

Chapter 7

Development trends and challenges in Nordic political journalism

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Abstract

The objective of this chapter is to describe and discuss some important political journalism development trends in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden. The term political journalism traditionally refers to news, commentaries, and other genres related to the coverage of political processes, institutions, and policy questions. It is, however, difficult to draw a clear dividing line between political news and other types of current affairs coverage. While political logic once dominated the discourses of political journalism, the emergence of the news media as an independent institution gave journalists a substantial definitional power and an ability to define the communicative rules of the game, but professional political sources quickly learned to exploit news media logics for their own aims and objectives. During the last decade, the growth of social media networks and the relative weakening of the legacy media has created a less stable situation for the negotiation of control between journalists and their sources.

Keywords: political journalism, news regimes, policy professionals, sacerdotal traditions, communicative rules

Introduction

Since the turn of the millennium, the digital revolution and the commercialisation of communication have challenged the terms of political journalism in at least two important ways. First, they have led to structural changes in the media system, resulting in severe effects; for example, legacy media organisations, especially print newspapers, have lost large parts of their advertising income to tech giants, such as Facebook and Google, and been forced to develop new business models to survive. One answer has been payment for online news content, a strategy which has been more important and successful in countries like Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Finland than in most other parts of the world (Newman et al., 2019). However, in most Nordic media organisations,

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financial problems have also led to staff reductions and other editorial cuts, limiting the resources available for quality journalism based on investigations and reportage.

Second, the establishment of online media and social media networks have given political actors, such as governments, parties, and individual politicians, increased opportunities for communication with opinion leaders and voters, often independent of legacy media's editorial judgements and filters. Internet penetration in the Nordic countries is among the highest in the world, and the adoption of social media is generally high, giving political actors a means to reach the public without the assistance of legacy media. These parallel development trends represent a wide range of changes and challenges, not least affecting legacy media organisations, which have traditionally considered political journalism an important part of their democratic role.

The term “political journalism” traditionally refers to news, commentaries, and other journalistic genres related to the mediated coverage of political processes, institutions, actors, party programmes, and policy questions. Classical examples of political journalism are reports about government decisions, party initiatives, public policy proposals, parliament resolutions, and politicians' election campaigns.

However, this definition limits political journalism to an institutional context, which in many cases is problematic. It is difficult to draw a clear dividing line between political news and other types of current affairs coverage in the news media. Both “hard news” and feature stories concerning crime, the environment, unemployment, immigration, health, social services, and other societal questions may have political implications, leading to policy debates about priorities and the allocation of values in society. A news story without any direct link to parties or politicians can trigger discussions about politics or, as Lasswell (1936) defined the concept in a famous book title, *Politics: Who gets what, when, how*. News journalism and other types of current affairs journalism are intertwined in practice. Likewise, normative theories about media and democracy recognise that news and current affairs journalism – not only institutional political news – is “claimed to be the life blood of democracy” (Fenton, 2010: 3).

The intertwining of political and current affairs journalism is also reflected in the editorial departments of news organisations. Most local journalists are all-round reporters and desk editors, covering several news areas, including local politics and current affairs. Today's newsrooms are organised to emphasise convergence, speed, and technological skills in order to compete in the changing and increasingly convergent media markets. Lack of specialisation has been strengthened by a general tendency in today's media industry in which journalists are expected to meet higher demands for the production of content for different platforms and have less time for journalistic research and time-consuming reportage work (Nikunen, 2014).

However, national news organisations and some regional media houses in the Nordic countries still have some specialised political reporters who regularly cover traditional, institutional political news. These news outlets also offer daily political commentaries and analyses. The press lobbies of the parliaments in the Nordic countries are long-lasting examples of the organised relations between political journalists and politicians (Allern, 2001, 2010; Dalen & Skovsgaard, 2010). One contributing economic factor behind such continuing priorities may be that parliamentary and party-centred political news is relatively cheap to produce, especially compared with more investigative forms of journalism. News interviews and background interviews are easily organised and cost effective (Niemikari et al., 2019). In fact, according to Dalen and Skovsgaard (2010), Danish political journalists, covering the parliament as a regular “beat”, have experienced less internal, commercial pressure than other journalists in their media organisations. One reason may be that they are able, with small expenditures, to deliver a steady stream of news stories.

The objective of this chapter – based on a review of research literature in the field – is to describe and discuss some important political journalism development trends in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden. The next section discusses the media’s roles as channels, arenas, and actors on the scene of politics. Then, in “New political actors on the media scene”, we discuss the relations between journalists, politicians, and policy professionals. The next section, “The communicative rules of the game”, addresses how media formats and “logics” influence politics and power struggles. The following section, “Changing approaches to political journalism”, discusses conflicting news media strategies concerning the prioritisation and presentation of political news in today’s media environment. The last section comprises some concluding remarks about the future development of political journalism in a hybrid media system.

Changing historical relations between media and politics

The relations between Nordic news media organisations and political institutions have gone through dramatic changes during the last half century. The traditional political role of the mass media – associated with the omnibus press and the party papers in the first two decades after World War II – was, first and foremost, to be a *channel* for other political institutions, such as political parties, governments, parliaments, and municipal authorities. In the contacts and negotiations between journalists and their political sources, the politicians generally had the upper hand and many of them played a double role as both politician and publisher. The state-owned public service channels, representing a monopoly in radio and television, primarily functioned as information disseminators and educational institutions, not as independent news producers (Bjerke, 2011; Djerf-Pierre, 2000; Esaiasson

& Håkansson, 2013; Hjarvard, 1999). The political parties strictly controlled the limited political debate programmes broadcast before national elections. In this period, the role of journalists was reduced to that of technical moderator, ensuring that the politicians received their agreed transmission time (Allern, 2010, 2011a; Esaïsson & Håkansson, 2002; Hjarvard, 1999).

In the late 1960s and 1970s, this party-controlled channel role was weakened and eventually abolished. An important part of the journalistic professionalisation process in this period focused on gaining independence from political parties. The media channels were gradually developed into *arenas* where the parties and politicians had to compete for visibility and influence. During the 1980s, the deregulation of telecommunication and broadcasting ended the public service channels' monopoly in radio and television, leading to changes that furthered this development. The party press also became history. News media organisations and journalists became, in an increasingly competitive media market, independent actors and political interpreters (Allern & Blach-Ørsten, 2011; Lund et al., 2009; Pedersen et al., 2000; Østbye, 1997; Østbye & Aalberg, 2008).

In Finland, these historical changes were described through the study of three generational groups of political journalists (Kantola, 2012, 2016a; see also Koljonen, 2013). The oldest group, characterised as “the solid moderns” in the news organisations, were, in many cases, directly engaged in politics and aligned with a political party in their youth (Kantola, 2012). They were carriers of national responsibility, had tight relations with their sources, and were critical of politics as “infotainment”. Today, most of them have retired from the newsrooms. Journalists that came into the profession in the 1980s (a middle generation characterised as “the liquefying moderns”) have independent professionalism as their central ethos (Kantola, 2012). Many of them have university educations and see themselves as professionals detached from politics. They have also endorsed storytelling techniques and market-oriented news criteria to a greater degree than the solid moderns. The youngest generation, described as “the liquid moderns”, has an anti-institutional, flexible identity and accepts opinionated journalism with an agenda (Kantola, 2012). They do not cover politics as a regular beat but participate in projects and teams using ad hoc sources.

Using a term taken from institutional theory, this development of journalism can be characterised as a succession of distinct news regimes with a set of norms and routines that cut across individual news media organisations (Blach-Ørsten, 2014; Ryfe, 2006). The “partisan news regime” associated with the party press was gradually influenced by the rise of public broadcasting and developed into an “independent news regime”, characterised by professional media organisations with an informal but central role in political processes (Blach-Ørsten, 2014: 93). Practically speaking, this is still the case today. There are, however, signs of changes to a new type of regime defined by competition more than

anything else. The “competitive news regime” is increasingly dependent upon professional sources that can deliver exclusives and scoops (Blach-Ørsten, 2014: 94). This may strengthen the interactions and cooperation between journalists and professional political actors.

It is notable that differences in political history and culture may lead to country-specific media coverage of political movements and parties. For example, this has been observed in the press coverage of the right-wing Nordic populist parties, organisations that have common traits, such as their opposition to immigration, but may also represent important differences concerning political history and life cycles (Herkman, 2016, 2017a, 2017b; Jungar & Jupskås, 2014; Herkman & Jungar, Chapter 12).

Interesting differences were also revealed in a recent study of mediated political scandals related to the #metoo movement in the four Nordic countries. While there were several national scandals in the political field related to #metoo in Sweden and Norway, there was only one sexual harassment case related to the Finnish Parliament and none in Denmark. A likely hypothesis “is that the culture of silence related to questions regarded as personal and sexual is somewhat stronger in the Finnish and Danish political environments than in those of Sweden and Norway” (Pollack et al., 2018: 3103).

New political actors on the media scene

Direct contact and negotiations between journalists and politicians comprise a basic relationship in political journalism. However, other professional political actors have grown in importance on the media scene. While politicians traditionally get their mandate through democratic elections, the new type of political actor is an employee or a consultant for hire who has political and communicative expert knowledge. In an analysis of this development in Sweden, Garsten and colleagues (2015) called this new category of political actors “policy professionals”; they are not elected but employed to pursue politics – they have power but no democratic mandate.

A large group of policy professionals are employed as political or communication advisors in government ministries and parliamentary party groups or as party organisation leaders. Others are employed as lobbyists or advisors in corporations and trade and interest organisations – or they have jobs as consultants in public relations firms offering lobbying advice (Blach-Ørsten et al., 2017a; Ihlen & Gullberg, 2015; Kantola, 2016b; Karlsen, 2010; Lounasmeri, 2018; Svallfors & Tyllström, 2017). This labour market has opened revolving doors between politics and public relations, lobbying, and media organisations (Allern, 2011b, 2015; Allern & Pollack, 2018; Svallfors, 2016). Furthermore, former politicians and former journalists offer their professional competence

as a commodity on a new labour market. Historically, this phenomenon can be analysed as an expansion of market logic into public areas where market exchange had previously been restricted (Tyllström, 2013).

Policy professionals are also employed in think tanks – representing a type of expertise that is more engaged in strategic attempts of political and ideological opinion building than that of advisors who are more engaged in day-to-day politics. The expansion of think tanks today is a common phenomenon in the Nordic countries, and they are frequently referred to in the national media and among decision-makers. Politically, think tanks represent both business and labour union interests, but the largest and most influential organisations in the Nordic think tank landscape are financed by business interest organisations and represent a market liberal ideology (Allern & Pollack, 2016, 2020; Bjerke, 2016; Blach-Ørsten & Kristensen, 2016; Christensen & Holst, 2020; Kelstrup, 2016a, 2016b, 2018, 2020; Kelstrup & Blach-Ørsten, 2020; Lounasmeri, 2016, 2020; Óscarsdóttir, 2020; Sörbom, 2018).

The expansion of the public relations industry and the introduction of new types of policy professionals also represent a countermeasure to the professionalisation of journalism, namely, the growth of more professional news media sources. For many decades, political parties, government departments, corporations, trade organisations, and interest groups have prioritised building up their own communication expertise, handling both media relations and direct communication to stakeholders and voters. This is important because the relations between journalists and their sources largely explain the content of the news media, especially news and reportage material.

The journalist-source relationship also applies to political journalism. Reporters, commentators, politicians, advisors, and consultants with backgrounds in media or politics know each other well; they usually develop long-term, strategic relationships and regularly talk “on record” as well as “off record” (Dindler, 2015). Both parties initiate possible news stories and “follow-ups”. Gans (1980: 116), in his analysis of American news organisations, characterised such relations using a dance metaphor: “sources seek access to journalists, and journalists seek access to sources. Although it takes two to tango, either sources or journalists can lead, but more often than not, sources do the leading”.

While the ability of resourceful actors to engage journalists and lead the “tango” is also documented in Nordic media research (Allern, 1997, 2015; Kristensen, 2004; Mathisen, 2013; Sahlstrand, 2000), this should not be interpreted as though professionalised sources have permanent positions as primary definers; influence through agenda setting and the framing of news stories are always conquered through negotiations of control (Allern, 1997, 2018; Ericson et al., 1989; Schlesinger, 1990). The final decision concerning publicity is, after all, an editorial responsibility.

The communicative rules of the game

According to theories of mediatisation, politics in the Nordic countries today is largely driven by a “news media logic” – in contrast to a “political logic” based on the conceptualisation “that politics ultimately is about collective and authoritative decision making as well as the implementation of political decisions” (Strömbäck & Esser, 2014: 14). While political logic is constituted by polity (the institutional framework of politics), policy (the content of politics), and politics (the power struggles over policy making), news media logic is constituted by professionalism (journalistic norms and criteria), commercialism (economically motivated rationales), and media technology (news production according to different technologies’ affordances) (Strömbäck & Esser, 2014).

In line with this, the news media define the communicative rules of the game, and politicians are, to a large degree, dependent on media coverage for gauging public opinion and generating attention (Esser, 2013). Politicians, therefore, adapt their initiatives to conventional media formats and general news values, such as conflicts, proximity, sensations, and personalisation (Blach-Ørsten, 2014; Skovsgaard & Dalen, 2013; Strömbäck, 2008; Strömbäck & Esser, 2014). The expansion of policy professionals as a new layer of non-elected advisors and communication specialists inside government institutions and parliamentary party groups confirms and reinforces this development. However, contradictory tendencies in relation to the news media also exist, such as when governments and parties consciously try (and succeed) to avoid the public floodlight by closing media access to important back regions (Albæk et al., 2014; Allern, 1997; Ericson et al., 1989).

How news media logic influences the power relations between journalists and political parties is, however, complicated to analyse. To interpret examples of the mediatisation of politics as a general expression of media power would be naïve, although such general conclusions are too often drawn on a weak empirical basis. The role of journalism in relation to business and marketing enterprises may illustrate the pitfalls of this reasoning. For nearly a century, commercial corporations and their public relations advisors have professionalised and refined their ability to adopt, use, and exploit media formats and general “news values”. A well-known strategy is to produce “information subsidies” – pre-packaged and framed news proposals – which may lower the editorial news threshold, influencing how information is prioritised and presented to the public (Allern, 1997, 2018; Gandy, 1982). Today’s media-trained politicians and professional communication advisors also know how to “spin” a story. They offer interviews and news “exclusives” to competing media organisations, as well as backstage “leaks” with information directed against political opponents. In the strategic dance between journalists and political sources, both parties can take the lead, and, as mentioned above, professional sources

often succeed (Allern, 1997; Gans, 1980; Green-Pedersen & Stubager, 2010; Kristensen, 2004; Schlesinger, 1990).

However, such promotional successes depend on several factors. Theories of news values generally predict that politicians in top positions get the most media coverage (Harcup & O'Neill, 2001, 2016). A Swiss study of politicians covered by the print media observed that “formal power in the policy-making process [...] easily translates into discursive power in the media, which can further strengthen the political power of an actor and ultimately lead to a self-perpetuating cycle of political influence and media coverage” (Tresch, 2009: 71).

A party's standing in the polls generally influences its media appearances, concluded a Swedish election study (Asp, 2006); the same conclusion was drawn in a Norwegian study of the representation of political parties in televised election programmes (Allern, 2011a). The consequence of such practices was characterised in a Danish study of election news as an incumbency bonus in political news coverage: “the more powerful you are, the more attention you receive”, and governments with more support (who are the expected winners of an election) had a larger incumbency bonus than weaker governments (Hopmann et al., 2011: 278). The news media's orientation towards party leaders and well-known politicians with good communication skills makes it harder for lesser-known politicians to gain media access (Skovsgaard & Dalen, 2013).

Therefore, a mediatised campaign – adapting to or adopting media formats and market-oriented news media logic – does not tell us much about who influences whom. In Norway – with its long history of televised election programmes – politicians have, since the 1970s, been professionally trained to master different programme formats, including question programmes, duels, or television-arranged “public meetings”; in other words, they have adapted to the “media logic” of the television channels. In 1997, TV 2 – one of the two leading Norwegian television channels – decided that their journalists that year should be political agenda-setters during the pre-election period. Polls about the voters' interest in different topics were made and followed up with news and reportages. The hope was that these party-independent initiatives would strongly influence and frame the discussions in the televised debate programmes. The strategy was afterwards summed up as a fiasco; the news initiatives had little or no influence on the political parties' prioritised agendas (Allern, 2011a). Thus, power over media formats does not guarantee political agenda-setting power. A Danish study of the 2011 national election drew the same general conclusion: political parties had substantial influence on which issues the news media covered during the election campaign, while the media had limited influence on the parties' agendas. According to Hopmann and colleagues (2012: 186), the news media “are not independent actors acting autonomously but are engaged in an interaction with political actors who are their central sources in election campaign coverage”.

As Van Aelst and colleagues (2014) summed up, concepts such as media logic and political logic may be seen as overlapping, but they are not mutually exclusive. Politics is about power, and media logic can be used as a tool to reach political goals, or – alternatively – it can be an obstacle; this was the conclusion of a recent study by Nygren and Niemikari (2019: 218), which found that “media logics set the rules of the game, and political sources can play the game to reach their goal according to political logics”.

These changes in political communication need to be seen in a historical perspective. While political logic once dominated the discourses of political journalism, the emergence of the news media as an independent institution gave journalists a role as actors with a substantial definitional power and the ability to define the communicative rules of the game. However, professional political sources quickly learned to use and exploit news media logics for their own aims and objectives. During the last decade, the growth of social media networks and the relative weakening of the legacy media have created a less stable situation for the negotiation of control between journalists and their sources.

Changing approaches to political journalism

Following Blumler and colleagues (1989), we may distinguish between four different approaches to political journalism that characterise the priorities of modern news media organisations: the “sacerdotal”, “pragmatic”, “conventionally journalistic”, and “analytic” approaches.

First, the sacerdotal approach – which is understood as a type of priestly ritual – views political processes and institutions as sacerdotal to democracy and, therefore, as important *per se*. In line with this, news organisations must inform voters about political proposals, conflicts, and decisions; scrutinise the work of political power holders; and contribute to the democratic process by stimulating political debates. This interpretation of what journalism is and should be echoes the traditional, institutionally oriented definition of political journalism mentioned above. In the Nordic countries, as in some other Northern European countries and the UK, a sacerdotal approach has its historical roots in the party press and public service channels.

In this tradition, politics is an important beat to be covered by specialised and knowledgeable reporters who develop professional source relationships in the field. An organisational expression of this is the existence of a press lobby in the parliament, securing regular contact between journalists from the leading media organisations and national politicians. Another well-known feature in the Nordic countries is broad coverage of election campaigns, including interview programmes with party leaders and televised election debates (Allern, 2011a; Esaiasson & Håkansson, 2002; Johansson & Strömbäck, 2019). News deci-

sions and programme priorities are, in this tradition, strongly influenced by the agenda of the political institutions and parties.

Another characteristic feature of the sacerdotal approach is that political news is seen through a national, institutional prism. Domestic policy questions are prioritised and, in some cases, supplemented by foreign policy questions of national interest, which are on the parliamentary agenda. This scenario is still typical for the Nordic countries, regardless of whether they are members of the European Union, as is the case in other countries where the news media primarily operates in a national or local market (Aalbæk et al., 2014; Ihlen et al., 2010; Slaatta, 1999). Geographical proximity and possibilities for national framing are important criteria of newsworthiness; this also applies to political news journalism about European affairs (Heikkilä & Kunelius, 2014; Ørsten, 2004)

A contrast to prioritising politics, especially domestic politics, as important *per se* is represented by the pragmatic approach; political events are not institutionally predefined as newsworthy and must, therefore, compete with other types of news – including crime, disasters, sports, and celebrities – for the allocation of space on news pages or time in broadcasted news programmes. Media organisations working in this tradition will often have only a few specialised political reporters or commentators (or none).

The pragmatic approach means that politics (in contrast to content such as sports and entertainment) does not represent any reserved editorial news area. This is especially typical of the priorities of the popular tabloid papers and their online sites. With the exception of the final weeks before national elections, such pragmatism is, today, a typical editorial line. Political news competes with everything. The priorities are based on market-oriented and commercial news criteria related to the interests (and advertising value) of specific audience groups and segments of readers (Allern, 2002, 2010; Schultz, 2007). In all types of media, including television, an organisational expression of this development is an editorial system where journalists must try to “sell” their stories and reports to the central desk and its editors.

The pragmatic approach is close to the conventionally journalistic approach, which entails selecting and prioritising events laced with drama and conflict to fulfil market-oriented news values. A norms violation by a well-known politician, which can be framed as a political scandal, will always create headlines. The pragmatic and conventionally journalistic approaches are both associated with the dramatised storytelling tradition of newspapers and broadcasting channels, representing market-oriented, popular, and tabloid journalism.

The fourth type, the analytic approach, gives journalists the roles of interpreter and commentator. The rise of the punditocracy – or commentariat – in the Nordic press and the public service broadcasting channels over the last two decades represents an institutionalised expression of this approach (Nord & Stúr, 2009; Nord et al., 2012). The pundits are ascribed the role of the all-round

experts of the news media, commenting on polls and explaining what the politicians “really mean” and intend to do. A new, hybrid genre, also representing the analytic approach, is political news analysis, blurring the traditional distinction between news and views on the news pages.

Commentary, which is historically linked to the essay genre, is one of the classical genres of modern journalism, but, in the Nordic party press, political commentaries were mostly editorials, representing the collective voice of the paper and symbolising the difference between news and views. The development of political journalism representing an analytic approach has given commentaries and news analysis more prominence in all types of news media (Nord & Stúr, 2009; Nord et al., 2012). In an area of greater competition, news organisations have upgraded the market value of interpretations and political opinion making (Allern & Blach-Ørsten, 2011).

The structure of the news media industry has always been important for the relevance and strength of these different approaches to political journalism. A traditional, sacerdotal approach was a dominating feature of Nordic political journalism in the decades after World War II – lasting until the late 1980s. Politics mattered and political journalism was at the core of the journalistic profession in an era when national politics was regarded as the most vital public issue (Kantola, 2016a). The coverage was issue- and party-oriented, and stories concerning politicians’ personal or private lives were not part of the political reporting.

The changes in the media system throughout the last three decades have led to market changes that have generally weakened the sacerdotal approach and strengthened the other three approaches. Newspapers and other media organisations have been reorganised into media houses, publishing on several platforms, both online and offline. The state-owned Nordic radio and television public service channels – now also publishing online news – face tough competition but continue to be important parts of the media structure in all four countries (Syvertsen et al., 2014).

Combined with a “conventional” journalistic approach demanding drama, conflict, and lively pictures, one effect of this marketisation seems to be that institutionalised political news about processes and decisions is generally marginalised. Another important development trend is the strong increase in mediated national political scandals in the Nordic countries during the last two decades. Commenting on well-known political corruption cases in West Germany in the 1980s, Logue (1988: 261) wrote that the Scandinavian labour movements and governments “are virtually free of such embarrassments”. Nobody would award such a political certificate today. Today, frequent scandal reporting is the “new normal” in political journalism with a substantial increase in the mediation of personal behaviour scandals (Allern et al., 2012; Herkman, 2017a; Pollack et al., 2018).

However, during the final weeks before national elections, the heritage of the sacerdotal tradition is still strong in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden, and the public service channels continue to serve as the most important arenas for political election debates. Such debates are traditionally organised by the large public service channels, but some of the commercial media houses also offer this format on their online sites nowadays. As a general rule, the norms of “balance” and “impartiality” in public service broadcasting indicate that all political parties represented in parliament should have the right to participate on par with other parties.

This sacerdotal tradition has – after the deregulation of broadcasting in the 1980s – been supplemented and combined with a more market-oriented, pragmatic editorial line. One example is staged, televised duels between prime minister candidates, a popular format that favours the leaders of the largest ruling government party and the largest opposition party, leading to a “presidentialisation” of the media coverage (Webb, 2007). However, just before a national election day, a debate between all party leaders is still an institutionalised “grand finale” in all four countries.

In these election periods, the national, regional, and local newspapers and their online sites try to mobilise citizens to vote and initiate polls, debates, and interviews as regular and important content elements (Allern, 2011a; Asp & Bjerling, 2014; Esaiasson & Håkansson, 2002, 2013). In Denmark, political journalism almost exclusively focuses on national-level politics, national actors, and the parliament. In Sweden, Norway, and Finland – which still have relatively strong local press and regional public service channels – the coverage of regional and local politics traditionally plays a somewhat greater role. However, a recent media study of the 2018 Swedish election campaign documented a dramatic change in media habits and communication patterns; the position of the local media was weakened, many local editorial offices closed, and social media played a more central role (Nord et al., 2019).

From an institutional perspective, these approaches represent changing priorities and changing news regimes, but old forms do not vanish when new forms develop. Political journalism still subscribes to the institutional myth of the news media as the fourth estate, independent of other power holders; this myth is strengthened by the established discourse and research on the news media’s importance for democracy (Aalberg & Curran, 2012). While journalists are no longer partisans – as political journalists were in the period of the party press – they are definitely actors and participants in politics, representing new types of political interpretation and interventionism (Allern & Blach-Ørsten, 2011; Reunanen & Koljonen, 2018). Thus, norms and ideals generally change slowly.

Nordic journalists were recently studied as part of a *Worlds of Journalism Study*, based on a large survey dataset; a telling result, and especially relevant for political journalism, was that Nordic journalists still share an ideal vision of

being watchdogs, critically monitoring and scrutinising those in power (Ahva et al., 2017). Finnish political journalists stand out as a coherent group with particularly uniform values. They also endorse the role of analytical independent watchdogs that keep their distance from audiences and commercialisation and are cautious in using controversial reporting practices (Väliveronen, 2018). The professional orientation of Nordic journalists matches well with the structural characteristics of the Nordic media system and the media welfare state (Syvertsen et al., 2014) and, according to Ahva and colleagues (2017: 609), “appears to clearly be linked to the characteristics of the political context and media system in which they work”.

The regular coverage of political institutions represents an influential historical tradition in both public service broadcasting and the printed press, and it also serves as an argument for a democratic media policy.

Conclusion: Challenges in a hybrid media landscape

The conventional wisdom (or hypothesis) in today’s media landscape is that political journalism in its traditional formats and genres, disseminated by the legacy media organisations, will gradually wither away. Thus far, these prophecies have failed. One reason may be that such structural and institutional changes take time. Media habits have an institutionalised inertia that undermines both utopias and dystopias (Enroljas et al., 2013). Another basic factor is the historical lesson that the old media institutions are, in most cases, long-lived because of their ability to adapt to the challenges of a changing technological and economic environment (Blach-Ørsten et al., 2017b).

However, an important change the last decade is the conversion of traditional newspaper organisations into multiplatform media houses, offering their audiences a wide range of journalistic products, including printed newspapers, online news and feature stories, videos, and podcasts. A crucial question is linked to this business model: How can journalism be funded in a media world where the global tech companies yearly increase their share of the advertising market? One of the media industry’s most important answers to this question has been to establish online paywalls, especially combined subscriptions for printed and online products. According to the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019* (Newman et al., 2019), 34 per cent of the Norwegian population and 27 per cent of the Swedish population pay for online news, while this was the case for only 16 per cent of the population in Finland and 15 per cent in Denmark. However, even in Norway, which tops the Reuter Institute’s international list for payment for online news, the income (from audiences and advertisements) of the printed press was still as high as 74 per cent in 2018, while digital incomes of all kinds accounted for 26 per cent (Medietilsynet, 2019). The newspaper may be an endangered species, but

it is still – as a medium – the funding base for most of the journalism produced outside of the large, publicly funded public service institutions.

Concerning news, current affairs, and political journalism, the Nordic public service radio and television channels play an important role. When it comes to brand trust, they top the national media organisation lists (Newman et al., 2019). However, due to the growth of right-wing populism and a polarisation of the political climate, public service channels are currently experiencing challenges concerning political support for their funding and independence. An early warning signal was the 20 per cent funding cut for the main Danish public service provider, Danmarks Radio, by the right-wing government in 2018. The settlement reduces the staff by 375 jobs and reduces the number of television channels from six to three – the new contract also forbids the production of long, text-based news articles online (Schrøder & Ørsten, 2019). In Sweden, the new conservative bloc (comprised of the Sweden Democrats, the Moderates, and the Christian Democrats), launched attacks on the Swedish public service media during the autumn of 2019, arguing for a reduced financial base and a more limited programme mandate (Allern, 2019). These attacks continued in 2020, and have resulted in a more polarised public debate concerning media policy and the future of public service media.

In a complex, hybrid media system, traditional news media, online sites, and social media coexist and interact (Chadwick, 2013). Political actors use Facebook and Twitter messages as direct communication (and propaganda) tools to reach voters, but such messages are also sources for news and provide a basis for follow-up stories and comments in online news, printed newspapers, and broadcasting programmes. Legacy news organisations operate on several independent platforms and have developed their own web applications, but they also use social media as news disseminators. A study of Facebook news use during the 2017 national elections in Norway – comparing news disseminated by four leading legacy media organisations and three hyperpartisan, right-wing media outlets – found that, with a few exceptions, established legacy media dominated the most engaging news stories (Kalsnes & Larsson, 2019). Despite the public focus on social media platforms, the traditional media organisations (with public service broadcasters in the lead) still seem to remain the most important media for most voters (Asp & Bjerling, 2014; Blach-Ørsten et al., 2017b; Jensen et al., 2016; Larsson & Skogerbø, 2018; Skogerbø & Krumsvik, 2014). In addition, there is also the old, direct, and verbal type of voter contacts (seldom studied by media-centred communication scholars) through door-knocking, house parties, street agitation, and traditional physical meetings. Summing up the experiences from the 2017 national election in Norway, the Conservative Party’s chief communication officer even characterised door-knocking and talking to ordinary people about the party’s policies as “the most important election campaign tool” (Solhaug, 2019: 33).

Therefore, as several of the chapters in this anthology describe, modern political campaigning and communication analyse, discuss, and are characterised by the use of a wide range of media and communication tools, including legacy media and the many social media networks. One of the challenges in the study of political journalism is to continue to analyse this dialectic between “old” and “new” types of political communication and political journalism with an open mind.

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7. DEVELOPMENT TRENDS AND CHALLENGES IN NORDIC POLITICAL JOURNALISM

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