. As for the housing company, the property value increases with these measures:

[...] we've had a lot of problems with youth hangouts and cannabis... well, cigarettes and stuff. Until it's completely clean. And it creates a whole area,

it increases the value of the properties, that's also an important aspect.
(Interview 1 – Collactivate)

Although all the partners interviewed in the context of the smart-sensor project emphasised the success of this specific project, pilots like the one studied here rarely make it to full and upscaled implementation. As the interviewee with Ignite confirmed:

Of the matching meetings... I think that in public, of the matching meetings that we have, about 50 per cent go to follow-up meetings and 10 per cent... I would say between 10–15 per cent go to pilot. And it might increase a little bit then, because we haven't been in business that long. So some of it is a bit behind schedule. But I'd say it's probably about 10 per cent that goes to the pilot. And of those, a number have gone to scale-up and the others we don't really know yet. [...] if there are 13 pilots in Uppsala. I think it's between 10–13 pilots in total in Uppsala. If the figure is important to you, I can get it for you. And they have scaled one, two, three... Well, they may have scaled three of... three or four of them already. It's a methodology that works, you could say. But there I can bring out... If you want those numbers, I can bring out exactly how many pilots and with which ones and so on. (Interview 5 – Ignite)

Another aspect that potentially jeopardises the ideal of decommodification is the issue of data ownership. In this specific project, the ownership of the data produced by the sensors is unclear. The project leader from Uppsalahem we spoke with was not sure who owns the produced data and did not consider this question a crucial problem either. The start-up Collactivate argued that the data are owned by Uppsalahem. At the same time, the customer – a public actor – does not really have access to the raw data except through dashboard mediation. The data are furthermore stored in a cloud-based storage solution provided by Amazon, which makes the ownership even more problematic.

Data diversity

Data diversity of the data welfare state refers to the acknowledgement of citizens' different needs, which has been discussed previously under the umbrella of the capabilities approach suggested by, for example, Martha Nussbaum (2006). Building on Amartya Sen's work, she suggested that justice concerns "what people are able to do": their capabilities to actually achieve well-being rather than formal rights or freedom. This implies that "individuals need different levels of resources if they are to come to the same level of capability function. They also have different abilities to convert resources into actual functioning" (Nussbaum, 2003: 35). The introduction of smart digital systems such as sensors is often motivated with quantitative measures of efficiency and resource-savings, as well as fairness and equal treatment based on the

assumption that bias and noise will be minimised or eliminated altogether by reducing human intervention in the decision-making process. In contrast, the capabilities approach advocates for nuanced and individual measures based on specific, contextual needs. The data produced by the sensors are standardised, decontextualised measures and registries of movement patterns that say very little about the reasons why young people are hanging out in certain areas of the residential blocks and vandalising the interior. Rather than considering the specific needs of the groups that are identified as problematic, the sensors place focus on the deviant behaviour itself by datafying, and hence streamlining, it. In doing so, the sensors are considered more reliable and accurate, as the Collactivate representatives argued:

And we do this in two ways, both for illogical sensors and logical sensors. The illogical sensors are the residents and staff who report when something is abnormal. It could be, for example, that you find drugs, or if you see that the cleaner goes and finds cannabis butts or finds lots of soda cans, candy wrappers or something. Well, then you can get an indication of what is going on there. Or that someone has peed in the elevator or something like that. Then we have the residents who can report when an unsafe incident is detected. And then we have the logical sensors. You've been to Uppsala and seen these devices. They looked a bit different in Uppsala. But this is our sensor, as we call it. It uses a, what we call, threshold value, when an event exceeds these parameters, then something should happen. (Interview 1 – Collactivate)

This can subsequently be set against the backdrop of how so-called vulnerable areas are considered as venues for these and other similar security solutions (see, e.g., Melgaço & de Freitas, 2022). Based on the public awareness of an area as dangerous, as a “lawless zone” outside a common norm, policy measures are justified. When such representations of an area take hold in the public consciousness through political or media discourse, actions that would otherwise be considered unthinkable become feasible. These aspects become central to how the use of technology is linked to social relations and power structures, and how they can contribute to the stigmatisation of specific areas. Housing is a central concern in this chapter, but it is housing in specific areas, namely areas characterised by “messiness” and vulnerability.

Transparency and accountability

Lastly, the data welfare state should adhere to principles of transparency and accountability. In the case of the smart-sensor project, residents were informed about the installation of the sensor boxes in the cellar area. In the future, it is furthermore planned to allow for participation in the reporting of deviant behaviour through an app that streams the generated data to Uppsalahem's

dashboard. However, this degree of transparency and involvement of residents was not self-evident in the beginning. During the development phase of the project, there were numerous discussions about whether and how to involve the residents in the project.

Beyond this specific project, start-up companies are coached by Ignite Public in how to navigate the transparency and public information requirements in Sweden, where access to public records has been a notoriously strong value that is safeguarded by constitutional law. Here, Ignite Public recommends applying for parts of the project being treated as trade secrets to ensure that the development process does not have to be made fully public and a commercial product can be developed afterwards.

Another aspect that touches upon the question of transparency is that the collected data travel from this specific housing company into broader collaborations and networks though in an aggregated process. Insights and data can be, for example, shared in the context of “Effective Coordination for Safety” [Effektiv Samordning för Tygghet – EST] work by municipalities, as the project coordinator at Uppsalahem argued:

I can imagine that the data can be used for many purposes. One is to know “what is normal?” and “what’s going on?” That’s great. Then we can use it in this big security work together with the municipality, this EST work where we report incidents to the municipality and then we work together with it. So I think it can be of great value there. Then you have to package the data. You can’t just say “there’s been a scream”. It’s not like that. But you have to say “here we have had this kind of anomaly”. I think that will definitely be useful in the EST work. (Interview 4 – Uppsalahem)

This move is indicative of a general tendency to share data across domains and draw public housing initiatives into the data analytic practices of the police, which is sometimes explored under the banner of predictive policing.

Discussion: From the logic of care to the logic of control

Digitalisation initiatives, such as the Trelleborg model and smart-sensor projects funded by public sector institutions, rarely adhere to the normative principles of the data welfare state. Instead, the projects are indicative of how the welfare itself is increasingly conceptualised, and in extension, provided for in a manner that adheres more with market principles. While Lina Dencik (2022) has argued that the datafied welfare state emerges around two logics, namely the actuarial logic of the individualisation of social risks and the logic of rentierism – the reliance on an economic model that is based on the production and circulation of data – we argue that the data welfare state is also based on a shift in the relation between care and control.

Welfare state models have historically been based on the balance between providing care – to different degrees depending on the specific welfare model – and control, both in terms of nudging citizens into certain behaviours and controlling fraud with welfare benefits (van Kersbergen & Vis, 2013). Data-based services and forms of surveillance that are increasingly part of the welfare state, and which have led to the emergence of the *data* welfare state, shift this balance. Here, we do not argue that surveillance and control are new or characteristic only of the data welfare state, but rather that they have emerged in a new quality and scale that is historically unprecedented.

The logic of care within the welfare state ranges from providing support for fundamental needs to supporting citizens in their flourishing and good life (Jakobsson et al., 2022b; Lomborg, 2020). The logic of control instead refers to paternalistic policy with the aim to enforce or prevent certain behaviours, for example, promoting what is considered to be healthy lifestyles by punishing or more subtly nudging citizens. The logic of control also refers to the prevention of welfare fraud and the unmotivated payments of benefits. In contrast to the logic of control, the logic of care can also be characterised as more open-ended and requiring interaction, as well as negotiation between different parts. Providing care following the capabilities approach necessitates the contextualisation and situatedness of needs (Ruckenstein & Turunen, 2019). The logic of control is increasingly expressed through safety and surveillance initiatives, as the one explored here.

While the smart-sensor project was initially motivated with reference to the aim of social sustainability and promoting the feeling of safety among the residents, all implemented measures first and foremost focused on control mechanisms with identifying, disrupting, and preventing deviant behaviour as the main aim. Although it has been argued that the generated data can also be used to advocate for broader and long-term measures, including youth and civic centres as alternative spaces for young people to hangout, it was emphasised that this long-term work is more difficult to engage with. The business developer at Uppsalahem pointed out:

We will see things that are far beyond being a property owner, that maybe the municipality has to take more responsibility in or that we together take more responsibility. Just the example of these young people who don't really have anywhere to go. That's the basic problem. That's what we have to get to grips with. They must have meaningful employment and, of course, somewhere to be. [...] It is clear that we can't do it ourselves, but we must help. Maybe finding facilities, maybe giving them a chance to try out some different leisure activities so they don't just wander around the area. (Interview 4 – Uppsalahem)

In terms of the financial investment in digitalisation projects more generally, we can draw a comparison with the budget post for Allmännyttan's Digitalization Initiative, which ran between 2019 and 2022 and had a budget of

around 88 million Swedish kronor (approx. 7.8 million euro) in investments for the energy efficiency of buildings, and a total budget of 900 million Swedish kronor (approx. 80 million euro) in 2021. While the digitalisation initiative supported small-scale pilot projects like the one explored here, energy efficiency projects are often large infrastructural investments.

In the case of the Trelleborg model, the success of reducing the number of social benefit recipients has dominated the discussion. The automation project has also been motivated with efficiency gains when it comes to the administration of records. The saved time was supposedly dedicated to personalised service for the individual citizen. Instead of controlling applications, case workers were supposedly investing more in meeting the needs of the individual resident. However, the project also came with a re-structuring of the whole department, which led to a reduction of case workers from eleven to three. Again, the supposed gains for investing in care work seem marginal.

Conclusion

Many of the contemporary data welfare state projects are still appearing as comparably simple technologies, such as decision-trees and rule-based static algorithms, as well as simple sensor systems, but they have increasingly important functions for mediating the common good. For example, the smart sensors have a social function in the lived spaces, delivering a sense of security for the tenants and providing valuable information to property owners by informing them of malicious damage. Beyond that, we also show in this chapter how these data welfare projects have broader implications than just delivering an efficient administration and innovative security solution. These technologies are challenging the policy decision-making processes and broader ideas of welfare by mobilising data as facts about and for welfare as well as expressions of welfare delivery.

The policy aspects can be understood by considering the intersection of different stakeholders: public actors, with a democratic mandate and budgetary boundaries; private actors, such as start-ups; matching actors (often consisting of a public–private partnership); and external software developers. Within these relationships, tensions emerge around time, transparency, and accountability. Public actors have a long-term time frame, transparency requirements, and concern for citizens' opinions. A small start-up company, with a shorter life span, may not even survive a full term of office. However, being designed as a pilot project is a way to circumvent long-winded decision-making processes and lengthy procurement processes – in favour of fast-track projects decided by civil servants, making the political process redundant. This development further risks depoliticising what are political decisions and implementing social measures without political anchorage, which is a general future challenge of the data welfare state.

In the chapter, we point out how data welfare technologies are specifically implemented, often in socially vulnerable areas; for example, an expanded use of smart technologies as a safety measure means that some areas would be targeted over others. Although reinforced by the idea that data welfare technologies are objective and based on “hard data”, telling us what is really happening, such measures also challenge public trust and risk creating stigma, while also excluding political discussion.

While data welfare technologies have in fact led to improved service delivery and, for example, reduced vandalism and littering in defined areas as well as an increased sense of well-being, in the case of the smart-sensor project, they complicate the role of citizens as both consumers and producers of data. The residents consume the service produced by the data-based smart sensors, yet they also produce the data that is fed into the system, contributing with their labour. This is a value-creating process, where the value accrues mainly for external stakeholders outside the area in which it is produced. Residents in vulnerable areas produce data daily through living and dwelling, but at the same time, they do not take part in a holistic solution, as these technologies create islands of automation and digitalisation in a larger welfare state context.

The case studies provide insight into various deviations from the principles of the data welfare state with a reinforced focus on control that should be of concern for future research in the area. Packaging data-based welfare technologies into a narrative that highlights efficiency, safety, and security, making it difficult to raise concerns about these types of smart solutions, ultimately threatens the very idea on which the principles of the data welfare state is based. The discussion presented here is also an attempt to bring welfare research and media research closer together by extending the concept of the digital media welfare state by the notion of data welfare.

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From reality-TV to rurality-TV

Exploring the genre of idealised rural lifestyles in Nordic public service television

LINUS ANDERSSON, MARTIN DANIELSSON, MALIN HALLÉN,
& EBBA SUNDIN

MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION STUDIES, HALMSTAD UNIVERSITY, SWEDEN

ABSTRACT

This chapter introduces rurality-TV as a genre, and we discuss how public service media, through this genre, contributes to symbolically resolving tensions between the rural and the urban, and we address processes of mobility and urbanisation in the Nordics. Three popular reality-TV programmes depicting rural life are analysed: *Bonderøven* [loosely translated as *The Hillbilly*], later known as *Frank & Kastaniegaarden* (DR), *Hjælp vi har købt en bondgård!* [*Help we have bought a farm!*] (SVT), and *Oppfinneren* [*The Inventor*] (NRK). These are approached through three questions: What constitutes public service rurality-TV as a genre in terms of form and content? What values are negotiated in the programmes? How can we understand rurality-TV in the context of public service broadcasting in the media welfare state?

KEYWORDS: reality-TV, lifestyle-TV, public service media, rural

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Introduction

It is the life story of a man in the wilds, the genesis and gradual development of a homestead, the unit of humanity, in the unfilled, uncleared tracts that still remain in the Norwegian Highlands. It is an epic of earth; the history of a microcosm. Its dominant note is one of patient strength and simplicity; the mainstay of its working is the tacit, stern, yet loving alliance between Nature and the Man who faces her himself, trusting to himself and her for the physical means of life, and the spiritual contentment with life which she must grant if he be worthy. (W.W. Worster, in an afterword to his translation of Knut Hamsun's novel *Growth of the Soil*)

Knut Hamsun's 1920 novel *Growth of the Soil* depicts a mythical primordial scene: a man who mixes his labour with the land to make a living for himself. The novel can be read as an anti-modern romantic, and it earned Hamsun the Nobel Prize in 1920. Arguably, this literary rejection of modernity is not an entirely Nordic phenomenon but finds its counterparts in the American transcendentalist's movement of the late nineteenth century (High, 1986). However, in their Nobel Prize presentation speech, the Swedish Academy stressed how the setting and theme for the novel is as familiar to Swedes as it is to Norwegians: The story of a man, on his own, developing a homestead with his bare hands, is a theme that seemingly runs deep in Nordic culture.

A more recent contribution to this mythology is a television genre that has gained popularity in Nordic public service broadcasting over the past decade, a genre that invites the viewer to witness how a man (and his family) turn their back on urban modernity to cultivate the land and connect to a pre-modern tradition, supposedly more authentic than what an urban lifestyle has to offer. We call this genre rurality-TV, and our aim in this chapter is to use it as an example for discussing the role of public service media in the current media welfare state model at a time where ideological conflicts are cast in an urban–rural framework. The purpose is to discuss how public service media contribute to symbolically resolving tensions between the rural and the urban and processes of mobility and urbanisation in the Nordics. In doing this, we focus on three popular programmes: *Bonderøven* [loosely translated as *The Hillbilly*], later known as *Frank & Kastaniegaarden* (DR), *Hjälp vi har köpt en bondgård!* [*Help we have bought a farm!*] (SVT), and *Oppfinneren* [*The Inventor*] (NRK), asking what constitutes public service rurality-TV as a genre in terms of form and content. For example, what values are negotiated in the programmes? And how can we understand rurality-TV in the context of public service broadcasting in the media welfare state?

In this chapter, we argue that this television genre, as developed in the context of public service, should be understood in relation to the media welfare prospect of universal services (Syvertsen et al., 2014) and community building (Jakobsson et al., 2023). Since the concept of the media welfare state was

introduced, it has been the subject of various reinterpretations and rearticulations (Enli & Syversten, 2020). Primarily, the concept has been applied to system level analysis, showing its heritage from Hallin and Mancini's (2004) comparison of media systems. Our chapter addresses a conventional aspect of the media welfare state: public service television. However, it focuses on an aspect often overlooked in the media welfare state literature – content – and a form of which is seldom discussed in relation to media welfare: entertainment. Essentially, we are interested in meaning and how the principles of media welfare translate into the symbolic realm through popular television. It is well-documented how public service media institutions in the Nordic region enjoy a high level of trust among their audiences (Kalsnes et al., 2021; Lindell et al., 2022). The high support and trust in public service broadcasting organisations that can be found in the Nordic region ultimately come down to the programming, or at least we can assume that the average media consumer is more likely to encounter public service broadcasting through its programming rather than the policies and broadcasting agreements. Nevertheless, the Nordic public service broadcasting companies airing the rurality-TV programmes under scrutiny here (DR, SVT, and NRK) all adhere to various content regulations, and these regulations constitute an important aspect of the media welfare state. For example, the interrelated media welfare values of universalism and community are evident in regulations declaring (albeit in slightly different words) that these public service broadcasting companies must provide diverse programme content that connects and reflects the whole population across geographical and cultural differences (Ministry of Culture Denmark, 2023; Swedish Press and Broadcasting Authority, 2023; NRK, 2023). The principle of universalism in the context of public service broadcasting thus extends beyond questions of universal access to services and includes also universal rights to be represented on television.

Lifestyle media and reality-TV have been described as a kind of modern moral theatre that stages a normative boundary work to separate legitimate and illegitimate ways of life, often with implied class connotations. For example, Raisborough (2011) has pointed to the role that lifestyle media plays in late modernity as a guide to assist the self in navigating the uncertainties and multiple choices in late modernity. Jakobsson, Lindell, and Stiernstedt (2021) have shown how the turn to reality and lifestyle programming among Nordic public service broadcasters has been understood as an adaptation to neoliberal governance structures.

Media welfare in the Nordic region

In their 2020 report on the state of the Nordic region, the Nordic Council of Ministers declared the following:

Compared to other countries in Europe, the populations of the Nordic countries stand out as being the most mobile which contributes to the ongoing urbanisation of the population. This shift in the population away from periphery rural areas towards urban centres brings about planning challenges in both shrinking and growing regions. (Heleniak, 2020: 45).

These migration intensities are comparable to other highly mobile societies, such as the US, Canada, and Australia. Still, the Nordic region is more rural than urban, and the rural–urban divide has become increasingly politicised and understood as a source of polarisation (Kenny & Luca, 2021). Public service media, then, must navigate a landscape marked by internal mobility, urbanisation, and a threat of rising conflicts between the cities and the countryside.

Public service broadcasting is central to theories of the media welfare state. It is a manifestation of universal access, but also an institution upholding the responsibility to represent the whole country. Part of this responsibility draws on mass media's power to symbolically establish divisions in terms of centre and periphery, and to charge place with social and cultural significance (see Couldry, 2004). Following Jakobsson, Lindell, and Stiernstedt's (2023) discussion of the normative foundations of media welfare, this responsibility can be framed in terms of compensation for inequalities in recognition due to an uneven distribution of symbolic power. Public service's ability to deliver on this responsibility has been debated for decades, and in Sweden, the relationship between the site of production and the quality of the programme content (in terms of representing the whole country) has been discussed (Reimer et al., 2004). A more recent article about the neoliberal media welfare state (Jakobsson et al., 2021) argued that Nordic public service broadcasters have adjusted to a neoliberal model of governance, and that this adjustment can be considered a turn to reality- and lifestyle programming. Aside from this, Nordic public service television in this era displays a certain type of output that can be understood in a media welfare state framework. Among the successes of Nordic television over the past decade, we find at least three genres that are interesting from this perspective. The first two genres are slow-TV (Pujik, 2021), and Nordic Noir (Creeber, 2015), genres that have received much scholarly attention – slow-TV as a reinvention of the television medium and its relation to the audience; Nordic Noir as a theme that explores the trauma of a failed utopia in Nordic welfare states. The third genre is less exploited: a type of lifestyle television that idealises rural life, and we suggest the label rurality-TV for this genre.

Rurality-TV programmes are produced and broadcast in all Nordic public service television organisations, and they are also transmitted to neighbouring countries. Examples of programmes included in this genre are *Frank & Kastaniegaarden* (DR), *Mandelmanns gård* [*Mandelmann's farm*] (TV4), *Karl Fredrik på Österlen* [*Karl Fredrik in Österlen*] (TV4), *Hjälp vi har köpt en*

bondgård! (SVT), *Oppfinneren* (NRK), and *Strömsö* (Svenska Yle). Although clear examples of lifestyle-TV, these programmes differ from the lifestyle programmes described by Raisborough (2011) in that they do not intend to display and correct the behaviour of “failed subjects” but instead promote a way of life that is down to earth, in sync with the seasons, and far from the urban way of life. Furthermore, these programmes do not involve external experts who intervene, but the protagonists themselves are the experts, or are in the process of becoming experts with help from the community.

Reality- and lifestyle-TV

Much of the critical engagement with reality- and lifestyle-TV has focused on genres that strive to discipline individuals who express a lack of control when it comes to eating, exercise, financial matters, clothing, or relations. According to Raisborough (2011), the significance of lifestyle- and reality-TV is closely linked to the decline of the welfare state in the neoliberal era. When the state fails to provide, production companies step in to help deprived families and failed individual life-projects in exchange for framing their misfortunes as entertainment for a television audience. This has been interpreted as an exploitation, but Raisborough has stressed how the lifestyle television provides a narrative with a happy ending, something that is quite unusual in other forms of reality-based mainstream media. The underlying promise is “the good life”, and that this can be available to all.

Literature on reality television has identified various subgenres. According to Hill (2007), there are two types of lifestyle programmes: instructional and makeover programmes. The former offer straightforward advice, while the latter present the transformation of something (the self, the body, a home, etc.). Ouellette (2016) expanded Hill’s classification into four types: 1) how-to and advice programmes, 2) makeovers, 3) talk shows (e.g., Dr. Phil, Oprah Winfrey, Judge Judy, etc.), and 4) docusoaps. Christensen (2010: 129) has applied a specific Nordic or Scandinavian perspective on lifestyle television, arguing that Nordic broadcasters have introduced a category “in which lifestyle is neither related to tips and handy advice nor has it to do with a makeover”. Christensen called these programmes expository, as they invite the viewer to enter the home of ordinary or semi-well-known personalities.

The countryside is a well-known setting for establishing authenticity in popular culture. As such, this “rural idyll” emerges in various media: magazines (Lagerqvist, 2014), television (Fountain, 2020; Fountain & Bulmer, 2022; Kraszewski, 2017), and social media (Linné, 2016). Moreover, it takes on different forms in various geographic and cultural settings (Fountain, 2020). Central, however, is the rural idyll as a space for projection, promising a simpler, more genuine way of life than what urban modernity has to offer. Furthermore, as noted by Fountain and Bulmer (2022: 85), mediated

representations of farming and agriculture are under-theorised in academic research. The rural–urban divide is a common theme in reality-TV. In fact, one of the first programmes to contribute to the genre’s popularity in early 2000s was *The Simple Life*, where celebrities Paris Hilton and Nicole Richie were confronted with “real” America and had to perform various manual jobs. Stiernstedt and Jakobsson (2019) have shown how the masculine, working-class ideals of “real men” are established in contrast to urban life in Swedish reality-TV programmes. In a more international context, Kraszewski (2017: 142ff) has written about rural reality television as a specific subgenre of reality-TV, as represented by programmes such as *Swamp People*, *Moonshiners*, and *Alaska: The Last Frontier*. Kraszewski (2017: 142ff) traced the fascination with the rural in reality-TV back to how country life has been portrayed in fiction as a refuge from the chaos of urban life, offering “peace, innocence and simple virtue”. Kraszewski (2017) identified two types of rural representation and nostalgia in reality-TV. One is the countryside as an expression of a lost golden age: “simplistic celebration over complex understanding” (Kraszewski, 2017: 139). The other is the countryside seen as “so backward that viewers aspire to the opposite values to those seen on the screen” (Kraszewski, 2017: 150), where the rural population is presented as a contrast to the urban middle class. While the latter is more in line with an understanding of lifestyle-TV as a display of “failed subjects”, the former provides a fruitful context for discussing rurality-TV as a genre that attempts to reconnect with traditional values and the countryside as a site for community and meaning.

Our aim is not to prove how well these programmes represent these intentions on behalf of the producers, but instead to offer an interpretative argument where we ask how the rurality-TV genre can be understood in a media welfare framework. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to make any claims about explicit intentions when it comes to this type of programming. Any comments on the relationship between the rurality genre and the broadcasting companies will necessarily be speculative. However, production studies of similar programmes, for instance, Puijk’s (2019: 127–166) study of Norwegian slow-TV, suggests that NRK producers stress how programmes such as *Norge rundt* [*Tour of Norway*] or *Der ingen skulle tru at nokon kunne bu* [*Where no one would expect that anyone could live*] reflects a programming “ideology” of the broadcasting company that involves simplicity and nostalgic views of the rural. An interview study with Swedish and Norwegian public service broadcasters (Larsen, 2014) found how quality was contrasted with commercial programming and an active ambition to preserve national language and culture.

Rurality-TV as a genre

Our approach to analysing rurality-TV as a genre is in line with the theoretical genre concept (Todorov, 1990), as we argue that there is a specific genre of Scandinavian lifestyle television that shares common themes and aesthetics. Theoretical genres, according to Todorov, are created through analysis by identifying common traits among texts that originally have little to do with each other. Nordic Noir is an example of a theoretical genre that appeared as a marketing label, quite similar to its namesake film noir. The label was constructed through the observation and argument that Scandinavian crime fiction shared some common themes and aesthetics. Moreover, we draw on Feuer (1987), who divided genre analysis into three areas of focus: the aesthetic, the ritual, and the ideological. Our analysis of the aesthetics combines attention to technical and semiotic codes (Selby & Cowdery, 1995), with the visual and auditive ingredients, as well as their combinations in creating an “overall semiotic effect” (Chouliaraki, 2006). The ritual dimensions of rurality-TV are explored through an analysis of how this genre can be understood in terms of an “exchange between industry and audience [...] through which a culture speaks to itself” (Feuer, 1987: 119). More specifically, this involves an examination of which cultural beliefs and values are expressed and negotiated through public service rurality-TV programmes, and the potential meaning of this exchange in relation to the social order and challenges of contemporary Nordic societies. The analysis of ideology focuses on three dimensions, drawing on Chouliaraki (2006): space, time, and agency.

We have selected three texts for analysis: *Bonderøven*, later known as *Frank & Kastaniegaarden* (DR), *Hjælp vi har købt en bondgård!* (SVT), and *Oppfinnere* (NRK). The criteria for selection was that they are produced by national public service broadcasters, set in a rural setting, and portray a lifestyle far from urban environments. Moreover, we have limited our analysis to the first season produced of each series. Our main motivation for this delimitation is that the first season establishes the narrative and presents the premise and characters.

As can be seen in Table 13.1, there are some obvious differences and similarities between the programmes. The number of seasons is one distinction, where *Frank & Kastaniegaarden* is a long-runner, whereas the two other programmes are more recent additions. On the other hand, they all follow the same format of an eight-episode season.

Table 13.1 Overview of analysed programmes

Title	Network	First aired	No. of seasons	Episodes season 1	Also shown on
Frank & Kastaniegaarden	DR	2008	15	8	SVT, NRK, YLE
Oppfinneren	NRK	2016	3	8	SVT
Hjälp vi har köpt en bondgård!	SVT	2020	3	8	no info

Frank & Kastaniegaarden

During the first seasons, the programme was called *Bonderøven*, a degrading term in Danish suggesting an unsophisticated and simple peasant, perhaps similar to the American term hillbilly. The intro, however, shows an ambition to reclaim the term and appropriate it as something desirable: not only is Frank a genuine “bonderøv”, but he is also proud of it. The narrative arch is about Frank transforming an old, abandoned farmstead into a proper, fully functional farm by using traditional tools and techniques. The promotional material from DR describes the programme in the following way: “In Frank & Kastaniegaarden (formerly *Bonderøven*), Frank Erichsen shows the way to a life with a focus on sustainability and self-sufficiency. The starting point is family life at Kastaniegaarden, where he comes up with new ideas with inspiration from near and far” (DR, 2024).

Oppfinneren

Oppfinneren [*The Inventor*] is a strange mix of personal nostalgia, ethnology, and retro-futuristic mechanical imaginaries. The promotional material from NRK states: “Multi-talent Erik Alfred Tesaker realises his dream of creating a mechanical paradise for the whole family on the small farm Øystøl. Playful creative joy is combined with old craft traditions, and the result is solutions far outside the box” (NRK, 2024).

Hjälp vi har köpt en bondgård

Hjälp vi har köpt en bondgård [*Help we have bought a farm!*] is a more hyperactive programme about an urban family well-known to Swedish viewers from previous reality programmes (e.g., *Kalles & Britas hälsoresa* [*Kalle's and Brita's health journey*]) who now decide to leave their urban life to become farmers. The premise is that they are absolute beginners and that they will learn as they go. SVT describes the programme as follows: “Brita Zackari and Kalle Zackari Wahlström have long dreamed of changing lifestyles,

leaving anxiety and stress in the city and moving to the countryside with the family. And now the dream has come true: Brita and Kalle have bought a small farm” (SVT, 2024).

The following analysis combines the three perspectives of genre – aesthetics, ritual, and ideology – in order to address the research questions:

- RQ1. What constitutes public service rurality-TV as a genre in terms of form and content?
- RQ2. What values are negotiated in the programmes?
- RQ3. How can we understand rurality-TV in the context of public service broadcasting in the media welfare state?

In the first part, we describe what constitutes rurality-TV as a genre, focusing on the form (technical semiotic) and content (themes of space, time, and activities). In the second part, we analyse values expressed and negotiated in the programmes, including sustainability, community, and de-alienation. In the final part, we position the genre within a framework of the demographic development in the Nordics and discuss how public service broadcasting contributes to address these challenges.

Constituents of the rurality-TV genre

This section gives an overview of the overall semiotic effect and the aesthetic qualities of these rural lifestyle programmes. This overview combines the technological and semiotic codes of the visuals, the verbal and auditive, as well as the relationship between the two. Moreover, it addresses narration and themes explored in all three programmes that relate to space, time, and activities.

Stylistics

Overall, the rurality-TV programmes share the stylistics as well as technical and semiotic codes typically found in reality television: There is a direct address to the viewer and it is filmed on location (not in a studio). Unlike talk shows and docusoaps, it is scripted, and the programmes are clearly edited to include “spontaneous” events such as mistakes. Using the categories described by Ouellette (2016), they are a combination of how-to or advice programmes and makeover programmes. But there are some specific aspects that make these types of shows different. While there is a focus on performing a craft, in contrast to cooking and home improvement programmes, this craft is exclusively expository (similar to the cases described by Christensen, 2010). Craftsmanship is shown, but not in an instructive way. The viewer is invited to be a spectator but is not expected to acquire the skills presented.

Basically, it is a type of programme that includes the spectatorship of work, but it is not work as we recognise it from everyday life in late modernity; it is premodern work, with simple machinery and a lot of manual input. Moreover, the makeover is not a process initiated and guided by an expert, as the cases described by Raisborough (2011), but driven by the inner motivation of the protagonists. The makeover is both internal and external: By learning and developing skills, they become proficient “farmers”, and this transformation involves turning a run-down and abandoned farm into a homestead.

In terms of narrative, the rurality programmes under analysis are formatted in seasons of eight episodes. They have a seasonal arc, which in all three examples consists of the process of making a run-down farmstead into a fully functional homestead. In addition, each episode has its own narrative arc focusing on the fulfilment of one or more specific tasks. When performing the tasks, the images are shot in close-up, which invites an intimate relation with the protagonist, who displays and explains the different steps in the process. Still, the mode of address is expository rather than instructive. While the process is heavily edited, there is an emphasis on the slowness of the handicraft. One interpretation of this is that the concentration on one thing – performing one task and indulging in the work – is something that stands in contrast to the chaotic and distracting urban life.

The tempo is slow, and the point of view is close and involved. In *Frank & Kastaniegaarden*, there is no zoom but much panning with a hand-held (shaky) camera. Lighting is low-key (natural), low contrast, often smooth, and with cool colours. In *Oppfinneren*, the environment – the mountains and valleys – appear in lengthy, static tableau-style shots. This type of environmental shot is also found in *Hjälp vi har köpt en bondgård*, where they display two things: wildlife such as elk and deer, and the seasonal shifts. *Hjälp vi har köpt en bondgård* is the only programme out of the three that includes graphics to introduce participants and mark out different parts of the farmstead planned for development.

The rurality-TV programmes focus on one to two protagonists – *Frank & Kastaniegaarden* and *Oppfinneren* revolve around a man (while partner and kids make occasional appearances), whereas *Hjälp vi har köpt en bondgård* depicts a heterosexual couple where both a man and a woman are equally active in developing the narrative. In both *Frank & Kastaniegaarden* and *Oppfinneren*, the wife is more of a supporting character who does not actively nor frequently pursue her own projects but mainly acts as an enabler of her husband’s ambitions (e.g., by taking responsibility for the children and the household). Here, too, the absence of time as a constraint becomes a fact. For Frank and Erik Alfred, work and leisure are closely intertwined and enabled by a traditionally gendered division of responsibilities. The verbal statements are always in the form of the first person singular (“I have always wanted...”, “My philosophy is...”, “I am starved of old culture”, “This is farm life, and

this is my project”, etc.). This further reinforces the sense that this is Frank’s and Erik Alfred’s project, respectively, and that the rest of the family are more like fellow passengers on an already mapped-out journey. For Kalle and Brita, the planned joint work is challenged by Brita’s pregnancy, which makes it difficult for her to carry out her parts (demolition work, heavy lifting, painting, etc.). The division of responsibilities and the need to rethink and reschedule due to Brita’s condition are, however, explicitly negotiated in the programme, further emphasising the joint project.

Like typical makeover programmes, invited experts play a central part in each episode, but often these experts are family members or neighbours rather than professionals. And in the cases where external professionals are involved, they are introduced as friends or acquaintances. Dress codes in all three programmes depict a premodern style. The protagonists in *Frank & Kastaniegaarden* and *Oppfinneren* are seen wearing traditional knitwear and a flat cap. In Frank’s case, his clothes are torn and dirty, whereas Erik Alfred is more clean-cut in appearance. The dressing style of the couple in *Hjälp vi har köpt en bondgård* is more eclectic. Kalle can be seen wearing a cowboy hat, a knitted wool cap, or a sheepskin vest. This is the only programme where we also see modern, professional outfits when Brita is clearing the forest, taking down trees in a signal jacket and proper helmet.

The audial editing gives an extra dimension to the philosophy expressed in the programmes. The programmes include both diegetic and non-diegetic verbal commentary from the protagonists. *Frank & Kastaniegaarden* and *Oppfinneren* include a lot of silence, contributing to the slow pace of the programme. However, *Hjälp vi har köpt en bondgård* is more quick paced, and never silent; the protagonists are talking all the time, either diegetically or in voice-overs. There is also a lot of pop music of various genres heard in the score of *Hjälp vi har köpt en bondgård*, though they are used more sparsely in the other two programmes. In *Frank & Kastaniegaarden*, some lyrics are frequently used in most episodes and by artists like Maria Frank, Colorblind, Natural Born Hippies, Anastacia, and Kira & the Kindred Spirits, among others. Phrases like “I’m just a symptom of my time” and “...sick working nine to five” amplify the message. *Oppfinneren* does not have the same audial settings, but in one episode, a Norwegian singer-songwriter amplifies the magic of Erik Alfred’s “dream tower”, the key building project of season 1: “On the call in the forest no one will have an answer, find the way back to what you have...”

Space

The setting of all three programmes is the rural landscape, since it is the idea of the programmes overall. However, unlike the rural programmes described by Kraszewski (2017), these programmes make little to no use of maps or

other graphics to display where the farms are located or the geographical distance from modern urban life. Instead, these farms are dislocated from space. There are also many dimensions of the rural space shown in the different programmes, just as there are dimensions of time and ideological agency. To start with, the openings of the programmes have similarities and differences between the visual editing. Both *Frank & Kastaniegaarden* and *Oppfinneren* flirt with old times. In the opening of *Frank & Kastaniegaarden*, we find the setting of the farm combined with a somewhat old-looking car and close-ups of old tools with a voice-over announcing that this is a farmer who wants to do things the old-fashioned way, and the farmer himself, Frank, stating in every episode's opening: "It is not to get back to the old stone ages, but to make things more simple". In the opening of *Oppfinneren*, the rural landscape with an old-fashioned factory once built by the grandfather of the main character, Erik Alfred, is presented and with old still photography. The opening of the third programme, *Hjälp vi har köpt en bondgård*, differs from the Danish and Norwegian programmes in that the emphasis is on the main characters' own "journey". The moment the family decides to buy a farm of their own is also where the story begins: Brita Zackari and Kalle Zackari Wahlström have long dreamed of changing their lives, leaving all the anxiety and stress of the city and moving to the country with their family. The visuals offer glimpses of the buying process, with explicit markers like the symbolic handshake between the real estate agent and the couple when the deal is sealed. The couple expresses happiness at the decision while also describing an almost panicky feeling of not knowing what they have gotten themselves into (hence the title of the programme).

Time

Time is a central theme in rurality-TV programmes, most visible in the focus on seasonal changes. Life on a farm is in sync with seasonal changes, and most activities are determined by nature. Old-fashioned crafts are essential in *Frank & Kastaniegaarden* and *Oppfinneren*. A visual intertextuality repeated in different episodes is Frank's references to an old book: the Danish Farmers Dictionary from 1951. In this sense, the linguistic reference becomes obvious. In *Oppfinneren*, the relation to time has similar features to *Frank & Kastenjegarden*. As Erik Alfred says: "If we are able to combine the best from the present with the past, I think we are able to create a fantastic future".

Oppfinneren has the most explicit style in reconnecting the present with the past. The opening vignette consists of a montage where two videos are placed next to each other framed by graphics. One video is old and grainy, with black-and-white or faded colours, showing people involved in carpentry or farming activities. The quality of the footage together with the clothing of the people signals that these are old films, either archival footage or family

Super 8 films. In the frame next to this footage are clips from the programme where the protagonist is performing the same or similar activities: operating tools in the woodshop, tending to animals, and so on.

A similar relationship with the past also characterises *Hjälp vi har köpt en bondgård*. Despite a lack of previous knowledge and experience, both Kalle and Brita are keen to use materials on the farm for new purposes. The relationship between then and now becomes essential as the couple reflects upon the renovation of the house and how past choices and materials can be brought back to light: “We want to bring out the things that remind us that there have been people here before us”. In *Hjälp vi har köpt en bondgård*, a recurring humorous theme is the main characters’ constant need to re-evaluate the difficulty and time involved in each step of transforming the run-down farm into a functional, self-sustaining home. Brita reflects on her earlier statement: “How cute it was when I previously imagined this would be easy!”

The lack of time as a constraint is a recurring theme in all three programmes. Frank’s quote – “to make things more simple” – is not related to the actual time spent. Although it occurs in all three programmes, it is possibly more noticeable in the Swedish programme, where the main characters’ initial level of knowledge is significantly lower. Making one’s own planks for an interior wall from trees on the land is time-consuming, especially when each step is done for the first time (although Kalle and Brita use more modern tools and machinery than Frank and Erik Alfred). At the same time, Kalle expresses frustration that all ambitions for the farm take a long time to realise, creating a tension between modern life’s desire to control time and space and a necessary adaptation to rural life and the actual conditions of nature (the drying time of wood, etc.). The main characters address this tension on several occasions, distinguishing the Swedish programme considerably from the others.

Activities

Many of the activities that engage the protagonists are similar between the programmes. Kalle in *Hjälp vi har köpt en bondgård* and Erik Alfred in *Oppfinneren* go into the woods to cut down trees or collect logs that they bring to their sawmills to produce lumber for building. On some occasions, chainsaws are used, but often trees are cut down by axe. Another activity is purchasing animals to have on the farm. This activity not only includes the actual purchase but also making room for the animals: building pastures for goats and sheep or building a chicken coop or hen house. A third activity seen in *Frank & Kastaniegaarden*, as well as in *Hjälp vi har köpt en bondgård*, is slaughter. Here, the farm animals are transformed from cute family pets into a nutritional resource, and the procedure is commented on and contrasted with modern food consumption where meat is a commodity that bears no

traces of its origin. A fourth activity, recurring in all three programmes, is cultivation of the land by planting crops, harvesting, and preservation. How to store crops using traditional methods is explicated quite thoroughly in both *Frank & Kastaniegaarden* and *Hjälp vi har köpt en bondgård*.

The values of rurality-TV

Many of the values that we find in these rurality lifestyle programmes are similar to themes Fountaine (2020) identified in their study of *Country Calendar*, New Zealand's longest-running television programme, which for over 50 years has depicted "those who live and work on the land". Those themes are family, community, the pursuit of a dream, and connection to history and tradition (Fountaine, 2020: 114).

Rurality-TV as a genre is also characterised by the ways in which it communicates several different but interrelated beliefs and values to the audience. First and foremost, in all three programmes, the viewers are invited to reflect upon and reconnect with a shared national and agricultural history, thus adding to the community-building project of public service media and its historical role in "representing the nation" (Jakobsson et al., 2023). The past as a value is perhaps most explicitly negotiated in *Oppfinneren*, where long and detailed sequences of various forms of traditional craftsmanship (such as the use of the Norwegian building technique "stegeverk") are regularly accompanied with short "lessons" on their cultural history, including archival footage. The project of restoring connections with the past is very much a personal one for the programme's protagonist, Erik Alfred, whose dream of a "self-sufficient, mechanical paradise" is traced back to the summers he spent at his grandfather's homestead as a child and his admiration of the inventive capabilities of his grandfather. In the first episode, we learn that Erik Alfred has recently bought the old factory where his grandfather used to work. While working in the factory he says:

It's nice to think of how grandpa worked here when he was at my age. Now I'm back to my roots, in a way. A lot of things are so rootless. You need foothold and support to continue to build on something. It's nice to show that it's possible to make use of our heritage. To find a way of living in these times, while also preserving the old and not ruining it for those coming after us.

Here, the personal biography of Erik Alfred transforms into a narrative of society's past, present, and future, inviting the viewers to recognise not only the value of their shared history but also how our current way of life has consequences for future generations. This points to another central value in public service rurality-TV: sustainability – or, more specifically, sustainable consumption.

By turning to the past, all three programmes suggest we might find guidance in developing lifestyles that are more ecologically, economically, and socially sustainable. In *Frank & Kastaniegaarden*, for example, Frank frequently consults old books as well as senior farmers in order to acquire the knowledge and skills he needs on his route to self-sufficiency. A stubborn and explicit critic of contemporary consumption society and urban life, Frank is determined to completely stop the few shopping tours he is still forced to do to the nearby city of Aarhus. Instead, he strongly advocates the reuse of old materials: “From scrap to gold”, he calls it. Erik Alfred has a similar approach to second-hand materials: “It’s some kind of treasure hunt to see what’s inside an old house – doors, windows, trims – that could be used again”. This approach is not primarily about saving money but is rather represented as a respectful way of dealing with the past. “The nice part of reusing is that you give an old thing a new life”, Erik Alfred says.

The value of sustainable consumption is also communicated through the protagonists’ relationship to nature, their family, and the local community. In *Hjælp vi har købt en bondgård*, for example, the audience is invited to follow Kalle and Brita in their gradual acclimatisation to a life closer to nature. While this process involves friction – nature is sometimes represented as invasive (e.g., when flies and mice enter the house) or dirty (e.g., when Brita refuses to eat a hare full of ticks out of fear of it being infected) – they always strive for a harmonious relationship with nature, to unify with nature and become pure. When asked to get horse manure and urine-imbued hay while planting a tree, Kalle declares: “You feel like you’re part of the circle of life instead of just standing on the outside looking in. I like it a lot!”. The value of sustainability is further consolidated by Brita when watering the newly planted tree: “Now we have our tree where our grandchildren will swing one day. If the Earth still exists then. Planet Earth, I mean. We’ll see”. These programmes are thus inviting the viewers to consider themselves not only as part of history but as part of nature, too. Towards the end of the season, Kalle articulates this sense of wholeness when talking about his relationship to the farm:

So, I’m a part of this place. I make it better. I don’t suck the power out of the place until it’s dead and I need to move on like a swarm of locusts. Instead, I’m involved in developing this place into something better than it was when I arrived.

When extracting birch sap, Frank voices a similar caring attitude towards nature: “It’s on nature’s premises”, he says, explaining how an over-extraction of sap might jeopardise the survival of the trees – and deny the ants a tasty meal as well.

The cultivation of sustainable lifestyles – based on self-sufficiency, recycling, and care for nature – in these programmes is accomplished through the

intergenerational learning taking place within the extended family and local community. The tricks of the trade are often learnt from senior experts in the community or from the protagonists' own parents, and in the case of *Oppfinneren* and *Hjälp vi har köpt en bondgård*, they are also passed on to their children, who are regularly encouraged to participate and help their parents with various projects on the farm. These programmes thus emphasise social interdependency as part of the human condition and the value of tight-knit families and communities. Indeed, such relations are represented as a precondition for increased self-sufficiency vis-à-vis the market. In the final episode of *Hjälp vi har köpt en bondgård*, Kalle explicitly acknowledges this to the camera: "It's nice to think of the network we have built since we moved here [...] The dream of fending for oneself is not true. You are part of something bigger together with the people you live with".

The same episode includes Brita's attempt to finalise the realisation of Kalle's dream of wearing a cap knitted of yarn from the wool of their own sheep. "Honestly", she says, "that should be everyone's dream", implying that self-sufficiency, sustainable consumption, and traditional handicraft are parts of an ideal way of life. In this project, Brita involves her mother, who teaches her how to knit using a "lovely old book from 1946" with "various knitting patterns approved by the state", as she puts it, for a laugh. At the end of the episode, when Brita is handing over two identical knitted caps to Kalle and their new-born baby in front of the sheep, whose wool has been used in the process, several core values of public service rurality-TV are reaffirmed. Not only do the gifts confirm their bonds to each other, and hence the family, as value, they also represent the value of reconnecting with the past (through the traditional craft of knitting), sustainable consumption practices (make your own caps from scratch instead of buying them in the market), and cultivating a close and harmonious relationship with nature (symbolised here by the sheep). The scene also points to a final central value of these programmes: meaningful work.

The value of meaningful work is negotiated in various ways. First, work is represented as an activity of care. In all three programmes, the work on the farm is carried out for the benefit of those that our protagonists deeply care about (i.e., themselves, their partners, and their children). For example, throughout the whole season, Frank struggles with completing the new residence on the farm so that his wife will not have to suffer another winter in their current non-insulated house. Likewise, several episodes of *Oppfinneren* end with Erik Alfred handing over a gift, made by himself, to his wife or children. In the first episode, for example, he builds a "pop pop boat" for his son's birthday, and we get to follow how they paint it together and then launch it in a pond in an intimate moment of family affection.

Second, work is represented as a focused activity, especially in *Frank & Kastaniegaarden* and *Oppfinneren*. Here, the different steps involved in

completing a task are carefully exposed in long and rather slow sequences, inviting the viewers to reflect upon the hasty and distracted character of modern working life, where a deep focus and unbroken concentration on singular tasks are rare opportunities. These programmes thus remind the audience that work might actually be a rewarding or even healing activity rather than a never-ending surge of disintegrated and potentially disintegrating tasks and duties.

Third, public service rurality-TV de-alienates work in the sense that these programmes are carefully detailing the labour involved in manufacturing the products most of us simply encounter and purchase in stores and supermarkets. In both *Hjälp vi har köpt en bondgård* and *Frank & Kastaniegården*, for example, the acquisition, nurturing, and slaughter of animals is depicted and acts as a reminder of the labour hidden in meat products sold in the supermarket. Similarly, all three programmes expose the time and energy invested in the complex processes of producing timber and growing vegetables. In *Hjälp vi har köpt en bondgård*, the viewers are even invited to reflect upon the labour behind the honey jars piled up in shelves in their local grocery store, as Kalle starts practising beekeeping.

In this sense, public service rurality-TV, with its do-it-yourself ethos and focus on work as process rather than product, can be read as an attempt to repair a set of understandings and skills that has been broken in the urbanisation and high-level division of labour and specialisation of modern societies. The genre encourages its audience to participate in a collective project of recollecting and perhaps also learning from a shared agricultural past, in which work had not yet been internally divided into bits and pieces and externally separated from domestic life and nature.

Rurality-TV and media welfare

According to Kraszewski (2017), the rural–urban tension as a theme in popular culture is particularly strong in times of profound transformation. The turn to rurality in reality-TV is visible in commercial and public service broadcasters alike. The examples discussed by Kraszewski (2017) are all from commercial channels. Still, we argue that the public service version of this turn has a stronger institutional meaning than is the case with the programmes analysed by Kraszewski. Even though they too are edutainment programmes that represent an idealised, “simpler” way of life far from urban modernity, they are not produced within a social responsibility framework where universality, recognition, and representation are normative values. As already mentioned, broadcast mass media exercises symbolic power by establishing differences in terms of centre and periphery (Couldry 2004; Andersson & Jansson, 2012). Symbolic power is unevenly distributed, and one way of understanding universality and equality in a media welfare context is public service broadcasting’s responsibility to redistribute symbolic power.

The urban–rural tension has been present throughout the history of public service broadcasting. With production concentrated to the urban areas, concerns are raised about how the country is represented. In the governmental directive to SVT, the company is obliged to have 55 per cent of its production outside of Stockholm. Earlier reviews have shown that this “55% rule” does not guarantee an equal distribution of visibility among regions. Reimer and colleagues (2004: 116) pointed to three principles that decide what parts of the country are visible in television and how these are shown. The first is journalistic, based on norms about what issues are important to cover and assess. The second principle is democratic, where the coverage of events and actors located far from the centre of power is an end in itself. The third principle is popularity: SVT wishes to offer programmes that engage a large audience. The report is old and the changes in terms of production and consumption of media has since changed, but these principles are still relevant for understanding rurality-TV as a genre within the public service commitment.

The journalistic principles of relevance and actuality can here be understood in relation to the demographic dynamics mentioned above. Even though these programmes are meant for entertainment, they exist in a historical context marked by urbanisation and migration, and where the climate crisis has made values such as sustainability a serious concern. To reconnect with the past, to become self-sufficient, contribute to a circular economy, and foster community can be seen as values that become desirable in an age of mobility, polarisation, and climate change. The protagonists of *Hjälp vi har köpt en bondgård*, *Frank & Kastaniegården*, and *Oppfinnaren* share a dream of settling down and make a place their home. This illustrates and sets an example of a more holistic and meaningful approach to life.

The democratic principle can here be understood in the rural focus of these programmes. They are evidently filmed on locations outside of urban areas, and the countryside is granted significant airtime; at least, this is true at a glance. A more critical view might suggest that the rurality-TV programmes are far from the reality experienced by people populating the countryside where small-scale, self-sufficient farm life is more of a curiosity than a norm. An aspect of this was a brief controversy that erupted when journalists found out that the family in *Hjälp vi har köpt en bondgård* still formally lived in their terraced house in a Stockholm suburb, despite the claims in the programme that they “left everything and moved to a farm” (Carlsson, 2020).

The principle of popularity can be seen in the relative success of the programmes: *Frank & Kastaniegården* has run for fifteen seasons, whereas the other two programmes have three seasons each (they started much later). Moreover, the fact that the programmes are aired in other Nordic countries adds to this principle of popularity. But popularity in a public service setting is not restricted to quantitative measures. It can also be a qualitative virtue as the opposite of elitism. Accusations of elitism and paternalism has long

accompanied public service policies, but as pointed out by Jakobsson, Lindell, and Stiernstedt (2023), the Nordic broadcasters display less paternalistic traits than their counterpart in the UK. Again, a critical viewer could point to the privileges that condition the rurality-TV programmes: Practices are often time-consuming, and the definition of sustainability is restricted to strictly material aspects (reusing, repurposing, etc.). In a broader sense, the cost and time that goes into these traditional methods are arguably less sustainable than buying commodities, and the skills and handicrafts are remote, not only from the average urban audience, but from modern rural life as well.

Discussion: From reality to rurality

It might seem contradictory to, in a book about the future of the media welfare model, spend time on content that is preoccupied with the past. Public service broadcasting's role for social cohesion is perhaps a lost cause. Still, it would be difficult to imagine a discussion about Nordic media welfare without addressing the social responsibility model strongly associated with public service institutions. This discussion is important in the context of our current digital social spaces. Recently, Couldry (2023) asked whether the current model of social media platforms is toxic for solidarity, making our societies ill-prepared for meeting the challenges posed by climate change. Social media platforms, argues Couldry, encourage competitive behaviour and polarisation when we are in desperate need of solidarity. Here, public service broadcasting, and perhaps the genre of rurality-TV with its focus on community and sustainability, represents an alternative.

Our aim with this chapter was to introduce the term rurality-TV to discuss a certain genre of Nordic lifestyle television programming, and to suggest how it could be understood within a broader framework of public service broadcasting in the media welfare state.

By way of summary, the genre of rurality-TV can be defined as a serialised text that follows some of the well-known patterns of reality-TV (documentary footage, meta-commentary from participants, scripted but spontaneous), but set in a rural environment where premodern technologies are favoured, exposing a dream of a simpler way of life.

Our analysis shows that public service rurality-TV communicates a number of different but interrelated values to its audience. By turning to a shared agricultural past, this genre suggests we might find clues on how to deal with the challenges of modern life and develop lifestyles that are more sustainable, both materially and spiritually speaking. Self-sufficiency, the reuse of old materials, traditional craft, care for nature as well as for family and local community, and slow, undistracted, meaningful work – these are represented as important values and practices constituting a sustainable way of life as well as a remedy to the unwelcome side effects of modernity and its intensi-

fied processes of individualisation, urbanisation, mobility, secularisation, and digitalisation. Our study contributes to further understanding of mediated representations of farming and agriculture, and based on our findings, we see implications for further research in two main areas. The first would be comparative approaches between cultures and media systems. We have argued that there is a difference in how public service broadcasters approach rurality compared with commercial outlets, but it would be interesting to also see how the values and representations of rurality varies between countries and cultures. Secondly, the urban–rural theme can be further problematised and approached not so much as a divide but as a continuum. What role do televisual representations of rural life play in this process?

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Extending the media welfare state

The role of libraries in the Nordic countries

TERJE COLBJØRNSSEN, HÅKON LARSEN, KIM TALLERÅS,
& MACIEJ LIGUZINSKI

DEPARTMENT OF ARCHIVISTICS, LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SCIENCE,
OSLO METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY, NORWAY

ABSTRACT

An account of the Nordic media welfare state that does not consider the library sector, its historical mandates, and the role it plays in securing universal access to media content while also contributing to sustaining the media industries, is missing a piece. With this chapter, we aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of public libraries in relation to a wider media context. As holders of collections of media – books, but also audio and audiovisual media – as well as important enablers of public discussions and events, libraries co-exist with media industries in multiple ways: They purchase media content, promote various forms of media, and compete with the mass media for the attention of the public as well as the resources of the state. We ask questions about the intersections between libraries and the media industries: What are their mandates, social remits, and forms of regulation? What are the challenges that face them today? What are their roles within an extended media welfare state?

KEYWORDS: media welfare state, Nordic cultural model, media policy, cultural policy, public libraries

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Introduction

In their influential book on the organisation of the media sector in the Nordic countries, Syvertsen, Enli, Mjøs, and Moe (2014) argued that it makes sense to talk about a Nordic media welfare state, alongside other aspects of the so-called Nordic model, which for the most part has been dedicated to welfare policies and working-life issues (Alestalo et al., 2009; Dølvik et al., 2015). According to Syvertsen and colleagues (2014), such a media welfare state rests on four pillars: universal services, editorial freedom, a cultural policy for the media, and policy solutions that are consensual and durable, based on consultation with both public and private stakeholders.

Throughout their analysis, the authors of *The Nordic Media Welfare State* make use of a common delineation of what constitutes the media: They stress the importance of print media, public service media, and the corporate structure of the Nordic media and communications sectors. Syvertsen and colleagues' book helped situate media actors within a larger, sociopolitical context and connect media and communication literature with a broader set of social science literature. Nonetheless, the emphasis on actors and processes in the media sector comes with the risk of leaving elements outside of the media industries that could be said to constitute essential aspects of a welfare state which caters to media and culture. Some scholars have argued that the media institution makes up only one of five institutions underpinning the public sphere in the Nordic model (Engelstad et al., 2017). Others have highlighted that missing pieces may include aspects of digital infrastructure (Ala-Fossi, 2020; see also Flensburg & Lai, Chapter 8; Sjøvaag & Ferrer-Conill, Chapter 9), and that new patterns of digital media usage, as well as economic-ideological transformations, challenge the notion of a media welfare state (Jakobsson et al., 2021; Lindell & Hovden, 2018).

In this contribution, we wish to point out how the libraries of the Nordic countries play an important part in what may be termed an *extended* welfare state model for media and culture. We argue that the account of the Nordic media welfare state will be stronger if it also includes the library sector, the historical mandates of libraries, and the role libraries play in securing access to media content and contributing to sustaining the culture industries, as well as providing an infrastructure in support of the public sphere. We do not argue that the library sector and the media sector are one and the same; rather, they form separate institutions that intersect and interact. By incorporating libraries into the discussion, we also see that interesting and understudied patterns of conflict and collaboration come to light. In our chapter, we ask the following questions about the intersections between libraries and the media industries:

- RQ1. What are their mandates, their social remits, and forms of regulation?

RQ2. What are the challenges that face them today, specifically with digital media?

RQ3. What are their roles in a media welfare state?

With this chapter, we aim to contribute to an understanding of how libraries co-exist with media industries and media actors. The role of libraries vis-à-vis the media sector at large is interesting for several reasons. Here, we wish to highlight how publicly financed libraries operate alongside commercial media companies (e.g., publishers or producers of books, newspapers, music, and film), forming complex and sometimes fraught relationships. We especially wish to shed light on how digital formats and technologies have put a strain on the relationship between libraries and the media industries.

In the following parts of the chapter, we first put the development of public service media and libraries in a policy context before we discuss how digitalisation has affected the cultural sector and specifically the relationship between libraries and media producers. In our conclusion, we come back to the question of where the media welfare state is headed and why we believe that it is important to take libraries into consideration.

Media, culture, and the Nordic model

To understand how libraries can fit within an extended model of the media welfare state, we first need to place them within the context of policy development in the Nordic countries. Many features of Nordic policies for media and culture are common across the countries and were developed along the same historical lines. According to Duelund's (2008) summary, the trend for Nordic cultural welfare policies was set in motion with the social democratic movement in the 1920s and reached "full blossom" in the 1960s. A common goal was to establish institutions to promote art and culture, ensuring artistic freedom and cultural democracy (Duelund, 2008; Mangset, 2020). Still, the backdrop for the formation of national cultural and media policies is far from one-dimensional: Denmark and Sweden have been independent states for hundreds of years, while Finland, Norway, and Iceland are comparatively newly created nation-states.

Today, across the Nordic countries, the state is active in supporting the media and culture sectors but is reluctant to impose demands on the content produced. As such, there is a liberal aspect built into these policies: They are designed to promote autonomous organisations who can engage in critique of the state. This has been possible because the state's provision of economic support to media organisations, arts organisations, and culture organisations is accompanied by freedom from restrictions on journalistic, artistic, or cultural expressions (Engelstad & Larsen, 2019). The so-called arm's length principle (Mangset, 2013; Moe & Mjøs, 2013) is thus crucial for securing a

balance between socialist and liberal values, a combination that has strongly influenced the Nordic societal model (Berggren & Trädgårdh, 2006; Esping-Andersen, 1990; Sørensen & Stråth, 1997).

As parts of the state-supported cultural infrastructure, public libraries and public service media have partly tangential historical developments in the Nordic countries, but there are also elements that set them apart. One significant factor is that public libraries are slightly older than public service media institutions, dating back to the 1890s and 1920s, respectively. The Nordic states all have comprehensive media policies, with different types of economic support for newspaper production or distribution, in combination with strong support for public service broadcasting (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Syvertsen et al., 2014). Overall, public service broadcasters have a strong position in the media markets of the Nordic countries. A system of broadcasting in the service of the people was originally based on the idea that broadcasting (first radio, later television) was such a powerful medium that it needed to be organised as independent from the market and the state. As a consequence, the broadcasting institutions were set up to serve the people and, through that, democracy (Engelstad & Larsen, 2019). The contribution to democratic goals and ideals remains part of the mandates for public service media across the Nordic countries. As stated in the public service contract for DR, the Danish broadcaster is “an indispensable part of democratic debate” (DR, 2019). (This and all other non-English quotes are translated by the authors). In Finland, Yle presents itself and other European broadcasters as “responsible for strengthening democracy and culture and promoting equality and inclusion” (Yle, n.d.).

In a similar fashion to how the media sector and specifically public service media have evolved, the Nordic states have developed sophisticated systems for supporting the production, publication, distribution, and dissemination of arts and culture (Duelund, 2003, 2008; Mangset et al., 2008). One aspect of this expansive cultural policy is the formation of public libraries that are free to use, regulated by national governments and funded by municipalities.

The Nordic library sector

Across the Nordic countries, the library sector is extensive, performing multiple functions from a mostly non-commercial position. What we term the library sector brings together national networks of different library types, including school and academic libraries that support educational needs and research activities throughout the education system, libraries with national responsibility related to cultural heritage, and public libraries in the municipalities. In addition, there are several libraries that handle document management in companies and public institutions. Although these libraries have much in common through their basic and practical functions, they also

operate on the basis of a variety of objectives and mandates. Here, we concentrate mainly on the public library sector.

Public libraries are among the most widely used cultural offerings in the Nordic countries, with Finns and Danes particularly eager to visit the library. While the Covid-19 pandemic caused a dramatic drop in the use of most cultural offerings, statistics from the years before the pandemic indicate that library visits are stable. In Norway and Denmark, visits have increased since 2010, while in Sweden and Finland, they have decreased to a certain extent.¹

While libraries and public media institutions are seldom discussed together, their political organisation is similar, being subordinate to the ministries of culture. Further, the library systems are similarly organised with a National or Royal Library at the top with the responsibility to collect, store, and disseminate the nation's cultural and media production, and municipal public libraries that offer universal services directly to the population. In all the Nordic countries, public libraries are subject to laws that formulate similar social missions and purposes that associate them, at least implicitly, with the notion of a media welfare state. Central themes in these laws are inclusion, democracy, and "the formation of an educated and informed citizenry" (Rydbeck & Johnston, 2020). In Norway, the law contains the following sections:

The task of public libraries is to promote the spread of information, education, and other cultural activities through active dissemination and by making books and other media available for the free use of all the inhabitants of Norway. Public libraries are to be an independent meeting place and arena for public discussions and debates. (Lovdata, 1985)

The etymology and traditional understanding of what a library is suggests an assortment of books. Public libraries have traditionally been just that, a collection of books, and gradually other types of media, that have been made accessible to citizens. The Norwegian law states that one of the means to achieve its purpose is to make available "books and other media". The Danish law is more specific about the library collection and what it should contain, mentioning films, music, audiobooks, and multimedia resources on the Internet (Kulturministeriet, 2000). Conversely, the Icelandic Library Act states that a "common purpose of libraries [...] is to provide access to a varied collection of library material" (Icelandic Ministry of Culture and Business Affairs, 2017).

Nordic library acts also express ambitions beyond the facilitation of universal access to media content. The Swedish law states:

The libraries in the public library system shall promote the status of literature and an interest in learning, information, education, and research as well as other cultural activities. (Riksdagen, 2013)

Both the Swedish and the Finnish library acts emphasise the *activities* of the libraries and do not mention specific media types or collections.

Despite some differences, the library acts exhibit an apparent trend in the Nordic public library sector towards relating the social mission to learning, democracy, and the public sphere (Koizumi & Larsen, 2023). This has previously been referred to as a shift “from collections to connections”, where one “focuses upon the mission instead of the tool” (Audunson & Aabø, 2013). In recent years, governmental strategy documents have underlined this development. Both the Norwegian (Norwegian Ministry of Culture and Ministry of Education, 2019) and the Swedish (Swedish Government Offices, 2022) library strategies state that libraries contribute through their missions to a strong democracy and an informed citizenship.

This attention to democratic ideas does not imply that libraries are no longer concerned with collections and lending, but it does convey a stronger emphasis on activities that take place inside physical libraries (Kaun & Forsman, 2022; Mathiasson & Jochumsen, 2020). Recent years have seen a reorientation (perhaps even a rebirth) of the library as a *place*, with monumental library buildings in Aarhus (Dokk1, built 2015), Helsinki (Oodi, built 2018), and Oslo (Deichman Bjørvika, built 2020) as prominent manifestations (all have been awarded “Public Library of the Year” by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions). These buildings are expected to conform to certain ideas about the library, some new and some old: The library is expected to be open, participatory, engaged, and contributing to urban development, social inclusion, and public debate (Audunson et al., 2020).

The new role, where the library no longer just promotes the works of others but is also itself an active curator and facilitator of public debate, does not come without challenges (Larsen, 2024). The role of ensuring access to a variety of media content is based on a tradition of professional practice, while taking an active role in the public discourse requires new interpretations of the library’s role, both on a general level and in local communities where libraries often serve as providers of physical rooms for meetings and events. In recent years, there have been several discussions about how libraries should deal with organisations on the political extremes wanting to utilise library facilities, demanding inclusion in the universal mandate (Golten, 2022: 89–90; Larsen, 2024). Established guidelines for editorial and ethical assessments are partially lacking in the sector. Expectations for public libraries to serve, at least in effect, as extensions of welfare state institutions such as schools (e.g., offering help with homework), employment offices (e.g., helping with job applications), and youth centres (offering a place to hang around and meet friends) are also not uncontroversial or without dissenting voices (Fagerlid, 2020).

Media and cultural policy in a digital age

Historically, public service broadcasters were financed directly from the public, through the collection of a fee paid by everyone in possession of a radio, and later a television set. New technologies and media consumption patterns have now rendered this model outdated, and politicians have been struggling to replace the license fee with an economic model reflecting the contemporary media landscape. Like other media organisations, public service broadcasters are adapting to a digital media environment (see Ala-Fossi et al., Chapter 5), and politicians are developing policies and legal frameworks to preserve public service broadcasting organisations in current times (Engelstad & Larsen, 2019). Similar issues have beset the libraries as these historical institutions have worked to stay relevant in the digital age.

For libraries, securing funding has hinged on the perceived legitimacy and relevance of the institution. The so-called turn from collections to connections can be seen as a response to digital technologies that make obsolete the idea that we need library buildings as storage spaces for physical media (Audunson & Aabø, 2013). As a consequence, public libraries have instead emphasised their social role in local communities. Scholars have also argued that collections can make up an important part of public libraries' societal role in local communities (Söderholm & Nolin, 2015).

One example of a reformed political framework that impacts both media institutions and libraries is the revision of the paragraph on freedom of expression in the Norwegian Constitution in 2004, in which the state is explicitly provided with the responsibility to take care of the infrastructure necessary for an enlightened public discourse: "The authorities of the state shall create conditions that facilitate open and enlightened public discourse" (Lovdata, 1814: Article 100). In other words, the state is obliged to provide "positive freedom" (Berlin, 1990) to its citizens, which is secured through active media, culture, and knowledge policies. In addition to securing a well-functioning media sector, operating at arm's length from the government, the state is also expected to support cultural institutions such as public schools, public universities, and public libraries (Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security, 1999). The revision of the paragraph on the freedom of speech in the constitution later inspired the 2014 change in the Norwegian public libraries act, which now specifies that "public libraries should be an independent meeting place and an arena for public discussion and debate" (Lovdata, 1985: Article 1).

Libraries, the media, and cultural industries in a digital age

Because of their position as significant gateways to culture and media (especially books), libraries occupy an interesting position vis-à-vis producers and publishers of media content. Since libraries rarely produce content of their own, they depend in large part on media industries “that produce and distribute the knowledge and information they provide” (Rubin, 2020: 5). Accordingly, as per Rubin (2020: 5), in order to develop library collections and services, librarians and other library professionals need to understand “the characteristics of these industries”. Simultaneously, as libraries are significant customers, competitors, and collaborators, it is indeed important for professionals in the media and cultural industries to understand the library sector.

The need to understand the characteristics of media production applies to library acquisition managers who wish to lend out any type of media to patrons: Films, videogames, other audiovisual content, and music recordings are examples. Still, the special relationship between the library sector and the media and cultural industries is most substantially developed between book publishers and libraries, where it is deemed as effectively “symbiotic” according to some accounts (Holzman & Lippincott, 2019). Over the centuries, close relationships based on transactions, collaborations, and a shared love for books have formed between those who publish and those who lend out printed volumes. Today, as holders of collections of media – books, but also audio and audiovisual media – as well as important enablers of public discussions and events, libraries co-exist with media industries in multiple ways. They purchase media content, promote various forms of media, and compete with the mass media for the attention of the public as well as state resources. However, while the notion of symbiosis suggests a balanced and mutually beneficial relationship, where both parties see the benefit of the other’s existence and practices, there are multiple examples of controversies and disagreements, not least going into the digital age (Colbjørnsen, 2017; Darnton, 2009; Larsen et al., 2022; Marcum & Schonfeld, 2021; see also Halvorsen & Bjerke, Chapter 6).

The state can act as a mediator in these controversies, balancing out the stakes of disagreement through legal frameworks. One example is the principle of public lending rights, “the idea that an author is entitled to be compensated for the multiple uses of his copyrighted books in libraries” (Stave, 1981). The idea of public lending rights dates back to 1919, when the Nordic Authors’ Association passed a resolution calling on governments to compensate authors for library lending. Denmark was in fact the very first country to establish a public lending rights system in 1946, followed by Norway in 1947 and Sweden in 1954 (Parker, 2018).

While legal frameworks, common values, and ideologies, as well as established practices of collaboration, enable a functional relationship between actors in the book sector and towards the state, there is no shortage of disagreements and complicated issues. In the following, we want to highlight how the relationship between, on the one hand, media producers, publishers, rights holders, and media industry stakeholders, and on the other, libraries, has been challenged as a result of the emergence of digital formats and forms of distribution. Our first example deals with digital books and the systems and arrangements that have been set up to enable the lending of e-books and digital audiobooks. Our second example takes the distribution of films through digital library services as an example of the complexity of non-book digital lending practices. At the heart of both cases are negotiations over distribution rights and the balancing act between commercial and public interests.

E-book and audiobook lending

As libraries have sought to distribute e-books and digital audiobooks, they have become reliant on so-called e-lending models, which set specific terms for library practices (Liguzinski, 2023). A key part of the e-lending model is that digital books, unlike printed ones, are made available by means of licensing. This marks a significant departure from traditional transaction models because it restricts what libraries can do with materials and changes how publishers are compensated (Perzanowski & Schultz, 2016).

There are wide variances in the specific terms that apply to e-lending models, but fundamentally they include restrictions on usage or lending that are not inherent to the technology: “artificial frictions” (Perzanowski & Schultz, 2016: 106). A digital copy of an e-book or an audiobook may thus be unavailable because it has been checked out a certain number of times or it requires a renewed license. For every licensing period, the library must pay the publisher, or the representing aggregator, often at prices exceeding those for physical books. Artificial frictions also dictate that the digital copy will typically only be available within the country (or a specified region) and without options for further lending or sharing with a third party.

The Nordic public libraries predominantly use a model that limits how many simultaneous users are allowed (“one copy, one user”) or a pay-per-loan model where the library is charged for every loan, or a combination of these two. Application of a particular model depends on many factors, but it is evident that the question of whether the title is front- or backlist is one of the most important. The “one copy, one user” model gives more control over lending costs for libraries, but limits accessibility for patrons. This model may be favourable for bestsellers that the publishers want to distribute mainly in commercial channels. In contrast, pay-per-loan is applied to older titles that are not in high demand, so paying for every single loan can help the publishers to make a profit.

While e-lending models are a feature of public libraries in all the Nordic countries, the specifics of their introduction and development vary somewhat. The rather conflicted introduction of eReolen in Denmark in 2011 is a case in point (cf. Grøn & Balling, 2016; Worsøe-Schmidt, 2019). The platform was launched by the Danish Agency for Libraries and Media, in cooperation with the biggest public libraries and publishers. The growing popularity of e-book lending and fear of the cannibalisation of sales led to several withdrawals and comebacks of the biggest publishers throughout the years, also because of discontent from the authors' side. The eReolen platform is nowadays governed by a municipal association, The Digital Public Library, and seems to be well established. According to Worsøe-Schmidt (2019), the partnership solution with publishers led to the situation where the Danish libraries took on a new role as drivers for building an e-book market.

The free-of-charge principle that is embedded in the mission statements of Nordic public libraries and national library laws may be challenging for library budgets in the context of digital books. While libraries cannot charge the patrons for loans, they are charged by the copyright holders (often via distributors) for licensing packages or for every loan, depending on the e-lending model. We can illustrate the consequences of such lending conditions by the way the pay-per-loan model caused a stir in Sweden in 2011 (cf. Rambøll, 2015). With no restrictions on the number of simultaneous loans, libraries paid 20 Swedish kroner (approx. 2 euro) for every loan. With the publication of in-demand e-book titles, including the biography of football player Zlatan Ibrahimović, the lending solution turned out to be unsustainable for both libraries and publishers. Through November 2011, the Zlatan biography was downloaded 13,000 times from the libraries, resulting in overall cost for e-book lending at around 1 million Swedish kronor (approx. 100,000 euros) that month. Meanwhile, the comparatively meagre sales through bookstores led to discontent from the Swedish publishers' side, who, fearing cannibalisation of their sales, introduced a quarantine on new titles. As a result, in 2014, a new e-lending model was established, with more internal "frictions" (and less turmoil).

The disputed introduction of e-lending models can be seen as exemplary of conflicts between public and commercial institutions, but they also illustrate the ongoing negotiations over terms of access for digital media. Unlike the "symbiotic" practices of publisher-library collaboration that characterise the dissemination of printed books, there is more turmoil in the digital context, where markets are unstable and immature.

Library film streaming

Despite disagreements, e-lending models represent a continuation of established library usage patterns for books. Film lending, however, is less institutionalised. Nevertheless, libraries have, since the emergence of personal

video formats (VHS and later DVD and Blu-ray), lent out films and television shows to patrons (Bay Sengul et al., 2012). Across the Nordics, public libraries have usually had video collections of different sizes since the 1980s, though the introduction of video formats was not without reservations (see, e.g., Norwegian Ministry of Church and Education, 1981; Dahlkild & Bille Larsen, 2021; Frenander, 2012). The association with popular culture and commercialisation created a different context for audiovisual media than for print media, which were associated with “high culture”, enlightenment, and *bildung*. Today, centralised media acquisition services, such as the Norwegian Biblioteksentralen or Swedish BTJ (Bibliotekstjänst) provide possibilities for purchasing DVD and Blu-ray titles for libraries, alongside books, videogames, and other media.

With the advent of streaming services for film and other audiovisual content, popularised by Netflix in 2007, libraries were confronted with a challenge. The increasingly popular streaming services meant that the physical formats were made redundant and less relevant (as many people got rid of their DVD players). Meanwhile, the new streaming players did not offer institutional access options for libraries and schools. The problem was identified by The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (2014: 21) in a background paper:

If “Netflix-like” subscription services become more established, it is anticipated that it will be very difficult to negotiate access for library users.

One response from the library sector (besides cutting down on film and television material) was the establishment of library film-streaming services. While some of these services are owned by public institutions as part of a cultural policy offering, most are run by commercial distributors and provided specifically *for* libraries.²

As libraries are not film-producing entities, the services rely entirely on deals with film distribution companies. Available film titles thus largely reflect what film distributors and producers consider fitting to release for library lending. Arguably, one important consideration is whether a title has commercial potential that is better exploited in paid streaming services or other distribution windows.

A brief look at who owns and runs the various Nordic services reveals some patterns, while the sizes and content profiles of the catalogues vary considerably. One significant player is the commercial distribution company Norgesfilm AS, which runs both Norwegian Filmoteket (est. 2020) and Swedish Viddla (est. 2017, in cooperation with library service provider BTJ AB). In both countries, the selection is wide, with 1,400–1,800 titles, mostly feature films and a selection of television series. Cineastera (est. 2017) represents a similar venture, developed by Swedish FörlagEtt AB, with localised versions in Finland, Sweden, and Norway.³ Film selections vary between countries and the libraries that have signed up for the service, but the content profile

is broad and the catalogue extensive, with some 3,200 titles available in Sweden. Two Norwegian and Danish services are somewhat dissimilar to the aforementioned. Filmbib (est. 2015) is operated by the national film institute in Norway, while Danish Filmstriben (est. 2009) is developed by Norgesfilm and DBC Digital in close cooperation with the film institute. The content profiles of both differ from the commercial services, relying on expert curation and with a stronger emphasis on short- and documentary films.

Similar to the situation for e-books and audiobooks, the charges per usage of film streaming can infer significant costs for the library. Typically, the library will have budgeted a certain amount per month, and if that sum is exceeded, the films are unavailable until the next month. In Malmö, the library had to shut off access to Cineastera in 2020, as increased streaming incurred unsustainable costs for the city library (Mousaviyan, 2021).

The emergence of library film streaming represents new ideas about how to introduce digital media in the library. Drawing on the dominant technological format of streaming, library patrons are offered a service in the shape that most prefer. Still, the film-streaming offers from libraries pale in comparison to similar commercial services, and the collaborations with outside partners can be considered a compromise, as it leaves libraries with less control of the collection.

In conclusion: The extended media welfare state?

The concept of an extended media welfare state – that is, one which extends to libraries – can help us as media and social science researchers to see that the characteristics of the media welfare state are applicable beyond the media sector as it is commonly understood. As such, it can be a useful analytical concept. In this chapter, we have highlighted some of the characteristics and policy frameworks that unite libraries and media industry actors, in particular public service media. With common mandates across the Nordic countries to contribute to sound democratic societies, libraries and media actors (public or state-supported) are faced with many of the same expectations. We have shown that it is worthwhile to discuss the four pillars of the media welfare state – universal services, editorial freedom, cultural policy, and consensual policy solutions – in relation to the libraries in Nordic societies. This is not to say that the public library is a media institution, but to suggest that a notion of “media welfare” – or a “media welfare society” as suggested by Jakobsson, Lindell, and Stiernstedt in the Introduction to this edited volume – is incomplete without libraries added to the mix.

We argue that the clear commonalities in social missions and policy expectations indicate that it not only makes sense to analyse the institutions of libraries and media together, but also that it is relevant – pertinent, even – to extend the media welfare state concept. This way, we can more easily identify

tangents and better understand the dynamics and challenges of each sector. The conflicts and breakdowns that have accompanied the libraries' development in the digital age are not unique to this sector. It is worth exploring further the similarities between the library–publisher bond and the entangled relationship between commercial media companies and public service institutions in the audiovisual sector (cf. Kammer, 2016).

Our purpose with this chapter is not just to launch a concept or argue that we need to widen our perspective. We also want to shed light on the specifics of the relationship between libraries and various media sector actors. The diversity of library institutions (school, university, public, etc.) means that there are multiple aspects to this relationship and many ways to start analysing them. Significant differences in national policies for literature (and culture more broadly) are likely to influence how libraries relate to media and the role of the state as a kind of mediator (Bom & Schaffalitzky de Muckadell, 2021; Duelund, 2008; Lindsköld et al., 2020; Tallerås et al., 2023). Still, the public library institutions are similar across Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. As customers, collaborators, and competitors, public libraries stand in a close relationship with media producers, specifically book publishers but also extending to providers of newspapers, magazines, music, film, television, and videogames. The patterns of cooperation and conflict within a shared policy framework that we have started to explore in this chapter are not commonly discussed in the academic literature nor in textbooks for the education of librarians or media professionals. Hopefully, this contribution can be a starting point for more works at the intersection of libraries and media.

Not least, we have devoted parts of the chapter to how the institutions of media and libraries are changing, and to some extent converging. Unsurprisingly, one central and common driver for change is digitalisation. In the final parts of this chapter, we have exemplified with two cases of digital media distribution: lending models for e-books and audiobooks and library film-streaming services. Both showcase the complexity of setting up sustainable lending models for digital media. Examples such as Danish eReolen (e-books and audiobooks) and Swedish Cineasterna (film) indicate how digital lending models are the result of negotiations between rights holders and libraries over content and licensing terms. Cultural policy measures and ambitions create only a partial framework for this development, with disputes and breakdowns featuring heavily in the history of digital book lending models. Film-streaming services that are operated by public or state-owned organisations, such as Norwegian Filмотeket, exemplify the expansion of the state's cultural obligations into a digital terrain. Meanwhile, commercial vendors of digital media enter the fray with tailored services to library institutions, as libraries themselves risk losing control over collections in the longer run.

Libraries, in the way we discuss them in this chapter, are rooted in national and local contexts. As such, they find themselves in a precarious position in

a time of globalisation and transnational media developments. One might ask why it would make sense to uphold national systems of libraries in a time of platformed information providers – and further, if institutions from small Nordic countries can ever compete with global actors. These questions seem hard to avoid, but arguably miss the point. The services performed by institutions like public libraries and public service media may resemble those of the global media platforms, but they are embedded in a different value system. As the media landscape changes, it may be tempting to separate the values from the institutions. However, decoupling the institutions from the social goals and values of the media welfare state (see Jakobsson et al. in the Afterword) comes with the risk of throwing the baby out with the bathwater: Who can be trusted to safeguard universal access and editorial freedom in the new media landscape? For all their shortcomings as institutions born out of bygone social contexts, both public service media and public libraries perform roles that the new players are more reluctant to take on (to say the least). Repurposing online platforms under public control, as suggested by Huws (2020), is a tempting idea, but utopian and, ultimately, a risky endeavour in itself.

By making this argument on the relationship between libraries and the media, we have also attempted in this chapter to connect media policy research and cultural policy research, which too seldom intersect. The two fields have their own conferences and journals, and researchers typically work in different types of departments. The result is that media policy researchers will often disregard sectors that, for historical reasons, were deemed outside the scope of media and communications research, like book publishing and libraries. Likewise, cultural policy research tends to ignore the important cultural role that institutions like public service broadcasters and newspapers perform. This unfortunate situation is compounded by the fact that much of the research on libraries takes place in yet another field, that of library and information science. The widely shared expectations and fears resulting from digitalisation have made researchers see the benefit of scholarship that connects “media” and “culture” (Hylland, 2020; Roberge & Chantepie, 2017; Valtysson, 2020). We hope to have made another small contribution with this chapter towards connecting different strands of policy research, in seeking to extend the concept of a media welfare state.

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Endnotes

- ¹ We collected these data from the national library statistics, respectively.
- ² Outside of the Nordics, companies such as Kanopy, Hoopla, and Alexander Street provide media streaming services for libraries on a large scale (Cooper et al., 2022).
- ³ Named Cineasterna in Sweden and Finland, Cineast in Norway.

PART III

AFTERWORD

What's next for the media welfare state?

PETER JAKOBSSON,^I JOHAN LINDELL,^I & FREDRIK STIERNSTEDT^{II}

^I INFORMATICS AND MEDIA, UPPSALA UNIVERSITY, SWEDEN

^{II} CULTURE AND EDUCATION, SÖDERTÖRN UNIVERSITY, SWEDEN

ABSTRACT

This final chapter summarises some of the findings presented in the preceding chapters and asks what's next for the media welfare state. Continuing the discussion from previous chapters about the increasingly precarious situation of the media welfare state in a media landscape dominated by global actors and transnational policymaking, but also adding a discussion about the political challenges from right-wing populism, the chapter nevertheless ends with a positive vision for the future of the media welfare state, with a renewed role for the institution of public service media.

KEYWORDS: Nordic media, media welfare state, media system, media policy

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Media welfare in the Nordic countries

There are few people that are against welfare. Indeed, it seems stupid to be against welfare, since welfare is almost by definition “good”. Still, it can be argued that welfare as a concept is especially embraced in the Nordic countries: “Nothing concerns Norwegian voters more than welfare. The political party that is considered able to create the best welfare wins the election” (Knutsen, 2012: 179). In Sweden, the conservative parties (the Moderates and the Christian Democrats) and the right-wing populist party (the Sweden Democrats) have recently and respectively tried to frame themselves as the “new welfare party” – all of them claiming to take over this position from the Social Democratic Party. There are national differences between the Nordic countries when it comes to how central the concept of welfare is and has been in the political debate (Edling, 2019: 5). But even after decades of market reforms and concessions to the global economy, the concepts of welfare and the welfare state seem to, at least judging by the example above of the political debate in the Nordics, still retain rhetorical and political value.

The problem is, of course, that even though everyone likes welfare, there are disagreements about what it is and who should deliver it. This can be seen, for example, in debates about whether one should talk about “the welfare state” or “welfare society”. Few people think, given time to reflect, that political parties on the right and the left mean the same thing when they make proclamations about standing up for the welfare society. The Nordic countries also construct the concept differently in public the debate, with solidarity and equality being at the forefront in Sweden, community in Norway, and the effectiveness of the state to deliver on its promises in Denmark (Hellman, 2021). This is not to say that welfare in the Nordic countries is an empty signifier, but that it is a politically contested concept and that its popularity and brand value is partly dependent on its ambiguity (Edling, 2019: 1). For research however, this ambiguity is a challenge rather than an opportunity.

The media welfare state is a more recent coinage than the original concept of the welfare state. As such, it is exclusively used in academic contexts. The institutions, functions, and values associated with the media welfare state seem, however, to find support among Nordic citizens. As has been shown in this book (see Schröder et al., Chapter 1), Nordic citizens trust legacy media institutions to a higher extent than citizens in other countries. Furthermore, in a previous publication (Lindell et al., 2022), we have shown that, in Sweden at least, it is possible to speak about a media welfare *state of mind* among citizens.

However, even if media welfare state institutions are embraced by large segments of the citizenry in the Nordic countries, the institutional structures and measures of the Nordic media model is under increasing pressure. What will happen with the Nordic media systems if, on the one hand, state regulation is superseded by regulation on a supranational level (i.e., on the

European Union level) and, on the other hand, national media companies are challenged by global media actors that follow other rules and regulations as well as other traditions of accountability and responsibility compared with the traditional Nordic media companies? Furthermore, the chapters in this edited volume show that new issues constantly arise – issues that were not present when the foundations for the media welfare state were laid. What is the “media welfare state” response to these issues? Can they be handled by existing institutions?

In this afterword, we address the three questions hinted at above and discuss them one by one, in light of the contributions in this book. First, how does the media welfare state relate to the “regulatory turn” towards the global media companies, which mainly plays out on the European Union level? Is this a rebirth of the idea of the media welfare state, or are we rather seeing its demise, when state regulation of the media is handed over to supranational institutions? Second, what is the fate of the media welfare state in the age of global platforms? Is the media welfare state still relevant as a concept and as an empirical reality when global companies set the rules for media markets in the Nordics? Third, does the new media landscape call for a renewed understanding of the concept of the media welfare state? What is the media welfare we need in the age of digital platforms? In considering this last question, we argue that we need not only a normative analysis of the concept as such, but also a political analysis which takes into account the aforementioned politically contested nature of welfare, and media welfare in particular.

The regulatory turn in media policy and the media welfare state

The first two decades of Internet regulation, after the birth of the world wide web and the popularisation of the Internet in 1990s, were characterised by a liberal and hands-off approach. New regulations and laws were passed related to, for example, online copyrights, but in comparison to what was to come, Internet companies and platforms were left rather untouched by politicians in the Nordic countries, and elsewhere. This can perhaps be explained, at least partly, by a sense of optimism in relation to the Internet and online technologies, which were overall thought to have positive social, cultural, and democratic outcomes. The last ten years, however, have seen an almost complete reversal, both when it comes to laws and regulations and with regard to the general perception of the social, cultural, and democratic consequences of the Internet. As discussed in several of the chapters in this book, the European Union has passed directives aimed towards harnessing the power of the dominant US-based digital platforms and mitigating the consequences for European citizens, companies, and politics. The European

Union has tried to find a third way of Internet regulation, between the still rather liberal regulatory approach in the US and the heavily censored Chinese Internet (Stockmann, 2023). In this process, the European Union has managed to reach beyond its borders and influence Internet policy also in third countries (Kuner, 2017).

Judging by the analyses, discussions, and examples in this book, the Nordic media welfare states have remained relatively passive during this regulatory turn. Being members of the European Union (with Norway as the exception), the Nordic countries have implemented European Union Directives such as the e-Privacy Directive and the General Data Protection Regulation, which has led Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden to land in the top-five of countries that offer the best privacy protection in the world (see Flensburg & Sophus Lai, Chapter 8). The Finnish Council for Mass Media was also among the first to provide guidelines for the use of artificial intelligence technology in the media and thus provoked discussion about this in other European countries (see Romanova & Bergman, Chapter 2). Moreover, from a few examples where the Nordic countries take up a leading role in media policy debates, the general impression from the chapters of this book is that the authors wish the Nordic countries would reconnect to the legacy of the media welfare state and play a more active role in the media policy field. European Union membership can, of course, explain a lot of this perceived passivity, and as (mostly) members, the Nordic countries have been part of an organisation that pushes media regulations forward. On the other hand, several authors mention other European Union countries – France and Germany in particular – who on their own have been more active in relation to global platforms. What these examples seem to show is that it is still possible for individual member states to be active and create effective regulations, besides what is being done on a European Union level. If we are to summarise an argument that runs through many chapters in this book, it would be that the Nordic countries should, on their own or together, reconnect to the pillars of the media welfare state in the age of digital platforms, and formulate new policies that extend the four pillars into today's media landscape.

The media welfare state and the global platforms

While extending the principles of the media welfare state to today's digital media landscape is recommendable, the chapters in this book also show the many challenges associated with this goal. These challenges include, for example, the issues of mis- and disinformation on digital platforms and the prevalence of hate speech and toxic behaviour on social media platforms. At a European level, relating to these issues, steps have been taken to encourage self-regulation. The European Commission has developed a European Code of Conduct that has been signed by the four dominant digital platform com-

panies (Microsoft, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube). This initiative seems to have had some effect, at least to the extent that more of the “flagged” content is acted upon by the companies, as reported by Pöyhtäri in this book (Chapter 3). There is a need to get these global actors onboard in regulatory processes, since they are not only offering an arena for public discussion but also because they have the ability to form and mould commonly accepted norms and values in society. As Horowitz and Nieminen (Chapter 4) conclude, the spheres organised by digital platform companies can support human rights and public values, or they can work against them.

Within the Nordics, there seems to be a broad agreement between the different countries and policymakers that hate speech is a severe threat to democracy, and that this issue must be handled by democratic and political actors through regulation. The Nordic countries also show a relative similarity when it comes to how the issue of hate speech is handled. The main solution is so far increased and deepened “discussion and collaboration” (see Pöyhtäri, Chapter 3) between policymakers and the platform companies, a solution that seems to fit well with the tradition of consensus-oriented policy development in the Nordic media welfare state. There are, as Horowitz and Nieminen show in their chapter (Chapter 4), not yet many new tools to tackle the development of the “information disorder” that results from the rise of a platform society. On the contrary, the policymakers are simply thrown into this new reality. The global reach and power of these companies set further hurdles as they complicate the prospects for successful “discussion and collaboration”, since there is a greater distance – both physically and when it comes to their understanding of the purpose and role of such collaborative policy processes – than what has often been the case in previous processes of media change. The global reach and power of these companies also beg for more international collaboration (e.g., within the European Union) to find roads ahead for digital platform regulation.

The power and dominance of a handful of key players in the digital economy and the risk of abuse of market power is also discussed by Flensburg and Sophus Lai (Chapter 8) and Sjøvaag and Ferrer-Conill (Chapter 9) in their chapters on the ownership and control of digital infrastructure. While media systems analyses and discussions on the media welfare state have mainly tended to focus on legacy media and their institutions (e.g., public service television), the broader digital ecosystem on which legacy media are dependent has gained less attention in Nordic research. Several chapters in this book have tackled this specific question concerning the material resources and digital infrastructures that tend to refashion both how the media welfare state functions and the reach of traditional policy measures. The analyses of these material resources indicate both continuity and change, for instance, the traditionally strong focus on universality in Nordic (media) policy remains somewhat intact. As Flensburg and Sophus Lai (Chapter 8) conclude: “the

four welfare states [Denmark, Finland, Sweden and Norway] have played key roles in ensuring equal access in non-profitable areas and stimulating the development of publicly available digital services”. Other key elements of the Nordic media welfare states, such as, for example, the extension of cultural policy to issues of media and communication, and the consensual and cooperative solutions to media policy issues, have, however, been harder to uphold in a changing media ecology.

Several of the chapters in this volume have hence pointed to the fact that the changing media landscape has increasingly made the media welfare state more of an ideal than an empirical reality (see Flensburg & Sophus Lai, Chapter 8). Nevertheless, they have also underlined and provided examples of how policymakers, governments, and regulatory bodies, as well as at least parts of the industry, are making great efforts in adapting and maintaining these ideals in a “digital media welfare state”. However, no clear solutions have been found to the challenges posed by the digital development, but as underlined in many of the chapters of the book, these challenges might also revive and revitalise the ideas and ideals of the media welfare state. The challenges we face might even sharpen our sensibilities for what the basic values of media welfare are – or could be – and force us to think harder, not only about the normative content of the concept of welfare, but also about how such values could be put into practice in media policy. Furthermore, the rise of the European Union as a key player in media policy might warrant a shift in attention from a sole focus on the Nordic countries, and instead consider how we can rely on the legacy of the media welfare state to influence the development of media policy on the supranational level, including how “Nordic values” could influence the policy processes within the European Union.

Defining media welfare in the digital age

This takes us to the final contribution of this book: how to move forward with the concept of media welfare in the contemporary – digital – media landscape.

A general idea that recurs in the chapters throughout the book is to move beyond existing institutions and policy mechanisms. Much previous scholarly work on the Nordic media welfare state has tended to focus its attention on institutions such as public service television, or policies such as press subsidies – both of which have a uniquely strong standing within the Nordic region. Moreover, in general, legacy media have been the focal point of most writings on the Nordic media system. There are at least three reasons why the contributors to this edited volume find it necessary to look beyond these institutions and widen the concept of media welfare. For one thing, the legacy media themselves are increasingly dependent on digital infrastructures and global digital platform companies, as well as part of a transformed media ecology in which they are forced to act (see Ala-Fossi et al., Chapter 5). Secondly, an

increasing part of the publics' interaction with journalism and media content more broadly happens through digital platforms, in which a range of new and global actors have a strong position in the market, not least true for the younger audiences, as discussed by Schröder, Blach-Ørsten, and Kæmsgaard Eberholst (Chapter 1). New digital platforms and services, as well as new user practices and patterns, also put the media welfare state in front of sets of new problems, such as hate speech (Pöyhtäri, Chapter 3) and information disorder (Horowitz & Nieminen, Chapter 4), which calls for new approaches and solutions. Thirdly, the chapters by Kaun and Löfgren (Chapter 12) and Colbjørnsen, Larsen, Tallerås, & Liguzinski (Chapter 14) furthermore discuss the need to extend the concept of media welfare to sectors and activities that we do not immediately think of as "media", such as, for example, the library sector. It could, of course, be argued that books have always been a mass medium, that the library from the outset has been a "media house", and that it is only tradition and habit that place libraries in the realm of cultural policy rather than media policy discussions. Technological developments during the last 30 years (i.e., digitalisation), and the following reshaping of public institutions such as libraries as such, have, however, underscored the importance of including not only the library sector, but also other cultural institutions such as museums, which are increasingly hybrid media environments, within discussions of media welfare. The ongoing digitalisation and datafication of society further encourage us to think about new domains in relation to the concept of media welfare. Digital communication and media technologies are currently transforming the welfare sector more broadly, for example, through automation, new surveillance technologies, and artificial intelligence. In Chapter 12, Kaun and Löfgren therefore push us to widen the scope, and to think of both "data welfare" and "media welfare" when engaging with current and future digital challenges. The media welfare state cannot, if it ever could, be limited to questions about legacy media and traditional journalism.

It can, however, as has been noted by Ursula Huws (2020: 3) in relation to welfare more generally, "be difficult to separate the specific features of [welfare] institutions from the social goals that inspired their design". In order to do so, several chapters in this volume engage with the question of the normative content of welfare as such and take on the topic of how to define a desirable social goal. In the chapter by Moe, Enli, and Syvertsen (Chapter 11), the environmental issues of media policy are highlighted, an area that has not gained sufficient attention in the past, but that arguably must be included in media welfare discussions for the future, in light of the ongoing and global environmental crisis. Horowitz and Nieminen (Chapter 4) introduce a rights-based approach to tackle the question of what media welfare is and how it can be motivated. As noted by the authors, the rights-based approach to media policy has gained traction in recent years, especially

in the European Union and in relation to discussions of new, digital media. Starting from an idea of human rights, and hence individuals as the bearers of intrinsic rights, the chapter defines four basic communication rights – access, availability, privacy, and dialogical rights – as the starting point for welfarist policies in the media area. This connects to a wider international discussion of the basis for “just” media policy, in which a range of authors have suggested different possible moral foundations for media policy. Except for the right-based approaches, the literature in the field has mainly dealt with the capabilities approach, developed from Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum (Couldry, 2019; Hesmondhalgh, 2016) and the concept of media justice, with or without explicit references to Rawlsian political philosophy (Fenton et al., 2020). Using such discussions and insights from political theory and political philosophy might be one way to reinvent media welfare in the digital era.

Our own approach in this area is slightly different. We have, following Raymond Geuss, suggested the need for a “realist political philosophy”, rejecting the tendency in political philosophy to start every discussion with a definition of “rights” or “values” and instead start from how the “social, economic, political, etc., institutions actually operate in some society at some given time, and what really does move human beings to act in given circumstances.” (Geuss, 2008: 9). This means that we agree with other authors in this book, that the maintenance of the media welfare state cannot only be about guarding and reinforcing the existing institutions. This is because these institutions were built in a fundamentally different media landscape and were designed to take on challenges that are only partly the main challenges of the media systems of today. It also means that in order to look ahead or move forward, the primary challenge is not to devise new sets of rights or values. Social values such as universalism and decommodification are, in the Nordic countries, widely recognised as key constituents for the welfare state in general and for media welfare. They are not in any way uncontested – a point we come back to – but they still resonate with people across the political spectrum, when it comes to the provision of goods that are central to the concept of welfare. One way forward then, we argue, is to look to the existing institutions, not so that they can be preserved for eternity, but for two distinct but related reasons. First, existing institutions warrant our interest and analysis so they can be transformed in a way that allows them to meet today’s challenges. This also entails that if we need new institutions or regulations, we should start by looking at the ones we already have to serve as inspiration. Second, the role existing institutions play – the social goals they are set to fulfil – have historically been negotiated in political struggles. For example, the media welfare state was built on compromises between democratic principles and market interests, and from ideals and values about universality that have been fought for by political actors. The media welfare state has, for a long time, managed to get sufficient support from a large

enough number of key actors, and it is an approach that has support among the Nordic citizenry (Lindell et al., 2022). The existing institutions of the media welfare state, then, afford our critical interest, since their histories and institutional structures can help us unpack and analyse the processes of political action that are, so to say, embedded and “hidden” behind and within the seemingly stable institutions of the media welfare state, as well as to assess the viability of achieving similar political goals and compromises in the present situation. This is important since, as the chapters of this book suggest, one of the key questions at the moment is how we can maintain and extend these compromises into the future, or in other words – how “media welfare” can survive in the future. This is in itself not an easy question, but one that seems more important than devising new normative frameworks.

For some, however, the compromise between democratic principles and market interests in the media welfare state already appears to be broken. We have ourselves, in analysing the situation in Sweden, argued along those lines (Jakobsson et al., 2021). The privatisation, financialisation, and re-administration of the Swedish social welfare system has led Sweden to the top among country rankings measuring inequality (Hort et al., 2019), and this neoliberal turn has not left the media system unaffected. International trends and developments that set Sweden on this path to inequality might, however, now push Sweden and the other Nordic countries in a different direction. European media policy is said to be “on new paths” and the *laissez faire* approaches that have dominated European media policy for several decades is giving way to something new. It has been described by Christina Holtz-Bacha (2022) as a move from the “single market” to “European values”; and from “neoliberalism” towards a “value based approach”. From a Nordic perspective, now might thus be considered an opportune moment to revitalise the institutions of the media welfare state and to develop them into new areas. This is also a moment when the Nordic countries should make themselves heard in Europe, so that the turn to “European values” does not mean a turn towards insular discussions about a European identity, but instead about the democratic elements that should be at the centre of media policy, over and above the needs of the market.

One thing that has not been addressed in this volume and that stands in the way of such a revitalisation of the media welfare state is, however, right-wing populism, a political trend which has also taken hold in the Nordic countries. We have already seen the consequences of right-wing populist rule for journalism and the media in countries such as Poland and Hungary, where the media’s ability to hold those in power accountable has been severely diminished. If right-wing populist parties continue to grow in the Nordic countries, this might have implications for the media welfare state. Right-wing populism demonstrates, as discussed in the introduction to this chapter, the contested nature of social welfare and media welfare. While right-wing

populist actors might not be against, for example, the idea of public service media, their vision for public service media companies is different from universalist ideas of public service media for all citizens, instead emphasising national values and excluding parts of the population with other cultural identities and linguistic competences.

Right-wing populist actors also often hold negative views on commercial legacy media companies, instead favouring so-called alternative media outlets as well as social media platforms. One reason for this is the notion that right-wing populist ideas were initially marginalised by key media outlets. Correct or not, this has certainly changed in recent years as right-wing populist parties have become a major political force in several of the Nordic countries. Right-wing populist ideas have, during this period of growth for the parties, become normalised in national media (Ekman & Krzyżanowski, 2021; Krzyżanowski & Ekström, 2022). Despite this normalisation process, right-wing populist actors still resent the so-called mainstream media. Social media platforms, on the other hand, have tended to amplify right-wing populist voices and have thus been at the centre of the media strategies of these political actors. Although right-wing populists have also sometimes criticised social media platforms for their content moderation policies, populist communicators have clearly favoured digital platforms over traditional media outlets.

Following from these observations, we might thus speculate that should right-wing populist parties be given increased influence over media policy developments in the Nordics, this would lead counter to what the chapters in this book have argued is important in order to preserve and develop the media welfare state into the future. In contrast, it would lead to an abandonment of the universalist principles of the media welfare state, diminished support for legacy media institutions, and a weakened support for regulatory measures when it comes to social media platforms.

In devising a realist position on the future of the media welfare state, the following is what we have to start from: a private media sector dominated by global companies with little to no democratic control or accountability; a still popular public service institution, although with an aging audience and with limited possibilities to broaden its offer into the digital realm; and a political landscape still dominated by entrenched neoliberal ideals of privatisation and market solutions, with some signs that this era might have come to an end, but with new political challenges for the media welfare state in the form of right-wing populism. One might, from this description, be tempted to say that a realist position should be equal to the fatalist position that the end of the media welfare state is inevitable. From this vantage point, it is only a matter of time before the media welfare state is all but forgotten. Instead of this negative conclusion, we would, however, like to propose that an alternative is possible. This rests on two different but complementary strategies – on the one hand, forcing a shift in the business model of the dominant digital

platforms, which is the root cause of many of the problems discussed in this book, and on the other, offering an attractive alternative to the same platforms. These are by no means original ideas, but seem to us to be the most important strands in this ongoing discussion, and we end this book by placing them in conversation with the ideas and analyses offered in this volume.

The business model shared by many of the dominant digital platforms requires that companies gather as much information as possible about their users and employ that information in order to maximise traffic on their platforms (Zuboff, 2019). This is the only way for these companies to increase their revenue, which mainly comes from advertisement. It is this business model that drives companies to disregard, or downplay, things such as the value of a truthful and respectful dialogue, instead optimising for increased traffic, regardless of whether this means also maximising things such as disinformation and hate speech. It is also this business model that makes it necessary for the companies to downplay concerns about privacy and allows them to create filter bubbles and engage in algorithmic discrimination. We share the concern voiced by Bennett (2023) that many of the policy solutions put forward in this space are focused on single concerns, such as disinformation, hate speech, privacy, algorithmic discrimination, and so on, but without a consideration of the underlying problem. It is true that some of the policies put forward by the European Union in the last years have had consequences for the advertisement business model, but this does not seem to have been the main concern, but rather a consequence of trying to solve other problems. Some of the legislation in this area has also caused problems for other organisations and individuals, when they need to comply with privacy regulations that are perhaps less relevant for them than for the platform companies. The European Data Protection Supervisor suggested in 2021 that “European legislators should consider a ban on online targeted advertising based on pervasive tracking and restrict the categories of data that can be processed for such advertising methods” (Woollacott, 2021). This might be seen as a too radical solution and risk, as Bennett (2023) put it, “killing the golden goose”, but it should be given proper consideration since upending the advertisement business model is as close to a one-size-fits-all solution that we can come.

Regulating the dominant platforms is, however, not enough; there is also a need for alternatives. Graham Murdock (2005, 2018) has argued that public service media is the most strategically placed actor to further a future built on the idea of universalism and democratic participation, as an alternative to the enclosed spaces of private digital media platforms. Murdock argued that universal access has been a core idea in the development of the Internet, as exemplified by the world wide web, the open source movement, and Wikipedia. Although these ideas and technologies have been successful in their own way, they have been superseded by later developments that

have put Internet users within walled and private ecosystems, whose main goal is to maximise profits by exploiting the data generated by users within these ecosystems. Public institutions, such as public service media companies, museums, libraries, and universities, are present online, but they do not act in a concerted way to offer citizens an alternative to the centralised platforms of the dominant private actors; instead, they increasingly rely on the infrastructures erected by these private companies. Murdock's idea then, which he shares with many others, is that public service media companies are uniquely positioned to serve as a hub, or a platform, through which the public can be given access to the vast array of offerings from these different public institutions. Furthermore, they should be made available in such a way that they invite and make possible a public discussion and further creative productions, inspired, or provoked, by these offerings.

Practical or not, this idea resonates with the spirit of many contributions to this book, which has emphasised the need to build from the existing ideas and institutions of the media welfare state, but transform those institutions in a way that make them relevant today and in the future. One way to do that might be to act upon the seemingly simple realisation that the media welfare state has always been something more than radio or television, also resting on public institutions such as libraries, which has been vital in giving citizens access to media technologies and media content. The idea is thus not so much to expand the remit of public service media, but to connect citizens with the information, ideas, data, and cultural materials that our public institutions are already housing and producing. The obstacles to realising this are, of course, enormous, and neither is this all there is to the future of the digital media welfare state, but it is one source of inspiration for how to build an alternative to the Netflixes, Facebooks, and Google Searches of the world. This is also in line with the ideas outlined in a report published by the Nordic Council of Ministers by The Nordic Think Tank for Tech and Democracy (2023: 6), which recommends the promotion of “innovation and implementation of technology that supports open digital public debate to create alternatives to large online platforms” and giving “public service media a strong digital mandate for online presence, content creation and development of platforms for democratic debate online”.

This vision is, as emphasised by Murdock (2018) and by the chapters in this book (see Flensburg & Sophus Lai, Chapter 8; Ala-Fossi et al., Chapter 5; Moe et al., Chapter 11), not only about content and public conversations, but also about the infrastructure that makes those conversations and the sharing of that content possible. Ala-Fossi and colleagues (Chapter 5) argue that it might not be possible to separate the idea of public service from the material infrastructure that once was constructed to realise that idea. Relying on the private infrastructure now being built by the global tech companies not only further entrenches these companies' position of power, but also reproduces

the unsustainable and ultimately undemocratic nature of that infrastructure, which doesn't take the environmental concerns of future generations into consideration. The dark side of the media welfare state (Moe et al., Chapter 11) has been the ecological footprint left by the broadcasting stations, television and radio sets, electricity consumption, and so on, that has been somewhat neglected in the literature on media welfare. Such concerns cannot be left to the discretion of private companies, since although they have developed energy-conserving ways to store data and ways to recycle limited resources such as precious metals, their quest to constantly accumulate more data and to expand their operations ultimately comes with a huge cost. Since a public alternative to the private platforms would not rely on advertisement as a source of income, there would be no need for the creation of an immense collection of data that would cast its shadow over the cultural and democratic achievements of the institutions of the media welfare state. If there is to be a future for the Nordic media welfare state at all, these are concerns that should not be forgotten.

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The media systems of the Nordic countries have for long been characterised by universality, freedom, trust, and cooperation between stakeholders. In comparative media systems research, the Nordic countries have been described as belonging to a single model – the Nordic media welfare state. The future of this model is now more uncertain than ever, as it is under increasing pressure from global tech companies, new digital media infrastructure, and developments in media policy, which all seem to elude domestic regulatory control. These developments raise questions about both the current state and the future of the media welfare state in a digital society – questions that this edited volume seeks to explore through conceptual, theoretical, and empirical analyses.

The first section of this edited volume analyses the current state of the media model in the Nordic countries and focuses on some of the challenges that the media welfare states are facing. The section provides a comparative analysis of how the media are used and how they are regulated. It also analyses specific challenges such as disinformation and hate speech and the current measures taken to tackle such issues.

The second section of this volume addresses conceptual and theoretical issues regarding the concept of the Nordic media welfare state. Through both historical and contemporary case studies, the section extends the concept of media welfare by attending to digital infrastructures, libraries, environmental issues, as well as the integration of the media with other aspects of social welfare. In the final chapter of the book, the editors propose that the digital media welfare state can be expanded and adapted to the digital media landscape using the public service media companies as a platform to connect cultural institutions and citizens.

This book is of interest to students, researchers, and anyone seeking to understand developments in the media industries and media policy in the Nordic countries. The chapters in this volume are written by experts in their respective fields and provide the reader with both an overview and detailed knowledge about the Nordic media model. The editors – Peter Jakobsson and Johan Lindell at Uppsala University and Fredrik Stiernstedt at Södertörn University – have collaborated in several research projects that connect to the question of the future of the digital media welfare state.

The logo consists of a solid blue square with the word "NORDICOM" in white, uppercase, sans-serif font centered within it.

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